

DID THE GREAT KILL THE LIB

The First World War altered lives forever and transformed society; empires fell and new nations emerged.

In Britain the party system underwent profound change, a transformation which plunged the Liberal Party into civil war and took it from a natural party of government to electoral insignificance within a few years.

The History Group's conference in November 2014 examined key issues and personalities of the period. This special issue of the *Journal* contains most of the papers presented at the conference, plus other material.

Here **Michael Steed** examines the impact of the war on the Liberal Party.



A GOOD STARTING POINT is the Trevor Wilson thesis (in his *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935*). His historical analysis of the party's fortunes between 1914 and 1935 is encapsulated in a memorable allegory: the Liberal Party is likened to an individual who experienced a traumatic accident (a rampant omnibus which mounted the pavement and ran over him), following which he first lingered painfully, then died. The case for accidental death appears strong, but as the patient/party had had symptoms of prior illness (Wilson noted Ireland, Labour unrest and the suffragettes) there are those who maintain that despite previous robust health the patient/party was already dying – or at least was

so weakened that natural causes played a part in his death. Wilson, writing in 1966, preferred the straightforward causal link from event to outcome.¹ How does that verdict stand up a century after the traumatic event?

First, what is death? The Liberal Party did not die – after declining for two decades, it maintained itself for another two and then revived; it is still alive, albeit with a slight change of name. What did cease to exist was a particular form of political party – a mass-supported broad party of sufficient size and strength to be one of a pair in a two-party system. Just as the First World War can be seen as causing the death of the Habsburg or Austro-Hungarian Empire, though Austria and

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Hungary each survived, the Wilson case is about the death of the Liberal Party's historic (1859–1915) role. The 'death' of the historic Liberal Party means the end of what made it effective on that scale.

Then, who were the relevant victims? Clearly the catastrophe of 1914–18 caused, in Wilsonian terms, many more dramatic deaths of more significant and longer-lived institutions – not just the Habsburg dynasty and empire, but Hohenzollerns, Ottomans and Romanovs, as well as many national borders. His omnibus ran over lots of pedestrians.

Specifically, in the category of Westminster political parties, it potentially injured four – Irish, Labour and Unionist as well Liberal. One (Redmond's Irish parliamentary nationalists) died almost instantly, one (Unionist) survived in good health with a name change while a third, after bad apparent injury, went on to grow stronger. This last case merits careful consideration.

In 1914, the Labour Party was deeply split by the onset of war, while the Liberal Party was ostensibly united. Most Labour MPs supported entry into the war, but Ramsay MacDonald, their leader, did not (though he subsequently supported the war effort) and had to resign. Much of the party in the country agreed with him, or went further, taking a pacifist position. In the first major by-election contest of the war, in November 1915, the late Keir Hardie's seat in

Merthyr Tydfil was fought between pro-war and anti-war Labour candidates.² In the December 1918 election, Labour made small progress and MacDonald himself lost his seat, a defeat generally attributed to his record on the war (or to the right-wing press's distortion of it), while he was to suffer humiliation at the Woolwich East by-election in March 1921.³ Yet only a little later the same Ramsay MacDonald led his party into government. The initially severe wounds inflicted by Wilson's omnibus had fully healed.

So how could the onset of war have been fatal for the historic Liberal Party but not for the nascent Labour Party? Was it that the patient/party's health in 1914 was already weak?

There are contemporary measurements of health – plenty of by-elections in 1911–14, as well as annual municipal elections each November up to 1913. These have been used, all too often selectively, to support contrary views as to the state of the historic Liberal Party. Generally, the fourteen by-election seats gained by Unionists from Liberals, and the role played in those losses by Labour interventions, are quoted in support of the ill-health thesis;⁴ but other historians such as Roy Douglas have emphasised Liberal successes in taking Labour seats in Hanley (1912) and Chesterfield (1913), as well as some better results against the Unionists on the eve of the war.

