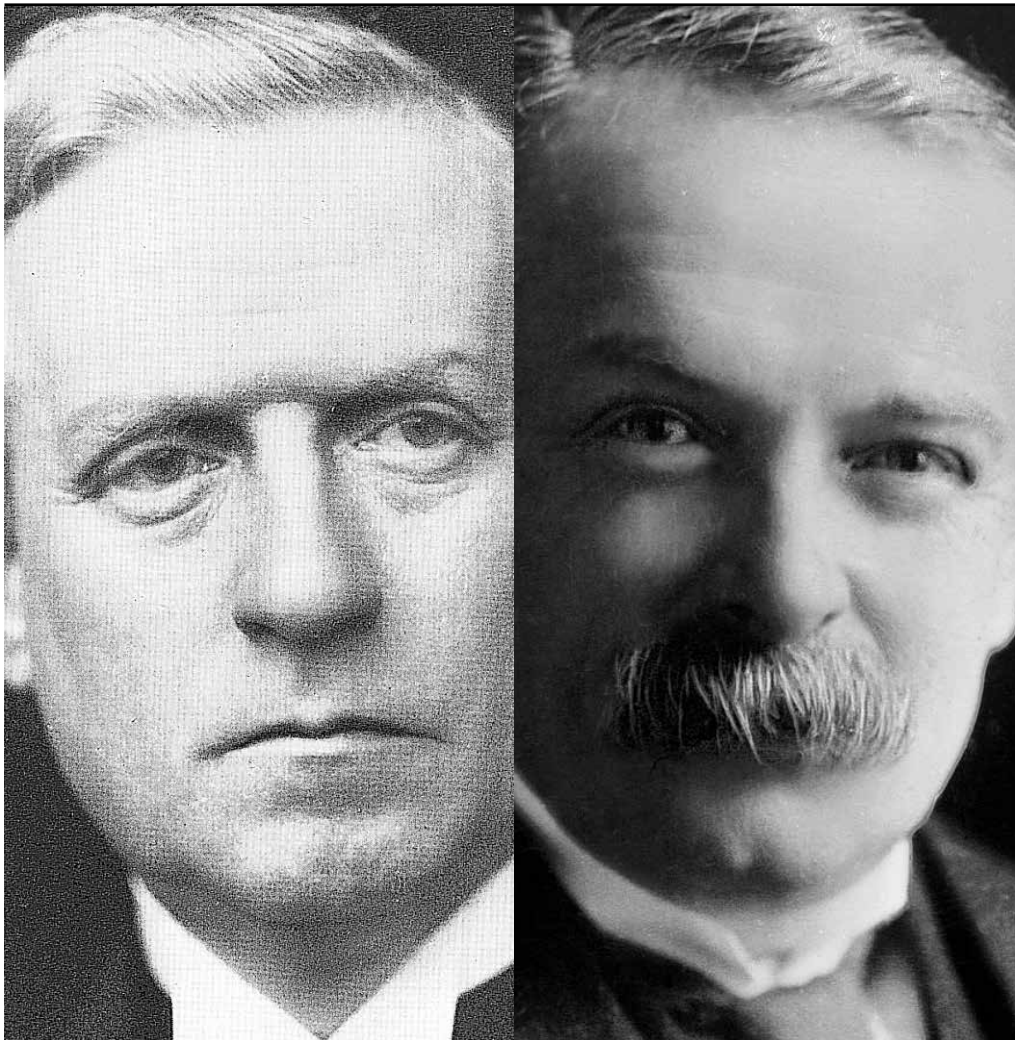


# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## The election that never was

Ian Garrett

**The Liberal Party and the general election of 1915** What would have happened?

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Trevor Smith

**The New Orbits Group, 1958 – c.1962** Modernising the Liberal Party

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Alun Wyburn-Powell

**Liberal defectors and the First World War**

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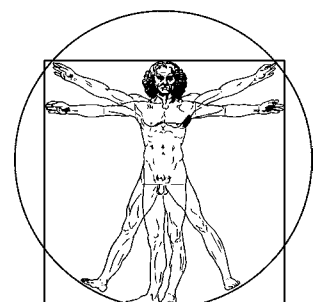
**The changing face of election campaigning** Interview with Chris Rennard

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Report

**Who rules? Parliament, people or the Prime Minister?** History Group meeting

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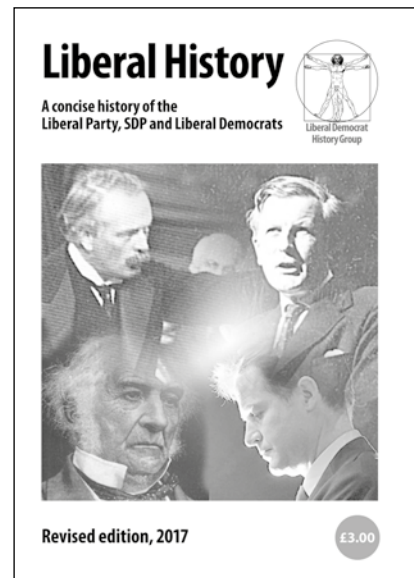
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**Counterfactual**

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

**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.**

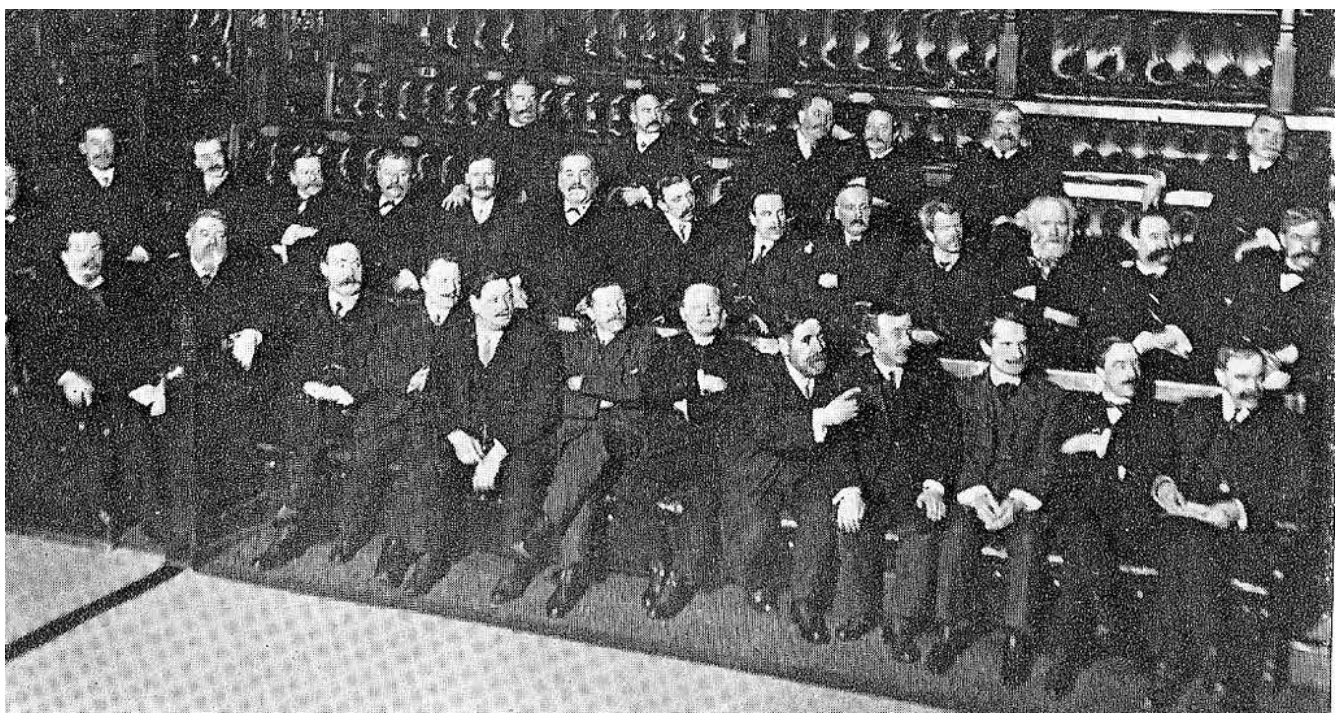
to 29 per cent in December 1910.<sup>14</sup> None of these individual pieces of evidence is conclusive, but the cumulative picture that they present is persuasive. Labour was not in a position to challenge Asquith's government in an election with any real prospects of even significantly enlarging the 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

**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.**

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.

# The New Orbits Group, 1958 – c.1962

THE NEW ORBITS Group has been little recognised in the histories of the modern Liberal Party. In two, otherwise relatively comprehensive, accounts – David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party* (2004), and Roy Douglas, *Liberals: A History of the Liberal Party* (2005) – no reference is made to the group. Arthur Cyr, in his *Liberal Politics in Britain* (1988), gives it a sentence: ‘It was during this period (late 1950s/early 1960s) that the New Orbits Group, a discussion club of younger Liberal Party activists, began publishing periodic essays to promote thought and controversy.’ At least he gave the group a mention, even though his description was in error: it was not ‘a club’, being run under the joint auspices of the Young Liberals and Student Liberals. The two chairs of these integral parts of the Liberal Party were co-vice chairs of the group, while Frank Ware was selected a ‘neutral’ chair between the two youth organisations. In its first four years, the group played a not insignificant role within the Liberal Party, which merits being more fully recorded.

The 1950s were a woeful time for the party. It was reduced to five MPs, two of whom, Donald Wade in Huddersfield West and Arthur Holt in Bolton East, held their seats by courtesy of a Lib-Con pact in both towns. The most promising likely future leader, Frank Byers, had lost his seat in Dorset in 1951 and the party continued to be led by the ageing and heavy-drinking Clement Davies. The only lively parts of the party were the Radical Reform Group, led by Desmond (later Lord) Banks and Manuela Sykes (who regularly contested Dingle Foot, the Labour MP for Ipswich). The RRG met in her Covent Garden café after closing hours; she later joined the Labour Party.

The other radically vibrant element was to be found among the younger members of the party. In those days, Liberal youth was divided between two organisations: the National League of Young Liberals (NLYL) and the Union of University Liberal Societies (UULS). Despite this formal division, many young graduates joined the NLYL which at the time had its main territorial strength in the north-west of England. Griff (later Lord) Evans was its chairman who was succeeded in turn by Barbara Burwell and then Timothy Joyce. The UULS’ main strength derived from Cambridge University and included such luminaries as George Watson, Richard Moore and Derrick Mirfin. Watson, who became secretary of the

Unservile State Group (an intellectual group of Liberals not formally attached to the party), was an English don at St John’s and author of a couple of books on Liberalism. Moore became an adviser to Jeremy Thorpe while the latter was leader, and Mirfin became secretary-general of the UK branch of Liberal International; both contested many general elections.

I had joined the LSE Liberal Society in 1955, becoming first its chair and subsequently chair of UULS in 1958. I contrived to change the title of UULS to the Union of Liberal Students (ULS) as I thought a rather loose confederal organisation would make less impact than a more unitary one. I had succeeded Roger Straker, a scion of the well-known stationery and printing family firm. He later gained a senior HR director’s position with London Transport. In turn, I was succeeded by David (later Lord) Lea, also from Cambridge, who later joined the Labour Party and rose to become assistant general secretary of the TUC.

At that time chairs of both NLYL and ULS were ex-officio members of the Liberal Party executive. Joining it in 1958, at the age of 20, I was the youngest member, Barbara Burwell being ten years older; the next youngest was Richard Wainwright then aged 40. I found membership of the executive a rapidly maturing experience! NLYL and ULS worked closely together by means of a joint political committee (JPC), which had been formed in 1957.

The major precipitating event for the formation of the group was the Liberal Party conference of 1958, held in Torquay. It was an organisational fiasco and it was this which prompted the JPC to attempt remedial action. Jo Grimond, the new-ish leader of the Liberal Party made an excellent speech, but it was overshadowed by the quite disastrous chairmanship of Sir Arthur Comyns Carr, QC. A distinguished lawyer and a very active Liberal, he had contested no less than eleven parliamentary seats, with a brief sojourn as an MP for a year between 1923 and 1924. He had been one of the leading prosecutors at the Japanese War Crimes tribunals after the Second World War. By 1958, however, he was 76 years old and long past his prime. Nevertheless, he still behaved in ways that had stood him in good stead throughout his career. He eschewed the use of a microphone, believing that his voice was resonant enough to be heard throughout the large hall – it was not. Appearing Emperor Hirohito-like, he wore a wing-collared shirt, black jacket and striped

**What did the New Orbits Group achieve? It contributed to the modernisation of the party under Grimond and showed that the party was capable of imaginative policy-making across a broad range of the public agenda.**

trousers and thus hardly presented the modern face of Liberalism which Grimond was trying to promote.

1958 was exactly one year before the next general election was due. The one cause for optimism had been the election of Mark Bonham-Carter in the Torrington by-election. The JPC was galvanised into taking a new initiative in the wake of Torrington, but even more by the disastrous handling of the 1958 Torquay Assembly.

It set up study groups amongst NLYL branches and university societies during the autumn of 1958. The results of these were analysed and summarised and brought together in a substantial booklet of some seventy pages called *New Orbits*. I had suggested the title as it reflected the main event of the time, which was the successful Soviet sputnik circumnavigation of the globe that was soon to lead to Yuri Gagarin's first human venture into space. The title sought, in a more modest way, to capture a similar sense of experiment and excitement within the Liberal Party.

The pamphlet was presented for discussion and endorsement to what we called the Operation Manifesto Congress in Manchester on 18 and 19 April 1959, just five months before the general election in the following September.

Manchester was a resounding success. It attracted many Young and Student Liberals and, indeed, was addressed by Jo Grimond himself. Anthony Howard, then a junior reporter and editorial leader writer at the *Manchester Guardian*, was sent to cover the Congress. An ardent Labour supporter and not in any sense a natural Liberal (he was later to become editor of the *New Statesman*), he nevertheless wrote an admiring leader and report of the congress in the newspaper, then editorially committed to the aims of the Liberal Party.

The New Orbits Group was the name given to the old JPC. Its senior participants comprised a very talented group. It included Tony Miller, Tony Stowell, Tony Lloyd, James Crossley, Griff Evans, Barbara Burwell, Frank Ware and Ronnie Fraser. Undoubtedly, the finest mind was that of Timothy Joyce, who was completing his PhD in the Moral Sciences at Cambridge. He later became a very successful businessman in the field of market research. He ultimately became chief executive of J. Walter Thompson, selling the firm at a high price and buying it back at a low one, thereby making a personal fortune. He had suffered from polio as a child which contributed to his all too premature death. Frank Ware, at the time, was the youthful head of the Liberal Party research department where he was assisted by James Crossley (who also died prematurely) and Peter Landell-Mills, who later founded a successful agricultural economics international consultancy firm. Another member was Sarah Myers, had been very active in the UULS while at Oxford and later became a journalist on the *Times Educational Supplement*.

A number of quite original policy papers were published as pamphlets in the subsequent next two years. The first was called *High Time for Radicals* and was a collective essay by eight leading members of the New Orbits Group; again, I had suggested the title. It touched on a number of themes, both of a policy kind and about how to improve the professionalism of the party itself. Its sub-title, 'A Discussion on the Future of the Left', indicated that the group sought to be left of centre in its orientation. There followed some ten pamphlets on a wide variety of subjects, including: the Central African Federation; the role of trade and aid in the world, to which John Williamson



Jo Grimond (Leader of the Liberal Party, 1956–67) with Eric Lubbock, winner of the Orpington by-election in 1962

**The advent of the New Orbits Group straddled two eras: that of an older order in the party, with its very heavy intellectual and organisational baggage, and an emerging, rather fragile new one.**

contributed (he was to become a leading international economist); *5 Year Plan* by Frank Ware; *New Unions for Old*, dealing with the reform of the trade union movement, written by Roger Cuss, Maurice Gent (later a BBC correspondent) and myself (later a university vice-chancellor); as well as *Teaching – A Proposal for an Institute of Teachers*, long before the idea such an institute became fashionable and it was created.

If Timothy Joyce and Frank Ware provided much of the intellectual stimulus, Barbara Burwell provided the group's organisational leadership. The group formally continued until 1968, but the founders left as they moved on in their separate careers.

What did the New Orbits Group achieve? It contributed to the modernisation of the party under Grimond and showed that the party was capable of imaginative policy-making across a broad range of the public agenda. Its main achievement lay in the recruitment of exceptional young talented activists, which galvanised the younger wing of the party over a longer period of time. The New Orbits Group was followed by what became known as 'the Red Guard' which had its origins in Manchester University and attracted the likes of Lawrence Friedman, then a student there. He later became Professor Sir Lawrence Friedman, FBA, and official historian of the Falklands War, who also sat on the official inquiry into the invasion of Iraq. Tony Greaves from Oxford, was also a member of this group and became chair of ULS; he later worked for the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and is now a life peer.

