

**Counterfactual**

Ian Garrett considers what could have happened in the general election due in 1915 but postponed because of the outbreak of war

# The Liberal Party and the



# The General Election of 1915

ELECTIONS AT THE beginning of the twentieth century were not of course held on one day, as they have been since 1918. Nor, therefore, would election counts have taken place largely overnight – it took several weeks for election results to emerge from around the country. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine the sort of studio conversations that might have taken place in the early stages of a hypothetical election night broadcast. If war had not broken out, and the election of 1915 taken place as expected, would such a conversation have proceeded something like this?

‘Well, Peter Snow, over to you – how is it looking for Mr Asquith?’

‘Not so good at the moment, David. The Liberals are struggling against the Conservatives in many areas of the country, but they are also expecting to lose seats in working class areas to the Labour Party. Last year’s events in Ireland haven’t helped the Liberals either.’

Was the Liberal government of 1914 on its last legs, ground down by problems in Ireland, the suffragette crisis, and the rise of the Labour Party? If that was the case, then if an election had happened in 1915, it would presumably have produced a similar result to 1918. And it would therefore have seen the same collapse of the Liberal Party – a collapse from which it has yet to fully recover.

Or was Asquith’s government no different to most governments? It was facing problems no doubt; but, on this interpretation, there was nothing that would suggest a fatal, and irreversible, decline.

The terms of the discussion were partly set as long ago as 1935 with the publication of George Dangerfield’s famous book, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*.<sup>1</sup> This is not well regarded by academic historians; but despite its remarkably overblown and breathless prose, it has done much to set the framework for the subsequent debate. Dangerfield concluded that the events of 1911–14 and the tide of violence associated with Ulster Unionists, suffragettes and militant trade unionists broke a political creed depending on rational debate and tolerance. In particular, the presence of the Labour Party from 1906 ‘doomed’ the Liberals, who were ‘an army protected at all points except for one vital position on its flank’.<sup>2</sup> The

outbreak of the First World War provided a suitably dramatic climax to the collapse of Liberal government and party.

More modern popular histories have come to similar conclusions. A. N. Wilson, another writer of fluent prose but shaky history, saw Britain as in the grip of ‘strikes and industrial unrest ... of a proportion unseen since 1848’,<sup>3</sup> embroiled in such an ‘impasse’ over Ireland in 1914 that war seemed preferable as a way out, as something that ‘could rally the dissident voices of the Welsh, the women, the Irish behind a common cause’.<sup>4</sup> And if neither Dangerfield nor Wilson seem particularly rigorous, it has proved remarkably difficult to escape the former’s shadow. The ‘Edwardian Age’ series of essays, for example, has nine separate entries for Dangerfield in the index, covering seventeen pages and five of the nine essays in the slim volume.<sup>5</sup>

Is it that straightforward? Dangerfield was writing in the mid-1930s, when the Liberal Party had split into factions that maybe shared ultimate aims, but were increasingly at divergence on how to achieve them, as the occasion of Liberals fighting Liberal Nationals in the 1937 St Ives by-election was to show soon after. By then, the Labour Party had indeed replaced them as the main political rivals to the Conservatives. It seems at least arguable that this was a case of writing history with the benefit of hindsight, as opposed to the demise of the Liberal Party being genuinely as evident in 1914 as Dangerfield suggested. How close was Labour to replacing the Liberals at that point, and for that matter, how confident were the Tories of triumph in the next election?

Until relatively recently, much of the history of the early Labour Party was written by those who supported it, and perhaps as a result, emphasised evidence that tended to suggest the rise of Labour was essentially inevitable.<sup>6</sup> Ross McKibbin, for example, maintained that even before the First World War, the growth of ‘class self-awareness’ meant that ‘the Liberal Party found it could make no claims on the loyalties of any class’.<sup>7</sup> Another historian of the Left, Keith Laybourn, is unequivocal in believing that by 1914 ‘the Labour Party was well established and threatening the hegemony of the Liberal party in progressive politics’.<sup>8</sup> The limited franchise, in Laybourn’s view, held Labour back, but class politics ‘ensured’ Labour would soon be a party of government,

Left: general election results (1910), posted on the *Western Times* office in Exeter High Street

## The Liberal Party and the General Election of 1915

and by implication, the Liberal Party would cease to be. On this reading, if a Labour victory was not yet on the cards, Labour was surely strong enough to prevent a Liberal triumph. Liberal reforms from 1906 to 1914 could be damned with faint praise as an attempt to buy off the working classes from supporting Labour by a Liberal Party that already saw the writing on the wall. Labour gains at Jarrow and Colne Valley in 1907 by-elections could be offered as evidence of this.