Examining the votes cast in all the by-elections, not just seats changing hands, and sorting them

by time and type of contest (critical psephological niceties all too often forgotten by historians), the picture becomes clear but complex. To simplify, I focus on one measure, the change in the Unionist share of the vote.⁵ In 1912, up to the completion of the Liberal government's National Insurance legislation in December, the swing to the Unionists in the 23 contested by-elections was minuscule (mean 0.4 percentage points); in the 16 clear cases, Liberal/Unionist straight fights directly comparable with December 1910, it was a little larger (1.2). The Asquith government re-elected in December 1910 enjoyed twelve months of reasonable popularity.

In 1912 and 1913 the picture changed dramatically as the Marconi scandal and other problems threatened. In all 33 contested by-elections, the pro-Unionist swing was 4.8 per cent; in the 18 clear cases it was 4.6 per cent. Given the large number of marginal seats at that period, any general election taking place with a swing on that scale would have put the Unionists back in power.

Then, although we have only eight contests in 1914 before the wartime truce took effect, another dramatic change is clear;⁶ as Unionists grappled with the conundrum of how to be loyal both to the Crown and to Ulster, the Unionist vote actually dropped (0.1 per cent in all eight; 1.5 per cent in the solitary clear case). But the press headlines told a different story: the

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Unionists gained four seats, all narrowly and three of them on a split in the anti-Unionist vote.

Here lies the material for rival predictions as to a hypothetical 1915 general election. If the Liberal and Labour parties fought each other on any scale, that could have allowed a Unionist victory. But if the nearly comprehensive pact of 1910 had been replicated, the Liberals would have been returned as the largest party, with Labour as an ally. Since the by-elections also showed the Liberal Party easily beating Labour challengers, it is likely that such a pact would have been agreed – otherwise Labour stood to lose most of its presence in parliament.

Local elections did show a small, net Labour advance – but as half the total Labour advance across the whole country was in Yorkshire, too much cannot be made of that, though the contrast in local elections between Yorkshire and Lancashire throws an interesting light on Peter Clarke's findings.⁷

Electoral support is not the only test of a political party's health, but it is a good one. On that basis, the historic Liberal Party showed no overt sign of disease in summer 1914. For an incumbent government, its support was holding up well against its main opponent; it was easily beating off the threat of a rival to its electoral base (more so, indeed, than the Conservatives were able to against UKIP in 2014); and it would probably have been re-elected for a fourth term in 1915.

That, of course, does not rule out another version of the 'natural causes' hypothesis – that the patient/party suffered from some hidden but inexorable medical problem or innate weakness which had yet to surface. The case of the other party killed by Wilson's omnibus throws light on what that might be.

For three decades, the Irish Nationalist MPs had held the firm allegiance of the nationally minded (or Catholic) Irish vote, despite the Parnellite split and despite the failure to have made much progress towards home rule. By 1914 they were close to that goal. Yet in 1918 (indeed also in by-elections towards the end of the war) they were utterly swept away by a rival party, Sinn Féin, dedicated to a much more far-reaching goal and a very different strategy.

There is little need to debate why. Wartime conditions altered the perceptions of force as a legitimate and effective means of attaining political goals, as well as the likely reaction of the authorities towards the use of force. The Easter 1916 rebellion followed, and then the brutal treatment of its leaders; their 'sacrifice' swung Irish opinion, and Redmond's party became irrelevant. So the Irish Party was not so much killed instantly by the omnibus as failed to survive what followed; or to shift the allegory, it expired in a radically changed environment.

The total war of 1914–18 put political parties, as with all institutions which had developed during the previous century of generally peaceful change, under totally new stresses. Some by their inner logic and character could survive (or even prosper) in such conditions; some found it more difficult, even impossible. Why should that have been such a strain for the historic Liberal Party?

