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Farron as leader

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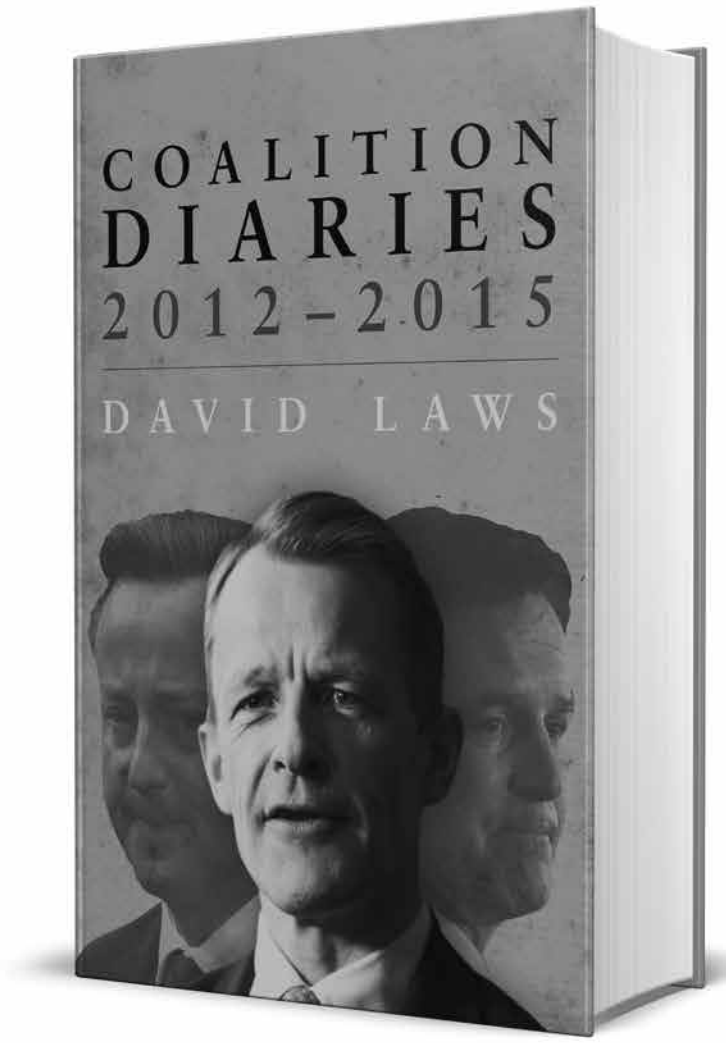

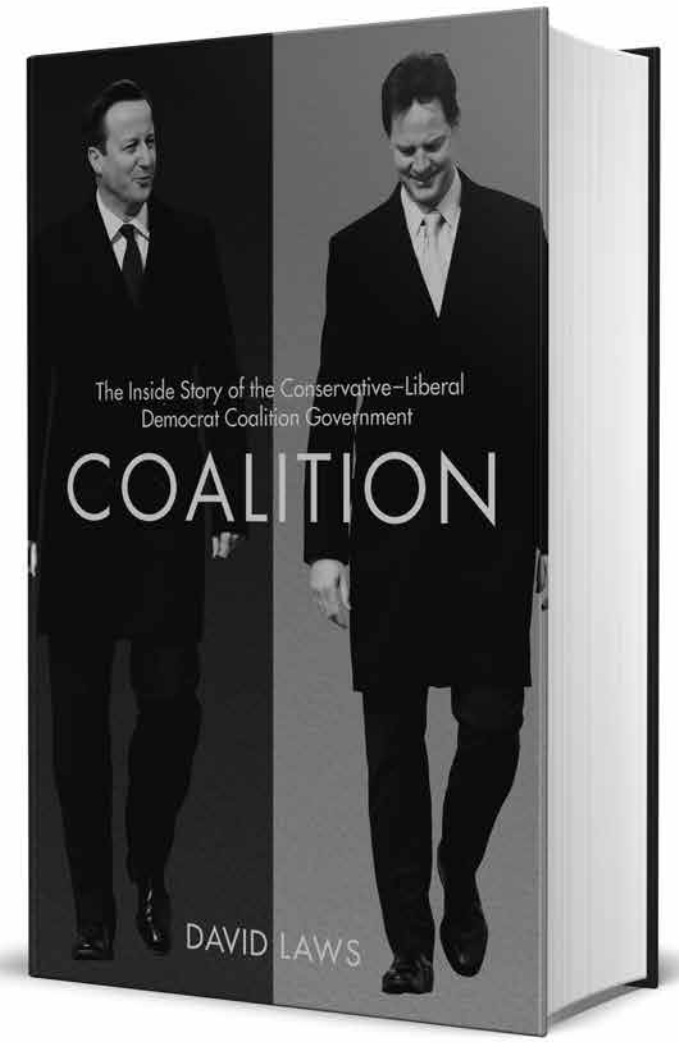

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Journal of Liberal History

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Cover photo: Tim Farron at the 2016 Liberal Democrat conference (photo: Liberal Democrats)

Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal of Liberal History* and other occasional publications.

For more information, including historical commentaries, details of publications, back issues of the *Journal*, and archive and other research resources, see: **www.liberalhistory.org.uk**.

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25 years of the Journal

This issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, number 100, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication originally known as the *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter*, then the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* and, since 2003, as our current title.

I think it is true to say that those of us involved in launching the Liberal Democrat History Group in 1988 – inspired by the Liberal History Group in the pre-merger Liberal Party – had no idea that we would end up where we are now.

Our original intention was simply to organise fringe meetings at the Liberal Democrat autumn party conferences. Slightly to our surprise, many of them turned out to be extremely popular, and we gradually accumulated a group of people willing to help out with other tasks. So, in 1994, we started to organise meetings both at the spring party conferences, and also in London, usually at the National Liberal Club, for the benefit of non-conference attendees.

And in September 1993, we produced the first issue of the Group's *Newsletter*, designed simply to publicise our activities and to publish reports of our meetings and a few book reviews of interest to students of Liberal history.

We managed to stick to a (more or less) regular quarterly publication, and twenty-five years on we can look back at one hundred issues, including twenty special themed issues, six books (published with the help of our friends at Politico's and Biteback), six shorter booklets, a rapidly developing website, and an expanding range of contributors and helpers. (Which is not to say that we wouldn't welcome more contributions and help!)

Our underlying aim has never changed, though – to promote the study and research of Liberal history, whether relating to the Liberal Party, SDP, Liberal Democrats or, more broadly, British (and sometimes foreign) Liberalism.We wanted both to remind political Liberals (members and non-members of the Liberal Democrats alike) of the history of their political beliefs, and to promote the study and research of political Liberalism – generally a neglected topic – amongst all those interested, whether academics or not, and to provide a platform for its publication.

We hope you find the *Journal of Liberal History* helps you in one or both of these aims, and manages to be a stimulating and enjoyable read at the same time.

I cannot thank enough all those who have made the *Journal* possible over the last twenty-five years. Here's to the next quarter-century!

Duncan Brack (Editor)

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How they used to look: the first issues of the three incarnations of the *Journal of Liberal History*

Letter to the Editor

Liberal Party Council

As David Steel says in his letter in issue 99 (summer 2018) the *Journal* is a respected organ of accurate history. As such he cannot be allowed, unchallenged, to describe the Liberal Party Council as 'perpetually chaotic'.

The Party Council was an important part of the Liberal Party constitution. It comprised some 250 members and its membership was democratically representative of all sections of the entire party. It met three (or possibly four!) times a year, and was always well attended. As well as policy and administrative matters, one of its most important functions was the opportunity of the membership to question – and challenge – our MPs, which it did most regularly and quite effectively.

I suspect it is this aspect which inspires Steel to describe it as 'chaotic'. For example, I do recall on numerous occasions expressing, along with other members, my disagreement with him on a range of matters, much to his annoyance. These exchanges, in a constitutional democratic organ of the party, were (and still are) a fundamental part of the Liberal approach to politics.

Disappointing and disagreeable for David Steel the Party Council may well have been, but chaotic, never.

John Smithson

Think history

Can you spare some time to help the History Group?

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with:

- Improving our website.
- Helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.
- Organising our meeting programme.
- Publicising our activities, through both social media and more traditional means.
- Running the organisation.

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** (journal@liberalhistory.org.uk) – we would love to hear from you.

Leadership

Interview with Tim Farron MP on his period as Leader of the Liberal Democrats, from 2015 to 2017

Tim Farron as

Farron launches the Liberal Democrat election manifesto, 17 May 2017

Tim Farron, Liberal Democrat MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale since 2005, was elected as the fifth leader of the Liberal Democrats in July 2015. In June 20 16, after the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, he was quick to call for a further referendum on the final deal following the negotiations, and committed the Liberal Democrats to argue for the UK to remain within the EU. His campaign in the 2017 general election, however, was dogged by repeated questions over his attitude, as a practising Christian, to gay sex. On 14 June 2017, six days after the election, he announced his intention to resign the leadership, and formally stood down when his successor was elected a month later. In June this year, the *Journal of Liberal History* interviewed him about his period as leader.

JLH: When did you decide that you first wanted to stand for the leadership?

TF: I think it only really occurred to me that I might in the weeks following the general election in 2010, when a number of younger MPs who were not in government encouraged me to run for deputy leader. Although Simon Hughes was successful then, I guess it set a number of us thinking about what might happen next.

I think it really began during the time I was president of the party [2011–15]. I am always an optimistic and positive person, but nevertheless you couldn't really look at how our poll rating was going, our standing in by-elections, local elections and the devolved parliaments and assemblies … It looked to me like the general election in what turned out to be 2015 was going to do us a lot of damage. I don't think I ever predicted just eight seats, but about twelve months before the election I did predict about thirteen or fourteen. I feared for that. I thought it would be awful for the party and therefore for the country.

Party Leader

A lot of my heroes are the 'come back from the dead' type of people: Paddy Ashdown, Neva Orrell (my great mentor from Leyland, who lost her ward four times and got it back four times), Jo Grimond, David Steel after the Thorpe scandal – there's something really joyful about being part of a comeback. Obviously I wanted us to recover, so I thought: 'Well, there's lots of things that I wouldn't be good at, but leading and building a campaigning insurgency was something I would be.' So I had no particular thought that 'I want it now' or 'I want it at this particular point', I just thought that there was a job needing to be done and I thought I could do it.

JLH: You were president of the party from 2011 to 2015. Was that a useful preparation to be leader?
TF: Yes, in terms of working out the relationship with headquarters and with the party in the country, with the campaigners – getting to know them and to understand some of the specific issues around particular constituencies and council areas. It was great for building relationships.

I think when you join the party at 16, you've been to nearly every conference since then, been to loads of by-elections, you know a lot of people and you have a deep relationship with people in the party. It wasn't that I needed any more of that, but being president gave me links to the professional structure of the party. It helped me to understand – and, forgive me, to be intolerant of – some of the party structures and the difficulties in dealing with things, particularly disciplinary issues. It reminded me that a lot of power is not formal, it is informal; and if you want to make stuff happen, you have to find a way to make it happen, even if the rules don't formally give you permission.

I also had to be thinking on my feet all the time. For all that people think of me as a sceptic about the coalition, I voted for it; I voted for 99 per cent of the things that were put to me and I spent a vast amount of my time trying to articulate in understandable language what we were doing – to our own people as well as to people out there – and to argue the Liberal Democrats' cause as opposed to the coalition's message. That was a valuable experience in terms of reacting to other people's decisions and trying to communicate them in ways that reassured, maybe even inspired, the members and gave us some chance of getting a distinct message across around the country.

JLH: What do you think the party did wrong in coalition? What do you think the Liberal Democrats should have done differently?
TF: I voted for coalition, and I still think that was probably the right thing to do by the country. But I think we were too afraid of our own shadow – we were scared of causing an early election, that's why we went for coalition rather than something else. We forgot, or weren't aware, how much more terrified of an early election David Cameron and George Osborne were. Bear in mind that they were supposed to be the Blair/Brown partnership who would deliver a majority for the Tory party, and they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory – largely because Nick played a blinder, but also because they were complacent. The Liberal Democrats going into coalition with the Tories saved Cameron's skin in many ways. If the coalition had not been formed, an early election may have happened, following a period of minority Tory government, and I bet you Cameron wouldn't have been leader – and they knew that. We held much more power over them than we realised.

