

# THE LIBERAL PARTY, THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

by Pat Thane

**U**NQUESTIONABLY THE LIBERAL Party emerged weaker from the war, Labour stronger. The extent to which Labour gained at the Liberals' expense is harder to judge, but there are reasons to believe it was one of the significant factors in the Liberal decline. These reasons include the following.

Labour was represented for the first time in the wartime coalition cabinets. In 1915–16 there was just Arthur Henderson, first at the Board of Education, then as paymaster-general; then Henderson and George Barnes in Lloyd George's war cabinet, although Henderson resigned in 1917 over the government's unwillingness to seek a negotiated peace, while Barnes remained in the cabinet until 1920. The trade unionist John Hodge was the first minister for the newly formed Ministry of Labour in 1916–17, followed by George Roberts, 1917–19. Labour politicians thus gained experience which perhaps gave them greater credibility in the eyes of voters.

The trade union movement grew significantly in numbers and strength during the war, from 4.1 million in 1914 to 6.5 million in 1919.<sup>1</sup> Most trade unionists were automatically Labour Party members. The unions were Labour's main source of funding and bigger unions meant more funds for the party and improved capacity to fight elections. Of course, being a union member had not prevented men from voting Liberal or Conservative in the past, but Labour's clear support for wartime strikes, while Asquith was far more equivocal, may have won the support of some trade unionists.

Labour Party supporters were actively and prominently involved in a range of successful social reform campaigns during the war: for rent controls, more and better housing, higher old-age pensions, improved maternal and child welfare, and for the extension of the franchise to women and to all men. All of these were implemented,

to varying degrees, during or immediately after the war. Many workers, especially trade unionists, had enjoyed unprecedented full employment and improved living standards during the war.<sup>2</sup> They wanted these conditions to continue after the war, supported the reforms and may have trusted Labour to carry on pressing for delivery. Also Labour were unequivocally in favour of continued state action to improve social and economic conditions, of the sort that had been successful during the war, whereas the Liberals were more divided on the role of the state. Some reform minded Liberals of course switched to Labour during or after the war, such as Christopher Addison.

Labour agreed a new constitution in 1918 which improved its organisation, including for elections. It established permanent constituency parties with individual members, whereas previously membership was only possible via membership of an affiliated organisation such as a trade union or the Fabian Society. This assisted it in mobilising members more effectively to improve its performance in central and local elections after the war.

The impact of the franchise extension in 1918 is hard to judge because, of course, voting was secret and there were no opinion polls at this time. Many working men and women got the vote for the first time, but so also did many middle and upper-class men who were not independent property holders, mainly younger, unmarried men.<sup>3</sup> However, the percentage of potential electors from the manual working class increased from 76 per cent to 80 per cent of an electorate which grew dramatically from 7 million to 21 million. It is unlikely that all new voters voted Labour but there was a probable advantage to Labour from the extended male franchise. Women had at last achieved the vote, but the female franchise was biased against poorer women: excluded

were the large numbers of living-in servants and shop workers, and any woman over the age of 30 who was not a ratepayer or married to a ratepayer. However women made up a substantial proportion of the individual membership of the party, over 250,000 by the late 1920s – at least half of individual party membership, in some constituencies more.<sup>4</sup> It is often argued that women voters were always strongly biased towards Conservatism, but there is no clear evidence of this for the interwar period.<sup>5</sup> The refusal of Asquith's government to grant votes for women before the war alienated some women from Liberalism. On balance, it is likely that Labour gained votes from the franchise extension to the disadvantage of the Liberals.

Deep dissension within the Liberal Party contributed a great deal to its post-war decline. The fact that a reform-minded alternative existed in the form of the Labour Party, which was growing in strength and credibility, gave many voters an alternative, assisting the long-run decline.

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- 1 David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900–2000* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 399.
- 2 J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1985).
- 3 Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 4 Pat Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906–1945' in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 1990), p. 125.
- 5 Pat Thane, 'What Difference did the Vote Make?' in Amanda Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 253–288.