Peace was in the core DNA of the party, expressed in its mission triptych, whether linked with Retrenchment and Reform or Reform and Liberation. Free trade had been central to the union of Whigs, Radicals and Peelites that formed it in 1859; Cobdenite evangelists for free trade always preached the peace-inducing effect of their cause. In 1868 Gladstone had defined his mission as bringing peace to Ireland; reforms – disestablishment, tenant rights and later home rule were means to that end. John Morley saw Gladstone's acceptance of the *Alabama* arbitration as adding 'brightest lustre to his fame', an action which Roy Jenkins described as 'the greatest triumph of nineteenth-century rationalist internationalism over short-sighted jingoism'.⁸ The Liberal Party resisted late nineteenth century jingoism, and lost some support over its stance on questions like the Sudan or the Anglo-Boer War.

The landslide 1906 victory consolidated the Liberal sense that the party stood for peace, emphasising efficient, rational defence expenditure rather than Unionist profligacy. Campbell-Bannerman's personal electoral address condemned 'costly and confused War Office experiments'; the Liberal

Imperialist Grey wrote of halting 'spendthrift ... expenditure' on defence.⁹ Capitalist and pacifist elements in the party sang in harmony. In 1910, Liberal candidates mentioned defence rather less and by the December election it had become a strongly Unionist tune, with 89 per cent of their candidates stressing defence as an issue compared with only 37 per cent of Liberal ones.¹⁰

Thus the peace-promoting Liberal Party was clearly uncomfortable in the atmosphere of escalating armaments leading up to 1914. It stuck to its faith in a naval defence strategy to protect Britain, with international arbitration as the way to prevent war. Though Unionists were mainly on the attack over Ireland, the Lords and Marconi, there was also an incessant demand, especially in the right-wing press, for a stronger, more expensive, probably conscription-necessitating, more land-based defence strategy. The 1911 Agadir crisis caught the Liberal cabinet divided, with the once pro-Boer Lloyd George delivered a sharp warning to Germany in his Mansion House speech in July 1911; this calculated switch from dove to hawk had been cleared with Asquith and Grey, but not the cabinet – Morley and Loreburn saw the Chancellor's intervention as provocative and aggressive.¹¹

Liberal MPs and the party at large were disturbed. The alliances by then in place meant that if the European powers went to war, support for France against Germany meant support for Czarist Russia, in Liberal activist eyes one of the more brutal and illiberal regimes in Europe. The Liberal rank and file turned out during the winter of 1911–12 to promote a campaign for Anglo-German understanding, moved more by belief in arbitration and dislike of Czarist oppression than by any love for the Kaiser.¹²

So when war loomed between Germany/Austria-Hungary and France/Russia in summer 1914, the Liberal Party was potentially deeply divided. That split was averted by the German invasion of Belgium, which turned a Great Power quarrel into a moral crusade on behalf of international law and small peaceful nations, so uniting all but a few Liberals. If the troops had really come home by Christmas, a united Liberal Party could

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still have faced the electorate successfully in 1915.

It was not to be. The drawn-out land war (negating the assumptions of Liberal Imperialist strategists), the militarisation of life, the irrational and implicitly racist anti-German hysteria, the deeply divisive introduction of conscription and the arrogance of the conservative elite of military leaders (who sentenced conscientious objectors to death, to be reprieved at Asquith's insistence) all challenged Liberal values. The Labour Party was more divided by the outbreak of war, but as war did not challenge its *raison d'être*, the mobilisation of the working class interest, it could recover. For the historic Liberal Party, the belief that reason, trade and moral principle could together bring peace was close to a *raison d'être*.

It is an exaggeration to see this belief as being as central to Liberal identity as class was to Labour's. But it was an important constituent in the glue that held together the disparate elements making up the party. It was a key part of the historic Liberal Party's faith that it possessed the capacity to foresee and manage progress, and so promote the best common or national interest. With that glue softened by years of all-out war, the disparate elements looked to their particular interests and a different, Conservative, view of the nation's interest came to prevail. Liberal self-confidence and credibility evaporated. The party's historic role had gone.

This is a rather different version of the Wilson thesis. The evidence is that the historic Liberal Party was in pretty good health in 1914 and was not fatally injured by a single traumatic event. It may be better likened to an individual required by an unexpected event to alter their whole style of life. The new style made severe demands, which suited some individuals and not others; this one's particular character, which had previously served it so well, could not cope so well with those demands. Decline and a much reduced role in life followed.