The tradition of dissent continued in the Young Liberals especially while Peter Hain was its chairman. He was a student of mine at Queen Mary College, London where simultaneously he was leading the successful *Stop the Seventy Tour* campaign, designed to prevent the South African

cricket team coming to Britain. He later became Labour MP for Neath, a cabinet minister and then a life peer. The JPC was a portent in the formation of the Young Liberals, which now represents both university students and young Liberal democrats within the Lib Dems.

The advent of the New Orbits Group straddled two eras: that of an older order in the party, with its very heavy intellectual and organisational baggage, and an emerging, rather fragile new one. Sir Arthur Comyns-Carr personified the older element, together with the Rt Hon. H. Graham White. The latter had been MP for Birkenhead from 1920 to 1924 and again from 1929 to 1945. He had had a year in office as assistant postmaster general from 1931 to 1932, the lowest ministerial rank but one which accorded him a Privy Councillorship. Like Comyns-Carr, he was born in the 1880s and both died in 1965.

The members of the New Orbits Group were aware of the residual influence of these older luminaries, which possibly accounted for the 'Young Fogey' character of the group. This was intentional so as to appear reformist rather than revolutionary and thus not gratuitously upset the older generation. But they were very alive to the need for radical new departures if the Liberal Party was to survive and flourish. And these new departures took root: seen as contributing to Eric Lubbock's famous Orpington parliamentary by-election victory, the new order within the Liberal Party became firmly established.

*Trevor Smith (Professor Lord Smith of Clifton) was an academic who taught at the universities of Exeter, Hull, York and Queen Mary, London. He ended his career as Vice-Chancellor of Ulster University. From 1970 to 2006 he was closely associated with the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, which was the main source of income for the Liberal Party. Knighted in 1996, he became a Liberal Democrat life peer the following year.*

## Corrigenda

### *Journal of Liberal History* 93 (winter 2016–17) – 'Trevor Jones (1927–2016): An Appreciation'

p. 4 Trevor Jones was first elected as a councillor in 1968, not 1970. In 1962 another Liberal councillor, Joe Wilmington, was elected alongside Cyril Carr.

### *Journal of Liberal History* 93 (winter 2016–17) – Letters to the Editor: 'Liberal Clubs' (Michael Steed)

p. 17 In fact there were six (not five) constituencies in Great Britain where Labour never once overtook the Liberal vote; the seat not mentioned was Bodmin, which, like the others, had a tiny industrial working-class vote.

### *Journal of Liberal History* 93 (winter 2016–17) – Report: the legacy of Roy Jenkins

p. 39 David Owen was Foreign Secretary, not Home Secretary

### *Journal of Liberal History* 94 (spring 2017) – Churchill Archives Centre

p. 33: Leslie Hore-Belisha was never a Conservative MP. MP for Devonport 1923–45, he was elected on three occasions as a Liberal (1923, 1924, 1929), then twice as a Liberal National (1931, 1935). He sat finally as a 'National' member, under which label he lost his seat in 1945.

### *Journal of Liberal History* 94 (spring 2017) – Reviews: Kirkup, *The Lib-Lab Pact*

p. 35: the two references to the 1970 election at the top of the page should be to the February 1974 election.

# Letters to the Editor

## Liberal Democrats and the Coalition

The account in the *Journal* (issue 94, spring 2017) of the autumn conference discussion on whether the Liberal Democrats could have handled the Coalition better made interesting reading. I am grateful to Neil Stockley for his careful and detailed report of the meeting.

The organisers, however, could have set up a more representative meeting that might have enabled dispassionate conclusions to be drawn. Three of the four on the top table (David Laws, Chris Huhne, and Jo Swinson) were at various times ministers in the coalition government. No articulate critic of Lib Dem participation in the coalition seems to have been chosen as a main speaker. This is unfortunate since, regardless of one's view on whether it was desirable or indeed necessary to enter a coalition with the Conservatives, there are many valid points to be made about tactical and strategic mistakes made by the Lib Dems in coalition, and how these led directly to the dreadful general election results of 2015 and 2017.

It also seems that no serious challenge was mounted to the extraordinary assertion that: 'smaller parties almost always suffer at the ballot box. The senior partner claims credit for popular policies and achievements, and leaves the junior partner to take the blame for unpopular features of the government's performance'. This nonsense is often repeated by defenders of how the coalition was managed – most recently by Nick Clegg at the Scottish Lib Dem conference in March of this year. It is just not true. Consider the FDP in Germany, for instance. They were partners in successive coalitions with Christian Democrats and Socialists in Germany from 1950 to 1990 without noticeable effect on their support, which fluctuated between 6 and 10 per cent for most of that period. Being junior partner in a coalition didn't particularly harm them. Their popularity waned only when they later swapped Liberalism for neo-liberalism in an ill-fated attempt to become a 'party for business'.

Nor is it necessary to look to the continent for examples. In Scotland, Liberal Democrats entered coalition as the junior partner with Labour in 1999 and suffered no damage at all in the subsequent election. They entered another,

more detailed, coalition with Labour in 2003 and again did well at the general election that followed. Key to this success was that long-standing, radical Liberal policies were written into an explicit programme for government and then implemented. Among these was the abolition of tuition fees, promised and successfully delivered. Other Liberal policies implemented include free personal care for the elderly, land reform, and PR for local government elections. If Lib Dems in the 2010 Westminster coalition could be shown to have achieved such radical change, the later political landscape might have been very different.

Instead, the 2010 Westminster coalition's achievements seem paltry in retrospect. Failures such as the AV referendum (lost); the Green Investment Bank (now sold to a hedge fund); the Fixed-term Parliament Act (didn't prevent the 2017 election); and chaos over tuition fees weigh heavily in the balance against successes like the pupil premium and the triple lock on pensions (still in place at the time of writing). Raising the income tax threshold benefited high earners as well as those on low (but not very low) incomes and therefore had only limited effect on combating poverty.

In the Scottish coalition, Liberal Democrats took senior government positions and enforced true collective responsibility among ministers. Arguably a similar approach in 2010, with Lib Dems taking at least one of the great offices of state, would have increased the profile of Lib Dems. It might also have enforced collective responsibility more fully, thereby preventing Tory adventurism such as David Cameron's exercise of the UK veto in the EU and Lansley's disastrous NHS reforms. Instead, Nick Clegg took the largely meaningless post of Deputy Prime Minister (as John Prescott's successor!) and decided to concentrate on constitutional matters. These included our relationship with Europe, the AV referendum, and reform of the House of Lords. I leave your readers to judge what a success was made of those.

Ross Finnie – a former MSP and Scottish minister – has written convincingly about the perception of political closeness between Lib Dems and Conservatives created by the image and

mood music of the 2010 coalition, so it is unnecessary to elaborate on that.<sup>1</sup> It may, however, be worth quoting just one sentence from his article: 'Whether the exercise of taking a party which had spent 60 years establishing itself as a radical party of the centre-left into a coalition with the Conservatives could ever have been achieved without electoral damage remains a moot point.' And there is the crux of the matter. Electoral disaster results not from being a junior partner in a coalition, but from your choice of whom to coalesce with, and how you do it.

It might also have been worthwhile for the autumn conference discussion to have considered the one formal attempt made during the life of the Coalition to examine how it was being handled. In 2012 the Scottish Liberal Democrats' spring conference voted to establish a Commission 'to evaluate the progress and achievements of the Coalition after its first two years in office, so far as they affect Scotland'. That Commission held a number of meetings and brought recommendations to the party in the following year.

The Commission's recommendations were all approved, almost unanimously, by the Scottish party conference in 2013. Four years on, they can be seen as a cry for help from the membership, and as ways in which the party could have been strengthened and Liberal Democrat presence in government made more effective. Sadly, however, although I understand they were transmitted to the UK leadership, the leadership took no action on them and passed up the opportunity to engage in any dialogue with the Commission and its members.

There is much still to discuss about the 2010 coalition and how it was handled. It is to be hoped that the debate can be taken further at future meetings. But next time, please let us have a panel of speakers that balances those who were involved in the coalition with people outside it who have a different story to tell.

*Nigel Lindsay*

<sup>1</sup> Ross Finnie, 'From coalitions with the Conservatives to a coalition with the Conservatives', in *Unlocking Liberalism* (FastPrint, 2014).

## The First World War and the Liberal Party

Alun Wyburn-Powell analyses the impact of the Great War on defections from the party

# Liberal Defectors and

**T**HE LIBERAL PARTY declined from 400 MPs in 1906 to just 40 in 1924. The extent to which the First World War was the main cause of the party's decline is still a source of historical controversy. Some, mainly earlier, commentators believed that the reasons for the decline predated the First World War. Many others cite the war itself as the major cause, while some consider that the party received most of its near-fatal damage after the war. In my work I have analysed all the individual defections of sitting and former Liberal MPs in the hundred years from 1910 to discover when each made their decision to abandon the party and what motivated their defection. This analysis sheds light on the state of the Liberal Party as seen by its elected representatives before, during and after the First World War and tends to focus the search for the causes of the party's decline onto the period after the war.

Analysing patterns of defections between parties can reveal much about the state of health of each party at a particular point in time. Parties are affected by defections of donors, peers, councillors and other supporters, but the most visible and quantifiable of defections are those by MPs. They are well informed and have much at stake in terms of their careers and reputations. Virtually all leave written records and other evidence of their motivation. Defection is not a decision taken lightly. It is usually an emotional event, played out in public. Each defection by an MP is therefore an expert judgment on the state of a party and its leader at a specific point in time. A planned defection could have been aborted at any time, had the circumstances changed. With a few prominent exceptions, most notably Winston Churchill, defections usually tend to be permanent. Studying the timing and reasons for defections to and from the Liberal Party therefore focuses attention on times of crucial strains within the party.

In 1886 the Liberal Unionists split from the Liberal Party over the issue of Irish home rule.

This was a serious blow to the Liberal Party, which subsequently only held power for three years out of the following twenty. However, the party remained relatively cohesive during this time. This was despite Gladstone's retirement in 1894 and the attendant problems thrown up when a long-serving leader departs, leaving a party dominated by their appointments, policies and image. In the period leading up to the First World War the Liberal Party was the beneficiary of a net inward migration of defecting MPs – the most prominent among them being Winston Churchill, Jack Seely and the Guest brothers in 1904 from the Conservatives. This supports the assertion of the party being in good health at this stage and argues against theories of a pre-war decline, which have been proposed by commentators such as George Dangerfield,<sup>1</sup> Ross McKibbin<sup>2</sup> and Henry Pelling.<sup>3</sup>

From 1903 until the First World War the Liberals worked in alliance with the nascent Labour Party, under the Gladstone–MacDonald pact, involving informal electoral cooperation. By 1906 the Liberal Party had recovered sufficiently to win a landslide general election victory with 400 seats, and further support from Labour's thirty MPs. A Liberal government was re-elected in the January 1910 general election, albeit without an overall majority. In the December 1910 election, the last before the war, the result was almost identical, although the Liberal share of the vote actually increased marginally from 43.2 per cent of the vote to 43.9 per cent. The Liberal Party still had over 270 MPs. This total compares favourably with the Conservatives' pre-war nadir of only 157 MPs.

Yet by 1924 the Liberal Party was reduced to only one-tenth of its 1906 figure, with the Labour Party firmly installed as the second party to the Conservatives, and with many former Liberals having defected to Labour. The single biggest event in the intervening period was the First World War and it is tempting to assume that this

**Analysing patterns of defections between parties can reveal much about the state of health of each party at a particular point in time.**



# d the First World War

was the reason for the party's decline, as did commentators Trevor Wilson,<sup>4</sup> Duncan Tanner<sup>5</sup> and Michael Bentley,<sup>6</sup> with more recent support from other historians, including David Dutton, who argued that 'the more evidence that has been accumulated to show that the Liberal Party was in no imminent danger of collapse in 1914, the more significance must be attached to the war as the key explanation of what subsequently occurred'.<sup>7</sup> However, analysis of the scale and timing of defections associated with the war suggests that, with few exceptions, Liberal MPs did not give up their confidence in the party until after the war.

The outbreak of the First World War on 3 August 1914 caused instinctive patriotic unity among Conservatives, a split from top to bottom in the Labour Party and a divergence of views among Liberals – soon to be demonstrated by the gulf between those who joined the anti-war Union of Democratic Control (UDC) and the fervently pro-war Liberal War Committee (LWC). However, it also heralded an electoral truce and a delay in the next general election, depriving historians of the evidence on the health of the parties usually shown up in election results.

In the very early days of the UDC, its founders believed that they were representative of a large body of Liberal opinion and that they were seeking Labour support merely to strengthen their argument. However, Ramsay MacDonald, who had resigned the Labour Party leadership on the outbreak of war, emerged as a leading figure in the UDC. He confided to his diary that his leadership had been futile and that the Labour Party was 'no party in reality'.<sup>8</sup> By collaborating with MacDonald, the dissenting Liberals were certainly not motivated by any future career prospects within the Labour Party. Until mid-September 1914, the founders of the UDC had reason to believe that Lloyd George might have joined them and carried with him a substantial number of left-wing Liberals. Lloyd George claimed that he had resigned from the cabinet on

1 August over Foreign Secretary Grey's pledges to France, but that Asquith had persuaded him to remain. Lloyd George had described his position as that of 'an unattached member of the Cabinet' who sat 'very lightly'.<sup>9</sup>

The key issue during the war, which has been blamed in large measure for the Liberal Party's problems, was the controversy over conscription, which had never before been enforced in Britain and which was regarded by many as the antithesis of liberalism.

The Conservative Party, the majority of Liberals and most of the Labour movement decided to back the war effort and support the voluntary recruiting drive which operated at the beginning of the First World War. The dissenters who opposed the war, and did not support the voluntary recruitment drive, were a small proportion of the House of Commons. They became labelled as 'pacifists', even though they represented a wide range of views, all opposed to the war, but from many different standpoints. Membership of the UDC did not necessarily imply pacifism. Liberal MPs who were Quakers, such as Arnold Rowntree and Edmund Harvey, objected to war on religious grounds, and were genuinely pacifist. Many others, such as Richard Denman, were opposed on political, economic or diplomatic grounds, but were not pacifists. However, their isolation from mainstream political opinion and, increasingly, their shared vilification in the press and in the street, brought them together for mutual support with members of the Labour Party and in particular, Ramsay MacDonald.

A majority of Liberal MPs supported all the moves towards military recruitment – the key legislation being the Registration Bill of July 1915, the Bachelors' Bill of January 1916 and full conscription in May 1916. Within this supportive majority, there was a group wholeheartedly advocating conscription, including Freddie Guest, Henry Cowan and Alfred Mond, all of whom later defected to the Conservatives. Other

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## Liberal Defectors and the First World War

prominent pro-conscriptionists included Cathcart Wason, Ivor Herbert, Frederick Cawley and Edwin Cornwall, who remained within the Liberal Party. But also included among the pro-conscriptionists were Josiah Wedgwood, Leo Chiozza Money and Alexander MacCallum Scott, who all eventually defected to Labour. It was hard to imagine a group of Liberals more diverse in their wider political opinions than those who came to embrace conscription. The Liberal conscriptionists included a number of very wealthy industrialists, but their ranks also contained a significant number of MPs who had been enthusiastic social reformers before the war.<sup>10</sup>

The existence of a group of Liberal MPs strongly supporting conscription added to the tensions within the party and further alienated some of the most ardent anti-conscriptionists. Freddie Guest, founder of the Liberal War Committee in 1916, was among the most outspoken of the pro-conscriptionists. *The Nation* reported that Guest's 'extreme' stance on the question of compulsion divided the conscriptionists, 'the more moderate openly dissociating themselves' from him.<sup>11</sup> This was an early example of Guest's ability to alienate like-minded colleagues: He was to become one of the most divisive figures in the party after the war. At the outbreak of war, Guest had enthusiastically re-joined the army, setting an example which he encouraged others to follow. Many other Liberal MPs did join the forces and six were killed in action.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst the UDC members always opposed conscription, they were not alone in the Commons in the first month of the war. At this stage, the Liberal cabinet on balance was opposed to conscription, as was the Conservative leader, Bonar Law. However, by November 1914 Bonar Law began to accept that conscription would become necessary, if sufficient volunteers were not forthcoming.<sup>13</sup> Lloyd George was also coming to the conclusion that compulsion could become necessary, but the lack of munitions delayed his demand for its introduction, as the shell shortage was more acute than the lack of troops.