However, it is not that simple. For one thing, the Colne Valley success was not actually Labour's – it was won by an independent socialist, Victor Grayson, who refused to take the Labour whip. Jarrow too, was won in unusual circumstances, with the usual Liberal vote divided by the intervention of an Irish Nationalist.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, these were two of only three such by-election successes for left-wing candidates until 1914. Indeed, from 1911 to 1914, the Labour by-election record was dismal.<sup>10</sup> Labour came bottom of the poll in fourteen seats contested, including four that they were defending. Admittedly, the situation was not always good for the Liberals either – two of those Labour defences were gained by Tory candidates. However, it is difficult to argue from this that Labour was poised to breakthrough, or that the Liberal Party was destined for defeat.

It is worth looking at some of these by-elections in more detail. George Lansbury's 1912 defeat in a straight fight with an anti-women's suffrage Tory at Bow and Bromley was an exceptional case, to be discussed further below in the context of the suffragettes. But it might be argued that *all* of Labour's defeats were exceptional. The other three defeats in seats Labour was defending all came in the Midlands coalfields where 'Lib-Labism' retained its potency. In one seat, North East Derbyshire (1914), the presence of both a Labour and Liberal candidate split the 'progressive' vote and let the Tories in. In the other two, Chesterfield (1913) and Hanley (1912), the official Labour candidate was defeated by a Liberal. In Chesterfield, that Liberal, Barnet Kenyon, had been the Labour nominee until accepting the Liberal nomination instead. In Hanley, the year before, the Labour candidate was defeated by the Liberal land reformer R. L. Outhwaite. David Powell's summary is that the 'only conclusion that can safely be drawn is that there were still some constituencies where Lib-Labism was more than a match for independent Labour'.<sup>11</sup> But how many times can the circumstances of a by-election be dismissed as 'admittedly peculiar',<sup>12</sup> before a trend is apparent? The trend is the continued difficulty the Labour Party had of making electoral headway against their opponents, the Liberals included.

The detailed figures make Labour's difficulties apparent. In Hanley, Labour's vote declined to 11.8 per cent of the poll, the Liberals taking the seat with 46.37 per cent, about 5 per cent (654 votes) in front of the Conservatives. Chesterfield

was worse still – there, the Labour vote sank to a mere 4 per cent, deposit-losing even by modern standards, and the Liberals had an overall victory with 55 per cent. North East Derbyshire was a stronger performance in some ways, with Labour polling 22 per cent in one of the last by-elections before the outbreak of war. This still left them in third place and some way adrift of the Liberal and Conservative candidates, the Conservatives gaining the seat on 40 per cent with the Liberals just 2 per cent back in second place, or in figures, a margin of 314 votes. The by-election record therefore cast doubt on the Labour Party's ability to win votes outside a comparatively narrow range of areas and circumstances. Where working class voters were already strongly unionised (South Wales was an example), the Labour Party could poll well, but if it was failing to hold its seats in the face of Liberal challenge in the Midlands coalfields, it seems unlikely that it could expand into new areas, or threaten either of the established parties on a broader front. These figures therefore do not suggest there was any likelihood of Labour breaking away from its electoral pact with the Liberals, or challenging the Liberals with sufficient strength to be a major threat in the next general election. If Labour had the capacity to damage the Liberals' prospects, this was unlikely whilst the result was likely to be even greater damage to Labour, as the by-elections discussed above indicate.

Nor were the two 1910 general elections much better. Labour's increase between 1906 and 1910 is entirely due to the Miners' Federation affiliating to Labour in 1909, thus turning several of the 'Lib-Lab' MPs elected in 1906 into official Labour. Several of these found their seats hard to hold: in Gateshead for example, the Lib-Lab MP elected in 1906, now defending as Labour, fell to third in the poll as the Liberals regained the seat. The two by-election gains spoken of above, Jarrow and the Independent Socialist Victor Grayson at Colne Valley, both returned to Liberal hands. None of the forty Labour MPs returned did so against a Liberal opponent, except in two unusual circumstances – West Fife and Gower – where the Conservatives withdrew in Labour's favour. Labour it seemed had little realistic prospect of electoral success outside the confines of the Liberal-Labour Pact. Ramsay MacDonald himself criticised Labour proponents of a 'false idea of independence'.<sup>13</sup> He himself depended on Liberal cooperation, holding as he did one of the two seats in the double member constituency of Leicester, alongside a Liberal. Other prominent Labour figures, including J. H. Thomas and Keir Hardie himself, were in the same position.