We spent the first two years – and especially the first six months – behaving like if anybody breathed the word 'dissent', somehow the coalition would crack and everything would be all over. That was always rubbish, and we should have known that it was rubbish. The mood music at the beginning was dreadful. We should

I voted for coalition, and I still think that was probably the right thing to do by the country. But I think we were too afraid of our own shadow.

have learned lessons from Scotland [the Labour – Liberal Democrat coalitions of 1999–2007], where we never looked like we were the same beast as the Labour Party. It was very clear that we dragged two things out of Labour. Every time something went wrong north of the border, between 1999 and 2007 everybody would go: 'Ah, yes. But they got us the fees [the abolition of tuition fees] and free personal care for the elderly.' We had none of that. We didn't think about the PR, apart from thinking that if we didn't look like two peas in a pod then somehow the world would end. But even so, as the summer recess began in 2010, we were still on 17 per cent; it was [tuition] fees that killed us. It's all very well saying, 'Oh, we got the four things on the front page of the manifesto into the coalition agreement.' We have to remember not just what *we* thought we offered the electorate, but what *they* thought we were offering.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s we had managed to build – amazingly, actually, and Paddy Ashdown, Charles Kennedy and Nick need to take huge credit for this – a core vote, based upon our position on Iraq and tuition fees and one or two other things. But because the leadership thought that tuition fees was a commitment we shouldn't have made, nobody died in the ditch – or even tried to put up any kind of fight – for it in the coalition negotiations.

It was always obvious that we would take some kind of hit for going into coalition with the Tories – after all, the Lib–Lab Pact happened for eighteen months when I was 7 and 8 years of age and it was still a reason people cited at me for not voting Lib Dem in 2010. So full-blown coalition with the arch-enemy is likely to do you damage whatever you do with them. However, I think that tuition fees was the difference between thirty MPs and eight.

The other thing, of course, was buying into austerity too comprehensively. I could understand turning the tap down on revenue spending, but to cut off capital spending right at the beginning, I thought that was wrong in terms of the impact on society, and politically it made it look like we'd changed sides. And that, if I'm honest with you, that's what motivated me to run for president more than anything else. I just thought: 'We have to have a voice that sounds like us.'

JLH: Looking further back, you were also the Liberal Democrat equivalent of a Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to Menzies Campbell during his time as leader. Was that useful preparation for your leadership?

TF: Yes it was. I have always massively admired Menzies Campbell, and I admired him all the more having been close to him as leader; he was an incredibly decent man who had a really tough and torrid time, utterly unjustifiably, during his period as leader.

He resigned as leader about a week or two after Gordon Brown bottled calling an election in 2007. I remember coming down to London that Monday evening, and Daisy McAndrew from ITV running down the corridor saying: 'Is it true Menzies' resigning?', and I said, 'I'm his PPS – I think I'd know!' But I didn't know, as half an hour later he resigned and I got a text from Archy Kirkwood telling me so. I remember sitting in the Members' Tea Room feeling slightly bewildered, and in comes Vince Cable in his raincoat looking even more bewildered, and said, 'I think I'm leader. I think I'll need a PPS, won't I? Do you fancy doing it for me?' So I became the acting PPS to the acting leader, which is about as low as you can get and still be on the ladder.

The contrast in leadership styles was really interesting to see at close hand. Menzies went about it thoroughly professionally, spending two or three hours preparing for Prime Minister's Questions every Wednesday. Vince was just a one-man band, coming in at 11 o'clock [PM's Questions is at 12 noon] having had a long soak in the bath where he had dreamt up a question that he ran past me.

I also became aware of how the leader's office and the party machinery – the party's HQ – are two separate power bases. Chris Rennard was still Chief Executive then, and I saw a clear tension there, which I believed was wrong, a waste of energy. So I made a virtue out of a necessity when I became leader, which was to move the leader's office to HQ. You move to HQ and you make everybody part of the leader's team; I didn't make it some exclusive club where I was up against the Chief Executive. I'd spend time just walking around talking to people in HQ, finding out who they were and what they were doing. I think it was motivating to people to feel that they were part of the leader's team, not just stuck ten minutes away from it. I also think Tim Gordon [Liberal Democrat Chief Executive 2012–17] and I worked really well together,

It's all very well saying, 'Oh, we got the four things on the front page of the manifesto into the coalition agreement.' We have to remember not just what *we* thought we offered the electorate, but what *they* thought we were offering.

JLH: Did you want to take the party in any kind of different direction, politically?

TF: I eschew all the left–right talk, but I felt that the party had – not by design but by drift, by being in coalition with the Conservatives, and through the general move to a post-Thatcher space where market economics are taken as the norm and intervention is seen as peculiar – I thought that the centre of gravity of the party had moved a little bit too far to the right for my liking. I am both a liberal and a social democrat, and I thought that we were pretty good on the liberal side but that we had

Farron and supporters on the march for Europe, London, 2 July 2016

just lost touch with the social democrat side a bit. So, yes, without wanting to do anything massively dramatic, I wanted us to be a party that thinks that government can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

JLH: So more at the social liberal end of the spectrum?
TF: I don't think being a social liberal is at odds with being an economic liberal. But an ambitious liberal government that creates more freedom via a degree of intervention is thoroughly consistent with liberal philosophy and liberal history and tradition. In reality, small government actually means weak citizens. There is a difference between big in-your-face government stamping all over your civil liberties and government that is active in creating strong public services and which redistributes.

I have always thought that the Adam Smith notion of the invisible hand in the marketplace is just not true. There is an invisible force in the marketplace and it is gravity – more comes to those with plenty to start off with – and so a real liberal wants to break that up, referee it, redistribute it. I thought the party needed to move a little bit more in that direction. I also thought that most of the members probably thought that too, and would feel more comfortable in that kind of party.

JLH: So basically your aims were to rescue the party from catastrophe and move it in a more social-liberal, leftward direction. To what extent do you think you achieved either of those things?
TF: Well I think the former, we've 100,000 members and we're moving forward. The day after I became leader, I think *The Times* declared that: 'The party that began with Gladstone will end with Farron'. We must never forget that that was absolutely a possibility, it might have happened.

We stabilised the party, found a cause, doubled in size. We aimed to help members pick a ward and win it, to give people the sense that look, you may have no MP or councillors whatsoever, but you can win somewhere – giving people a bit of self-belief, making campaigning a thing that wasn't an afterthought to a very Westminster-focused leadership but the life and soul of someone who was a born campaigner himself. I think we achieved that.

In terms of a leftward shift, we didn't really have much time. But I fought very hard, and successfully in the end, for us to commit to the additional penny on income tax for the NHS. If we had had more time, we'd have developed that more. Simply by virtue of being outside coalition and in opposition to the Conservatives, that move started by itself, without too much help from me.

JLH: Most leaders, at some time or another, have had problems with their parliamentary party. Did that happen to you as well?
TF: The main issue was when we took the decision to take an unashamedly pro-European position in the early hours following the Brexit referendum, including arguing for a referendum on the final deal – which not all of my colleagues agreed with. It was a massive political gamble. You could argue it nearly cost me my seat, because I think there was a large percentage of people who, however they'd voted, thought, 'Oh, enough whining already.' But I'd also argue that it's what saved the party – it's what doubled us in size, it's what won us Richmond Park [by-election in 2016], and it's what gave us any kind of clear message. The main enemy that we were fighting, post-2015, was irrelevance. Our biggest challenge in the 2017 election, and even now, probably, is a result of that election: we got so battered in 2015 that it doesn't matter how right you are – if you are not big enough to be credible, it becomes almost pointless. Much as I disagree with Labour's humming and hawing over Europe, when you're on 40 per cent you can afford nuance; when you're on 8 per cent, you can't.

We planned this – myself, Tim Gordon, my own staff, Alistair Carmichael [Chief Whip in

the Commons], Dick Newby [then Chief Whip in the Lords] – about a week or two before referendum day. I did something David Cameron never did – I planned for what happens if you lose. We spent two or three hours discussing it, and it became very clear that we had to come out and be unashamedly pro-Europe, (a) because we believed it and (b) because we were going to bleed into complete irrelevance if we didn't. We chose to be 'Marmite'; and the thing about Marmite is that some people love it, and some people really hate it. And some of my colleagues really hated it.

JLH: What are you most proud of achieving in your time as leader?
TF: Probably the fact that the party membership is the biggest that it has ever been. And that wasn't an accident. People don't join dying parties, and we were a dying party. So I think that is probably it – that we've grown and survived. It would have been nice to have gone on to further steps, but the first was live and grow, and we did more than that. Every party leader has promised that they would double the party's membership, or add an extra 40,000, or something like that. Well, I did that; nobody else did – helped by calamitous circumstances; but you don't automatically pick up 50,000 members unless you make key choices, which we did.

JLH: What did you find most challenging?
TF: Being a constituency MP. I won my seat in a very peculiar, very personal way – even by Lib Dem standards! I had a wonderful team, I'm not saying it was only down to me; but I loved Westmorland and Lonsdale to death, and I had a level of presence in my community that other people, even my great colleagues, didn't have. I found that maintaining that presence, and combining it with being a dad and a husband, really hard. The way I dealt with it was just by working stupidly hard. I would be up north an awful lot, but every second would be diarised. I think in terms of the balance of life, that was the real challenge.

JLH: Is that why your majority fell in 2017?
TF: I think so, partly. I also think that there was a perception that: 'Oh, he's the leader now. He's left us.' Which was never true, but perceptions are everything. And I also think, to put it bluntly, the position that we took on Brexit was always going to cut down the middle. On top of that was the level of Tory spending. I think I am right in saying that in 2017 Westmorland and Lonsdale Tories held the record for the largest amount of money spent in one constituency without winning. I guess they thought it was worth the effort of chucking the kitchen sink at us to decapitate the Lib Dem leader. But the Brexit position was the key thing that gave them the way in.

JLH: What were you most disappointed by in your time as leader?
TF: That I didn't get to complete all the projects we had started. I'm not somebody who thought: 'Oh, I must do this for ten years.' But there is a load more that I know I could have done, in terms of building our brand. The next project would have been building a well-funded centre, linked to the party, which would have been about wooing opinion-formers in society, in big business, in the media; having a credible economic plan that made it very clear that there was something other than mad English nationalism and Trotskyism on the agenda.

I thought credibility was key. Some of this is about being in the media, or winning elections, but some of it is about gaining credibility with people who have got the resources to help you. We were very close to that, and that would have been a big, seven-figure project that would have brought some very big people onside, some people from outside the party. That was on the cusp of happening when the election was called. I would have liked to have seen that project completed.

JLH: Do you think the party could have fought the 2017 election campaign better?
TF: In many ways we fought it well: I think we had a national message that gave us distinctiveness, though clearly it was a disadvantage in many of the areas where we had been strong beforehand. And there were some areas where it could have worked more in our favour. So perhaps we should have been scoping out other target seats, as we did in places like St Albans. But that would have meant dropping seats where we had been only a few hundred or thousand behind in 2015.

It helped that we had prepared for the snap election in autumn 2016 that didn't happen; we had the manifesto pretty much in the bag. I think the thing that really would have helped us in the 2017 election was not being so badly hammered in 2015 – that was 95 per cent of our problem.

JLH: Perhaps it didn't help that the election never got into the details of Brexit?
TF: The election was about Brexit, in the sense that people who had voted Leave had no sympathy with people who were still whining about Europe, and people who had voted Remain felt it wasn't cricket to whine about Europe. So, yes, if the election had been now

We spent two or three hours discussing it, and it became very clear that we had to come out and be unashamedly pro-Europe, (a) because we believed it and (b) because we were going to bleed into complete irrelevance if we didn't.

[June 2018], or in the autumn, then it might have been a very different kettle of fish.

In the end, it became about leadership. I guess our problem – my problem – was that I was the first Liberal or Lib Dem leader not even to be the leader of the third party. Our ability to get our message across was really limited, and the election became more obviously Labour *v.* Tory.

After the local elections it looked like Theresa May had played a master stroke; I thought she was going to win by 100 plus. It was really only as we got into the middle of May that I began to think, with the dementia tax and things like that, that she hadn't planned it; she was making schoolboy errors. But the combination of that very commanding result for the Tories in the local elections and us not performing – our vote went up by 7 per cent, but the Tory vote went up by so much more because of the UKIP collapse – and the effect of the 'strong and stable' message, which was working in the first week of May, meant that we were overcome. We didn't get the bounce we thought we were going to get from the locals.

And, perversely, because it looked like Labour were a million miles from power, there wasn't really any need to vote for Theresa May to keep out that dangerous loony Corbyn. Also, the messaging the Tories used about Corbyn, that they'd always assumed from day one would work, didn't. He's a unilateralist, he may have been sympathetic to the Soviet Union, he'd been with the IRA, all these kinds of things – you've got to be over 40 to even know about that stuff. And even if you do know about it, their message sounded like your grumpy old granddad telling you what you shouldn't do – which, obviously, you did. It wasn't just young people who thought, 'Oh, he's harmless and she's going to win anyway'; I think that was felt across the country.