Serious cracks within the Liberal Party were demonstrated in the parliamentary votes on conscription, but their scale was limited. Twenty-five Liberal MPs voted against the Registration Bill, six weeks after the formation of the Asquith coalition in 1915. When compulsion became inevitable after the limited achievements of the Derby Scheme, Asquith introduced the Bachelors' Bill on 5 January 1916. It was presented not as conscription, but as redemption of his pledge to married men, that single men would be called up ahead of them. Over thirty Liberals this time voted against the bill. John Simon resigned as home secretary. Reginald McKenna was opposed on practical and financial grounds, believing that the economy could not support a larger army, but he was persuaded to stay. The mounting military

losses meant that, on 3 May 1916, Asquith had to introduce the Military Services Bill. It provided for all men, regardless of marital status, between 18 and 41 to be conscripted. Twenty-eight Liberals voted against this measure.

Asquith had continued as prime minister after the Liberal Party was forced into coalition with the other parties in May 1915, but his abilities as a peacetime leader did not, in the view of many, translate him into an effective and decisive wartime prime minister. He had some loyal adherents, whose faith in him was unshakable, such as Reginald McKenna and William Wedgwood Benn, but others who looked for a more decisive new leader. Lloyd George emerged as that figure. Almost inevitably, there was antagonism between the supporters of the two figures and almost all of the Asquith supporters who were offered positions in Lloyd George's coalition in December 1916 turned down the posts.

The formation of the Lloyd George coalition heralded a period of turmoil for party politics. Most European socialist parties split over the war, and in Britain, adherence to the existing party system was challenged on several fronts. Arthur Henderson told Ramsay MacDonald that some Labour ministers 'do not mean to return to the Party', believing that Lloyd George wanted to form new party and that 'some Labour men will join him.'<sup>14</sup>

In total, thirty-five Liberal MPs dissented to the extent that they voted against at least two of the three conscription measures, or abstained on two and voted against the third. Historian Michael Hart claimed that constituency Liberal associations would not tolerate the continuation of wartime objectors in parliament and that this was a major cause of the decline of the Liberal Party.<sup>15</sup> However, this was rarely the case, as is shown in Table 1, which charts the electoral fate of all thirty-five of the Liberal dissenters.

For twenty-eight of the thirty-five Liberal MPs (80 per cent) who were wartime dissenters, their wartime stance was not a barrier to their future careers in the Liberal Party. In many cases their careers suffered setbacks, but this was the case with virtually all Liberals, due to the overall state of the party.

Just seven MPs defected from the Liberal Party entirely or partly because of the war: Richard Lambert, Joseph King, Arthur Ponsonby, Charles Trevelyan and Robert Outhwaite left the party entirely because of the war; while Bertie Lees-Smith and E. T. John defected partly due to the war.

Richard Lambert defected to the Labour Party in December 1918. He complained that after 'four years' experience of broken faith and broken pledges' the Liberal Party 'has neither policy nor leaders nor even principles'.<sup>16</sup> His constituency of Cricklade was abolished for the 1918 election. He did not seek another seat, nor stand again for another party.

**Just seven MPs defected from the Liberal Party entirely or partly because of the war.**

Table 1. Electoral fate of the 35 Liberal MP who dissented over conscription

MP/Constituency	Registration Bill vote 05/07/1915	Bachelors' Bill vote 06/01/1916	Conscription Bill vote 04/05/1916	Fate at 1918 election	Date of any defection
Arnold/Holmfirth	no vote	opposed	opposed	won – Lib	1922
Glanville/Bermondsey	supported	opposed	opposed	won – Lib	none
Hogge/Edinburgh E	opposed	opposed	opposed	won – Lib	none
Wilson JW/Worcs N	no vote	no vote	opposed	won – Lib	none
Alden/Tottenham	no vote	opposed	no vote	lost – Lib	1919
Barlow/Frome	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Chancellor/Haggerston	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Holt/Hexham	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Jones LS/Rushcliffe	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
<b>Lees-Smith/Nhampton</b>	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib*	1919
Lough/Islington West	opposed	opposed	no vote	lost – Lib	none
Molteno/Dumfriesshire	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Pringle/Lanarks NW	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
<b>Rowntree/York</b>	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Simon J/Walthamstow	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	1931
Outhwaite/Hanley	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Lib	1918
Mason D/Coventry	supported	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Lib	1939
Whitehouse/Lanarks M	opposed	opposed	no vote	lost – Ind Lib	1914
<b>Ponsonby/Stirling</b>	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Dem	1918
<b>Trevelyan/Elland</b>	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Lab	1918
<b>John ET/Denbighshire E</b>	opposed	opposed	no vote	lost – Lab	1918
Burns/Battersea	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Clough/Skipton	opposed	opposed	no vote	not candidate	none
<b>Denman/Carlisle</b>	opposed	opposed	no vote	not candidate	1924
Harvey A/Rochdale	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
<b>Harvey T/Leeds West</b>	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	1937
<b>King J/Somerset North</b>	opposed	opposed	opposed	not candidate	1919
Lamb/Rochester	no vote	no vote	opposed	not candidate	1924
<b>Lambert/Cricklade</b>	opposed	opposed	opposed	not candidate	1918
Runciman/Hartlepoons	opposed	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Sherwell/Huddersfield	opposed	opposed	no vote	not candidate	none
Williams/Carmarthen	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
<b>Morrell/Burnley</b>	supported	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Baker J/Finsbury East	opposed	opposed	opposed	dead	none
Byles/Salford North	supported	opposed	opposed	dead	none

**Bold = UDC member**

\* Lees-Smith is described in some sources as a 'Liberal' candidate and in others as an 'Independent Radical'. He did have the backing of the local Liberal association and faced no Liberal opposition.

Joseph King, Liberal MP for North Somerset from January 1910, claimed that the wartime Liberal Party had proved 'without courage, and false to its principles'.<sup>17</sup> He did not stand in the 1918 election, but supported Labour. He made the move to the Labour Party in 1919, hoping that Lloyd George would do the same. He was

disappointed in this and in his two unsuccessful campaigns as a Labour candidate in 1920 and 1923.

Arthur Ponsonby fell out with his constituency Liberal association and became the focus of hostile media attention during the war. He was physically attacked for his views and had his premises raided by the police. He fought the 1918 election

as an Independent Democrat and came last in the newly created Dunfermline Burghs constituency. He joined the Labour Party immediately after the 1918 election and served as a Labour MP from 1922 to 1930, when he went to the Lords. He eventually left the Labour Party during the Second World War.

Charles Trevelyan resigned from his ministerial post at the Board of Education on the outbreak of the First World War. His relationship with his Elland constituency association deteriorated and by the end of the conflict, he had come to believe that the war had 'taken away our reputations as well as it has done our careers'.<sup>18</sup> In November 1918 he announced that he had joined Labour, but he left his decision so late that the Labour Party already had a candidate in place in his constituency. Trevelyan contested the seat as an Independent Labour candidate, coming fourth and last, one place behind the official Labour candidate. Trevelyan was elected as a Labour MP in 1922 and appointed back to the Board of Education in the first and second Labour governments, although he fell out with Ramsay MacDonald in 1931 and resigned again from the department – the only minister to resign from the same department in the administrations of two different parties.<sup>19</sup>

Robert Outhwaite respectfully parted company with his local Liberal association in Hanley at the beginning of the war. Although his local party accepted that Outhwaite was motivated by 'the highest motives' and their opinion of his 'character and principles had been enhanced, rather than otherwise', the association put forward another Liberal candidate in 1918.<sup>20</sup> Outhwaite stood as an Independent Liberal. He came third, but won more votes than the official Liberal contender.

The two other Liberals who defected partly because of their dissent over conscription were Hastings (Bertie) Lees-Smith and E. T. John.

Lees-Smith was described in the press as a 'pacifist', but he volunteered for military service as the only MP to serve in the ranks. He contested the seat of Don Valley in 1918. He was described in different sources as either an 'Independent Radical' or as a 'Liberal', but, despite facing no Liberal opponent and having the backing of the local Liberal association, he came a distant second. He eventually defected to the Labour Party in June 1919, saying that his 'principles have in no way changed' but that he could not 'look to any section of the Liberal Party to carry them into effect ... practically all the men who share these views ... are in the ranks of Labour'.<sup>21</sup> Lees-Smith went on to serve three non-consecutive terms as Labour MP for Keighley. Lees-Smith had been brought into contact with like-minded Labour figures in the UDC during the war, but the timing of his departure from the Liberal Party demonstrated that his decision only crystallised well after the end of the war.

E. T. John defected from the Liberal Party to Labour during the war and actually stood as a Labour candidate in 1918. However, the Labour Party was not really his preferred political platform as his main preoccupation was with Welsh Nationalism. He had had misgivings about conscription, but mainly practical concerns from the point of view of an industrialist. He stood unsuccessfully under a Labour banner in three further elections, but never gave the Labour Party his full confidence.

Apart from E. T. John, there was just one other former Liberal MP who actually stood as a Labour candidate in 1918 – Leo Chiozza Money. Money narrowly lost the 1918 contest and never returned to parliament. His views were very different from the other defectors. He was not a dissenter over conscription and had remained in post at the Ministry of Shipping and loyal to Lloyd George throughout the war. He was motivated by preserving shipping nationalisation after the war. Money's private life and increasingly extreme political views undermined his political credibility. He was twice charged with indecent behaviour. He was acquitted the first time. However, on the second occasion, which involved a woman in a railway carriage, his defence failed. He claimed in court that he had been wearing a distinctive hat on the day in question, and had he done anything improper, a signalman along the route would have noticed. Money became an increasingly convinced supporter of the Fascist dictators between the wars.

No other Liberal MPs or former MPs defected to the Labour Party during the First World War and no Liberal MPs at all defected to the Conservative Party between December 1910 and the demise of the Lloyd George coalition in October 1922.

Another seven of the MPs who objected to conscription – Percy Alden, John Simon, Sydney Arnold, David Mason, Ted Harvey, Ernest Lamb and Richard Denman – all did defect from the Liberal Party at later dates, but for reasons unconnected with the war. The First World War was therefore not a major direct cause of defections of Liberal MPs from the party.

In a longer-term context, over the hundred years from 1910, a total of 707 individuals served as a Liberal or Liberal Democrat MP and 116 of these defected from the party (about 16 per cent of the total).<sup>22</sup> The peak years for defections were 1924 and 1931. Roughly equal numbers went to the right as to the left. In this context, the seven defections (all to Labour) driven by the First World War was not by any means a very significant proportion.

The Lloyd George coalition with the Conservatives did have indirect consequences for the future outflow of defectors from the Liberals. The split in the Liberal Party damaged its election performance and so reduced its attraction to career-minded politicians. This has been the major factor

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behind defections over the last century. Better prospects in another party accounted for 46 per cent of reasons for all defections over the hundred years. Disagreement over policy was responsible for driving another 37 per cent, while only 3 per cent were motivated purely by personality clashes. (The remaining 14 per cent had mixed motives.)<sup>23</sup> The Lloyd George coalition also led to the forging of working relationships between Liberals and Conservatives which led to calls for the fusion of the two parties. After this was rejected by the Liberal Party, some Liberal MPs transferred to the Conservatives – a phenomenon which has so far been absent since the 2010–15 coalition.

From the overall analysis of a century of defections, other patterns also appear. Wealthier and better-educated MPs and those with high-ranking military service were more likely to defect than their colleagues. They tended to be more self-confident and less reliant on their parliamentary salaries than their loyalist colleagues. Those who were divorced were also more likely to defect, perhaps reflecting an unwillingness to tolerate an unsatisfactory situation in any part of their life. MPs who belonged to a minority religion within their party were also more likely to defect than the majority of Nonconformists among the Liberals. Even after allowing for the vastly higher number of male than female Liberal MPs, men were proportionately more likely to defect than women.

Most of the leftward defections were motivated more by the problems of the Liberal Party, than by the attractions of Labour – they were a product of a failure of the Liberal Party, not a failure of Liberalism. For over half of the Liberal MPs and former MPs who defected to Labour, their move was not a success. Some of the dissatisfaction can be attributed to the difficulty for the former Liberals to assimilate themselves socially into Labour circles, where a culture of trades unionism, party discipline, dogged commitment in adversity, and, in many cases, poverty, predominated. In many cases the former Liberals, generally from wealthy professional backgrounds, found it difficult to make friends with, and to be trusted by, their Labour colleagues. Of the forty-five who had made the transition to Labour by 1956, twenty-four (53 per cent) either left the Labour Party or became seriously dissatisfied with their new party.<sup>24</sup>

Of all the Liberal Party leaders in the years from 1910 to 2010, Lloyd George suffered the greatest annual rate of attrition by defection (after allowing for the number of potential defectors in each year). Asquith was the next worst, followed by Clement Davies. Perhaps surprisingly in view of the woes of the 2010–15 coalition, Nick Clegg ends up at the top of the league table, along with Ming Campbell and David Steel, as the leaders who performed best at avoiding defections.<sup>25</sup> This may suggest that diligent party management can

go a long way to soothe the frustrations of war or even coalition.

*Dr Alun Wyburn-Powell is the author of biographies of Clement Davies and William Wedgwood Benn. He was awarded his PhD for research into political defections, which has been published by Manchester University Press as Defectors and the Liberal Party 1910–2010.*

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## Liberal and Liberal Democrat campaigns

Chris Rennard, former Director of Campaigns and Chief Executive of the Liberal Democrats, interviewed by York Membery

# The Changing Face of



Chris Rennard (left) visits John Leech's campaign HQ, Manchester Withington, 2010

**L**ORD RENNARD, THE Liberal Democrats' Director of Campaigns and Elections from 1989 to 2003, and the party's Chief Executive from 2003 to 2009, tells York Membery how electoral campaigning has changed over his forty-year years in politics.

*What was the first campaign you were involved in? What did you do? What was your impression of the campaign? Did we win?*

My first ever campaign was when I saw in the *Liverpool Echo* that someone was organising a

petition to try and save my local cinema. I was about 12 and went round neighbours' houses collecting signatures. The organiser was Harry Davies, the Liberal candidate for Childwall. He didn't quite win, but then moved to Three Rivers in Hertfordshire where he was one of the main inspirations behind us winning and controlling the council there. My first election campaign was when I was 13 and went round with Liberals delivering leaflets in the city council elections when we first won control of Liverpool in 1973. It was exciting because we won.

# Election Campaigning

*How big a role did you play in campaigning as deputy chair of the Liverpool Liberal Party? Did you campaign in across-the-board council elections?*

I was elected to that position in 1981, at a time when I was organising many of the battleground wards in the city, we were in control of the city council and fighting the Militants. I worked with a small group that included Trevor Jones (council leader), Mike Storey (his deputy), Ann McTegart (the chair), Chris Davies and others, and I recruited many activists to the party from the university who were crucial to our campaigns at that time.

*Who were your mentors and what did you learn from them?*

Cyril Carr, our first councillor and first council leader, was my original mentor. He and his team were responsible for the invention of *Focus* leaflets, in Liverpool's Church ward. He helped my family with casework, discovered my interest in politics and current affairs, and got me to attend the ward AGM, at which he suggested I become treasurer. I wasn't yet 14, but I was good at maths at school. Trevor Jones spread the *Focus*-style campaigning across Liverpool and then across much of the country as he oversaw by-election triumphs such as Sutton & Cheam in 1972. I learned a great deal from him about campaigning, as well as from David Alton, who was Trevor's protégé for a long time.

*You worked on David Alton's Edge Hill by-election campaign. What was your role? How did we achieve victory?*

The Labour MP for Edge Hill was threatening to resign and force a by-election from the summer of 1977 onwards in protest at his deselection. It was a difficult time for the Liberal Party, and Edge Hill was one of very few realistic hopes that we had of winning in a general election. I worked continuously as a volunteer until the by-election in March 1979, following the death of the Labour MP. In many ways, David ran his own campaign, having overseen the winning of all four wards within the constituency. I had numerous minor roles, as this was well before the era of the party sending in paid professionals to by-elections, although most of the staff in the very small Liberal Party Organisation Headquarters came up for the last couple of weeks. My roles ranged from running

the 'front of shop' in the HQ, designing and printing some of the local leaflets, organising the public meetings and running a committee room on polling day. I was 18 and I learned a lot of the skills about being an agent from John Spiller, who had been John Pardoe's agent in North Cornwall and had organised some of the by-election wins of the early 1970s. We gained the seat with an 8,132 majority, and the result ensured the survival of the Liberal Party in the general election that came five weeks after the by-election.