There were very few constituencies where there were regular three-cornered contests, but one such was Huddersfield, where the Labour vote had declined slightly but steadily at each election from 1906, a by-election included, slipping from 35 per cent in the 1906 general election

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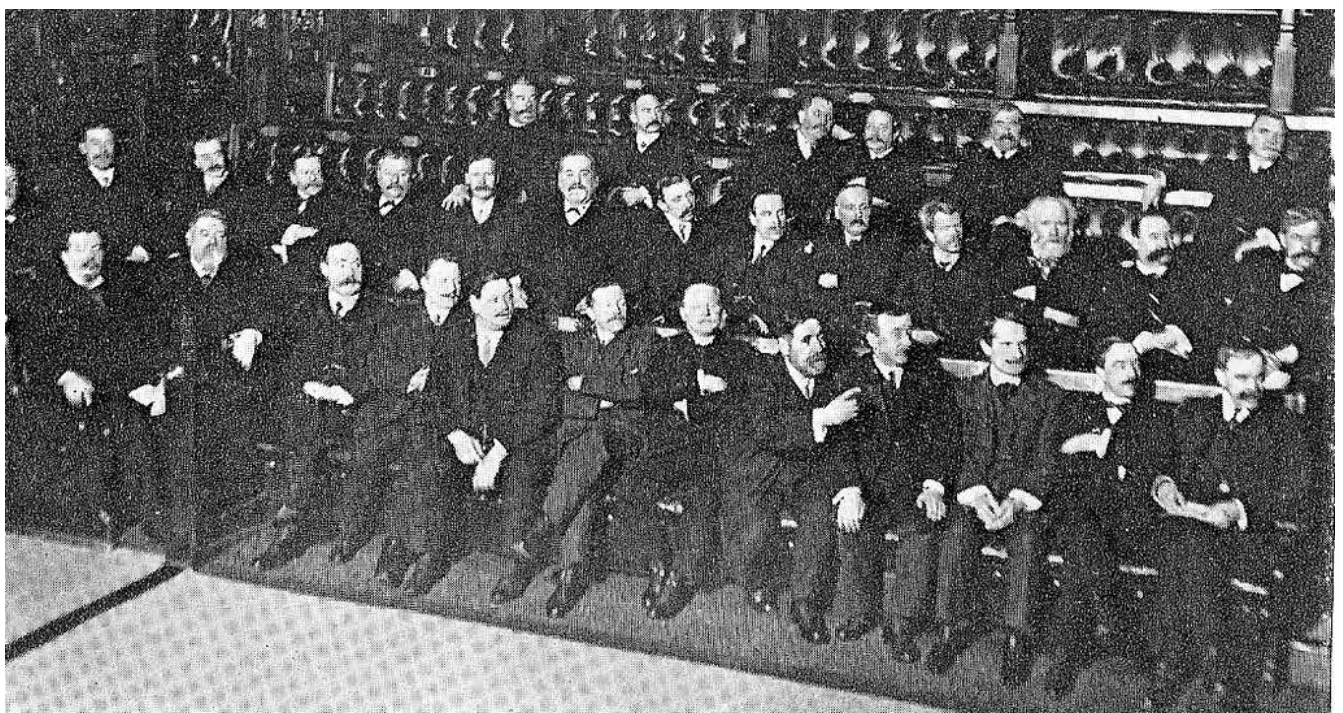
to 29 per cent in December 1910.<sup>14</sup> None of these individual pieces of evidence is conclusive, but the cumulative picture that they present is persuasive. Labour was not in a position to challenge Asquith's government in an election with any real prospects of even significantly enlarging the bridgehead of Labour MPs, let alone a more decisive breakthrough. It was certainly true that to withdraw from the pact and engineer as many three-cornered contests as possible would damage the Liberal Party, perhaps lead it to defeat – but this would be at the cost of the elimination of most Labour MPs and a return of a Tory government.