In many ways, the major problem with the Tory campaign, apart from their lack of preparation, was that it was too long a campaign. She should have looked at the local elections and gone the week after for a three or four-week campaign instead.

JLH: Do you think the Lib Dems would have done better in the 2017 local elections if the general election hadn't been called by then?
TF: I am 100 per cent certain. I also think that there was a fighting chance we'd have won the Manchester Gorton by-election. Our canvassing in Gorton was as good at that stage as it had been in Richmond at the same point. Poor Jackie Piercey – she could have been our tenth MP.

I also think that Labour were going to get hammered in those local elections. People like Owen Jones were beginning to be critical of Corbyn at that point because he was performing so poorly, and they had lost the Copeland bye-election [in February 2017]. I think Theresa May perhaps thought, 'This is your moment. If you are not careful, Corbyn will be sacked by the summer. You've got to grab your moment to fight him.' I'm certain we would have made quite big gains, probably into three figures in the locals, certainly above fifty, if we'd not had the general election called beforehand.

JLH: When did you decide to resign the leadership?
TF: After the first week or two of the campaign, when all I was getting were questions which related to my faith, I thought that this was not sustainable; it wasn't fair on the party. But I then pigeonholed that and didn't really tell anybody. Once the election result was announced, I certainly had no immediate intention of resigning, not least because we'd done all right. If you compare our result to the expectations, after Labour we did the next best. The Tories did worse than the expectations; UKIP did a lot worse; the Greens didn't achieve anything; the SNP went backwards; Labour did much better than expected; we made four gains [net] and were within a total of 400 votes of another four. It wasn't a nine out of ten result for us, but it was certainly a seven out of ten.

So I didn't even countenance stepping down in the day or two following the election, not least because I didn't want the message to be that we hadn't done so well. But I reached the conclusion that if all I was going to do was get these questions about my faith, I would either have to compromise my faith in a way which wouldn't be right, just to make them all go away, or I would – to put it bluntly – be a bad leader. I was the main mouthpiece for the party, and if all they were asking me was stuff to do with my faith, then our message wasn't going to be heard. So I either compromised my faith or, frankly, did the party a disservice; but I didn't want to do either of those things, really.

I remember probably about a week after the election, I had just been sworn in as an MP again, I'd had a really nice conversation with Tim Gordon about what we were going to do next and I thought: 'This is not fair. If I'm thinking like this, then I ought to go now rather than leave it to the Queen's Speech, or the summer', which I had been thinking of. There was a balanced Parliament, there could have been another election in October. So I made the judgement the following day that it was best to do it straight away. I was in the queue to swear in again, talking to lots of Labour MPs with swollen majorities who were surprised to be back at all, and I just thought: 'I

In the end, it became about leadership. I guess our problem – my problem – was that I was the first Liberal or Lib Dem leader not even to be the leader of the third party. Our ability to get our message across was really limited, and the election became more obviously Labour *v.* Tory.

need to do this now.' It was sad, but I felt it was the right thing.

JLH: It seemed very sudden, because you'd just called an election for deputy leader, and then you announced your resignation on the day after the Grenfell fire disaster. So it wasn't ideal, was it?
TF: It wasn't. But in the end I just took the view that leaving it over another weekend would just get people talking, and so I thought I needed to do it then. It was not ideal timing, but it never is; if I'd left it another day or two it might have got out of hand.

JLH: There were stories about deputations of peers and others coming to see you to ask you to step down. Did that happen?
TF: Not really. I think there were a number of people who had not approved of the position that I had taken keeping Chris Rennard out of office – which was never anything personal, I just thought it was the right thing for the party – so there was a sense in which they felt that I shouldn't continue. But I took the view that after any election there is always a bit of grumbling, and if I wanted to stay on as leader, then I would, and I would see people off – I'm good at a scrap. I had conversations with various people – I had a good conversation with Dick Newby [then Leader of the Liberal Democrat peers] and I had a really lovely chat with Jo Swinson, who urged me to continue and for which I was very grateful – but, in the end it was my decision.

I also thought that if there did end up being tittle tattle in the days ahead, then it would look like I was reacting to that. I didn't want to do that, I wanted to make sure that people were very clear that: a) we'd had a good election result and we should be pleased with ourselves; and b) me stepping down was for the reasons that I gave, which it really was. In this world, in this business, my experience tells me if you leave something twenty-four hours, you've lost control of it.

JLH: Did Brian Paddick's resignation as Home Affairs spokesman have any impact?
TF: No, not at all. I had a lovely chat with him, actually. I've always thought he has been one of the most understanding people and got how my head worked better than most people. He was clear that he was not going to continue; but I still have a very good relationship with Brian and he is a lovely man and a very kind man.

JLH: Do you think you could have handled the questions about your faith better during the campaign?
TF: The tricky thing is, when you are asked a question about anything about *sin* … what Christians mean by sin is 100 per cent different to what the rest of the world thinks. The only person whose 'sins' I am responsible for is me; and the commandment I find easiest to abide by is to not judge others. But how can you answer a question asked in one language from another language? Maybe it would have been better to say: 'This is a completely different linguistic framework you are using and whatever I say, whichever answer I give you, it will be understood completely wrongly and therefore we are just not going there.' But could I have held the line? It is amazing how David Cameron managed to not talk about things he may nor may not have done at university during all the time he was prime minister and leader. Would I have been capable of having that discipline, and would they have left me alone? I don't know. I do think that undoubtedly I bear responsibility for that. But I also think the tricky thing is – and this is why the media loved picking at this – was that you are talking about two different languages.

JLH: Speaking as an atheist, I think of sin as something that's bad and should be stopped, so if someone describes something as sinful it means that they think it should not happen.
TF: That's exactly what I'm getting at. That is how it is seen in the non-Christian world, and, indeed, to some extent even by some people who profess a faith. Whereas to us it talks about our relationship with God – it is very specific, and specific to us, and carries a totally different meaning. And so it just gets heard wrong – which is why journalists want you to talk about it.

JLH: Do you think, in an ideal world, that it would have been possible to find a way to deal with those questions? Or was it just not possible at all?
TF: Well, one of the ways I dealt with it – and it was the most successful way, I guess, but still, it wasn't right – was to say that it is a private matter; faith is private. But it isn't. You shouldn't impose your faith on other people, but nobody else leaves their world view at the door, whether it comes from a formal faith, Muslim, or Hindu, or Christian, or whether it's from reading Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill or whatever. I think that in an ideal world, in a more liberal world, then we'd accept that 'people of faith' isn't just a cultural expression. I think we tolerate faith where it's cultural, historical, or family-related – 'I'm from mid-Wales, therefore I go to the chapel', or what have you – but the minute that it practically affects your personal choices, we seem to be not OK with that. In an ideal world, we would understand that some people believe in God, and get over it.

One of the ways I dealt with it – and it was the most successful way, I guess, but still, it wasn't right – was to say that it is a private matter; faith is private. But it isn't. You shouldn't impose your faith on other people, but nobody else leaves their world view at the door.

JLH: Were the questions about your faith a surprise?
TF: Not entirely. I kind of knew it would come back, though everybody around me, I think, just hoped it wouldn't. Could I have prepared more? I don't know. I could have done something, I'm sure. Look, the reality is that the buck stops with me, and I could have dealt with some of those things more wisely.

JLH: Do you think it is possible for someone with strong religious views to be the leader of the Liberal Democrats?
TF: Well, I was! I think if they can't be leader of a liberal party, then I don't know who else they could lead. The whole notion of being a liberal is to defend different world views. There's a danger in Western society that we begin to think that we all have to accept the same world view. That's dangerous; that's bordering on the authoritarian. So just as we are the party that ought to be most likely to elect a leader from any other kind of minority background, we ought to be the most likely to elect people with a firm religious background, or the opposite.

I guess part of my challenge to people of faith is that government and politics will happen whether you are involved with it or not, and growing authoritarianism across the Western world is a threat to all minority groups – to all, as Mill would have put it, eccentric lifestyles and ways of thinking, things that are off-centre and not majority pursuits. So whatever minority you belong to – if you are a person of faith, whatever faith you belong to – you should crave liberalism; we should be the party and the movement for you.

JLH: What do you think are the characteristics of an ideal Lib Dem leader?
TF: Endurance: you've got to be able to just keep going. An ability to understand that the world owes you nothing and you've got to make your own luck. I think you've got to have a good sense of humour and realise that you are the butt of people's jokes just because of who you are and the party you lead.

I think also you have to be, not a micro-manager, but you have to understand that you have to try to turn round an organisation that is small and under-funded and make it massively more than the sum of its parts; and the fuel for that is inspiration and self-belief. So your message to the party is at least as important as your message to the public, because if you can't inspire your troops, then who is going to inspire the people out there? But you also have to understand that management and structure is really important, doing things professionally in an organised way, that you need to have a plan and you need to be able to decide that you are not going to try to do everything.

JLH: Do you think that the leader needs a clear plan and a clear vision for the direction in which you want to lead the party? Or is it more about simply reacting to circumstances?
TF: I think you need to be aware that when you are the third or fourth or fifth party, you are going to make less news on your own than you would like. Our mantra was, when it came to news events of any kind on any given day: 'first, original, funny', or 'first, different, funny', and if you can't be one of those three, don't bother. So even your reactiveness needs to be planned.

What did we want to achieve? We wanted to be a party that was clearly of the centre-left and that was pro-Europe. Given that we had been so badly hammered in 2015, we understood that the job was to establish credibility on a national level in two ways: being remembered for one thing – which ended up being Europe – and building up from the grassroots, which we partly did through our position on Europe; that run of local council by-elections we had [after the Brexit referendum] was the best we'd had since the early '90s.

So you needed to have a very clear vision, which was to try and pull out our distinctiveness, to not be so bogged down with our experience of government that we forgot how to be spiky, guerrilla-like and campaigning. So there was a quite clear vision of what we were trying to do: to have cut-through on domestic issues; to recognise that that was going to be hard, so we had to have a strategy for reacting; to build up at the grassroots; to re-energise the local government base and to build on it; and then to take a very spiky, Marmite-ish, and I think party-saving, position on Europe.

JLH: How would you like your time as leader to be remembered?
TF: I have often said that I don't care! I remember being here [in Parliament] in my first fortnight in 2005, and you get lost in this place, so I joined a tour for the Catholic primary school in Kendal. We got to the Peers' Lobby and I noticed Geoffrey Howe shambling in, and I was slightly starstruck – he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer when I was a kid. This eleven-year-old girl at the back could see who I was looking at, and she said, 'Who's he?' So I said, 'That's Geoffrey Howe. He brought down Margaret Thatcher', and she said, 'Who's Margaret Thatcher?' Which told me that if you seek to be remembered, it's in vain!

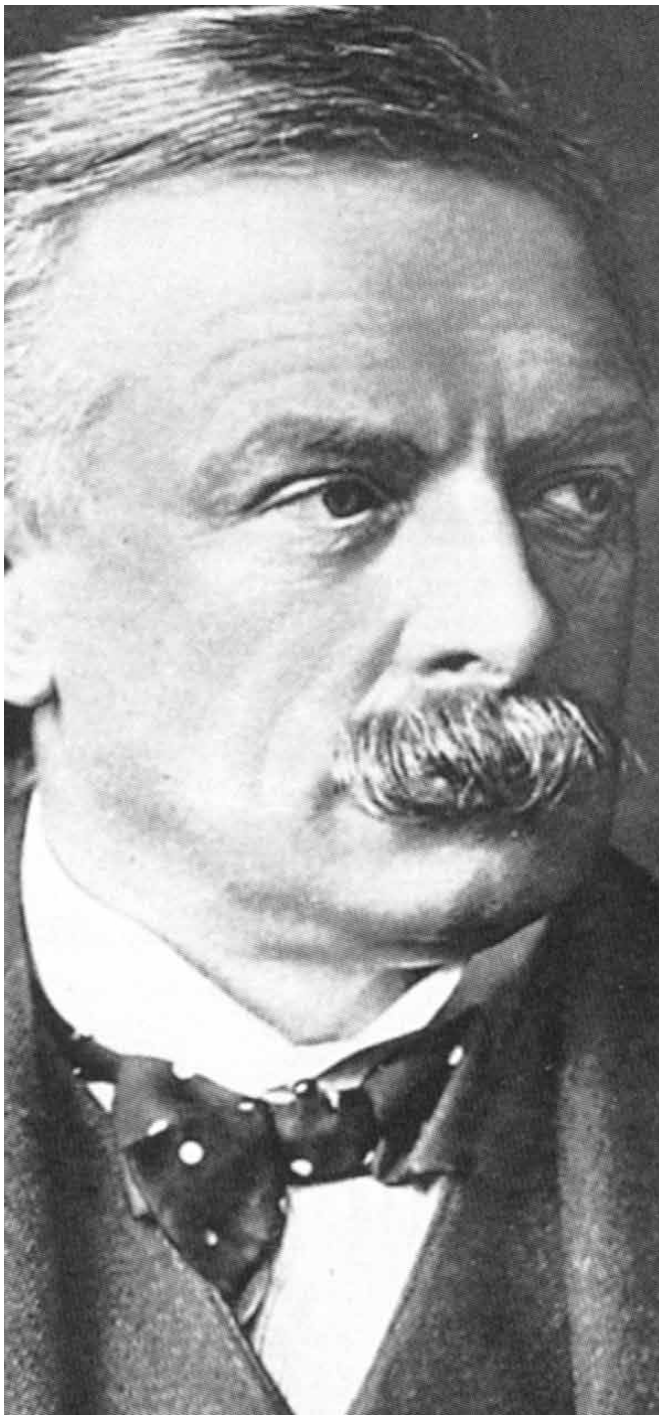
Insofar as it matters, I'd like to be remembered for stopping the party from evaporating, giving it a purpose and making it stand out at a point where it would have been much easier for it to have disappeared.