*You were David's agent at the Mossley Hill constituency in 1983 in which you achieved a 14 per cent swing. How?*

The Boundary Commission process led to Edge Hill being split up. We didn't know what the new boundaries would be until the summer of 1982, and the new 'Mossley Hill' seat was considered an impossible prospect for us as we had been on deposit-losing level in two-thirds of it at the previous general election. The organisation in the new seat was very small, but in less than a year I increased the number of active members working in it from under 100 to over 600. There were council by-elections in two of the five wards (one of them after the death of Cyril Carr) and I acted as agent in them both, securing over 60 per cent of the vote in each case. I ran the local election campaigns in each of the five wards and our aggregate vote share in the 1983 local elections was 49 per cent. It was very hard work. I didn't have a day off in the six months before polling day, as we built a delivery network capable of delivering over twenty leaflets to every household in that time, as well as knocking on almost every door in the constituency twice. I concentrated on writing the leaflets and building the organisation whilst David Alton was high profile as a brilliant local MP. I was just very determined, and at 22 nobody told me that I couldn't run a campaign and manage 600 volunteers.

*By 1984 you were one of the party's national area agents. What lessons did you bring from your Liverpool days?*

In 1984, John Spiller pressed me to work for the party nationally with a brief based on spreading the kind of campaigning that I had been involved with in Liverpool across more of the country and in parliamentary by-elections. John wanted me to become chief agent in time, but that didn't happen as he became ill and Andy Ellis combined that

**We gained the seat with an 8,132 majority, and the result ensured the survival of the Liberal Party in the general election that came five weeks after the by-election.**

## The Changing Face of Liberal Democrat Campaigning

job with being secretary-general. I was based in the East Midlands where I doubled our number of councillors in my time there. I also did a lot of training for the party in the region and at the annual Liberal Assemblies. But I found the 1987 general election campaign very frustrating as there were no winnable seats within the East Midlands region and a rigid regional structure limited my involvement across the country. Moreover the national [Alliance] campaign struggled with two leaders [David Steel and David Owen] and couldn't agree any effective political messaging.

*You were a member of the by-election campaign teams at West Derbyshire, 1986, and Greenwich, 1987. We came second in Derbyshire and won in Greenwich. What were the factors at work in the two by-elections and why were we able to win in Greenwich but not in Derbyshire?*

After being the winning agent in nine consecutive [council] by-elections, the first one which I lost was West Derbyshire in 1986, when after three recounts we lost by just 100 votes. It was a difficult three-way fight, and we were not helped by the former Tory MP, Matthew Parris, pretending that Labour were the challengers. I was overstretched and I decided in future that I should concentrate on being campaign director/manager in parliamentary by-elections while appointing someone else to oversee the logistics and legal side of the campaign. But there was also a significant failure to coordinate resources at national level, as we won the Ryedale by-election on the same day by 5,000 votes, while I had been warning that West Derbyshire was 200 votes either way. In Greenwich, we had a truly integrated Alliance campaign for the first and only time. Alec McGivan of the SDP was a brilliant agent and he had a team including Peter Chegwyn, Bill MacCormick and me writing most of the leaflets and generating the most sophisticated target mailings. SDP organisation and money combined most effectively with Liberal campaigning flair.

*In 1984 you became a member of the standing committee of ALC (Association of Liberal Councillors) and wrote some party publications on election campaigning and party organisation. What did you achieve?*

I worked closely with Tony Greaves and others in ALC, serving on their standing committee and writing a lot of their campaign, organisation and recruitment publications including a 160-page book, *Winning Local Elections*, and then their first guide to successful parliamentary campaigning, *The Campaign Manual*. I became an ALC-trained trainer and we provided the kind of campaign support and advice that helped the party elect over 5,000 councillors, take control of over thirty councils and provide a springboard for many of our parliamentary seat gains.

*In 1989, you were appointed as Director of Campaigns and Elections for the Liberal Democrats. What sort of changes did you make at head office?*

**In Greenwich, we had a truly integrated Alliance campaign for the first and only time. Alec McGivan of the SDP was a brilliant agent and he had a team including Peter Chegwyn, Bill MacCormick and me writing most of the leaflets and generating the most sophisticated target mailings. SDP organisation and money combined most effectively with Liberal campaigning flair.**

At first none, because the Campaigns Department had been reduced from thirteen members of staff to just one (me), as financial difficulties followed electoral failures and political and organisational difficulties in the first eighteen months of the new party. My objective was simply survival for the party, and this had to be achieved with very modest resources.

One of my first priorities was working with Andrew Stunell and what had become the Association of Social & Liberal Democrat Councillors, running a series of campaigns and activist training days all over the country, branded as 'People First'. The aim was to train members in successful community-campaigning techniques and in ways that might help the party gain attention and rebuild trust locally after the disappointments and acrimony that followed previous electoral failures. We had a great deal of success which ensured that by 1990 we were again doing almost as well in local elections as we had done in the Alliance years, and made major advances in 1991.

I also prioritised parliamentary by-elections to help the party recover its reputation and regain credibility. Every by-election was fought with a view to either maintaining our share of the vote from the 1987 high level, or to win if we could. One of the most significant of them was the Bootle by-election in May 1990, when we faced competition from both David Owen's 'continuing SDP' and a breakaway 'Liberal Party' backed by former MP Michael Meadowcroft. Our relative success with very modest resources was sufficient to persuade David Owen that his party should fold. This helped to give us a clearer run when better prospect by-elections later came along.

*You are credited with winning thirteen parliamentary by-elections for the party (eleven gains and two holds), between 1989 and 2009, as Director of Campaigns (1989–2003) and then Chief Executive (2003–09). Your first big success was winning the Eastbourne parliamentary by-election in 1990, despite Paddy Ashdown's initial opposition to fighting the seat. How did you win that seat, and what were the consequences of victory?*

We were within twenty minutes of Paddy issuing a media statement saying that we wouldn't contest the by-election [following the murder of Ian Gow MP by the IRA], when I found out about it and stopped him making any such statement before the Eastbourne Lib Dems had considered the issue. I then persuaded the local party (who needed little encouragement) that we should fight it to win, and persuaded my friend Paul Jacobs to be the agent. I moved there for the duration (as I did with many by-elections in those days) and built on a base of local campaign issues which reflected national issues, such as the introduction of car park charges at the local hospital which had caused much annoyance and reflected wider concerns about the NHS. Much of what we did repeated the approach of by-elections before my time, including Orpington and Sutton & Cheam,



but I had made it my business to understand what had been done in them (how and why) and then to innovate with all the latest campaign techniques including targeting, with the use of data gleaned from canvassing, and extensive use of the telephone. When we overturned a 16,000 Tory majority to win by 4,550, the party went from 8 per cent to 18 per cent in the polls nationally as a result. Six weeks later Mrs Thatcher was forced to resign by panicking Tory MPs. The campaign showed that the merged party of Liberal Democrats could win again and this was the most essential part of building consistent support for us.

*You notched up another scalp at the Christchurch by-election of 1993, achieving a massive swing against the Conservatives. How? And what were the consequences?* We won Christchurch in July 1993 on the back of the Newbury by-election in May that year. In both cases we exploited local angles on national issues such as the economy, the NHS and concerns about crime. We established ourselves as credible challengers and the principal opponents of the proposals [in Norman Lamont's budget of that year] to put VAT on domestic fuel bills, hitting those on fixed incomes such as pensioners particularly hard.

In Newbury we had an established position as challengers, based on control of the council, and we turned a 12,000 Tory majority into a 22,055 Liberal Democrat majority for David Rendel. Christchurch was most remarkable because there was very little base (one county councillor) and Diana Maddock had few very local credentials, and the Tories had held the seat in a bad year for them [with 63 per cent of the vote]. But we won with a 35 per cent swing against them, the biggest swing against the Tories since 1935. As a result, Norman Lamont was sacked, and plans to add full-rate VAT to domestic fuel bills were dropped. The Lib Dems were then on a par with the Conservatives in national polls and seen to be challenging for power.

*But your greatest triumph was arguably in the general election of 1997 in which you oversaw the party's target-seat campaign, which resulted in the Lib Dems nearly doubling their number of MPs from twenty-six to forty-six. What were the key factors behind the success of the strategy?*

The parliamentary by-election wins (six of them in four years) gave me much greater credibility within the party in trying to persuade it to adopt the style and methods of these campaigns nationally, and to invest in target seats seriously for the first time. (Before the 1987 election I had met the party's national campaign team and they had dismissed out of hand the sort of approach I outlined, based on promoting the kind of campaigning that I had been successfully involved in, in Liverpool.)

In 1992, the target seat campaign ran for only a short period before the general election and only

£120,000 was invested in it. But in 1997 I persuaded the party to invest an extra £1m in target seats over two and a half years before the election. By now I was building a stronger campaign team, including people like Candy Piercy, Paul Rainger and David Loxton, and we worked hard to spread best practice amongst the target seats and pioneer new techniques in the by-elections, which we also used as training exercises for the whole party. It was also crucial that we changed our approach to national messaging late in 1996 from being explicitly aiming for a coalition with Labour to emphasising our distinctiveness on the major issues. We also dropped the meaningless proposed slogans such as 'We're yellow, we've got courage' which was subject to much ridicule. I identified the issues from polling in the key seats and we focused on crime, health, education, economy, sleaze and the environment (which I called the CHEESE issues) and what difference the Lib Dems could make on each of them, compared to all the other parties.

*In 2001 and 2005, with Tim Razzall as campaign chair, and Charles Kennedy as leader, you directed the Liberal Democrats' general election campaigns, which further increased the number of MPs to respectively fifty-two and sixty-two, the largest total of Liberal or Liberal Democrat MPs since 1923. How did you achieve this? By pursuing a similar strategy?*

Yes, it was building on success. The strategy was based on incremental targeting of more and more seats (and incidentally electing more women Lib Dem MPs in each of these elections). This was all based on careful targeting, based on gaining credibility locally with effective candidates working over many years, strong local teams and usually dominating the local elections; but also powerful and well-tested messaging that emphasised our distinctiveness.

In 2005, the list of ten things 'we opposed' and ten things 'we proposed' was not popular amongst those most concerned with detailed policy in the party, but it was tested and found considerable approval (somewhat to my own surprise) among our target voters in our target seats, and we promoted it effectively in support of all our candidates. It was very difficult managing Charles because of his health problems, but on good form he was very effective in delivering the messages that we had devised.

*Your campaign style – to focus ruthlessly on local issues and the local candidate and largely to ignore national issues – is sometimes described as 'Rennardism'. Do you think this is a fair description?*

We never ignored national issues. But we did seek to address those issues of most concern to our potential voters, as opposed sometimes to the policy interests of some of our paid-up members. The CHEESE themes were adopted in order to stop the party appearing to bang on all the time about issues such as electoral reform, which appeared to be self-interested. The 1p on income

**The parliamentary by-election wins (six of them in four years) gave me much greater credibility within the party in trying to persuade it to adopt the style and methods of these campaigns nationally, and to invest in target seats seriously for the first time.**

**In the [2015] campaign, we were not really promoting the record of our MPs and candidates in much of the literature, and the attempt to argue vehemently that we existed to form a coalition with anyone willing to form one with us, on the basis that we did not have any major differences with the other parties, left us without a national raison d'être in the general election.**

tax to pay for education was the most successful national policy of any party in three successive general elections. But simply stating national policies repeatedly never won seats. We needed local campaigns, local credibility and strong local organisation led by capable and well-trained candidates, agents and teams to be able to win seats, often after two or three general election campaigns. They were often able to exploit tactical voting ruthlessly.

*In 2005 there was some disappointment that we didn't make more gains – why was that? And do you think the party's decapitation strategy was a mistake?*

Many people were completely unrealistic about the number of gains that we could make in 2005 because they knew so little of our strength on the ground in the constituencies. They over-egged expectations so much that Charles Kennedy was damaged. Nevertheless we won more seats in 2005 than any party in the Liberal tradition had done since before 1922, whilst making twelve gains from Labour (more gains from them than we have ever made in their history). It was a mistake to focus on the 'decapitation' seats, but hard to change it once it had been announced that Charles was concentrating on them. The labelling of it in particular was poor politics.

*To the surprise of many, the Lib Dems lost seats in 2010. Why was that? Was it inevitable given the rise in Tory support? Or did we 'screw up'?*

Labour support had dropped by 6 per cent since 2005 (while we went up 1 per cent), so we should have made net gains from them, instead of winning three from them and losing three to them. We did not appeal to Labour-inclined supporters as effectively as we had previously, and many such voters in the seats that we should have won thought it likely that we would form a coalition with the Tories – which we did. The Tories won back support from us during the campaign after: (1) the brilliance of 'Cleggmania' subsided; (2) when we seemed to lose our way in messaging, focusing too much on immigration issues that could not be won in the short term; (3) failed to rebut firmly and effectively the plethora of attacks on us that the Conservatives launched; and (4) ran out of things to say in the crucial last week. We had much less idea what was happening on the ground in 2010 than in previous general elections and some of the constituencies were badly advised.

*How would you have approached the campaign, if you would have been running the show?*

Hard to say, but I was very involved in the Eastbourne campaign in 2010 when Stephen Lloyd gained the seat with a majority in excess of 3,000. I would not have been so complacent about some of the other seats that we lost, would have advised other seats differently and would have sought to avoid some of the campaign errors such

as literature in our own target seats appearing to present the choice as being between Brown and Cameron.

*The 2015 election was a disaster for the Lib Dems. Any thoughts on the by-election-style strategy we fought? Was it right or wrong? What would you have done differently? And what do you make of the argument that the 2015 election exposed the weaknesses of Rennardism – that it builds only weak support for the party because it largely ignores what the party stands for, making Liberal Democrat seats excessively vulnerable to a national swing against the party? To put it another way, because it views any elector as a potential voter, it does not concentrate on building a core vote based on support for the party's values and policies, which would be more likely to stick with the party in bad times.*

What I have seen of the James Gurling-led review of the Lib Dem 2015 campaign seems to be very good. We did not fight a strategy anything remotely like that with which we had so successfully campaigned in by-elections or previous general elections. I would say that the 2015 results exposed the weakness of the 2015 general election campaign, rather than the weaknesses of previous ones. When I stood down as Chief Executive in 2009, we had 100 elected parliamentarians. We now have 16.<sup>1</sup> Winning so many seats at different levels was not weakness.

Winning involves making people think that you are credible contenders, at least where they live. By 2015 we had lost many of our other elected representatives and much of our local organisation. The leaflets that had to be posted in to our target seats to make up for this weakness were not based on the sort of successful leaflet campaigns that helped us to win seats over the previous thirty years, and our capacity to canvass face to face had been greatly reduced as we lost council seats and active members. In the campaign, we were not really promoting the record of our MPs and candidates in much of the literature, and the attempt to argue vehemently that we existed to form a coalition with anyone willing to form one with us, on the basis that we did not have any major differences with the other parties, left us without a national *raison d'être* in the general election.

*York Membery is a journalist and contributing editor to the Journal of Liberal History.*

<sup>1</sup> Figure correct at the time of interview (summer 2016). In terms of elected parliamentarians, in May 2009 the Lib Dems had 63 MPs, 6 Welsh Assembly members, 16 MSPs, 12 MEPs and 3 Members of the London Assembly. In summer 2016 the party had 16 elected parliamentarians: 8 MPs, 1 Welsh Assembly member, 5 MSPs, 1 MEP and 1 GLAM. 'This also meant the loss of about 500 full time jobs in the party as well as the loss of the work of the parliamentarians,' said Rennard. 'We now have 105 members of the House of Lords, meaning that 87 per cent of our parliamentarians are unelected Lords.'

# Reports

## 'Jeremy is Innocent': The Life and Times of Jeremy Thorpe and Marion Thorpe

Evening meeting, 6 February 2017, with Ronald Porter; chair: Michael Steed

Report by **David Cloke**

**T**HE HISTORY GROUP'S meeting on the lives of Jeremy and Marion Thorpe was different from the style we have come to expect from the Group. And not just, as the chair and former Liberal Party President Michael Steed noted, for being its first meeting to play music ranging from Marion Thorpe's favourite composer Gustav Mahler to Sir Arthur Sullivan. Ronald Porter's talk was an illustrated one making use of a large number of photographs. Unfortunately, as I am writing up the event from the editor's audio recording, my experience of it is perhaps somewhat diminished.

The meeting was different for other reasons. Porter's style was gossipy and discursive, with possibly a little too much court intrigue for Liberal tastes, very much focusing on the tabloid headlines of his subjects' lives. It is thus rather hard to record in my usual quasi-minute fashion. Nonetheless, the evening was delivered with some style and panache and clearly demonstrated the regard in which Porter held the Thorpes. As he said at the close, he started his research believing that Thorpe deserved two cheers and by the end wished to give him three!

My personal connection with Thorpe is a rather tenuous one. I met him very briefly in 1984 whilst acting as research assistant to the Liberal peers (then, in some ways, the Thorpe Liberal Party in exile). It was the day of Lord Byers' funeral, or his memorial service, and it would be fair to say that Thorpe did not come over as the charismatic figure of report. But then perhaps it was not the day for it. In addition, what seemed like ancient history to the 18-year-old me must have felt still very raw to Thorpe.