There is little evidence that such a step was contemplated – and this is surely a suggestion that Labour was expecting the Liberals to continue in power. It is true that the pact was a matter for ongoing negotiation. Ross McKibbin<sup>15</sup> has argued that the 'election' of 1915 would have seen Labour contest about 170 seats, not necessarily rejecting the pact altogether perhaps, but fundamentally altering its balance. But this is to take figures perhaps largely offered as warnings to the Liberals at face value. There had been similar threats of up to 150 candidates before the 1910 elections. The Labour chief agent in 1914 was contemplating candidates in 113 seats, but this included twenty-two where a candidate had been chosen but not actually officially sanctioned by the Labour Party, and forty that he himself characterised as 'uncertain'. By 1915, the Labour Party NEC had only sanctioned sixty-five candidates in what was expected to be an election year, just a marginal increase on December 1910, and below the number Labour put up in the January election of that year.<sup>16</sup> The larger numbers projected seem better explained as background noise to the ongoing negotiation of details of the pact, reminiscent of

the rows between Liberals and Social Democrats over seat allocation in the approach to the 1983 general election – far from ideal, but, at the same time, not actually suggesting any fundamental desire to break away from the arrangements of the pact itself.

It is true that Labour had been making more progress in local elections. It is also of course true that Britain was far from genuinely democratic in 1914. In a famous article, Matthew, McKibbin and Kay<sup>17</sup> attributed Labour's relative weakness pre-1914 to the constraints imposed by a less than democratic electorate; and various writers, notably Keith Laybourn,<sup>18</sup> have highlighted Labour success and Liberal decline in local elections. Neither position is conclusive. The experience of the modern Liberal Democrats is indicative that a party might gain a success in local council elections out of all proportion to its general election prospects – protest voting was as likely in Edwardian politics as it has been in recent times. And the narrow front on which Labour was fighting in general elections was in any case repeated at local level. Two-thirds of Labour's local government candidates in 1912 for example were fighting wards in the industrial North of England, especially Yorkshire and Lancashire. As at parliamentary level, it was the Conservatives who benefited most from mid-term disillusion with Asquith's government. A typical year for Labour at this time would see something over 100 seats won, including a modest number of gains. In 1910, for example, there were 113 Labour councillors elected, incorporating thirty-three net gains. Martin Pugh's conclusion is that 'Labour's municipal performance is broadly consistent with its Parliamentary [performance] in showing that there was no significant take-off by 1914'.<sup>19</sup>

Labour MPs in the House of Commons, 1910



The effects of the franchise were similarly mixed. The group most obviously disenfranchised were the young, rather than any particular class. What existed before 1918 was essentially a householder franchise, and therefore those who did not have their own household – those who were still resident with their parents, of whatever class – did not qualify for the vote. Given that middle-class men tended to marry later in life than working-class men, it is not obvious that this disproportionately affected potential Labour voters, even if we were to accept that this was the natural political home for the Edwardian working class. Some occupations did suffer more obvious discrimination – soldiers and servants, who could not claim the vote as they similarly were not resident in their own household. However, whether rightly or wrongly, both these groups were widely held to be Conservative in bias. Perhaps this was out of deference to their superiors, or as a result of the influence that employers or officers could wield over them. At any rate, there is no conclusive evidence here that Labour was poised to break through at the Liberals' expense in 1915. There was no obvious group of disenfranchised would-be voters who, if and when they were enfranchised, would naturally look to Labour. To argue otherwise, whilst superficially attractive, is to assume too much about the effects of widening the franchise in different political circumstances in 1918.

What of the pressures that the likes of Wilson and Dangerfield identified? Certainly there was considerable conflict in Britain in the years leading up to 1914, but it is questionable whether these can carry the interpretive weight placed on them by popular histories of this sort. Suffragette activity was intensifying, the years 1912 and 1913 were particularly full of industrial strife and, of course, the situation of Ulster overshadowed the political process. Some of these issues clearly did damage the Liberals politically, and others were not handled well. However, it is not necessary to assume from this that the next election was as good as lost. The situation in Ireland in particular is a case in point. It would be difficult to argue that the Liberal government were well prepared to deal with Unionist intransigence. 'Wait and See' was not a policy. If it is difficult to show convincingly what Asquith should have done, it is difficult to argue that nothing was an appropriate response.<sup>20</sup> As is well known, in 1914 Britain faced conflict in Ireland that carried with it the risk of both sectarian bloodshed and at least some risk of spilling over into a wider confrontation, until an even greater conflict overshadowed the situation.