I'd like to be remembered for stopping the party from evaporating, giving it a purpose and making it stand out at a point where it would have been much easier for it to have disappeared.

Liberal divisions

The History of Parliament Trust's annual lecture, delivered by Kenneth O. Morgan (Lord Morgan) at Portcullis House, House of Commons, 7 December 2016.

7 December 1916: Asquith, Lloyd G



George and the Crisis of Liberalism

A hundred years ago today, minus one hour, David Lloyd George kissed hands as prime minister. The following evening, 8 December, Asquith convened a large gathering of Liberals, members of parliament and peers, at the Reform Club. This meeting confirmed his leadership by acclamation. But it also confirmed the death of a great party twenty-four hours earlier. The attendance there was politically a mixed one. There were stout allies and admirers of Asquith but also critics like Winston Churchill. Christopher Addison, a non-attender and supporter of Lloyd George noted in his diary that there was 'A pretty considerable stampede on to LG's side'.[1] Why did all these momentous events happen? At the Reform Club, Asquith had no doubt. He spoke of there having been 'a well-organised conspiracy'. In his remarkable eulogy on Lloyd George in the Commons in March 1945, Winston Churchill spoke of Lloyd George 'seizing' power, which startled some MPs. But he also quoted Thomas Carlyle on Oliver Cromwell – 'he coveted the place. Perhaps the place was his'.[2]

Until the late 1960s, blame for the Liberal schism was placed firmly on David Lloyd George. He was the Welsh Cain who slew the English Abel. He was also incidentally attacked for the irregularity or immorality of his private life, though this accusation tended to fade away after the revelations came of Asquith's intimate relationship with a very young woman, Venetia Stanley, to whom he revealed secrets about war strategy and other matters. Much of the writing about 1916 came from pro-Asquithians who condemned the little Welsh attorney from a rural shoemaker's cottage, who conspired against his leader, allied with the Tory enemy, took cash for peerages and inspired universal distrust. Almost the last of these works was Roy Jenkins's biography *Asquith* (1964), the work of a fellow Balliol man, who portrayed his subject as the 'noblest Roman' laid low by an envious Casca from Criccieth.

The battle for reputations went on after their deaths. The two men did not produce especially revelatory memoirs unlike the leaders of New Labour. Asquith's memoirs are guarded about Lloyd George. The latter's *War Memoirs* talk of Asquith being tired and lethargic during the war years but are far from consistently critical. More forceful combatants were the two daughters, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter and Lady Megan Lloyd George; Lady Violet greatly admired Churchill and in 1951 contemplated an electoral pact with the Conservatives. Lady Megan joined Labour and sat for Carmarthen. The Reform Club had been very hostile to the Welshman over the years. But now the National Liberal Club has a Lloyd George Room, adorned by Christopher Williams's portrait of the great man, while the Reform Club itself has a bust of Lloyd George, presented by the sculptor, in the Smoking Room of the very epicentre of Asquithianism. Perhaps in this great conflict we have reached an armistice at last.

Since the Beaverbrook Library, housing the Lloyd George, Bonar Law and Beaverbrook Papers opened in 1967, the balance of historical judgement has turned strongly towards Lloyd George – in the work of Alan Taylor, John Grigg, and perhaps myself – emphasising his radicalism, and charismatic inspiration as leader in war and peace. Now he has his statue in Parliament Square, close to that of another great world war leader. He is the only non-Conservative represented there. And yet Lloyd George's was put up a full seventy years after that of Clemenceau, *père de la victoire*, in the Champs-Elysées in Paris. In Britain, in the official commemoration of the centenary of the First World War, Lloyd George has so far been a conspicuous absentee. This is partly because of what we are discussing this evening. The crisis of 7 December 1916 is still very much alive.

Asquith and Lloyd George came from very different wings of the Liberal party. Asquith, the older by eleven years, was the son of a

H. H. Asquith (1852–1928), Prime Minister 1908–16, Leader of the Liberal Party 1908–26

David Lloyd George (1863–1945), Prime Minister 1916–22, Leader of the Liberal Party 1926–31

minor employer in the Yorkshire woollen industry. He won a classics scholarship to Balliol and took a first in Greats (classics). He had a successful career at the bar (including prosecuting the publishers of a famous novel by Emile Zola), he won a safe Liberal seat in East Fife, he immediately impressed in the Commons and became home secretary in Gladstone's government in 1892. He was, or had become, the supreme insider.

Lloyd George was always the supreme outsider. Like James Callaghan and John Major, he had to do it the hard way – an unprivileged background in a shoemaker's cottage in Welsh-speaking north Wales, education in a tiny village school in Llanystumdwy near Criccieth, his religion Campbellite Baptist (a fringe radical wing within the wider Baptist community) and there was no question of his being able to go to university. He made his way as a local solicitor and used this as a local base to attack the ascendancy, Anglicised landowners and clergy. His boyhood hero was Abraham Lincoln – not the great emancipator but the great democrat. His admirers made much of the log cabin to president mystique, in books with titles such as *Village Green to Downing Street*.[3] In 1890 he won Caernarfon Boroughs, a Liberal gain, by just eighteen votes at the age of 27, after a radical campaign. It has been claimed that twenty-four voters, all lifeboatmen from Pwllheli in his new constituency and all Conservatives, were working out at sea and thus unable to vote. Even in this early phase, Lloyd George had Napoleon's cherished quality of being a lucky general.

From the start, Asquith exuded effortless superiority and patrician self-control in parliament. He was a success as home secretary under Gladstone and Rosebery in 1892–5 – working with other imperially minded Liberals like Grey and Haldane. The coming man had definitely arrived. An early widower, he married the glamorous socialite Margot Tennant, a wealthy, snobbish woman who relished high society. Lloyd George, a relatively poor man, married the unassuming daughter of a local Caemarfonshire farmer (a woman who disliked city life and loved *le Pays de Galles profond*). Margot patronised her as a 'homely little woman'. Asquith went straight into Cabinet in 1892. Lloyd George, by contrast, was from the first a freelance backbencher and a rebel. He admired the radical Joseph Chamberlain. Gladstone, however, he thought was hostile to the causes of workers and nonconformists, and basically a Tory at heart.

The first contact between the two men was not a happy experience. In May–June 1895, the government majority had almost disappeared. Lloyd George then led a small group of four *Cymru Fydd* (Young Wales) Liberals in opposition to the government during the committee stage of the Welsh Disestablishment Bill. He then moved an amendment to set up a Welsh national council to administer the funds of the disendowed Church in Wales. This failed narrowly by ten votes. Soon afterwards, on 20 June, on a similar amendment, the government majority fell to only two. The next day the Rosebery government was defeated by seven votes on a different and trivial issue – supplies of cordite – and resigned. The Liberals lost the subsequent general election, heavily.[4]

Some in Wales now blamed Lloyd George for an act of wilful disloyalty. Asquith rebuked Lloyd George's Welsh colleague, Tom Ellis, the Liberal chief whip, for appearing to exonerate him for 'the underhand and disloyal way' in which he acted. He saw the rebellious member for Caernarfon Boroughs as 'a natural *frondeur*'.[5] After this, Asquith frequently showed a broad dislike of the Welsh in general – Jenkins quotes him as describing them as '*moutons enragés*'. On another occasion, Asquith declared that 'I am not passionately fond of the Welsh'. In 1924, when approached about a Welsh constituency, he observed, 'I would sooner go to hell than to Wales'.[6] Lloyd George attacked Asquith in return – 'the worst thing he ever did was to join the Church of England'. He did so not 'because of principle but because of society'.[7]

Both men advanced rapidly thereafter – but on opposite sides of the party. Asquith, like Grey and others was a Liberal imperialist; Lloyd George was a 'little Englander'. Asquith was a key figure in Lord Rosebery's Liberal League, an imperialist federalist, very supportive of the Boer War in 1899–1902. Lloyd George was a passionate pro-Boer who won celebrity by fierce personal attacks on Joseph Chamberlain, the all-powerful colonial secretary. He worked with anti-war radicals in condemning the British concentration camps on the Veldt. It was he who introduced the famous campaigner against these genocidal camps, Emily Hobhouse, to the Liberal leader, Campbell-Bannerman. From Emily the latter picked up the powerful phrase he applied to British tactics in South Africa – 'methods of barbarism', three little words which in due time helped to overthrow the greatest of empires.

Both men were prominent in the Liberal resurgence in 1902–5, being both active in speaking for free trade and other Liberal priorities. Instructive was education and their respective approaches in opposing Balfour's Education Act of 1902. Asquith offered a distinguished forensic dissection of it in the Commons and in formal meetings around the country. Lloyd George, by contrast, led a

Asquith was, or had become, the supreme insider. Lloyd George was always the supreme outsider.

For the next seven and a half years, theirs was a tremendous partnership – far more harmonious than, for example, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown after 1997.

nationwide revolt by the Welsh county councils (all Liberal controlled from 1904 onwards) in a populist programme of organised passive resistance towards the Act and of denying funds to National schools – a policy of civil disobedience that was clearly illegal. When the Liberals returned to office in December 1905, there was a revealing episode involving Asquith. The Liberal imperialists had made a private compact that they would all refuse office and ask Campbell-Bannerman to stand down from his seat in the Commons and retire to the Lords. But when offered the chancellorship, Asquith promptly broke his word and accepted the offer of this prestigious new post. He was an intensely ambitious man, even though in this instance he acted somewhat similarly towards Campbell-Bannerman as Lloyd George, Bonar Law and Carson were to do in December 1916, which he was to characterise as a conspiracy. Lloyd George now. took office at the Board of Trade in Campbell-Bannerman's new government. Both shone in office. Asquith proved to be a surprisingly radical chancellor, Lloyd George an adventurous president of the Board of Trade, casual in his attitude towards the Liberal shibboleth of free trade. In April 1908 Asquith became prime minister; Lloyd George followed him at the Treasury.

For the next seven and a half years, theirs was a tremendous partnership – far more harmonious than, for example, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown after 1997. 'Puffin', Asquith's son, and Megan Lloyd George, played together happily as children in the garden of No. 10 Downing Street. The two ministers collaborated closely from the start with the launching of Old Age Pensions when Lloyd George took over Asquith's proposals. Asquith had in fact seriously underestimated the cost of pensions, which amounted to almost £8.5m, and Lloyd George then added to the cost as the Finance Bill went through committee. To help pay for this, Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of April 1909 included radical proposals on direct taxation, new land duties, including on the 'unearned increment', and welfare reforms such as children's allowances. It was the new progressive increases in income tax and the new 'super-tax' on higher incomes that made the difference financially rather than the land duties, which were generally unproductive. The budget was resisted in Cabinet by conservative ministers such as Reginald McKenna, Walter Runciman and 'Lulu' Harcourt. Haldane crudely (and quite wrongly) claimed that Lloyd George did not understand his own budget. But Asquith was always strongly supportive. He saw clearly that it seized the political initiative from the Unionist tariff reformers. It provided a free trade answer to the need to pay for social reform ('the rich will pay') and also offered a new radical response to the challenge of Labour for working class votes. For Asquith was an intellectual but also a strongly partisan intellectual who despised the Tories and was certain that there was no more appropriate prime minister to run the country than himself. He helped steer the People's Budget through Cabinet with the ineffable words, 'I think there is substantial agreement on this point', the emollient formula of vice-chancellors down the ages.