My second connection was some twenty years later when I headed up the rather grandly named Leader's Correspondence Unit during the 2005 general election. One letter that I opened was

from Thorpe asking Kennedy to consider him for a peerage, arguing that sufficient time had now passed. I handed it on to Kennedy's team (foolishly without taking a copy) and heard nothing more on the subject!

Unsurprisingly, Porter's address was not especially critical of Thorpe nor did it argue the case for his innocence, but neither did it gloss over the events that brought him down. If anything Porter seemed to focus on them to the exclusion of most other significant events in his political career. Nothing was said, for example, about the Liberal leadership election in 1967 or about Thorpe's part in the 1975 European referendum. It was left to Richard Moore, Thorpe's political secretary from the 'day after he assumed the leadership' to the end of 1973, to highlight that the European cause had always been a major part of Thorpe's political ambitions and convictions. Much was said about Thorpe's ambition and courage but little evidence provided of what his aims were and how he displayed his courage, other than by facing his debilitating illness with resilience. Moore pointed out that Thorpe's doctor had said that he had survived longer with acute Parkinson's than anyone for whom there were medical records.

In looking back on the evening it seems to me that, of the two, Marion Thorpe had perhaps the most interesting biography. This might be because the highlights and lowlights of Thorpe's career are very familiar – and Porter did perhaps spend a little too much time on the trial that effectively brought that career to a close. On the other hand, Thorpe came over as the more interesting psychological case study – or is that itself too easy a response?

In a sense, the most revealing or thought-provoking remark Porter made about Thorpe was his description of him 'masquerading as the head of the general stores of the village in Devon where

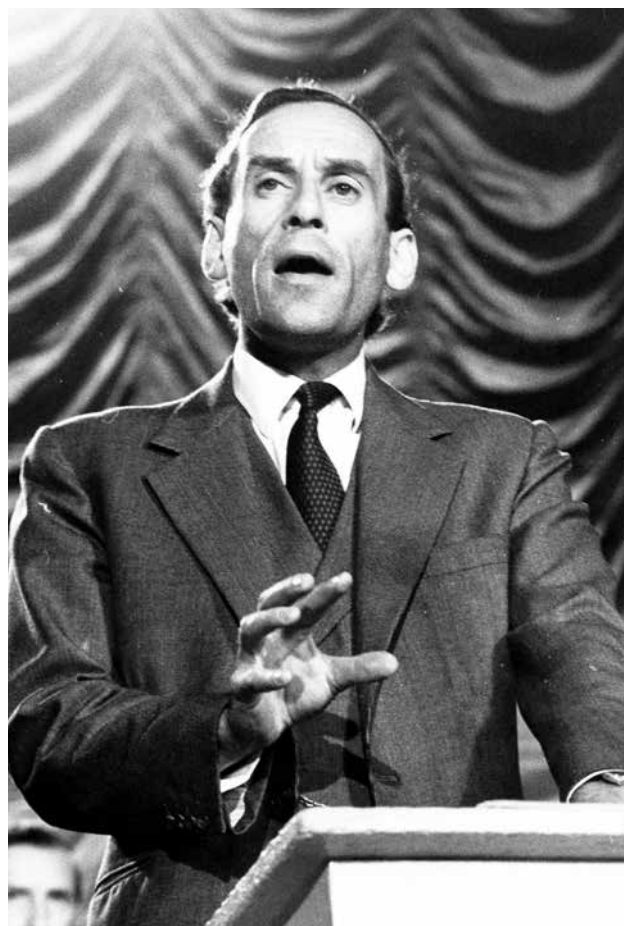
he had his cottage.' There is almost a sense in Thorpe of life as performance art or of him needing a stage. Throughout the evening there was a succession of photographs of Thorpe with the great men of his time: JFK, Nixon, Menuhin, Trudeau, Heath and Wilson. Unfortunately, Porter seems not to have shown the classic photo of Thorpe with Jimi Hendrix.

Thorpe came from a strongly Tory background, the son and grandson of Tory MPs. His father, a prosperous and successful barrister, had been MP for Rusholme in Manchester from 1919 to 1923, being defeated by Charles Masterman, himself defeated a few months later in 1924. His maternal grandfather was a well-known right-wing Tory MP, Sir John Norton-Griffiths, known as 'Union Jack'. Thorpe's grandmother was a recurring image during the evening, as was his mother, Ursula, 'a dominating and domineering woman' whom Porter said was the only woman that Thorpe was frightened of.

According to Porter, what led Thorpe into Liberal politics was another brush with a great man – Lloyd George – when he was 6 or 7 years old and, later, at country house party just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Thorpe knew that he wanted a prominent role in British politics from this early age – there were no thoughts of being a train driver or a fireman! As an aside, it was only at this point, in describing a photograph of the country house party, that Porter mentioned that Thorpe had two sisters.

Having had his name put down for Eton from birth, Thorpe progressed to Oxford, where he read law at Trinity College. His plan, according to Porter, was to go to the bar and then use that as a platform from which to enter politics. Successful networking whilst at Oxford led Thorpe to being elected president of the Oxford Union, succeeding fellow Liberal, Robin Day. Thorpe seemed to look back fondly on those days as, according to Porter, he assiduously attended reunion dinners and was shown in the company of Heath, Barbara Castle and Peter Shore.

Meanwhile, Marion Stein was being courted by the King's nephew George Harewood. The daughter of Erwin Stein, the Austrian émigré composer and associate of Schoenberg and Berg, Marion came to England with her family at the age of 13 fleeing the Anschluss. She did not speak a word of English and was naturally upset at leaving her home and friends.



Left: Rupert, Marion and Jeremy Thorpe. Right; Thorpe at Liberal Assembly

Nonetheless, in Porter's words, she knuckled down and learnt English perfectly. She went on to become head girl at Kensington High School for Girls and then studied piano at the Royal College.

She became a concert pianist and in 1947 she met George Harewood at a reception. He was also a great music lover and later in his life ran the Edinburgh International Festival and English National Opera. Music seems to connect all three main participants in this story, with Jeremy also being a fine violinist for whom making and listening to music was a great source of relaxation. Porter demonstrated this with an excerpt from Vaughan Williams's *A Lark Ascending*.

Despite the initial opposition of Queen Mary (apparently because Marion had an errant brother who fought for the Nazis and not because she was Jewish) she and Harewood were married at St Mark's, North Audley Street, Mayfair in 1949 followed by a reception at St James's Palace with the whole royal family in attendance. Marion thus became chatelaine of Harewood House north of Leeds. There she brought up her three children and took part in the musical life of the region, including

helping to found the Leeds Piano Competition.

Possibly revealingly, amongst her closest friends were the composer Benjamin Britten and his partner the singer Peter Pears. She had first met them in 1944 when her father had invited them to tea at the family flat off Kensington High Street. She later helped them to establish the Aldeburgh Festival and, as Porter demonstrated, holidayed with them in Moscow in 1960. When her marriage to Harewood broke down, Britten and Pears took her side completely after the divorce in 1967 and cut Harewood out of their lives. This was despite the generous terms offered by Harewood which included the family's London home, 2 Orme Square.

Thorpe's life during this period followed a completely different track. Porter noted that when he was called to the bar in 1954 Thorpe was very hard up. He had only a small private income from a family trust but was, in Porter's words, a big spender and so needed extra money. A friend who worked at the BBC came to the rescue. He informed Thorpe that there was a job going as a reporter for Panorama, a job at which he thought Thorpe

would be excellent. He was interviewed by a panel including Richard Dimbleby and was offered the job immediately.

Thorpe did indeed prove to be an extremely good TV journalist, his favourite part of the job being interviewing 'top-notch politicians and heads of state' – the great men and women of the time. Among those he interviewed were the Shah of Iran and Golda Meir, the prime minister of Israel.

As Michael Steed noted at the start of the evening, Thorpe stood for Devon North in the 1955 general election in which he obtained a memorable second place, cutting the Tory majority in half. He went on to take the seat in 1959, marking the occasion with a torchlight procession through the streets of Barnstaple with his mother looking on.

According to Porter he made an immediate impact in the House of Commons and seven years later he was elected Liberal leader in succession to Jo Grimond. During his initial period in the House of Commons he met and had an eighteenth-month affair with Norman Scott, the ending of which caused great antagonism in Scott who vowed to seek vengeance.

Porter later added that Thorpe was 'quite a serious thinker in his way' and had three great principles in his life: the abolition of apartheid, the breakdown of racial divisions in the UK and the United States, and for women to play a wider role in the financial and commercial life of the country. He was one of the first advocates for there being at least one woman on company boards.

Shortly after his election as leader Thorpe met and subsequently married Caroline Allpass. Together they had a son, Rupert born in 1969. According to Porter, Caroline came from roughly the same social background as Thorpe but, unlike him, was not highly politicised. Nonetheless Porter felt that she was a good political wife and supported him wholeheartedly as leader of the party. This seemingly happy life was brought to a devastating end by a road traffic accident in which Caroline was killed shortly after the 1970 general election. Thorpe was left desolate by the news and was on autopilot for several months afterwards.

Thorpe and Marion Harewood were thus both alone when they met at a dinner hosted by the pianist Maura Lympany. Porter rather romantically put it that Marion had declared that she would remarry if Mr Right walked into her life and for her Thorpe was that man. They were married in early 1973 and followed it with a musical celebration. Later that year Marion joined Thorpe on the platform at the annual Liberal Assembly and was shown by Porter looking on approvingly as Thorpe acknowledged the applause.

The year of their marriage was followed by the year that represented the high watermark of the Liberal Party in the post-war era, 1974. The inconclusive February 1974 general election gave the surprising result of Labour winning more seats than the Conservatives despite the Tories winning more votes but with neither able to command an overall majority. Thorpe entered into short-lived talks with Heath regarding another, political, marriage. According to Porter, Thorpe demanded PR from Heath but Heath would only offer a Speaker's Conference. This went down 'like a lead balloon': 'they take minutes and waste years.' Thorpe realised that he was wasting his time and pulled the rug from under Heath. No sooner was Thorpe out the door than Heath was on the phone to arrange an audience with the queen at which he would tender his

resignation and recommend that Wilson be invited to form a government.

Porter noted that some had said that Thorpe was desperate for high office. This he believed was 'largely untrue'. Nonetheless, there had been talk during this brief period of Thorpe being defence secretary or leader of the House of Commons. Heath later told the Times that Thorpe would have been Home Secretary. Richard Moore noted at the end of the meeting that Thorpe would have been a bad defence secretary, as he didn't understand the technicalities at all well. He added that he would have been worse as Chancellor of the Exchequer as he understood little about economics.

However, these passing opportunities were not to be and a little over two years later in May 1976 Thorpe was forced to resign as a result of the scandal that engulfed him. He remained as an MP until 1979, when he was roundly defeated by the Tory candidate. A few days after that, 'he faced the scales of justice at the Old Bailey'.

Porter talked through the case in quite some detail at both the start and the end of the evening. It seems to me to be a familiar tale recorded elsewhere that does not need further repeating here. What was perhaps most interesting was that music emerges again in Thorpe's life, with a satirical song about the case, 'Jeremy is Innocent'. It deals amusingly if not subtly with the central allegations in the case. There are two versions available on YouTube and Porter regaled the room with the version recorded by Doc Cox, later famous for his work on That's

Life, under the name of Rex Barker and the Ricochets.

Thorpe left the court a free man, though with not all the country was convinced of his innocence, as evidenced by Peter Cooke's parody of the judge's summing up. Consequently, he could not return to what Porter described as the love of his life, British politics, though he clearly tried intermittently. He participated at the margins through attendance at meetings like that of the Channel Tunnel Association in a church hall on an estate in Dover, where Michael Steed met him for the penultimate time.

According to Porter, Thorpe hated his retirement life spent in 'shallows and miseries', even before Parkinson's ravaged him. Moore felt that Porter slightly overdid the misery of the retirement years noting that his friends largely stuck by him (including from other political parties, such as Michael Foot and Julian Amery), though some of his immediate political colleagues did not, and that he survived so long. In summing up, Porter regarded Thorpe as one of the bravest men in British politics and closed with a recording of Sullivan's 'He is an Englishman' despite the piece's ironic intent.

Moore, who had known Thorpe from 1952 to his death, shared Porter's view about his courage but also remarked on his humour and argued that his one weakness being that 'he was not always wise in his choice of friends'.

*David Cloke is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group's executive committee.*

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## Who Rules? Parliament, the People or the Prime Minister?

Spring conference fringe meeting, 17 March 2017, with Professor Michael Braddick and Baroness Joan Walmsley; chair: Baroness Lynne Featherstone

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT History Group's fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat spring conference in York in March 2017 focused on the issue of Parliamentary supremacy: hard won in the seventeenth century but being challenged by the government response to Brexit, placing under question whether Parliament or the executive – or the popular will, expressed through

a referendum – should have the ultimate say. Here we reprint the edited transcript of the recording of Professor Michael Braddick's talk (with thanks to Astrid Stevens for the transcription), and the paper that should have been delivered by Lord Martin Thomas; in fact he was unable to be present and the paper was delivered (in a slightly abridged form) by Baroness Walmsley.

## Report: Who Rules? Parliament, the People or the Prime Minister?

### Michael Braddick

I want to talk about two poles of argument in the seventeenth century. One is the relations between Crown and Parliament, culminating in a constitutional settlement which we still broadly inhabit. A second pole is between the individual and the state, because this is also an important period in which many of the institutions of the state took form, and posed new questions about the relationship between the individual and those powers. The thesis I want to advance is that we are really still having those seventeenth-century arguments.

I will talk about liberal democrat views in the lower case, because I think we are still having an argument about liberal democracy and its implications, which started in the seventeenth century. I'm not going to speak to a room full of Liberal Democrats (upper case) about Liberal Democrat thinking on these matters.

So, the Crown and Parliament: well, we all know the story (I hope we all know the story). Charles I came to the throne in 1625. He had five years of rather troublesome parliaments. He had eleven years without parliaments. He called a parliament in 1640 from a position of great weakness, having lost the war and needing money from that parliament in order to pay an occupying force. That parliament demanded more and more constitutional restraint, that culminated ultimately in a civil war, so that the parliament Charles had called in 1640 was the parliament that executed him in 1649, and then continued until 1653 in further constitutional experiments. So we know, in broad outline, this story, which of course I could talk about at great length (indeed, I am *paid* to talk about it), but I'll stop there. So there is a broad picture there of conflict between Crown and Parliament, starting – pick a date – but ending in the execution of the king.

The drivers of that conflict were really two-fold. One is military change. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, gunpowder had been adopted, not just for artillery purposes, but for handheld infantry purposes that required more expensive equipment and more expensive training. It turned what had been a voluntary service into a professional service, and that required cash. So there was a commutation, we call it, in the game of service and cash, that produced an escalating need for money. The only institution capable of providing

that money was Parliament, and Parliament was not always willing to provide the money. One line of constitutional conflict comes out of that essential change of the professionalisation and commodification of warfare.

The second driver of change was the Reformation. The Reformation was about purifying the Church, not about establishing a new church. The question was: how much of the old Church needed to go, in order to render the current Church pure? There was a very extreme version, which was that everything not explicitly stated in scripture was forbidden, but there was a much bigger middle ground: everything not stated in scripture which didn't seem too bad was allowed. And that was the Reformation debate which drove a lot of conflict over the shape of the Church of England through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Now, that was a matter between Crown and Parliament because Henry VIII had started the whole process by statute – it was the Parliament which had legislated for the independence of the English church.

So these two drivers of conflict – Reformation, and the cashification of warfare – produced considerable tension between Crown and Parliament. The crisis was precipitated not within England, but by a separate crisis in Scotland. If we were convening a meeting today about history, I might be talking to you, in fact, about relations between England, Scotland and Ireland, which also took shape in this period, but we'll park that as well.

In 1637, the Scots, for completely other reasons, rebelled against the king. The king needed money. That caused constitutional tensions, and the war was designed to enforce the king's view of religion in Scotland, and that raised all the religious concerns. The English failed to support the war, and Charles I's English government unravelled.

What then followed was a period of reform in which Parliament demanded more and more safeguards against royal authority – safeguards on money and safeguards on religion – escalating into armed conflict. As these issues became more entrenched, people tried to take control of arms, stores of arms, strong-points and so forth, and that became a war by default, not by anyone's will. It was a defensive war, sought to protect gains rather than to dethrone the king.

So the 1640s' resolution came to be the execution of the king. But that was not the intention of Parliament in 1640. The

intention was not to abolish the monarchy; it was to restrain the monarchy. And Parliament's negotiating position throughout the 1640s was a negative one: 'don't do this ... don't do that ... don't do that ... don't do that ... this is the settlement that we require'. The king was executed, in the end, in order to prevent further war, not to establish a republic. A very controversial statement: in a similarly sized roomful of historians, I'd now be facing a lot of abuse, but I can tell you it's true, and that's the end of things!