However, it is making too many assumptions to presume that this would have caused electoral damage in 1915. Such votes as the Liberals were to lose over home rule were long since gone – it is difficult to see that there were a new group of voters, previously loyal Liberals, who would now be alienated. A handful of Liberal MPs consistently

voted against home rule, mostly those who represented strongly Nonconformist areas in the South-West. They may have been responding in part to local feelings and local pressure, but the Celtic/dissenting nature of these seats makes it hardly likely that home rule would have led to the loss of such constituencies. In any case, the considerable majority of Liberal MPs came to regard the passage of home rule as an essential commitment, and most Labour MPs agreed. The Conservatives had placed much emphasis on the implications for Ireland of Lords' reform in the election of December 1910 – and it had not won them that election then. Why should it do so in 1915, when the Liberals could – justifiably – blame the Conservatives for pushing Britain so close to civil conflict? Bonar Law's notorious speech in which he stated that there were 'Things stronger than Parliamentary majorities', and that he could 'imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I should not be prepared to support them',<sup>21</sup> was surely not one designed to win over the moderate or uncommitted. Even if it was a policy of 'bluff, bluster and brinkmanship',<sup>22</sup> Bonar Law was to some extent trapped by the fate of his predecessor Balfour – he had to seem 'tough' on Ulster, in contrast to the effete leadership that had, it appeared, let the party down in the previous few years. 'I shall have to show myself very vicious, Mr Asquith, this session', Bonar Law privately warned; fine for shoring up the 'core vote', but hardly a strategy to appeal to the undecided.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the not very liberal treatment of the suffragettes might alienate radical Liberals, but they were hardly going to vote Conservative as a result, and the group most obviously affected were of course not in a position to retaliate at the ballot box!<sup>24</sup> It is true that the question was affecting the morale and motivation of Liberal female activists, but as yet, that was not really an electoral problem. The incident that perhaps does most to indicate that the suffrage issue, and the suffragettes in particular, were not likely to damage the Liberals to the point of defeat in 1915 was the fate of George Lansbury. Lansbury, later relatively briefly Labour leader in the aftermath of the disastrous 1931 election, was highly committed to the introduction of women's suffrage. He represented the inner London seat of Bow and Bromley, which he had gained in December 1910 in a straight fight with a Conservative. He was certainly angered by the Liberal government's lack of action on the suffrage question, and in particular by the force-feeding of the suffragettes, on one well-known occasion crossing the floor of the House to shake his fist in Asquith's face, crying 'You'll go down in history as the man who tortured innocent women!'<sup>25</sup> Lansbury was further frustrated by the failure, as he perceived it, of the Labour Party to take clearer action in support of the women, and wanted the Labour Party to divorce itself from the Liberals over the issue, even if Liberal reforms were of

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benefit to the working class. Lacking support for his stance within both the NEC and the wider party, Lansbury quixotically resigned his seat over the issue and fought the resulting by-election as an independent. Lansbury again faced only one opponent, Reginald Blair, an anti-suffrage Conservative, with neither 'official' Labour nor the Liberals standing. Nevertheless, Lansbury lost his seat on a swing of just over 10 per cent, not apparently benefitting from the presence of upper-class suffragette support, especially when he endorsed militant tactics like window breaking. 'They are using you as a tool'<sup>26</sup>, one correspondent told Lansbury. His defeat was not in a typical by-election, but it certainly warned the Labour Party, and reassured the Liberal Party, that there were not automatic votes to be gained in supporting votes for women. This was the view of Ramsay MacDonald, who described the suffragettes as 'simply silly and provocative', and compared the working women of the country with 'these pettifogging middle class damsels'.<sup>27</sup> In the longer term, the Liberals perhaps were handicapped by the government's failure to enfranchise women, and by the measures that Asquith's government took against the suffragettes. As David Powell concludes, 'Even if the government was not in danger of being brought down, its image was tarnished and its reputation for liberalism (in the non-party sense) diminished'.<sup>28</sup> But the impact this had, obviously so in terms of the response of women voters, lay in the future. In the immediate term, that of what should have been the next general election, the electoral fate of George Lansbury warns us against an assumption that the failure to deliver votes for women would have significantly damaged Asquith's prospects of being returned to Downing Street once more.