The Parliament Act of 1911, clipping the powers of the House of Lords, was Asquith's triumph as the People's Budget was Lloyd George's. Prime minister and chancellor were in agreement on all key points of policy and strategy, even if Asquith had to get Lloyd George to tone down some of his more aggressive personal attacks on dukes. They were very close as political comrades in the struggle. But they were very different types of men, and not close personally (Margot's snobbish instincts emerged after she invited the Lloyd Georges around for dinner). Lloyd George did not share Asquith's enthusiasm for bridge, while the latter had only languid fondness for either of Lloyd George's interests – the golf course or the singing of Welsh hymns. Asquith became increasingly addicted to brandy while Lloyd George was, for public purposes at least, a teetotaller. But each recognised the other's remarkable qualities. The events of 1909 and 1911 were a joint triumph. Asquith was also to back up Lloyd George on his various other enterprises in 1911–14 – National Health insurance, the land campaigns, collective bargaining with organised labour, negotiations over Irish home rule, and growing pressure to revive the government's fortunes with more radical policies including a possible form of national health service, based on the health insurance panels which Lloyd George and Addison were to discuss in the summer of 1914.

The supreme test of their partnership came in 1912 with the famous Marconi case. Lloyd George took a great risk in buying shares from the American Marconi company, when the government of which he was a member was negotiating a contract with the linked British Marconi company. He had committed a technical, but serious, offence as a minister of the Crown, even if he lost money in the transaction as he often did. If he wished, Asquith could have got rid of him. But his approach was predictably partisan. He knew Lloyd George, unpredictable though he might be, was the government's greatest asset. He had charisma and energy like no other member of

the administration. So Asquith brushed aside any idea that Lloyd George and his associate Sir Rufus Isaacs (through whom Lloyd George had actually bought the Marconi shares) should resign. Asquith urged instead that they should face it out and strive to avoid giving 'undue detail' even though he took some private pleasure from the discomfiture of his chancellor – the idol was left 'a bit clipped' he observed.[8] But Asquith could walk the low road of politics as well as the high. Liberal England, run by tough-minded survivors from Balliol and Brynhyfryd, won the day.

There were no problems between the two when war broke out in August 1914. After a few weeks of uncertainty, Lloyd George declared his strong backing for the war in a great speech at the Queen's Hall on 19 September. Before a large audience of London Welshmen, he declared it to be a war waged to defend Liberal principles, for the defence of 'the little five-foot-five nations', gallant little Serbia and Montenegro, gallant little Belgium (and perhaps by extension gallant little Wales).[9] In Cabinet debates on war strategy in early 1915, Lloyd George took a vigorous part but was not in any way manoeuvring against Asquith. When the Liberal government came to an abrupt end in May 1915, being replaced by a coalition still under Asquith's leadership, the main cause of instability was Churchill not Lloyd George. Asquith then re-formed his government quite ruthlessly (he cheerfully sacrificed Haldane, 'old Schopenhauer', ditched for the spurious reason that he had an interest in German Hegelian philosophy). All the key offices were retained by Liberals, even ministers with talents as limited as Walter Runciman and Augustine Birrell. Throughout the crisis, Lloyd George was totally supportive of his leader and this was recognised.by the Asquith family.

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Margot Asquith wrote that 'Ll.G. has come grandly out of all this; he has the sweetest nature in the world.' She added, perhaps predictably, 'He has wonderful charm'.[10] Asquith thanked him personally for 'your devotion, your unselfishness, your powers of resource… your self-forgetfulnenss. They give the drabness of politics a lightning streak of nobility.'[11] It was a very emotional letter, and marked the high point of their long relationship.

The great crisis then began in the late summer of 1915 over the issue of military conscription to replace the current system of voluntary recruitment to the armed forces. Asquith disliked it as a threat to civil liberties and the free choice and movement of citizens. His close colleague, Sir John Simon, the home secretary, resigned from the government in protest. Lloyd George, however, strongly supported it, as did most of the Conservatives. For him it was a litmus test of how committed the country was to total war. His reputation had been greatly enhanced now by his commanding role as minister of munitions, in effect taking the manufacture of shells, guns and the new tanks into national control. He was also now identified as the major spokesman of the aggressive policy of 'the knock-out blow'. His friend George Riddell, owner of the *News of the World*, noted how he was now breaking with his old party. The old radical had completely changed. 'It looks as if he is going the same road as Chamberlain. L.G.'s attitude to the war makes his severance from the Radicals inevitable.'[12] After prolonged and bitter argument in Cabinet, eventually in April 1916 conscription was adopted for all men between 18 and 45, with exceptions for men working in reserved occupations at home such as miners. Here lay the seeds of profound future division. It was in April, not December 1916, that the roots of the great split in the Liberal Party really lay. Ministers like McKenna and Runciman supported Asquith in his reservations. Conversely, a backbench group, the Liberal War Committee, led by Sir Frederick Cawley and also including Sir Alfred Mond and Freddie Guest declared its strong support for conscription. In effect it was potentially a pro-Lloyd George group. More important, Christopher Addison, Lloyd George's staunch ally and his deputy at the Ministry of Munitions, drew up with F. G. Kellaway and David Davies, two important backbenchers, an unofficial list of over 100 Liberal MPs who would back Lloyd George if a governmental crisis were to occur. Addison, a distinguished medical man, had been close to him since the passage of National Insurance in 1911. A. J. P. Tay|or, with some exaggeration perhaps, has even called him the kingmaker, 'the true maker of the Lloyd George government.'[13]

The course of war now got steadily worse. There followed the slaughter on the Somme, the hard-fought naval battle of Jutland, the retreat from the Dardanelles, the failure to assist Rumania in the autumn of 1916. Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary to the government's War Council, like others increasingly blamed Asquith's listless leadership. His leisurely War Council, with its variable membership and failure to reach conclusions or record ministerial decisions about high strategy was manifestly inadequate. Even in Ireland when Lloyd George, asked to intervene by Asquith, was unable to get a settlement with the Irish Nationalists, blame fell on Asquith, for policies that varied from being too dilatory to being too ruthless after the Easter rising in Dublin. Lloyd George was now extraordinarily vocal as war

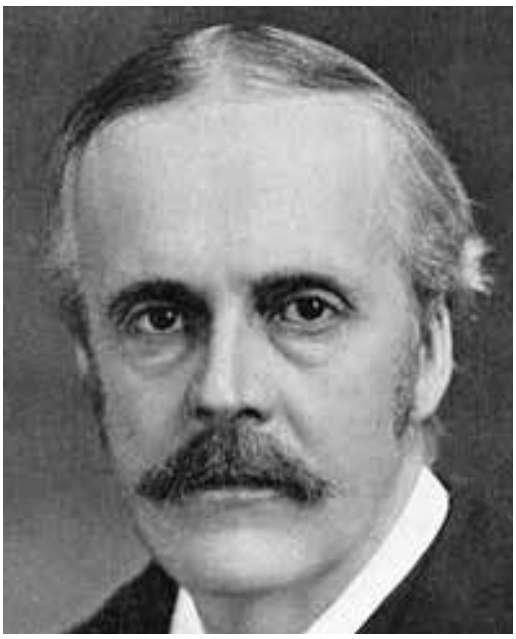
minister (in which post he had succeeded Kitchener). In a searing speech on 20 December 1915, he condemned his own government: 'Too late in moving here. Too late in arriving there. In this war the Allied forces have been dogged by the mocking spectre of too late'. He produced for the Cabinet 'a most lugubrious and pessimistic' analysis of the military situation.[14] He told Hankey in November 1916, 'We are going to lose this war'.

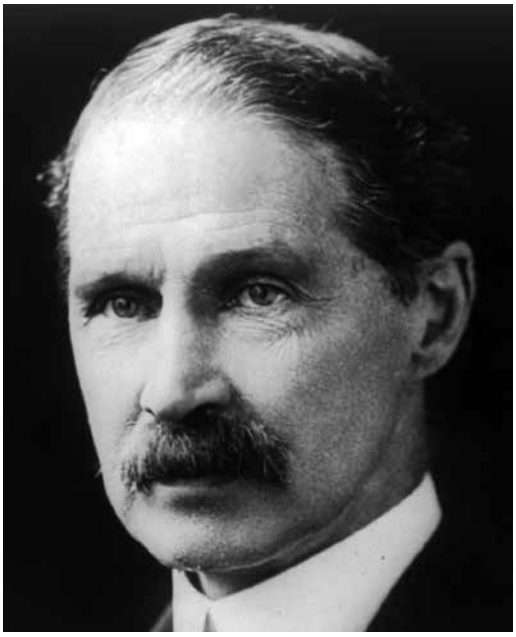
The ultimate crisis occurred at the end of November and early December. A problem here is that we are still heavily dependent on the memoirs of Lord Beaverbrook, especially his *Men and Power*. He was a remarkably knowledgeable observer of the high politics of the time, and a participant in them of much importance, but his account is a hybrid of fact and fiction, notably his attempt to boost the role of Bonar Law. The crisis began with Maurice Hankey, a civil servant. He proposed a War Committee far smaller and more influential and effective than Asquith's version. Lloyd George, the Unionist leader Bonar Law, and the influential Unionist backbencher, the Irishman Sir Edward Carson then started having almost daily private meetings from 20 November onwards, to a degree convened through the newspaper magnate, Max Aitken, owner of the *Daily Express*. They argued that an efficient War Committee should be detached from the Cabinet and consist of only three members, without portfolio, not a dozen or more. As Lloyd George observed, drawing on his biblical knowledge, 'You cannot govern with a sanhedrin.' On 1 December. Bonar Law formally proposed to Asquith that a War Committee should be set up separate from the Cabinet; the prime minister not being a member though having the right of veto over its decisions. This was the work of a 'little gang of brigands', said Margot Asquith. It confirmed her worst fears ever since Lloyd George, that 'ignorant little sneak' had gone to Munitions.[15] (15)

There are some important points to be noted about these events. First, it was not a conspiracy working behind Asquith's back. He was constantly kept informed in detail about the meetings in which Lloyd George played a central part. He was regularly briefed in some – though not complete – detail by Bonar Law. Secondly and importantly, it was not intended by Lloyd George as a blow directed against the prime minister. Lloyd George wanted to run the war and believed with some reason that he could do so better than anyone else. But he did not want to become prime minister and take on all the responsibility of running the House and negotiating with the political parties. His plan for a new War Committee was directed not against Asquith but against the generals, notably Sir William Robertson. Yet, third, in fact many generals favoured his scheme. They recognised that Asquith, a tired and despondent figure who had recently lost his son on the western front, was too leisurely a leader and the current war committee far too slow-moving. But Asquith would have to be made to agree, and he seemed most reluctant to do so. On 2 December, Lloyd George wrote a dramatic short note to Bonar Law – 'The life of the country depends on resolute action by you now.'[16]

Lloyd George and Asquith leaving a meeting of the War Cabinet, 28 January 1915

Then on the 3rd the idea of a new War Committee was accepted by Asquith. The problem seemed to be resolved. Asquith wrote to Reginald McKenna's wife on Sunday 3 December 'the "crisis" shows every sign of following its many predecessors to an early and unhonoured grave.'[17] A formal memorandum was drawn up to confirm it by Hankey and Bonham-Carter, Asquith's secretary. And then came another sensation. On the morning of Monday 4 December, Asquith changed his mind again. He reversed his view, citing a leading article, actually written by Geoffrey Robinson, in Northcliffe's *Times* that morning





Unionist leaders:

A. J. Balfour (1848–1930), First Lord of the Admiralty 1915–16, Foreign Secretary 1916–19

Andrew Bonar Law (1858–1923), Colonial Secretary 1915–16, Chancellor of the Exchequer 1916–19

George Curzon (1859–1925), Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, Leader of the House of Lords 1916–19

which saw the new scheme as a great humiliation and downgrading of Asquith. Asquith's change of view led directly to the great Liberal split. How, when and why this occurred is still a matter of historical debate. It is noticeable that at the later Reform Club meeting on 8 December, Asquith indicated that his change of mind had occurred before 4 December, meaning that the leading article in *The Times* was not a crucial factor. Some scholars have claimed that Asquith's mind was changed for him by a meeting with other leading Liberals. But Asquith was at Walmer Castle on the Kent coast on the night of 3–4 December, and it is difficult to find out that any such meeting took place. It looks as if Asquith had a rapid rethink and reached a different view all on his own. It was a fatal change of attitude.