So, in 1649, the king was executed to prevent a further war, and Parliament instituted a set of constitutional trends which were about restraint of the monarchy, not about a positive view of a republican settlement. Similarly, the Church of England was abolished by default. It was not a view of religious toleration; it was a failure to agree what the Church of England should be. So, two of the great outcomes of the 1640s – the abolition of the monarchy and the abolition of the Church of England – were really wrong turns taken from a position that was initially defensive, about establishing a balance between Crown and Parliament that safeguarded property rights (the money stuff) and safeguarded religion (the Reformation stuff).

And all that carried on through until 1689, skating over a similarly long period of similarly complicated history, with a settlement that has been celebrated as achieving the balance between Crown and Parliament.

There is one long argument there, about Crown and Parliament, which was driven by two of the key issues of the age – money and salvation. But what they produced was a constitutional settlement which established that sovereignty lay with the king in parliament. The king had accidentally, more or less, been executed – I'm getting more and more outrageous – the king had been executed in order to prevent a further war, not to establish absence of monarchy in England. It had been to establish a peaceful settlement. So there's one big narrative about the seventeenth century.

The second big narrative about the seventeenth century is a related one. During the 1640s, when war really came to England. It was a huge war, this, in which one in ten adult males were in arms, the armies constituted the equivalent of the second, third, fourth and fifth largest cities in the country put together, all of them taken out of agricultural and productive labour and becoming simply



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a burden on an economy that did not have a large surplus – it was a huge burden to undertake. That produced administrative reform and taxation reform, which was frighteningly effective. The proportion of the GDP being taxed in the 1640s doubled, and it doubled again in the 1690s. And in the 1690s, all these men (all men of fighting age, taken out of productive labour) were sent to Belgium with sacks of money to fight continental wars. This was a massive administrative achievement, and it was a huge burden on the English economy. And that involved, of course, all the current property right questions that produced hostility to the king.

So fighting a war to defeat the king actually seemed to make the cure worse than the cause. And in the course of the 1640s, people began to argue that the war was not between king and Parliament, but between the individual and tyranny. And it is at that point that more radical arguments emerged.

A similar case could be made for the Reformation. In 1640, the Church of England was looking purified from Charles I's crypto-Popery (from a certain point of view), stripped of all that, but there were people who felt that it now needed stripping right back to the real core of Protestantism. There was a debate within parliamentary ranks which was

much more rancorous than the debate between Royalists and Parliamentarians on religion – a rancorous debate within the parliamentary cause about what would constitute a purified Church. And in that argument, lots of people made arguments that *sound* like religious toleration: 'don't persecute me, because I am godly'. But lots of those arguments actually were: 'don't persecute me; I am godly – persecute him instead; he is ungodly'. The argument against persecution was not an argument for toleration, it was an argument for persecution of the right people. But there were people in the 1640s who argued that no human institution could be perfected, no one could understand the mind of God sufficiently perfectly, we all have to pursue our own path to righteousness, and we have to be set free. Government should have no role in interfering with the individual's pursuit of their own salvation.

And so in the 1640s, with that argument about the individual and the state on money, there was also an argument about the individual and the state on religion. 'I must be set free, to pursue my religious conscience. If we *all* truly follow God's promptings inherited through our conscience, society will automatically be perfected.'

So there was an argument, then, for toleration in the 1640s. Now that

argument is, I think, a different argument from the parliamentary sovereignty argument. It's not an argument about the balance between Crown and Parliament; it's about the individual and the state. And I think we're still having this kind of three-cornered argument. Parliament protects us from executive tyranny – but who protects us from the tyranny of parliaments?

On the toleration issue, though, suppose the majority of the population are misled about religion, and they are persecuting a righteous minority – who protects the righteous minority? And there the issue is against the tyranny of the majority. And my guy, John Lilburne [Michael Braddick is shortly to finish a study of John Lilburne and the English Revolution], squared all this with an argument that sounds rather like liberal democracy. We need parliamentary sovereignty to protect us from executive tyranny, but we need the parliament to be responsive to the people's will – so it has to be grounded on popular sovereignty – but we need protections from the tyranny of the majority when that impinges on such fundamental rights as our religious conscience.

And I think those are the arguments that are in play, really, in the referendum versus parliamentary sovereignty and so forth. A slender majority dictating

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about the legal rights of a slender minority seems to be at the heart of this (lower case) liberal democrat question. How do we have both a sovereign parliament answerable to the will of the people but also protection of the individual from the tyranny of the majority? I think that argument would not have been familiar to Henry VIII, but it would have been very familiar to the Levellers of the 1640s. I think we're still having an argument that was kicked off by the crisis of the 1640s.

### Martin Thomas / Joan Walmsley

The question is sparked by the decision of the Supreme Court in *Miller v. Secretary of State for Exiting the EU* and the subsequent reluctant introduction of a tiny bill, the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, to give the government authority to press the Article 50 button. The government was taken to court because the prime minister was claiming the right to exercise the royal prerogative to make or unmake treaties with foreign powers, without the necessity for parliamentary approval. She asserted that she was carrying out the 'Will of the People' as expressed in the referendum.

In 1807, the British Navy seized a strategic island situated in the German Bight, off the coast of Schleswig Holstein, but belonging to Denmark. It was Heligoland – less than a square mile in extent and occupied by a small population speaking their own dialect of the Frisian language, Halunder. The admiral's purpose was to beat Napoleon's Continental System, which barred British merchants from Europe, simply by creating a base for smuggling. Denmark ceded the island to Britain in 1814, so the inhabitants became officially British subjects. It became a fashionable holiday resort for wealthy Europeans in the nineteenth century, noted for its free and easy atmosphere.

But in the latter part of the century, the European powers were engaged in the scramble for Africa. In 1890, the Tory government under Lord Salisbury did a deal with the Germans. Britain entered into the Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty under which Heligoland was ceded to Germany in return for a large chunk of the African continent, including Zanzibar and Uganda. Lord Salisbury considered it necessary for the treaty to be ratified by an Act of Parliament and introduced the Anglo-German

Agreement Bill. The reason for involving parliament was stated to be that it dealt with the rights of the Halunder-speaking British subjects, some 1,300 of them, then living on the island.

Mr Gladstone, briefly out of office and leading for the Liberal opposition, was incensed that a precedent was being set to involve parliament in the use of the royal prerogative in treaty-making. But he conceded that there were exceptions:

No one doubts, Sir, that this power of Treaty-making lies in this country with the Crown, subject to certain exceptions, which, I believe, are perfectly well understood. Wherever money is involved, wherever a pecuniary burden on the State is involved in any shape, I say, it is perfectly well understood, and I believe it is as well known to Foreign Powers as to ourselves, that the Government is absolutely powerless without the assent of Parliament, and that that assent, if given, is an absolutely independent assent, upon which the Crown has no claim whatever, presumptive or otherwise. I believe it to be also a principle – and I speak subject to correction – that where personal rights and liberties are involved they cannot be, at any rate, directly affected by the prerogative of the Crown, but the assent of Parliament, the popularly elected body to a representative chamber, is necessary to constitute a valid Treaty in regard to them.

He went on nevertheless to complain at length about the introduction of a bill into parliament. He did not believe that either of the exceptions he referred to applied to this particular treaty. No doubt he expected soon to be back as prime minister, as indeed he was in 1892, and wanted his hands free to conduct his own foreign policy.

It is these exceptions – particularly the second – which have recently come under scrutiny in the Supreme Court.

Lord Neuberger, President of the Supreme Court, summarised in *Miller* the clash which he saw had arisen between two principles of the UK's constitutional arrangements. They were as follows:

(a) the principle that the prerogative power of the Crown may be exercised by its ministers freely to enter into and to terminate treaties with foreign powers without recourse to parliament; and

(b) the principle that the Crown through its ministers, may not normally exercise that prerogative power if it results in a change in UK domestic law affecting rights, unless an Act of Parliament so provides.

We live in a real democracy under the rule of law. From Trump, to Farage, to Marine le Pen, to Putin it is a despised 'liberal democracy' run by the enemy, the liberal elite.

There are other systems which have the trappings of democracies – they have elections and votes – but these are not much use when there is only one candidate or one party. Where the power rests in just one hand and one person or one body is able not only to make the laws, but also to administer and execute the laws, and finally, to judge whether those laws have been broken, there you have arbitrary government.

My own experience is of appearing in a Singapore court, in a libel action brought against my client by the prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Lee was the founder and leader of the People's Action Party, which has won virtually every seat in every election in Singapore since its foundation as a republic in 1965. The PAP explicitly reject effete Western-style 'liberal democracy'. My client was the leader of the Workers' Party who had the misfortune to win a by-election and to become the only opposition member of parliament. I was appearing before judges appointed by the prime minister. I lost.

Over our long history, Britain once subject to the arbitrary government of the Crown, slowly developed a system of checks and balances:

*Law making.* The power of *making* laws remained in theory with the Crown, but only subject to the assent of the Lords and the Commons, constituting parliament. Hence today every Act of Parliament is enacted by 'the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal and Commons in this present Parliament assembled and by the authority of the same'. The queen has no legislative power of her own to make laws, although under her royal prerogative, she alone can call parliament together and dissolve its authority. It follows that her ministers also have no power to make either primary or secondary legislation. Ministers may only introduce procedures into parliament to obtain the assent of parliament to their bills or their statutory instruments.



*Executive power.* The power of administering and executing the laws remained with the Crown. The king or queen is the supreme executive. In the course of time, that executive power was placed in the hands of ministers. It is still the queen's prerogative to call upon a member of parliament to form a government and the members of the government kiss her hand upon appointment and thereby derive their executive power from her. But it is not unrestrained executive power. No one is above the law, not even the queen and therefore she, and her ministers, can act only within the law. In the *De Keyser Hotel* case (1920) much quoted in *Miller*, Lord Parmoor described the royal prerogative in these terms:

The Royal Prerogative connotes a discretionary authority or privilege, exercisable by the Crown, or the Executive, which is not derived from Parliament, and is not subject to statutory control. This authority or privilege is in itself a part of the common law, not to be exercised arbitrarily, but 'per legem' and 'sub modo legis'.

But royal prerogative power may be constrained or removed by Act of Parliament. It happens in this way: the assent of the reigning monarch is necessary to every act – 'La Reine le veult'. To the extent that the act in question limits or removes the royal prerogative, the scope of the prerogative is thereby diminished and cannot be regained.

As an example, the royal prerogative to dissolve parliament was abrogated by our own dear coalition's Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, a demand of the Liberal Democrats. If parliament were to repeal the act, the Queen would recover her power to dissolve parliament by reason of *that* act and not at common law.

*The judges.* Interpreting the law is the province of judges. In the history of Britain, the judiciary though appointed by the monarch on the advice of her ministers, have judicial *tenure*. The Act of Settlement of 1701, which brought the protestant George I to the throne following the reign of William and Mary, provides that judges are appointed *quamdiu se bene gesserint* (during good behaviour) and can be removed only by both Houses of Parliament. They are therefore independent and not subject to political interference. They decide what an Act of Parliament means. It is also the body

of their decisions from time immemorial which, through the following of precedent, constitute the common law. Unlike the continental systems of law, the common law continues to adapt and evolve and is consequently much more flexible. Hence in *Miller*, it was the Supreme Court which decided whether the executive could trigger Article 50 merely by the use of the royal prerogative, or whether only an Act of Parliament could give the executive that power.

Now President Trump, amongst many failings, does not understand the American constitution fashioned in 1787, fundamental to which is the separation of the three powers: legislative, executive and judicial. Without delving into it too deeply, Article II of the constitution provides: 'The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.' This was the equivalent of the royal prerogative of George III. Using that executive power, presidents have from the beginning issued 'executive orders' which do not require the consent of Congress – although Congress can deny the supply of money to carry them out. George Washington issued 8 – Roosevelt over 3,000 and Obama 276. Trump has scored 18 or so to date. Almost all of these orders have been upheld when challenged in the courts – for example, Roosevelt's executive order of 1942 for the internment of Japanese Americans living in the USA in the Second World War. But these orders must comply with the constitution. Trump's executive order banning the refugees of seven countries from entering the USA was restrained by Federal Judge Robarts in Washington State on the grounds that it breached the guarantees in the American constitution of religious freedom and equal protection. Judge Robarts, the 'So-called Judge' as Trump termed him, was able to act in this way, because he enjoys 'tenure'. The British principle set out in the Act of Settlement of 1701 was followed by the founding fathers in the constitution of the USA. On Wednesday, a Hawaiian district judge restrained Trump's revised order on the grounds that, coupled with his many public statements, it is motivated by religious prejudice against Muslims, contrary to the guarantees of religious freedom in the constitution.

So all these principles are alive and well and active in the modern world.

One aspect of the royal prerogative which still survives is the granting of honours and peerages. Only the

queen can make the grant; parliament plays no part. In most cases, she follows the advice of her prime minister but she has the power without such advice to make distinguished people Companions of Honour, Knights of the Garter and to make awards under the Royal Victorian Order to retainers and friends. One of the more amusing aspects of the Regency was that George, Prince of Wales, finally became Prince Regent in 1811 on the final illness of his father George III, but only by Act of Parliament. His prerogatives were limited by that statute so that he could not appoint his cronies peers, make viscounts into earls, earls into marquises and marquises into dukes for a full year. When Spencer Percival, the prime minister, was assassinated in 1812, the regent's Whig friends who had supported him for decades expected to be swept into office. Prinny hesitated, ran around in circles for days, and finally turned back to the Tories, using his royal prerogative to appoint the Earl of Liverpool as prime minister – the longest to serve continuously as such.

The royal prerogative more importantly survives in the realm of foreign affairs. It is the monarch who recognises foreign states. Ambassadors still present their credentials to the Court of St James. Your passport is issued under the royal prerogative and is entirely discretionary: there is no statutory right to a passport. It is the monarch who issues declarations of war and peace, and forms international treaties. That's the basic principle.

However, from early days, the royal prerogative did not control foreign trade and commerce. Clause 41 of Magna Carta says:

All merchants, unless they were openly prohibited before, shall have safe and sure conduct to depart out of England, and to come into England, and to tarry in and go through England, as well by land as by water, to buy or sell, without any evil tolls, by the old and rightful customs, except in time of war; ...

In an interesting foretaste of our current debate concerning EU residents in the UK and the one sided assurance we in the House of Lords sought to give them last week, clause 41 goes on:

... and if they be of land at war with us, and if such be found in our land at the beginning of the war, they shall be attached without harm of body or

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goods, until it be known unto us, or our Chief Justice, how the merchants of our land are entreated who shall be then found in the land at war against us, and if ours be safe there, the others shall be safe in our land.

Many statutes were passed in subsequent centuries governing foreign trade. A statute in the time of Edward III declared 'que la mare soit overt' – that the sea 'shall be open to all manner of merchants to pass with their merchandise (where it shall please them).'

All merchants, strangers and denizens, or any other may sell corn, &c. and every other thing vendible to whom they please, foreigners or denizens, excepting the King's enemies, and any charter, proclamation, allowance, judgment, &c. to the contrary shall be void.

A famous jurist Sir Matthew Hale writing in the early part of the eighteenth century, observed:

... that upon the whole matter, it will appear from the several Acts of Parliament that have been made for the support and increase of trade, and for the keeping of the sea open to foreign and English merchants and merchandise, that there is now no other means for the restraint of exportation or importation of goods and merchandises in times of peace, but only when and where an Act of Parliament puts any restraint.

Several Acts of Parliament having provided, que la mere soit overt, it may not be regularly shut against the merchandise of English, or foreigners in amity with this Crown, unless an Act of Parliament shut it, as it hath been done in some particular cases, and may be done in others.

The jurist Joseph Chitty in his *Treatise on the Royal Prerogatives of the Crown*, published in 1820, was able to say:

As these statutes contain comprehensive and positive enactments which bind the Crown, it may be laid down as a general rule, that the King does not possess any general common law prerogative with respect to foreign commerce.

Chitty concluded that the king may not, from mere political motives, and

independently of any treaty or legislative provision, prevent his subjects from carrying on, or being concerned in, any particular trade in a foreign country at peace with this (however prejudicial such trade may be to the interests of this country).

This was the legal context when negotiations to join the Common Market began in 1960. After several false starts, and De Gaulle's 'Non', a Treaty of Accession was eventually signed by ministers on 22 January 1972 and Britain entered the Common Market. It is noteworthy that in October 1971, prior to the treaty being signed, Ted Heath secured resolutions in both Houses of Parliament which were to 'approve HMG's decision of principle to join the European Communities on the basis of the arrangements which have been negotiated'. Those arrangements were fully debated.