Indeed, some have considered the Edwardian and pre-war era to be as much a 'Crisis of Conservatism' as one of Liberalism.<sup>29</sup> The party had suffered three successive election defeats – that Asquith's government was driven into dependence on the hated home rulers simply added to the Conservatives' impotent fury. Having said this, by 1914, by-election gains made them the largest party in the Commons. From 1910 to the outbreak of the First World War, when normal political rivalries were suspended, the Conservatives gained fourteen seats from the Liberals in addition to the two won from Labour. The Conservatives at the time took this as evidence that they were headed for victory, a viewpoint endorsed by some historians such as John Ramsden.<sup>30</sup> Nine of these sixteen gains came in three-cornered contests, a trend that accelerated over the course of the parliament. The last six Conservative gains, from Reading in November 1913 onwards, came in such contests. In each case, the official Labour or the Socialist candidate was third in the poll, often by a significant margin, but in all cases bar the very last such by-election at Ipswich in May 1914, the Labour/Socialist vote was greater than

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the Conservative majority. At Leith Burghs for example, in February 1914, the Unionist majority was a mere sixteen, with a Labour vote in third of over 3,000. The result in Crewe in 1912 was similar – a three-cornered contest which the Liberals lost with a sizeable Labour vote in third. The *Melbourne Argus* commented that 'Mr Murphy [the Liberal candidate] said that his defeat was due to a split in the progressive vote'.<sup>31</sup> It might be noted that such successes were no guarantee of general election success than similar occasions in more recent history when the by election trend has gone against a government only for it to be reversed when the general election comes.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, this has not always been the case, and the Liberals might have noted their own success in the by-elections leading up to 1906 as a strong indication of the outcome of that general election. The key point however, as the words of the defeated Mr Murphy indicate, seems to be the success of the Conservatives in three-cornered contests, which offered the starkest of warnings to both MacDonald and to the Liberal leadership of the likely result of the end of the Liberal-Labour electoral arrangement.

Focusing just on the by-election trends also tends to obscure the extent to which the policy positions that the Conservatives had adopted on a number of issues had left them with nowhere to go politically. Bonar Law offered strong leadership – which, as strong leadership often does, alienated groups within his own party. Fierce commitment to Ulster Unionism left Southern Unionists feeling abandoned, and was in danger of leaving the Conservatives held responsible for civil conflict. The party's attempt to compromise over protection – the offer of a referendum on tariffs – caused division when much of the party was committed to protection, but still left them vulnerable to the charge of opposing cheap food. Defence of the Lords had proved a political cul-de-sac. It was the Conservatives who now looked sectional – opposition to Liberal social reforms could be portrayed as basically selfish, an easy target for Lloyd George's demagogic talents. It was difficult to find positive reasons for voting Conservative, a fact acknowledged by F. E. Smith when he founded the Unionist Social Reform Committee in 1912 in an attempt to fill the gap. As Martin Pugh comments, the impact of the positions that the Conservatives took on a range of issues was to add to their 'alienation from the bulk of the working-class vote',<sup>33</sup> and in turn make it still less likely the Liberal-Labour alliance would fragment, given the common enemy.

Nor were the Liberals out of ideas. The 'New Liberalism' that had helped create a range of social reforms had not run its course by 1914. Whilst the 1914 budget ran into problems with the right-wing Liberal backbenchers, it does show that Lloyd George had hardly given up on progressive taxation. Increased death duties and a raised super tax were to pay for further state provision in

### Further reading

David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2004)

George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (Stanford University Press, 1998, originally 1935)

Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867–1945* (Blackwell, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 2002)

E. H. H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism* (Routledge, 1996)

Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party* (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

housing and for children. In 1913, Lloyd George launched the Land Campaign. If successful, this could revive the basis of the Liberals' 1906 victory – binding the working and middle classes together against the landed. The Liberal defence from the Conservatives in a by-election at North West Norfolk in 1912 by a candidate – E. G. Hemmerde – who concentrated on land reform indicated the potential of this campaign. By 1914, moreover, the previously unpopular National Insurance provisions had begun to bring political benefit to the Liberals as, ironically, unemployment rose due to a recession. The Tories, previously promising to repeal National Insurance, now had to assert that they would make it work better. Obviously, not everything was running the government's way – but the by-election trend that had previously benefited the Tories was now starting to turn in favour of the Liberals, with more successful defences than defeats from the summer of 1913 onwards. It is not an uncommon trend for governments to suffer mid-term losses then recover as an election draws close. It seems at least plausible that this was the case here. As Pugh comments, 'with the opposition at a disadvantage ... there are few grounds for thinking that the New Liberalism had been checked on the eve of war in 1914.'<sup>34</sup>

So if a 1915 election would not have witnessed the 'strange death of Liberal England', was all healthy in outlook for Asquith and his government? To adopt another famous image, Trevor Wilson argued that whilst experiencing 'symptoms of illness' such as Ireland or the suffragettes, the Liberal Party was in a state of relative health before the First World War, until, in Wilson's famous words, it 'was involved in an encounter with a rampant omnibus (the First World War) which mounted the pavement and ran him [the Liberal Party] over'<sup>35</sup> Wilson maintained that those who maintained that the 'bus' was irrelevant, or only successful due to the weakened state of the patient were mistaken. If it was guesswork to hold the First World War responsible for the Liberal party's decline and fall, then 'it is the most warrantable guess that can be made'<sup>36</sup>