The political party background to the events on 3–4 December was complex but crucial. Unionist disaffection with Bonar Law had been profound for some time, ever since a Unionist revolt on the theme of German property in Nigeria in early November. Carson was a major figure in this. Such leading Unionist figures as Lord Curzon and Walter Long all harboured their own ambitions. An even more important Unionist was the former prime minister, Arthur Balfour. To Asquith's great astonishment, Balfour (who was on his sick-bed) wrote late on 4 December saying, in effect, that he would be prepared to consider taking office under Lloyd George, if asked.[18] This was a major turning point in the crisis. Perhaps it was Balfour, not Addison, who turned out to be the real kingmaker.

In the Liberal ranks, things were very confused. Asquith had around him a group of strongly anti-Lloyd George Liberals, headed by McKenna, who urged defiance. But he himself was amazingly casual in defending himself. At the height of the crisis on 3 December he had taken the extraordinary decision to take a trip to Walmer Castle in eastern Kent, the residence of the Warden of the Cinque Ports which involved a long, slow drive and removed him from the centre of the action in London at a crucial moment. Meanwhile, Addison was again busy mobilising the ranks of the potential pro-Lloyd George Liberals, growing rapidly in number.[19]

Apart from manoeuvres in the political parties, another background factor was the unique influence of the press in wartime. With a supposed party truce in place and traditional party politics in abeyance, it was in the wartime press that much of the debate, speculation and gossip was now occurring. This gave particular importance to press men like Robert Donald in the *Daily Chronicle*, Henry Dalziel's *Reynolds*

News, C. P. Scott in the *Manchester Guardian*, and above all the energetic though highly erratic Lord Northcliffe in *The Times* who saw Lloyd George almost every day. Lloyd George's links with the newspaper world, journalists, editors and proprietors, was a central thread in his political career from the start of his parliamentary career in Wales. By contrast, Asquith largely ignored the press (he had enormous contempt for Northcliffe) and he was to pay a heavy price.

In the end, Asquith concluded early on 5 December that the price demanded for the new War Committee was too high, and said this to the king. Unionist support was melting away, while grandees like Lord Curzon pursued their own ambitions. Asquith now resigned along with all his ministers – this was intended not as a surrender but as an aggressive gesture, which assumed that he would shortly return to office since no other leader could be found or could command sufficient support. Bonar Law soon declined the king's proposal that he become premier. Then at 6.30 pm on 6 December, the king asked Lloyd George if he could form a government. It took just twenty-four hours. Liberal backbench MPs were again approached by Addison on behalf of Lloyd George: there were 49 firm supporters plus another 126 who would support him if he were prepared to become premier, well over half the 260-odd Liberal MPs in the Commons). Finally and crucially Lloyd George, by one vote only (according to his *War Memoirs*),[20] or more probably half a dozen or so, won over the support of the Labour Party national executive – a key factor was that their leader, Arthur Henderson, would join the future five-man War Cabinet. Lloyd George then went to see King George V around 7.30 pm on 7 December. One fascinating feature of their conversation was that Lloyd George appears to have rowed back and agreed to keep Carson at the Admiralty, rather than put him in the War Cabinet (Milner went there instead and was a great success). This unusual act of deference to his monarch by a Welsh radical (and half republican) merits attention. It may have been a rare modem example of a king successfully insisting on a change of personnel amongst his ministers, comparable to George VI apparently determining the offices of Ernest Bevin and Hugh Dalton when Attlee formed his Labour government in 1945. It was Milner who filled up the place in the War Cabinet while Carson went to the Admiralty – where it must be said George V's confidence in his ministerial talents was soon disabused. In the end, Carson, something of a pliant tool of the admirals, had to be sacked.

The truth of these tumultuous events is that Lloyd George and Asquith were both ambitious men playing for the highest stakes in politics. But Lloyd George did so far more effectively.

The truth of these tumultuous events is that Lloyd George and Asquith were both ambitious men playing for the highest stakes in politics. But Lloyd George did so far more effectively. Asquith misjudged all the Unionists, especially the outlook of Arthur Balfour, whose personal ties with Lloyd George had been formed during the Parliament Bill crisis back in 1910. He despised Bonar Law and thought him 'third- rate'. 'I would sooner wrestle with a chimney sweep,' declared Asquith of the Unionist leader.[21] Similarly Asquith's old colleague, Lord Haldane, dismissed the new government as 'very lower class'. Asquith disregarded Labour as relatively unimportant and took for granted that his own loyal Liberals would inevitably follow his lead. He forgot Addison as Lord Randolph Churchill had in 1886 allegedly forgotten Goschen. He exaggerated his own indispensability and assumed his old Liberal loyalists would follow him regardless. He thought it totally improbable that Lloyd George would be able to form a government at all. It was Asquith who broke the tentative accord on 4 December and therefore triggered off his own downfall. The next day, Friday 8 December, the mass meeting of Liberal MPs and peers at the Reform Club was to endorse Asquith's leadership. But the Liberal split had been institutionalised. Even Generals Haig and Robertson appeared to support Lloyd George's rise to power at the time.[22] There was now a leader at last.

Thereafter Lloyd George launched a political revolution – Richard Crossman has even suggested, with much exaggeration, that he did away with traditional Cabinet government with a new era of prime ministerial government more akin to the regime of an American president. Certainly he launched the Cabinet Office (at first the Secretariat), he handled matters from negotiations with Clemenceau to private agreements with the trade unions, he talked at first hand to the press, he had his squad of special advisers, some of them working in the grounds of No. 10 – the 'garden suburb' headed by Philip Kerr.

It must be asked whether, after this dramatic crisis, Lloyd George proved to be a better war leader than Asquith had been? Certainly, he made bad mistakes, notably in backing the disastrous French army offensive under General Nivelle in the spring of 1917 which undermined morale in the French army and led to mutinies in the ranks. In the summer, Passchendaele occurred under his watch, when he was outvoted in Cabinet by his usual allies, Milner and General Smuts. But overall Lloyd George was clearly in command in a way that Asquith could never approach in wartime and

was an inspirational force who rallied the nation with his eloquence. By contrast, Asquith was, in effect, a poor leader of the Opposition. He performed badly in the Maurice debate (9 May 1918) when he seemed half-hearted in trying to defend General Maurice's charges that the government had reduced British forces on the western front and lied about it to parliament. In the debate, Lloyd George destroyed Asquith, showing that the government's own figures about the reserves had come from Maurice's own office. It was a devastating parliamentary triumph and it was well that he won it in order to preserve civilian not military control of wartime government, Subsequently the Liberals divided up into pro- and anti-government MPs. At the general election of December 1918, the followers of Asquith claimed fewer than thirty MPs, while Lloyd George won a landslide with 520 'couponed' supporters including 130 Coalition Liberals. Asquith was defeated at East Fife and, no doubt wisely, refused Lloyd George's offer (a very half-hearted one) of the post of Lord Chancellor.

The odds were totally against Asquith at this stage. There had been a visionary aspect about some of Lloyd George's wartime leadership. In international affairs, he had produced, before the trade unions, his own version of the 'fourteen points', perhaps more realistic than the utopian ideas of the US president, Woodrow Wilson. His government was also an important one in domestic reform. It passed votes for women, an important state education Act, much social reform including Addison's social housing schemes, a Ministry of Health, and extended unemployment insurance. The government's attempts at Reconstruction, though later derided, proved to be the last hurrah for the New Liberalism of pre-1914[23] Some called it a Land Fit for Heroes, which indeed, contrary to Keynes's later accusations, was what the government primarily offered the electors in their manifesto in the so-called 'coupon' general election of December 1918.

Liberals thereafter were haunted by the legacy of the December days of 1916, nowhere more so than in the Reform Club where Asquith's followers were powerful, notably his biographer, J. A. Spender. Asquith remained president of the club's political committee until his death in 1928 when he was succeeded by his old Whiggish ally, Lord Crewe. Politically, Lloyd George supplied new energy, ideas and policies for his party down to 1929, but was now a divisive force whose Political Fund (put together by selling off titles and peerages in the clubs of Pall Mall) created a wave of distrust and perhaps disgust. Old Asquithians were to leave him after the general election in 1931 – he was left with a family party of four, while the National Liberals, formed by Simon, Runciman and other former Asquithians, in effect became Conservatives. Lloyd George's controversial *War Memoirs* did not help in winning followers at this juncture. It was ironic that an old Liberal, Winston Churchill, finally became prime minister in May 1940, to some degree with Lloyd George's rhetorical support. Unlike Lloyd George, he was to make sure of his political base by ensuring that he became party leader of the Conservatives after the death of Neville Chamberlain. In the First World War, his old Liberal comrade had in effect been a prime minister without a party.

But it would be wrong to leave the relationship between Asquith and Lloyd George as simply a record of distrust and division. Until perhaps the summer of 1916 they were a hugely effective partnership, perhaps our greatest ever in times of peace. The qualities of both were needed – as Matthew Arnold put it, those of 'the Saxon and the Celt'. There was Asquith, Balliol's 'noblest Roman', with rare clarity of judgement (even if, as A. J. P. Taylor wrote, 'the toga was somewhat tattered'),[24] and the irrepressible Welshman with unique dynamism and vision. It was an irresistible combination. World war fatally disrupted their partnership and undermined their alliance. But for years they had made their party an incomparable instrument of government. They changed their country irreversibly and for the better. A hundred years on from the crisis, to the very day, the very minute, perhaps that is what we should most remember.

Professor Lord Morgan FBA is a former Fellow and Praelector of The Queen's College, Oxford and Vice-Chancellor, University of Wales; he is presently Visiting Professor, King's London, a Labour peer and a member of the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution.

1 Christopher Addison, *Politics from Within, 1914–1919*, vol. I (Herbert Jenkins, 1924), p. 274: entry of 9 Dec. 1916. Addison's informant was F. G. Kellaway MP; *The Times*, 9 Dec. 1916, for reports of the meeting.
2 HC Deb., vol. 409, cols. 1377–92 (28 Mar. 1945).
3 J. Hugh Edwards, *From Village Green to Downing Street: Life of the Rt Hon. D. Lloyd George MP* (Newnes, n.d [1908]).
4 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868–1922* (Univ. of Wales Press, 1963), pp. 152–7.
5 Asquith to Tom Ellis, 30 Nov. 1895 (Nat. Lib. Wales, Aberystwyth, Ellis Papers, 74), 'private'; Stephen Koss, *Asquith* (Allen Lane, 1970), p. 114.
6 Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (Collins, 1964), pp. 84–5, 344 n. 2, 505.
7 Colin Cross (ed.), A. J. Sylvester, *Life with Lloyd George* (Macmillan, 1975), pp. 143–4 (entry of 30 Jul. 1936).
8 Jenkins, *Asquith*, pp. 250–4.
9 *The Times*, 20 Sep. 1914.
10 Cited in Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds.), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary, 1914–1916: the view from Downing Street* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 161.
11 Asquith to Lloyd George, 25 May 1915 (NLW, Aberystwyth, Lloyd George family letters).
12 *Lord Riddell's War Diary* (Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1933), pp. 136–7, 139.
13 A. J. P. Taylor, *Lloyd George: Rise and Fall* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 26.
14 Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets, vol. I, 1877–1918* (Collins, 1970), p. 318.
15 See Anne de Courcy, *Margot at War* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2014), and Michael and Eleanor Brock, op.cit., p. 301.
16 Lloyd George to Bonar Law, 2 Dec. 1916, quoted in David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (Odhams, 1938 edn), vol. I, p. 589.
17 Stephen Koss, *Asquith*, p. 219
18 Balfour to Asquith, 4 Dec. 1916, quoted in Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 453.
19 Addison, *Politics from Within*, vol. I, pp. 270–2 (entry of 9 Dec. 1916).
20 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. I, p.

632.

21 Michael and Eleanor Brock, op. cit, citing Margot Asquith, p. 123; Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 367

22 Entry from Robert Donald's diary, 24 Nov. 1916, quoted in H. A. Taylor, *Robert Donald* (Stanley Paul, 1934), p. 110. Robertson said approvingly that 'the only man who could decide quickly, say "Yes" or "No" without hesitation was Lloyd George' and that was what the nation required now.

23 See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: the Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918–1922* (Oxford University Press, 1979) for an overall view.

24 In a critical review of Roy Jenkins' *Asquith*, in *The Observer*, 1 Nov. 1964.

Research in Progress

If you can help any of the researchers listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information, please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete digital edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/cobdenproject). *Dr Anthony Howe School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk*.