This is also not far from a Darwinian version of the 'natural causes' thesis, understanding the impact of war as dependent on the character of each party. It was not the force of the omnibus hit, nor previous disease, that decided the

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outcome; it was a cruel form of natural selection in a harsh new environment.

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- 1 Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (London, 1966), especially pp. 18–19.
 - 2 In a members' ballot the South Wales Miners Federation selected J. Winstone as the Labour candidate over the miners' agent in Merthyr Tydfil (C. B. Stanton) by 7,832 to 6,232. Stanton then stood as a pro-war Independent Labour candidate in the by-election on 25 November 1915, defeating Winstone by 10,286 to 6,080. In 1918 Stanton was re-elected as Coalition Labour (NDP) with a massive vote (78.6 per cent) over the official Labour candidate, though he was then defeated on a massive 35.8 per cent swing in 1922. There is no Liberal parallel to this indicator of Labour voters' attitude to the Great War at successive stages.
 - 3 Labour had held Woolwich East unopposed in 1918, and was to hold the seat continuously from 1922 until it went SDP in 1983. But in the March 1921 by-election MacDonald was defeated by the Conservative candidate, a working-class war hero with Coalition Labour (NDP) antecedents.
 - 4 Chris Cook and John Stevenson, *A History of British Elections Since 1689* (London, 2014) lists all 20 seats changing hands at by-elections in 1911–14 (table 11.10, p. 289), including a Liberal gain from Unionist in Londonderry not included in my analysis. Cook and Stevenson (p. 290) conclude that the evidence points to 'Liberal decline', but do not distinguish between by-elections held in 1912–13 and those held in 1914.
 - 5 My analysis covers all British by-elections in 1911–14; figures taken from F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885–1918* (London, 1974). It may seem counter-intuitive to measure Liberal health by reference to the change in the Unionist vote, but as we are concerned with the state of the historic Liberal Party's broad support at a period when that included a partial pact with Labour, change in the Unionist vote best captures this. The 1911–13 figures show that the change in the Unionist vote was very similar in the 34 clear cases to what it was including the 22 more complex ones (three-cornered fights
- 6 The methodology and 1911–13 figures discussed in footnote 5 are crucial here. In 1914 there was only one clear case (Grimsby in May – with a switch from a Liberal Unionist label to simple Unionist), so the evidence of the seven other contests is critical for Grimsby's significance. The only other Unionist/Liberal straight fight in 1914, Wycombe in February, also saw a Liberal recovery, but compared with January 1910, as there was no contest in December 1910. See also Iain McLean, *What's Wrong with the British Constitution?* (Oxford, 2010), Figure 11.1, p. 230. McLean measures public opinion by the average Unionist vote at by-elections, rather than the change in the Unionist share; he shows a very similar pattern to my analysis, except that his method identifies the drop in the Unionist level of support as occurring in early autumn 1913. My analysis identifies the first sign of the change at a by-election in the tiny Wick Burghs constituency on 8 December 1913. Ignoring three-cornered fights, there are three by-election tests of Unionist/Liberal support in the December 1913 to May 1914 period. All showed a swing from Unionist to Liberal since the previous contest, with an average of 2.4 per cent.
 - 7 P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971) provides support for the good pre-war health of the Liberal Party, based mainly on evidence from that region.
 - 8 Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London, 1995), pp. 356–57, quoting John Morley in full.
 - 9 Taken from more extensive quotations in A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide – The General Election of 1906* (Newton Abbot, 1973), p. 70; Russell summed up his analysis of Liberal candidates' election addresses as painting 'their belief in arbitration and rationality in international affairs on the canvas of alleged Unionist irresponsibility and war' (p. 69).
 - 10 Analysis of individual candidates' election addresses in Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People – The British General Elections of 1910* (London, 1972), p. 326.
 - 11 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers – How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), pp. 209–11.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 236.