This is perhaps too sanguine. The potential long-term damage of the issue of votes for women

has already been noted, and even without the outbreak of war, the strains caused by Sir Edward Grey's foreign policy were of some significance. Many of those who were to reject the Liberal Party for Labour after the war were to do it on the basis that Labour had proved itself more liberal than the Liberals, not more socialist, Charles Trevelyan and Josiah Wedgwood being cases in point. Even so, these were mainly the problems of the future – they do not necessarily indicate that the chance of success in 1915 was ebbing away. However, taking an optimistic view of the prospects of success in 1915 on the basis of by-elections has recently been challenged by Ian Packer.<sup>37</sup> Packer emphasises that there are limits to statistical extrapolation from by-elections as a tool to identify theoretical general election results, 'because trends in by-elections were prone to be upset by political developments'.<sup>38</sup> He highlights the uncertain and volatile situation in Ireland as a particular case in point. Packer also highlights the abolition of plural voting, believed to have critical in Conservative victories in nearly forty divisions in December 1910, as a crucial part of Liberal election strategy. (This was of especial significance in the light of the fall in the number of Irish MPs to forty-two if and when home rule finally went through.) The government's success in achieving the abolition of plural voting 'was crucial ... and might be decisive to the result'.<sup>39</sup> In summary, Packer's conclusion is that the result of the hypothetical 1915 election was that it was heading towards a closely fought context, in which 'the Conservatives probably still had the edge, but the margins were very small'.<sup>40</sup>

So does that lead us to the conclusion that the scenario outlined at the beginning of this article would have been likely if there had been no First World War? I remain unpersuaded. The more plausible scenario is that the Liberals would have retained power, as long as they continued to have the backing of Labour and the home rulers. An overall majority, a repeat of 1906, would have been highly unlikely. But Asquith did not need this, as long as Redmond and MacDonald stayed loyal. And whilst the Conservatives remained committed to Ulster Unionism, to protection, and to Bonar Law's hard-line approach generally, that unity was unlikely to fracture. It was in the interests of the Labour Party to maintain the Progressive Alliance, as much as it was in the interests of the Liberals. Philip Snowden in his memoirs maintained that, without the electoral arrangements, 'not half a dozen Labour members would have been returned'.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, if a Liberal government of the future did enfranchise women, or some women, this would presumably be part of a package that would include the abolition of plural voting, which would significantly weaken the prospects for the Conservatives. Even in the meantime, the Liberal and Labour parties, in the 'Progressive Alliance', complemented each other. Both had weaknesses, but to 1914, their

strengths were more significant, reinforced by the political positions that the Tories adopted under Bonar Law. In the words of Duncan Tanner, ‘The Progressive Alliance was an almost uniquely attractive anti-Tory force ... Labour’s positive appeal was so localised (and so complimentary to the Liberal Party) that co-operation ... was pragmatically sensible’.<sup>42</sup> Whilst Bonar Law looked to the right, and the Liberals remained engaged in reform, and in control of the alliance with Labour, the likelihood of the 1915 election not resulting in Asquith remaining in Number Ten seems slim.

Back in 1903, Jesse Herbert had told Herbert Gladstone, ‘If there be good fellowship between us and the LRC, the aspect of the future for both will be very bright and encouraging’.<sup>43</sup> There is little reason to assume that this would not have continued to be the case. Whilst it did so, the evidence would point to an election result very similar to those of January and December 1910. The by-election record itself was one very strong argument for the Progressive Alliance to continue, as the no doubt disgruntled Harold Murphy of the Crewe by-election could emphasise. The troubled situation in Ireland was another powerful incentive to keep together and not let the Tories in, and was probably the reason for an approach by Lloyd George to MacDonald in March 1914 to enquire about the possibility of a formal coalition. So it seems a reasonable conclusion that, if Britain had avoided the First World War, at least a government led and dominated by Liberals would have continued to rule Britain, with Labour still a broadly willing ally and the Conservatives remaining in opposition. Progressivism in 1915 still had the capacity, if only just, to build an election-winning coalition of voters.