Furthermore, the Accession Treaty was not binding unless and until it was formally ratified by the UK. A bill was laid before parliament which received the royal assent in October 1972 as the European Communities Act 1972.

In the years that followed upwards of twenty treaties were made relating to the EU – including the Maastricht Treaty, the Amsterdam Treaty, the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Lisbon. The latter introduced the fatal Article 50, which contained a provision entitling a member state to withdraw from the EU. Each of these treaties was signed by ministers. But each required an amending Act of Parliament to add them to the list of 'Treaties' in Section 1(2) of the 1972 Act. Their terms were thereby incorporated into British law.

Under the European Union Act 2011 passed by the coalition government, you will recall that the most important restriction was that where a treaty or a decision increased the competences of the European Union, it had to be approved in a UK-wide referendum. The use of a referendum in this area began of course, with Harold Wilson's *confirmatory* Common Market Referendum of 1975. Note that we were *already* in the Common Market by the treaty signed under the royal prerogative in 1972 and the European Communities Act passed by parliament in 1972. It was not a referendum to *negotiate* terms, but to confirm what had already been done. If the country had voted No, presumably Wilson would have introduced another Act of Parliament to revoke the 1972 act.

So we come to today. I know of no respectable lawyer – and I exclude a number of Tory lawyers from that appellation – who ever thought the government could win the *Miller* case. It is so obvious that that the population of Britain gained rights under the 1972 act and its successors which could only be removed by legislation through parliament. Look at Heligoland and Mr Gladstone's pronouncement. The only way in which Mrs May could win was to concede that notice under Article 50 is revocable and that therefore giving notice did not inevitably lead to a loss of entrenched rights. Lord Pannick used the analogy of pulling the trigger of a gun – the bullet is discharged and cannot be deflected from its target. But if she did say it was *revocable*, and Pannick said it was *irrevocable*, the only way in which the interpretation of Article 50 could be determined finally would be to refer the dispute to the European Court of Justice! Further, by conceding it was revocable, she would give fuel to the Liberal Democrat demand for a referendum on the final deal: No to the deal would leave Britain within the EU – not the outer darkness of WTO rules.

So the Supreme Court was not asked to determine whether the Article 50 notice can be revoked: they were asked by all sides to proceed on the basis that pressing the button was the end of the matter – the entrenched rights of the people of this country would inevitably be prejudiced.

So who rules? The truth is that the supine, derelict and divided Labour Party have allowed Mrs May to have her way. It need not have been so. Parliament could have asserted its primacy. That's what we have called for. The royal prerogative exercised by the Brexit Brigade could and should have been curbed.

What about the referendum on the deal? If the Brexit negotiations fail, surely there must be a general election and the people will have their say. If the Brexit deal is negated by parliament, surely there must again be a general election. But if a Brexit deal is done and is pushed through parliament, the people will not have their say at all. The important point is that the British people will not then have *ownership* of the deal. If as we all believe, the deal goes wrong, they will blame the political elite. That way madness and instability, social and political, lies. It will be as my family motto says: Ar bwy mae'r Bae' – Who can we blame?

# Reviews

## All prime ministers competently surveyed in a single tome

Dick Leonard, *A History of British Prime Ministers (Omnibus Edition): Walpole to Cameron* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Review by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

**T**HIS OMNIBUS EDITION of Dick Leonard's British Premiers trilogy, surveys the lives and careers of all the fifty-three prime ministers between Sir Robert Walpole (1721–42) and David Cameron (2010–16), bringing to life the political achievements and also the personal idiosyncrasies of Britain's rulers over nearly three centuries.

Dick Leonard is well known as a prolific political journalist and sometime Labour MP. He has published more than twenty volumes, some of these in joint authorship. *Journal* readers may well recall his enthralling joint biography, *The Great Rivalry: Gladstone & Disraeli, a Dual Biography* (I. B. Tauris, 2013), reviewed by the present writer in the *Journal of Liberal History* (85). And this latest offering, aptly termed an 'Omnibus Edition', is a composite amalgam of three previous sequential volumes written by Leonard, namely *Eighteenth-Century British Premiers*, *Nineteenth-Century British Premiers*, and *A Century of Premiers*. In addition, the chapters on the last three prime ministers – Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron – have been substantially revised and updated for this new edition.

The fifty-two men and (at the time of writing – July 2016) one woman who have held the office of prime minister of the United Kingdom are all given a single chapter in this marvellously authoritative and highly readable manual, clearly the result of wide, thoughtful immersion in so many scholarly volumes and reference works. All the entries are informative, well composed and pithily succinct. The less well-known premiers are not at all neglected by comparison with the leading figures. It deserves to be used widely alongside the entries on the prime ministers in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

In each successive chapter, the author probes the various circumstances which propelled each prime minister to the top

of the 'greasy pole' of British political life. He balances their merits and demerits, looks at their successes and failures during their terms of office, and enquires how long their impact will possibly last. Alongside the official story, interesting snippets of information are recounted on the private and personal lives of the PMs. Although he was briefly a Labour MP himself, Dick Leonard displays no obvious partisanship when dealing with recent premiers. Blair is described as 'a fallen idol', Brown as an uncertain and paranoid premier, and Cameron as 'Blair in a minor key'. *Journal* readers will undoubtedly savour the scholarly, substantial essays on Palmerston, Gladstone, Asquith and Lloyd George.

It is indeed instructive to compare the Grand Old Man, Gladstone, who was almost 59 years of age when he formed his first ministry in 1868 (out of four which ended in 1894 when he was aged 85), and David Lloyd George who was still aged only 59 and still at the height of his political powers, when he was ejected from 10 Downing Street in the autumn of 1922, destined to spend the rest of his days, more than twenty-two long years, generally unrewardingly in the political wilderness.

Especially useful are the short bibliographies of the most useful works appended to each article, and the source of some, but by no means all, of the direct quotations are helpfully noted in the main text. This is the kind of book which it is exceptionally useful to have to hand and it will certainly stimulate and expedite further reading and research on these figures.

The author is also to be applauded for his knack of summing up the careers of each successive prime minister in a few words or sentences. W. E. Gladstone, we are told, was 'more than any other British leader, strongly and publicly motivated by his Christian beliefs which were undoubtedly sincere, though he was

not above cutting corners and indulging in sharp practice, from time to time' (p. 476). And due attention is paid here to Gladstone's absorbing passion for rescuing fallen women, a near obsessive proclivity which continued into his advanced old age.

Leonard's assessment of Herbert Asquith is admirably fair-minded and balanced, underlining his undoubted 'mixed legacy' to posterity. On the one hand, he deserves to be remembered 'as a pioneer, whose achievements have reverberated down the years, paving the way for the welfare state legislation of the Attlee government in 1945–51, as well as Blair's constitutional reforms (especially concerning the House of Lords) in 1997'. But he is also described, with exemplary fairness, as 'the last of the nineteenth-century Liberals', and one who must bear 'some responsibility for the eclipse of the once mighty Liberal Party'. As the author, wholly reasonably points out, 'It is arguable, though far from certain, that it would have been replaced, in any event, by the nascent Labour Party' (p. 548).

Dick Leonard is clearly an avid fan of David Lloyd George. Although fully aware of 'the Goat's' weaknesses and excesses, he marks him out as 'probably the most gifted of all the prime ministers of the twentieth century, and he had perhaps a greater influence on people's lives than any other politician'. In support of this, the author refers to his introduction of old age pensions, national insurance and other welfare benefits, 'curbing' the excessive powers of the Upper House, and his role in securing victory in the First World War (p. 567).



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A fascinating 'Appendix' (pp. 852–59) is a notably engrossing read, providing statistics on the age of each prime minister on first attaining the office, the dates of each successive ministry, detailed to the exact day, and the total time which each spent in the prime ministerial office. Details of spouses and offspring are also included in this section.

Sir Robert Walpole's record of 20 years and 314 days in prime ministerial office still, wholly predictably, stands, and is indeed highly likely to do so. Of the twentieth-century premiers, Andrew Bonar Law (209 days in 1922–23) and Sir Alec Douglas Home (362 days in 1963–64) were the only two premiers to serve in office for less than a year in the top job. Lady Thatcher's extremely lengthy 11 years and 209 days in office ('I want to go on and on and on', she once said!) was the lengthiest prime ministerial term of office since Lord Liverpool (14 years, 305 days) in 1812–27, before the passage of the First Reform Act in 1832. Lord Liverpool was aged just 42 years and 1 day when he first took up office, but Tony Blair and David Cameron were only a little older. By far the youngest of the lot, of course was William Pitt the Younger, aged just 24 years, 205 days, in 1783. It would have been interesting and helpful if the author had added the age of each PM at the time of his death. The oldest, in fact, was James Callaghan, 93 years and 10 months at the time of his death in 2005, but he was run close by Harold Macmillan and Sir Alec Douglas Home, both aged 92.

Some minor errors, inevitably, have crept into the text. Jennifer Longford, Frances Stevenson's daughter, was in fact born in October 1929, not 1927 (p. 553). Twice in fact (pp. 553 and 857), she is described as Lloyd George's natural daughter as if this were beyond challenge, but it is highly possible that she was the biological daughter of Colonel T. F. Tweed who had an intimate relationship with her mother at the very time of her conception. And James Callaghan became prime minister in April 1976, not 1978 (p. 858).

Given the format of the volume, and the constant necessity to compress and over-simplify the material, it is inevitable that some possible misjudgements have crept into the book. 'LG', we are told in no uncertain terms, 'took to ministerial life like a duck to water' (p. 555). In fact, he faced serious teething problems at both the Board of Trade and the Exchequer, although he eventually

achieved a great deal at both of course. The infamous Lloyd George Political Fund is described as 'a private fund entirely controlled by himself' (p. 565), but its control was, at least nominally, in fact vested in a group of trustees or scrutineers.

The chapter on Stanley Baldwin, too, contains some overstatements. Baldwin did not singlehandedly 'destroy one coalition government under Lloyd George' in 1922 (p. 592), although he did contribute to its downfall at the Carlton Club meeting. And it seems a gross exaggeration to claim that, had Baldwin not insisted on pursuing his annual vacation at Aix-les-Bains in the high summer of 1931, then the idea of forming a national government would 'probably' 'have been nipped in the bud' (pp. 592–93). And Baldwin's key role in bringing about the enforced abdication of King Edward VII in December 1936 is certainly underplayed at the end of the chapter (p. 594).

Again, Dick Leonard is rather harsh on the deceased Labour Party leader John Smith – 'He lacked Blair's charisma, and would not have gone nearly so far in reforming the Labour Party. ... Had he survived, the Tories might well have done rather better' in the general election of May 1997 (p. 793). But would

John Smith have colluded in rather underhand fashion with George W. Bush to take the country into the Iraqi War and lived to pay the price? Scarcely believable.

Although the reviewer might well cavil at the total lack of illustrative material in the book, it is an engrossing read, and the general standard of accuracy is very high indeed throughout. At £20 for a paperback edition, it is also very reasonably priced for a tome running to 881 pages which must have tested the skill of the bookbinders to its limits. The hardback edition, published in 2014, had a price tag of £140 and included photographs of the premiers. Leonard's survey generally lacks an analytical dimension, but it provides the best general account we have of the fifty-two men and one woman who have held the office of prime minister. As such, it is a considerable achievement, which should appeal to a wide readership. It will serve its purpose well for a long while, although a new Tory prime minister is being selected as I write these very words.

*Dr J. Graham Jones was formerly Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.*

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## Saint or devil?

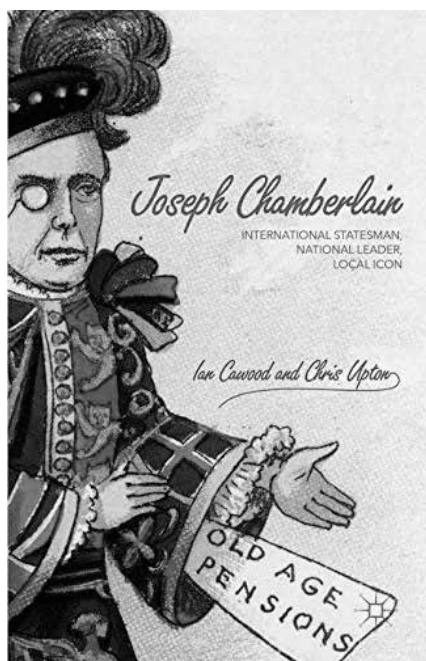
Ian Cawood and Chris Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain International Statesman, National Leader, Local Icon* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Review by **Tony Little**

AT THE LAUNCH of this collection of essays in Portcullis House, Westminster, Ian Cawood arranged for spokesmen from the three major political parties to comment on the legacy of Joseph Chamberlain. Gisella Stuart, the Labour MP for Chamberlain's old Birmingham seat, spoke of the tradition by which she received orchids on her election in his memory. For the Conservatives, Lord Carrington spoke of Chamberlain's continuing influence on the organisation and philosophy of his party. But for the Liberal Democrats, Lord Beith drew a sharp distinction between Chamberlain's legacy of municipal reform in Birmingham, still an inspiration to many Liberals, and the destructive impact on both the Liberal and Conservative parties of

Chamberlain's ruthless crusading for his policies. No one else can equal his record of splitting two opposing major parties. Though he never led one of the great parties and never held a more important office than Colonial Secretary, it would be hard to find more than a handful of Victorian politicians better remembered.

Remembered but not necessarily revered. Ian Cawood quotes from Chamberlain's first biographer Alexander Macintosh that contemporaries were divided as to whether Joe was 'a saint or a devil' (p. 229). Even within this collection, Thomas Otte draws attention to his record of 'division and destruction' (p. 20), and the editors quote approvingly from Beatrice Potter (later Webb): 'no one trusts him, no one likes him, no one believes in him' (p. 205). Why?



Chamberlain was a self-made businessman, whose wealth derived from a screw manufacturing company, now part of GKN, and was a founding investor in Lloyds Bank. When his wealth was sufficient he began to play a part in Birmingham local government and in the campaign for state primary education. With colleagues, he pioneered mass membership party organisation both on a local and national basis. He exploited his local fame as mayor of Birmingham to become Liberal MP for the town in 1876 and was quickly elevated to Gladstone's second cabinet.

Here his promotion of extensive government intervention for the benefit of new, more working-class, voters elevated him to the most prominent radical. Splitting with Gladstone over devolution for Ireland, he became increasingly committed to imperialism, accepting office in a Tory–Liberal Unionist coalition government in 1895. His restless, inventive mind saw the opportunity to combine imperial ambition with the creation of a welfare state. Imperial tariff preference would knit together the empire and provide the funds for old age pensions. But the policy split the Tories and his campaign for it divided the nation, resulting in the Liberal landslide of 1905 and, for Chamberlain, the stroke that, in 1906, ended his career. Both his sons Austen and Neville led the Conservative Party and maintained effective control of Birmingham for their lifetimes. In the crisis of the Great Depression, the Chamberlainite Tory Party ended free trade.

The centenary of Chamberlain's death inspired a conference, partly sponsored by the Liberal Democrat History Group, held at Newman University in 2014, from which these essays derive. As the title suggests, the volume covers Chamberlain the imperialist, Chamberlain the national politician and Chamberlain's relations with his local base. It is supplemented by a preface from Lord Beith, a framing essay by his leading biographer, Peter Marsh,<sup>1</sup> a concluding assessment by Ian Cawood and a valuable extensive bibliography. No such collection can give comprehensive coverage of a whole life and this one gives little on the private man or on the political organiser, but it can hope to supplement the biographies by a focus on the indicative details and contexts a biographer, even one with as much space as Peter Marsh, cannot give. Perhaps, in due course, someone with Ian Cawood's understanding of the campaigning culture of the late Victorian period will present us with a good modern history of the National Liberal Federation.

A particularly valuable part of the book is the portrait painted of Chamberlain's personal relationships, with his colleagues, with his rivals and with his acolytes. These sketches humanise the idealised picture Garvin sought to create in the 'tombstone' biography. Roland Quinault presents a favourable reassessment of the relationship with Gladstone based on the undoubted courtesy shown in the correspondence between the two and the admiration of Chamberlain for Gladstone's many talents. But does he underestimate Chamberlain's impatience with the aging statesman on one side and Gladstone's dislike both of Chamberlain's less than gentlemanly political professionalism and Chamberlain's preference for expanding central government intervention in day to day lives?