Dadabhai Naoroji

Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917) was an Indian nationalist and Liberal member for Central Finsbury, 1892–95 – the first Asian to be elected to the House of Commons. This research for a PhD at Harvard aims to produce both a biography of Naoroji and a volume of his selected correspondence, to be published by OUP India in 2013. The current phase concentrates on Naoroji's links with a range of British progressive organisations and individuals, particularly in his later career. Suggestions for archival sources very welcome. *Dinyar Patel; dinyar.patel@gmail.com or 07775 753 724.*

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830-49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842-46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. *Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com*.

The Liberal Party in Wales, 1966–1988

Aims to follow the development of the party from the general election of 1966 to the time of the merger with the SDP. PhD research at Cardiff University. *Nick Alderton; nickalito@hotmail.com*.

The emergence of the 'public service ethos'

Aims to analyse how self-interest and patronage was challenged by the advent of impartial inspectorates, public servants and local authorities in provincial Britain in the mid 19th century. Much work has been done on the emergence of a 'liberal culture' in the central civil service in Whitehall, but much work needs to be done on the motives, behaviour and mentalities of the newly reformed guardians of the poor, sanitary inspectors, factory and mines inspectors, education authorities, prison warders and the police. *Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.*

The life of Professor Reginald W. Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans' Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. *Dr Yury Boshyk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk*.

Russell Johnston, 1932–2008

Scottish Liberal politics was dominated for over thirty years (1965–95 and beyond) by two figures: David Steel and Russell Johnston. Of the former, much has been written; of the latter, surprisingly little. I am therefore researching with a view to writing a biography of Russell. If any readers can help – with records, other written material or reminiscences – please let me know, either by email or post. *Sir Graham Watson, sirgrahamwatson@gmail.com; 9/3 Merchiston Park, Edinburgh EH10 4PW.*

Liberal song and the Glee Club

Aiming to set out the history of Liberal song from its origins to the days of the Liberal Revue and Liberator Songbook. Looking to complete a song archive, the history of the early, informal conference Glee Clubs in the 1960s and 1970s, and all things related. *Gareth Epps; garethepps@gmail.com.*

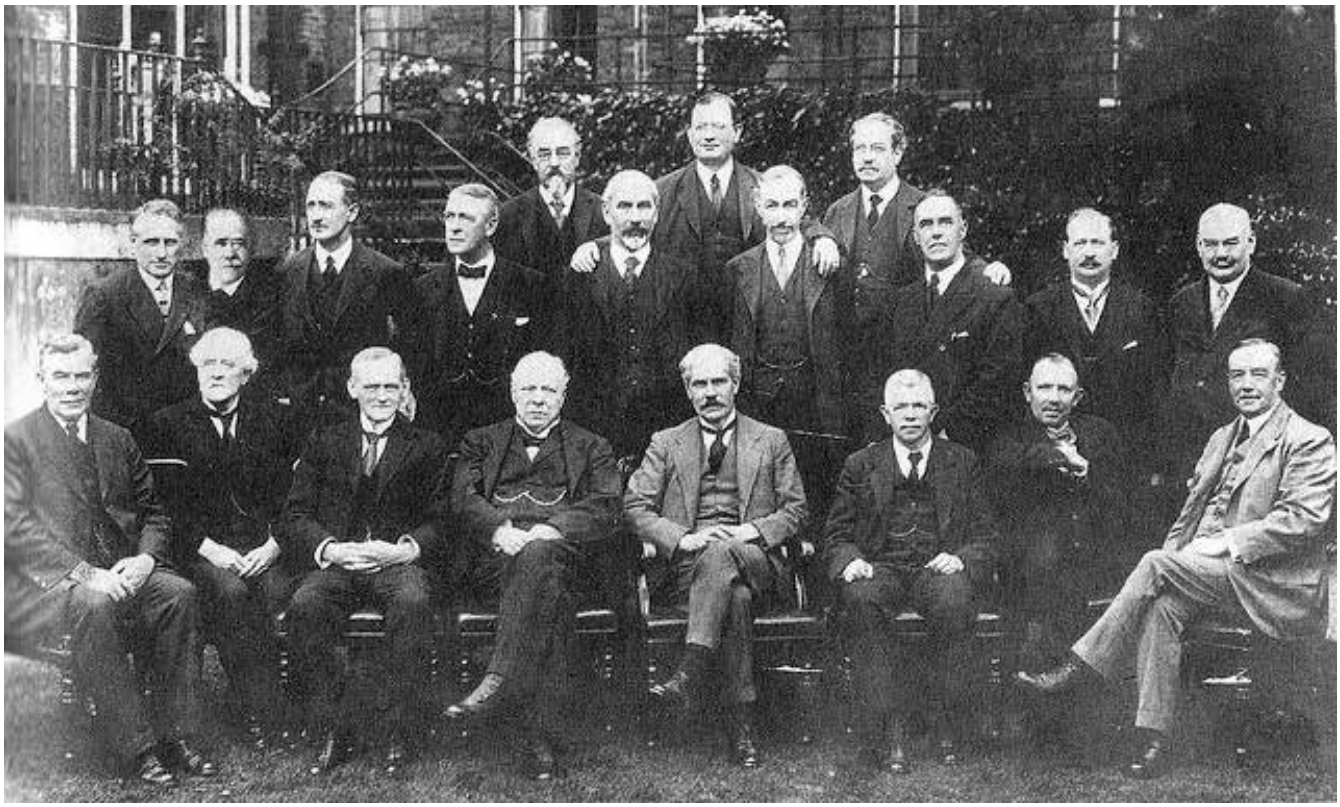
Policy position and leadership strategy within the Lib Dems

This thesis will be a study of the political positioning and leadership strategy of the Liberal Democrats. Consideration of the role of equidistance; development of policy from the point of merger; the influence and leadership strategies of each leader from Ashdown to Clegg; and electoral strategy from 1988 to 2015 will form the basis of the work. Any material relating to leadership election campaigns, election campaigns, internal party groups (for example the Social Liberal Forum) or policy documents from 1987 and merger talks onwards would be greatly welcomed. Personal insights and recollections also sought. *Samuel Barratt; pt10seb@leeds.ac.uk.*

Party whips

The period of the first Labour government, in 1924, dealt a fatal blow to the Liberal Party. How of much this was the fault of the party whips? Michael Meadowcroft examines the evidence.

The 1924 Labour Government



The Labour cabinet of 1924; Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald is front row, fifth from left

The first Labour government has been the subject of much research, aided by a remarkable number of MPs who served in the 1924 parliament who either wrote memoirs or were the subject of biographies. However, though there is a consensus on the underlying strategic aim of Labour to use the arithmetic of the Liberals' political dilemma to deal the party a lethal blow, there has been no focus hitherto on the day-to-day parliamentary process and the lack of a clear Labour strategy in government. There was neither a tactical decision to have measures that the Liberals could be expected to support, nor a deliberate policy to press forward with more socialist legislation that would please its own MPs, or at least the more vocal of them, and deliberately challenge the Liberal MPs. Instead the government continued along an almost day-to-day existence. The Labour parliamentary party had no collective experience of managing parliament and singularly failed to learn the tricks of the trade, not least as a consequence of the failure of the party whips to function effectively. This analysis focuses on the key role of the party whips and on their responsibility for the short nine-month life of the first Labour government.

I have to declare an interest as a paid up member of the Whips' Union, having acted as Alan Beith's deputy whip, 1983–86. The importance of the whips in a party system is a neglected field of study. There are few serious studies of the role of whips, or even whips' memoirs. Given their undoubted importance it is a curious gap. The evolution of structured

t and the Failure of the Whips

national political parties led to the development of a more formal role for the whips but there is only one significant early biography, that of Aretas Akers-Douglas, the first Lord Chilston, who was a very skilful Conservative whip for ten years, over the period of the Liberal and Liberal Unionist split of the 1880s.[1] The biography of Herbert Gladstone by Sir Charles Mallet[2] contains a chapter on the chief whip's role and work whereas Gladstone's own memoirs[3] are curiously silent on his six years as chief whip. Vivian Phillipps, a key figure in the 1924 parliament, produced a privately published volume of memoirs which contains many useful anecdotes of his travails as chief whip.[4] Later Liberal whips as diarists, from Percy Harris in 1935 onwards, were dealing with such small forces that their role was survival and to achieve visibility more than being strategic. More recently Tim Renton produced memoirs, not just of his own experience serving Margaret Thatcher, but also giving a history of the office of chief whip.[5] Another, wholly unlikely but excellent memoir, is that of Gyles Brandreth on his experience of the fraught 1992 John Major parliament.[6] Finally there is a less substantial but readable book by Helen Jones in the 'How to …' series.[7] There is an interesting and practical chapter on the role of whips in Frank Gray's 1925 book *Confessions of a Candidate*. Gray was a junior whip in 1924 but his chapter is, curiously, all in the abstract with no references to the actual whips situation.[8]

Any Liberal who does naively oppose the 'Whip System', should be in the House for a free vote – it is chaotic. Members of Parliament, except on the rare occasions when they have a keen interest in a subject and may be unhappy with the party 'line', rely on their whips to indicate into which lobby they should go. With a free vote MPs descend on the lobbies but are given no indication as to any 'line' and have to rely on information from colleagues involved in the debate. But much more important than getting all one's MPs in to vote in the right lobby is the continual negotiation over the parliamentary timetable and one's party's participation. The ability of parliament to function relies greatly on the cooperation between the whips' offices and the Speaker's office. The timing of debates and, usually, of divisions; the introduction of statements and even the names of one's speakers in debates, are all aided and abetted by the whips and usually agreed between them. In almost all circumstances it works smoothly and the public only finds out about the process when it breaks down. It was over the lack of informal, functioning 'usual channels' that the 1924 parliament failed and where the Labour government was so ill-served. This article focuses on the running of the government and the policies and initiatives of it only insofar as they impinge on the necessary machinery for its survival. On the content of the government's nine months in office, the 2006 work by John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn provides a detailed record.[9] The excellent, and well-indexed, *Liberal Magazine* bound volume for 1924 provides a detailed and largely objective record of parliamentary proceedings but with the addition of Liberal speeches.[10]

Much more important than getting all one's MPs in to vote in the right lobby is the continual negotiation over the parliamentary timetable and one's party's participation. The ability of parliament to function relies greatly on the cooperation between the whips' offices and the Speaker's office.

The path to 1924

I now return to the Liberal Party and its own travails over its whips. From 1912 the Liberals' whips' team was in the capable hands of Percy Illingworth. Illingworth, as his name implies was a Yorkshire wool man, MP for Shipley from 1906. He was personally popular and his competence was universally respected. Unfortunately he ate a bad oyster in December 1914 and died of typhoid fever only a few weeks later. Had he continued in office the Liberal Party divisions of 1916 and thereafter would probably have been diminished even if not prevented. Lloyd George is on record as stating, in his *War Memoirs*, that Illingworth would have prevented the rift that

occurred between him and Asquith.[11] It is curious, and certainly unique, that an unfortunate mollusc played a significant role in the downfall of the Liberal Party.

Asquith offered the post to J. H. Whitley, who had earlier had three years' experience as a junior whip, but he declined the post, ostensibly on health grounds but he had by then become Deputy Speaker and he raised the issue of the propriety of returning to the party fray from that position.[12] Also he had his sights set on succeeding to the top office – which he duly did in 1921. Whitley was the MP for Halifax and was another solid Yorkshire businessman who might well also have been an able chief whip. Asquith then tried to have a dual whip with John Gulland and William Wedgwood Benn, but this was also rejected. Eventually John Gulland was appointed. He was described as able, loyal but unimaginative. In any case he lost his seat at the 1918 election. This extremely unsatisfactory whips' office situation continued with the dual appointment of James Hogge and George Thorne. After the 1922 election Sir Arthur Marshall was added to make it a triumvirate. However, in February 1923, Thorne resigned on health grounds and Asquith decided to revert to a single chief whip. Hogge was thought to have personal and political defects and, eventually, Asquith's former secretary, Vivian Phillipps, was appointed.

Phillipps was a new MP in 1922 and had problems exercising authority over his troublesome colleagues and, in addition, he had one great fault – in Liberal historian Roy Douglas's words, he was 'one of the most virulent opponents of Lloyd George and his appointment could hardly be expected to help the cause of reunion.'[13] The die was now cast for the 1924 parliament and thus the final consequence of the bad oyster.