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1 George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (pub. 1935; repub. Serif, 1997).  
 2 *Ibid.*, p. 11.  
 3 A. N. Wilson, *After the Victorians* (Arrow Books, 2006), p. 127.  
 4 *Ibid.*, p. 106.  
 5 Alan O’Day (ed.), *The Edwardian Age, Conflict and Stability 1900–1914*, Problems in Focus series (MacMillan, 1979).

6 Not that there is anything necessarily sinister about this – a similar point could be made about historians and the Liberal Party.  
 7 R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910–1924* (Oxford, 1974), p. 244.  
 8 Keith Laybourn, ‘The Rise of the Labour Party’, *Modern History Review*, Sep. 1998.  
 9 Henry Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (MacMillan, 1968), ch. 8.  
 10 The electoral contest between the Liberal and Labour parties is discussed in more detail in P. F. Clarke, ‘The electoral position of the Liberal and Labour Parties 1910–1914’, *English Historical Review*, 1975.  
 11 David Powell, *The Edwardian Crisis* (Palgrave, 1996), p. 113.  
 12 *Ibid.*, p. 92.  
 13 Quoted in Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn., Blackwell, 2002).  
 14 This is discussed in greater detail, along with giving many of the specific voting statistics, in Pugh, *Making of Modern British Politics*, pp. 130–5.  
 15 McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*.  
 16 Figures from Pugh, *Making of Modern British Politics*, p. 144.  
 17 H. C. G. Matthew, R. I. McKibbin and J. A. Kay, ‘The Franchise Factor and the Rise of the Labour Party’, *English Historical Review*, 1976.  
 18 E.g. in Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour 1890–1918* (Taylor and Francis, 1984).  
 19 Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain, A New History of the Labour Party* (Vintage, 2011), p. 92.  
 20 See, for example, Patricia Jalland, *The Liberals and Ireland*, (new edn., Gregg Revivals, 1993).  
 21 Speech at Unionist rally at Blenheim Palace, quoted in *The Times*, 29 Jul. 1912.  
 22 Title of article by Jeremy Smith – ‘Bluff, bluster and brinkmanship: Andrew Bonar Law and the Third Home Rule Bill’, *Historical Journal*, 1993.  
 23 See Richard Murphy, ‘Faction and the Home Rule Crisis 1912–14’, *History*, 71, June 1986.  
 24 Those who attended the Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting at the Birmingham Assembly on 19 Sep. 2011 will have heard Dame Shirley Williams discuss this point and come to different conclusions.  
 25 Quoted in, among other sources, Paula Bartley, *Votes for Women 1860–1928* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1998).  
 26 In a letter from George Saunders Jacobs to George Lansbury, quoted in Pugh, *Speak for Britain*, p. 94.  
 27 Quoted in David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 148.  
 28 Powell, *Edwardian Crisis*, p. 93.  
 29 E. H. H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism* (Routledge, 1996).  
 30 John Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin* (Longman, 1978), p. 86.  
 31 Quoted in the *Melbourne Argus*, 29 Jul. 1912; accessed at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/10517853>.  
 32 Readers of this journal will doubtless not need reminding, for comparison’s sake, of the by-election record of the Conservative government from 1987 to 1992, which lost seven by-elections in succession and recovered them all in winning the 1992 general election. The same pattern was evident from 1895 to 1900, where the Conservatives lost eleven seats but won the 1900 election  
 33 Pugh, *Making of Modern British Politics*, p. 120.  
 34 *Ibid.*, p. 123.  
 35 Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–35* (Collins, 1966), p. 18.  
 36 *Ibid.*, p. 18.  
 37 Ian Packer, ‘Contested Ground: Trends in British by-elections 1911–14’, *Contemporary British History*, Jan. 2011.  
 38 *Ibid.*, p. 163.  
 39 *Ibid.*, p. 169.  
 40 *Ibid.*, p. 170.  
 41 Philip Snowden, *An Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 218, quoted in Packer, ‘Contested Ground’, p. 161.  
 42 Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 190–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 424–425  
 43 Letter from Jesse Herbert to Herbert Gladstone, 6 Mar. 1903, quoted in Frank Bealey, ‘Negotiations between the Liberal party and the Labour Representation Committee before the General Election of 1906’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 29/30, 1956/7.

## Future History Group meetings

- Sunday 17 September 2017, Liberal Democrat conference, Bournemouth: joint meeting with the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, marking the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Association of Liberal Councillors (see back page for full details).
- January/February 2018, National Liberal Club, London: The 2017 election in historical perspective; speakers to be announced (and History Group AGM).
- 9 or 10 March 2018, Liberal Democrat conference, Southport: fringe meeting, details to be announced.