The interrelationships with George Dixon, portrayed by one of his descendants, James Dixon, and Leonard Courtney, considered by Eleanor Tench, play up Chamberlain's warts rather than disguise them. Dixon was a fellow Brumagen, a fellow Liberal organiser and a fellow advocate for education but that did not prevent Chamberlain elbowing him aside when he became impatient to enter parliament. Like Chamberlain, Courtney was a radical from a middle-class background, with imperialist tendencies, who became a Liberal Unionist. He was an enthusiast for proportional representation, related by marriage to

Beatrice Webb and a friend of the Fawcetts. Yet Chamberlain helped thwart his efforts to become Speaker and thereafter the relationship between the two deteriorated progressively, breaking down completely over Courtney's opposition to the Boer War. Chamberlain had little tolerance for colleagues who had served their purpose or who were insufficiently subservient.

The story of Chamberlain and Birmingham's municipal socialism, or more properly municipal capitalism, has been widely celebrated. Joe's plan to take over the local gas and water companies to provide the funds to rebuild the city centre makes a best-practice case for businessmen in politics. Andy Vail has provided a valuable service in the essay outlining the subtleties of the Nonconformist theological context for the approach that Chamberlain and his council colleagues adopted; while Cawood and Upton's own essay draws attention to the vibrant, if not always thriving, regional satirical journals alternately damning and supporting 'King Joseph'. The depth of illustrative resources is one of the strengths of Cawood's work more generally and here the editors do not disappoint in the novelty of local cartoons to set against the almost clichéd inclusion of the same few *Punch* and *Vanity Fair* caricatures seen elsewhere. They analyse the way in which these squibs were produced and beg the question as to whether other regional centres might provide similar riches. They also point out the way in which the Birmingham cartoonists both migrated to national fame and anticipated in the local papers Joe's iconography of the national press.

Although treated first in the book, Chamberlain was only truly an international figure in the final part of his career when he rather surprisingly joined Lord Salisbury's government at the Colonial Office rather than in a senior domestic office. Thomas Otte gives a valuable, penetrating overview of Chamberlain's engagement with the wider world, which predates his assumption of cabinet office but I was more intrigued by the other contributions which give us two very different perspectives from inside colonies. Jackie Grobler discusses Chamberlain's visit to South Africa in the aftermath of the Boer War. Chamberlain's part in the instigation of the war has always been deliberately obscured and conclusions about his role marred by partisanship both at the time and subsequently. What makes Grobler's essay

of interest is its focus on Chamberlain's failure to understand the antipathy of the defeated leaders to the Colonial Secretary's 'conciliatory' efforts build a new dispensation that largely excluded the Boers. Tom Brooking gives a very different view in outlining Chamberlain's friendship with Richard Seddon and the way in which both domestic and imperial policies developed interactively between the colonies and the mother country. Seddon was an autodidactic mechanical engineer and later populist prime minister of New Zealand. He visited Britain in 1897, the year of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and the two men exchanged correspondence thereafter. Seddon was a pioneer in his own country for social security and an advocate for closer imperial relations, consequently an ally for Chamberlain over imperial preference, though unfortunately for Joe, in a minority even among the self-governing colonies.

As Oliver Betts makes clear, tariff reform was a tricky sell even for as charismatic a politician as Chamberlain. Chamberlain proposed imperial preference not only as a tool for fusing the empire together but also as the answer to the worries about the advance of Germany and America as industrial nations and the means to fund old age pensions. As usual, Chamberlain had spotted a salient question but the electorate overwhelmingly judged that he had chosen the wrong solution. His Liberal opponents bogged him down in arguments about the costs of everyday shopping – the Big vs the Small Loaf. If the losers from the policy were obvious and

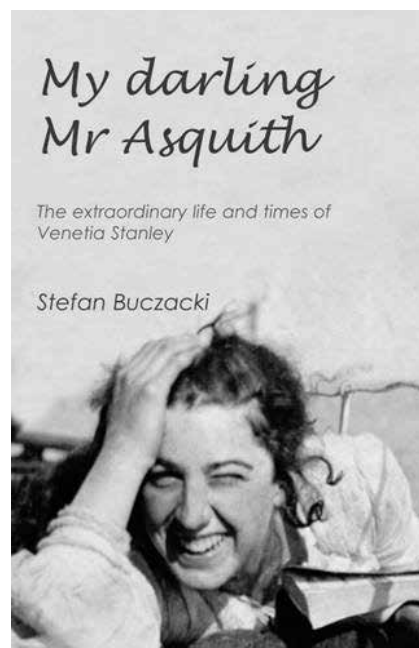
determined to vote against, it was harder to identify and motivate the potential winners. In echoes of the recent EU referendum, Betts utilises the evidence from Booth's survey to suggest that small British traders were less worried about the threats of imports from the Continent than the competition from foreign refugees lowering wage costs in their immediate neighbourhood.

Mrs May had an unexpectedly easy ride to the leadership of the Conservative Party but, in one of her few speeches as candidate, she highlighted Chamberlain as a political lodestar.<sup>2</sup> But was he a sensible choice – saint or devil? Undoubtedly, he was an effective organiser and manager. True, his objective was always the welfare of his fellow citizens. Agreed, he was innovative in extending the role of government. But, with his tendencies towards insubordination, egotism and disloyalty, he was not a team player. As Gladstone, Devonshire, Salisbury and Balfour all discovered, Chamberlain was unavoidable but insufferable. Ian Cawood and the late Chris Upton, have provided the inspiration for a realistic reassessment of Chamberlain's achievements and a deeper understanding of Victorian political culture which usefully supplements Cawood's work on the Liberal Unionists.

*Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

1 Peter Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain, Entrepreneur in Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994).

2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-37053114>.



and letters. He read and reread her letters to him (not available) and wrote 206 to her in 1915 alone. Buczacki claims he has identified letters of general and political interest not used by the Brocks and quotes from sixteenth such letters. None of them justifies his assertion. He includes, for example, more terrible poems, an explanation that Asquith cannot meet her because he has to see the Archbishop of York, and a reflection on seeing her on to a train.

Asquith wrote about his social activities, and commented on political events. He asked for her opinions on political appointments and revealed military secrets. Buczacki confirms the Brocks' analysis disposing of the canard that Asquith wrote many letters while in cabinet. He wrote fulsome and finally increasingly desperate declarations of his love for her: 'I love you with heart and soul'. She wrote on 11 May 1915 announcing that she was going to marry Edwin Montagu, a protégé of Asquith, who had proposed to Venetia several times from 1912 but had been rejected. Venetia described Montagu as an interesting companion, but ugly and unattractive.

The author reviews the overheated correspondence between Venetia and Violet Asquith (her best friend) to assess whether either or both had lesbian tendencies, and finds it highly unlikely. He follows the phallogocentric attitude of other commentators in pursuing the question of whether Venetia and Asquith had full sex. His case for saying it did not happen is much stronger than that of Judge Oliver Popplewell,

## Asquith's obsession

Stefan Buczacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith: The extraordinary life and times of Venetia Stanley* (Cato & Clarke 2016)

Review by **Alan Mumford**

THE AUTHOR CLAIMS that Venetia Stanley 'has had a poor press' but his evidence for this is very thin. He claims that, almost without exception, every book touching on Venetia's life has concentrated on 'three years during which Asquith wrote around 600 intimate letters to her.' In fact, the letters read by Buczacki and the Brocks<sup>1</sup> began (in relatively anodyne form) in 1910 and ended in May 1915, and my calculation is

that there were 568. The author portrays Venetia as a woman of more substance than simply being the recipient of letters from Asquith, and devotes only 20 per cent of the book to that relationship. The book title is misleading.

Asquith was 60 in 1912 when he developed an obsessional love for Venetia, aged 25. Politically, the importance of this lies in the time and emotional energy he was expending in meetings

who finds them guilty.<sup>2</sup> In one of the few areas in which Buczacki offers something entirely new, he criticises Asquith as unfaithful in a wider sense to Margot. Asquith liked young women and we are given much more detail on Asquith as a 'groper'. Buczacki does not comment on the difference in power and status between them.

He does not criticise Venetia for her contribution to Asquith's unfaithfulness as she allowed Asquith to make fervent assertions of love towards her. Buczacki does not quote Asquith's letter to her after she assured him that she did not want him ever to stop loving her and wanting her.

No new insights are offered on the reasons why she decided to marry Edwin Montagu despite her physical repulsion towards him. Extraordinarily, Buczacki omits her statement to Montagu that she 'agreed to have some relationship with him whenever she chose, while retaining her right to have sex outside the marriage'.<sup>3</sup>

The letter Asquith received on 12 May was a hammer blow. Buczacki strangely does not comment on the extent to which Asquith's decision, on 17 May, to form a coalition was significantly influenced by his emotional turmoil.

There is nothing of political significance in Venetia's remaining thirty-three years. She continued to have distaste for physical relations with Montagu, but had affairs including at least two before Montagu died in 1924. She was uncaring in bringing up her (probably not their) daughter Judith. The book shows Venetia was entirely self-centred and self-satisfying as she pursued the 'fun' which she had set as her mantra for life as a young woman. Buczacki's aim, to contradict what he claims to have been the poor press about her, has not been achieved.

*Alan Mumford's most recent article for the Journal was 'Churchill and Lloyd George: Liberal Authors on the Great War?' His forthcoming article for the Journal is 'Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal'. He is the author of a number of books on political cartoons, most recently a cartoon biography of Lloyd George.*

1 M. and E. Brock (eds.), *H. H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

2 O. Poplewell, *The Prime Minister and his Mistress* (Lulu Publishing Services, 2014).

3 N. B. Levine, *Politics Religion and Love* (New York University Press, 1991).

## Jeremy Thorpe and Norman Scott

John Preston, *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (Viking, 2016)

Review by Michael Steed

**E**VEN IF HE had never met Norman Scott, Jeremy Thorpe would be a controversial figure in Liberal Party history. His firmly upper-class style was strikingly at odds with the zeitgeist of the 1960s, and so with the ethos of young recruits to the Liberal cause who were flocking into the party at that time. Yet his principled stances on Europe, on apartheid and on human rights generally not only proclaimed a continuity with classic Gladstonian Liberalism, they were highly relevant to this period's political agenda. His personal impact on the peak electoral performance of the party in February 1974 is undeniable; yet when he resigned as leader in 1976, it still had only thirteen MPs compared to the dozen that Jo Grimond had bequeathed him in 1967. The thirteen did represent a much higher Liberal vote in the October 1974 election than the dozen had after 1966; yet in two out the three election campaigns where Thorpe led the party, it lost ground in votes badly.

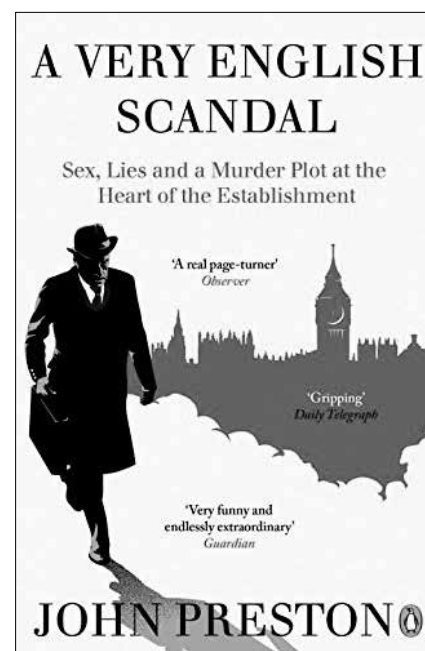
John Preston's study of Jeremy Thorpe's role in wider social history, the events which lead to his 1979 trial for a murder plot, has only a little direct relevance to his role as Liberal leader. Preston, a fiction writer and journalist rather than historian, tells it as a racy thriller, starting with a conspiratorial dinner conversation between Jeremy and a fellow Liberal MP Peter Bessell in February 1965. Bessell, it turns out, is almost as much the central character of Preston's tale as Thorpe. But not quite; the plot weaves around Thorpe's use of Bessell, and the latter's adulation of Thorpe. Bessell's own career was a distorted reflection of his hero's. His finale – his pitiful performance at Thorpe's trial – was of the worm that turned.

Herein lies some value for the political historian in Preston's study. Jeremy Thorpe had an extraordinary magnetism, which led to widespread adoration, from North Devon constituents to leading Liberal activists. His transgressions were not to be believed. He was able to sell meagre political achievements as triumphs; he has even cast a spell over some political historians, as evidenced in the issues of this journal immediately

following his death.<sup>1</sup> So when he needed help with his personal problems, Thorpe was able to call on the devotion of both Bessell and a lifelong personal friend, David Holmes, to put their energies and dubious skills at the service of their idol. The series of unlikely subterfuges and ultimate (maybe murder) plot may sound more like fiction; but I, and others, can attest that such high-risk, half-serious and half-baked conspiratorial behaviour was very much in character for the Jeremy Thorpe we knew. Preston's is an interesting, and legitimate, take on Thorpe.

That take relies overmuch on Bessell and Holmes, both of whom Preston considers as reliable sources. So he concludes that murder was the unquestionable intention of the conspiracy (which was undoubtedly Thorpe-inspired) that led to the shooting of Scott's dog and thence to the Old Bailey trial. In thriller style, Preston makes that the clear destination.

This contrasts with the sceptical stance of Michael Bloch<sup>2</sup> who, in my judgement, understood the complex psychology of Jeremy, the adored only son of Ursula, very much better. Bloch's biography, published in December 2014, immediately after Thorpe's death, examines the evidence forensically; Preston is not a detective. Bloch also researched the subject more thoroughly. There are several,



# Liberals in local government 1967 – 2017

The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC) was founded, as the Association of Liberal Councillors, fifty years ago. At this meeting, organised in conjunction with ALDC, we celebrate its 50th anniversary and discuss the role of Liberals and Liberal Democrats in local government. What has the party achieved in local government? To what extent has it taken a distinctively liberal approach?

Speakers: **Cllr Sara Bedford** (Leader, Three Valleys District Council), **Cllr Ruth Dombey** (Leader, Sutton Council), **Lord Tony Greaves** (long-serving councillor, Pendle Borough Council), **Cllr Richard Kemp** (Leader, Liberal Democrats on Liverpool City Council), **Baroness Kath Pinnock** (Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, former Leader of Kirklees Council) and **Matt Cole** (University of Birmingham). Chair: **Lord Andrew Stunell** (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Communities and Local Government, 2010–12).

7.45pm, Sunday 17 September

Bayview 2, Bournemouth International Centre (conference pass required)

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mostly small, discrepancies between the two authors; where I am aware of which is correct, it is usually Bloch.

Preston is looking for colour in his tale, and finds it in Bessell's private life, thereby adding (heterosexual) spice to the story. It is also some contribution to Liberal history, since Peter Bessell, Liberal MP for Bodmin 1964–70, is an understandably neglected figure. Bodmin was the only English seat gained from the Conservatives at the 1964 election and Bessell therefore a Liberal star in the mid-sixties.<sup>3</sup> He was also a good example of what was once typical of mid-twentieth-century Liberal candidates – the mixture of passionate Nonconformist and small business entrepreneur. Preston's fairly full account of Bessell's political career brings back my own direct memories of Peter's energy, style, quirky views and problematic temperament. It also says something of the sort of commitment required to win a Liberal seat in those days.

However, this book's main claim to a serious contribution to political history is surely contained in its sub-title,

the role of 'The Establishment'. Jeremy was certainly born and bred in the heart of the establishment, and frequently used his connections to deflect Norman Scott's accusations. He was immensely aided by Scott's inadequate grip on the truth – he had indeed fantasised about having a gay affair with Jeremy before it actually happened. But was there an establishment cover-up to protect the old Etonian culminating, as Bessell himself thought, in the acquittal?

Preston thinks so, telling the story from that angle. Curiously, then, he does not raise the question of why Thorpe and his co-conspirators were subject only to the most serious charge, involving intent to murder, which was never going to be easy to prove. The *New Statesman* interview with one of the jurors leaves no doubt that the four defendants would have been found guilty, 'If the charge had been conspiracy to intimidate, or something like that'.<sup>4</sup> As their agent, Newton, had been sentenced to two years for carrying out the intimidation, Thorpe would surely have gone to prison too.

So there remains scope for research into how the authorities decided what charge Jeremy Thorpe was to face, and whether at that stage he was protected by his social circle. If it was an establishment stitch-up, Preston illustrates the affair rather than examining and proving it.

*Michael Steed fought four parliamentary elections (including two high-profile by-elections) during the leadership of Jeremy Thorpe, and was President of the Liberal Party in 1978–79, the year of Thorpe's defeat and trial.*

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Liberal History*, nos. 85 and 86.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Bloch, *Jeremy Thorpe* (Little Brown, 2014), reviewed by David Steel in the *Journal of Liberal History*, no. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Garry Tregidga, in his entry on Peter Bessell in the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, argues strongly for Bessell's role in developing campaign strategy and techniques in Devon and Cornwall, so contributing (along with Thorpe) to later election success in the region.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Chippindale and David Leigh in the *New Statesman*, 1979, pp. 120–1 and p. 367.