In the midst of all this the Conservatives played a careful hand, quietly waiting to see how the cards would fall and ready to play their hand with tactical skill. Bolton Eyres-Monsell[14] had been promoted to chief whip in 1923 and served until 1931. He and Baldwin carried on skilfully keeping their Conservative flock in order and contributing towards the undermining of the Liberals. Baldwin saw the clear opportunity to 'smash the Liberals' and the opportunities piled up cumulatively during his time in opposition.[15]

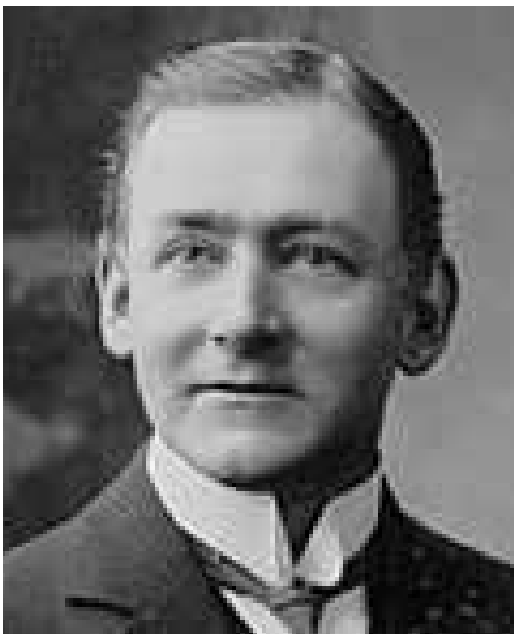
Labour had a particular problem with regard to its chief whip. In that office previously had been the experienced and highly competent Arthur Henderson but he was, at least temporarily, out of parliament. In Henderson's absence at the outset of the new parliament, Ben Spoor was appointed as acting chief whip and thus, following MacDonald's appointment

Chief Whips in 1924:

Vivian Phillipps (1870–1955), Liberal Chief Whip 1923–24

Ben Spoor (1878–1928), Labour Chief Whip 1924–25

Bolton Eyres-Monsell (1881–1969), Conservative Chief Whip 1923–31



as prime minister, the government chief whip. He was never replaced, even when Henderson returned following his victory at the Burnley by-election on 28 February. Ben Spoor remains a shadowy figure despite his crucial role in the 1924 Labour government and its demise.[16] His was an unexpected Independent Labour Party (ILP)[17] gain in Bishop Auckland in 1918, winning the seat on the back of his local government service and his Methodist local preaching. He was very much Henderson's protégé in the House but Henderson was apparently unaware of two of Spoor's incipient problems that would undermine his political career. One was not of his making: his war service in Salonika caused him to be invalided home with malaria – and the variety of this awful disease was one that recurred sporadically and which consequently impinged on his attendance in the House.

Spoor's other huge problem was his latent alcoholism, which developed rapidly over his years in parliament and which eventually caused his premature death. These two handicaps meant that he was very often absent, leaving an inevitably directionless and uncoordinated parliamentary party. On 4 June 1924, for instance, he sent a message to MacDonald, 'I am sorry I am knocked out this week but hope to be back at work in a day or two'.

The scene was set: a sick and increasingly alcoholic Labour chief whip and an inexperienced and factional Liberal opposite number. What was the parliamentary and political situation that faced them? The replacement of Asquith in 1916 as the wartime prime minister under duress by Lloyd George had created a bitter and deep-seated split within the Liberal Party that was never really healed. The division was compounded at the 1918 'coupon' general election[18] when Lloyd George contested the election at the head of a coalition of pro-coalition Liberals – essentially his personal supporters – and Conservatives (and a handful of Coalition Labour and a dozen other candidates.) The Coalition Liberals fielded 158 candidates, of which 133 were elected. Of the Conservatives, 335 out of 374 were elected and, with 10 Coalition Labour MPs, the government had a massive majority – 478 to 229. The Asquithian Liberals fielded 253 candidates but only 28 were elected. Asquith himself was defeated but was soon returned to parliament at a famous by-election in Paisley in February 1920.

The Conservatives became increasingly fed up with having a majority of seats in the coalition but being led by a Liberal prime minister and, in October 1922, in a meeting at the Carlton Club the MPs voted, against their own leadership, to end the coalition. In the general election a month later the Conservatives had a decisive majority. The Lloyd George Liberals, fighting as 'National Liberals' fielded 162 candidates but only elected sixty-two MPs. The Asquithian Liberals almost doubled their representation, to fifty-four seats. The alarming fact – for Liberals – was that the Labour Party more than doubled its representation – from 63 to 142 MPs – more, in fact, than the Independent Liberals and the Lloyd George Liberals combined.

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Stanley Baldwin[19] had taken over from Bonar Law[20] as Conservative leader in May 1923 and, six months later he gave the Liberals a considerable gift in suddenly coming out for protection and tariffs and calling an election on the issue. Asquith and Lloyd George immediately met and declared that all Liberal candidates would be simply and solely described as 'Liberals'. It was clear that only with unity between the two factions could the Liberal Party survive, and the two leaders, despite the bitter recent past, were theoretically reconciled and Lloyd George accepted Asquith's leadership in a united party. Even so, there were many in the Asquithian Liberal camp who did not trust Lloyd George and who never committed themselves fully to the united party.

It would be possible to go on at length about the December 1923 election results and the interesting differences in Liberal performance around the country but it is not germane to our subject in this article. Suffice to say that the result left the Liberals with a huge dilemma. The Conservatives were the largest party with 258 seats; Labour was second with 191; and, just 127,000 behind in votes, the ostensibly united Liberals were third with 159. Having fought the election on the key issue of free trade versus protection it was clearly impossible for the Liberals to keep the Conservatives in office.[21] It was equally difficult, politically, given the immediate past history of a damaging coalition, for them to enter into any kind of formal pact or coalition with Labour, even in the unlikely event of that party being willing. Asquith decided that the constitutional position was that if Baldwin could not get a King's Speech through the House of Commons then the king should ask Ramsay MacDonald,[22] as leader of the next largest party, to try and form a government – and the Liberals would not oppose that initial move. A meeting at the National Liberal Club of almost all the Liberal MPs agreed with this line – and, crucially, Lloyd George endorsed it.[23]

Asquith seemed not to have seriously envisaged playing for a minority Liberal administration.[24] After all, the Liberals had polled almost as many votes as Labour and the two parties had fought the election on the key point of opposing Tory tariffs, and moreover Labour's manifesto had little that could not be endorsed by

'advanced' Liberals. The arithmetic was, of course, somewhat more adverse, but the same principle applied – that the 'second' anti-Conservative party – whichever it was – would have to maintain a permanent presence in the Commons to ensure survival. Roy Douglas regards Asquith's failure on this point as 'Arguably … the most disastrous single action ever performed by a Liberal towards his party.'[25]

This is perhaps over-egging it a little,[26] but the opportunity was there – and would not have precluded the eventual outcome that happened. Asquith could simply have joined the Conservatives in voting down the Labour proposition to form a government. The king would, presumably, then have sent for Asquith who, crucially with Lloyd George, would have put together a Liberal administration and put this before parliament to see whether Labour would have voted with the Conservatives. It would surely have been worth a try, but he did not take the initiative and, as it turned out, even if it had failed it could not have been more disastrous than the eventual ending of the Labour government after just nine months and the heavy Liberal defeat at the 1924 general election. Maybe Asquith was weary – following eight years as prime minister, including three years of the war, and he was 72 years of age. Having said that, it is clear that he was not attuned to being an opposition leader. He certainly had a brilliant mind and was a superb debater, but it was more a legal than a political style. Lloyd George commented that Asquith could pick up the case to be put forward but, however exciting the idea, 'the words froze on his lips'.[27]

The only other possibility would have been some arrangement between Labour and Liberal parties, but there is no evidence that any approaches were made in either direction. Ramsay MacDonald probably thought that he had enough problems with his Left without disturbing them further. Asquith, on his part, was scarred by the recent experience of a split party and the Lloyd George coalition government. Following the election the Conservative leadership havered as to what it should do. Finally, not least because Balfour had pronounced himself in favour of the tactic,[28] Baldwin decided, as the incumbent prime minister and still leader of the largest party, to present a King's Speech. As was known in advance that it would be, it was duly voted down and, with official Liberal support, MacDonald took office, never having hitherto been in any government position. It should be noted, but rarely is, that ten Liberal MPs voted for Baldwin's King's Speech.[29] A bad omen, as will be seen later. Not all Labour MPs were keen on Labour taking office without a majority – the 'Red Clydesiders',[30] for instance, were opposed but were assuaged by one of their number, John Wheatley, holding out for an important Cabinet office as minister of health – which included housing.

It is at this point that the two whips – I exclude the Conservatives – should have begun meeting regularly and mainly secretly. Given Labour's wish to succeed, and the Liberals' expressions of goodwill, their role was (a) proactive – planning the parliamentary timetable; looking at potential problems; liaising with their parties outside parliament; and buying off troublemakers etc in advance; (b) reactive – ready to use standing orders and procedure – and persuasion – to cope with emergencies, and (c) disciplinary – ensuring attendance and voting with the whip's instructions as published weekly. This clearly never happened, not even at the very basic level of ensuring enough MPs present for the continuation of business. Was this a deliberate snub to the Liberals or incompetence? The evidence for the latter is, I believe, compelling.

Labour in office

The opportunity for Labour – and for that matter, the Conservatives – to use the parliamentary arithmetic to destroy the Liberal Party as a political force was obvious but, from the beginning, MacDonald announced that it was going to be an administration for the longer term. Labour could afford to wait and, indeed the ground had to be prepared if the electorate were to accept yet another early election. The final precipitate ending of the government and the subsequent poor result for Labour make the point vividly. He recognised the difficult arithmetic and made it clear that he would not regard every defeat in the House as a vote of confidence.[31] And the government embarked on a legislative programme which showed almost no signs of rampant socialism. Indeed, Asquith remarked that it was, in effect, a Liberal programme.

Maurice Cowling points out that:

> In taking office MacDonald hoped to keep it for a long time. The longer, he seems to have supposed, the better the opportunity to show that the Labour Party need not attract the fear and the hostility which Rothermere[32] and Birkenhead[33] had attempted to arouse. … It was probably the prominence of the Left which made him prefer the advantages to be gained from a long period of office to the dangers to be faced at an election in which the newspapers would give prominence to [that Left].[34]

MacDonald himself clearly looked to the government lasting at least for the medium term.

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Given the parliamentary arithmetic, it was necessary to cooperate closely with the Liberal chief whip even to keep the House sitting. This was simply not done. It is represented in the histories as a deliberate tactic but I suspect that it was simply a consequence of the gaps and failures of the Labour whips' office.

C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, noted after meeting with him:

> He once again remarked that he saw no reason why the Government should not last for a couple of years or so – there was plenty of work to be done on which the two parties were in agreement to occupy at least that time.[35]

More enlightening is the comment of Beatrice Webb in her diary at the end of April 1924, particularly given that she was opposed to continuing the government:

> [MacDonald's] constant insistence that there is no need for an election, that no-one wants it, and that the Labour government is quite prepared to carry on for two or three years, puzzles us. We are so completely outside his confidence that we do not know whether these sayings are said in order to get a longer term or merely in order to throw on the other parties the odium of all the insecurity and upset of the general election which he believes is imminent. We are inclined to think that he consciously and subconsciously desires continuance in office.[36]

Thus it is important to revisit the events of 18 December 1923 to 8 October 1924. On the failures of the processes necessary to the survival of the government and, in particular, the avoidable series of events that led to its fall, the standard histories are largely wrong, or, at very least, deficient. Essentially, the first Labour government could have accomplished much more and have survived much longer had Labour's – i.e. the government's – chief whip and the Liberal chief whip, been more experienced, more competent and, particularly in the case of Labour, more attentive. The parliament drifted willy-nilly, without direction and without planning. Even worse, the Labour whips failed to rein in the hotheads in their own party who were openly anti-Liberal. The government was under great pressure – it was hugely inexperienced – the prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, had never been even a junior minister, and was also trying to be his own foreign secretary. Only Arthur Henderson[37] had been in the Cabinet previously, having played a vital role in the War Cabinet until the events of the summer of 1917 relating to the efforts of the Kerensky government in revolutionary Russia to promote a meeting of socialist parties in Stockholm, which he was determined to attend, caused his resignation. However, he had lost his seat at the December 1923 election and his absence in the crucial early days was a serious blow to Labour. In addition to Henderson, only Stephen Walsh[38] had been even a junior minister.

Henderson – 'Uncle Arthur' to junior colleagues – was an expert at winning by-elections but losing general elections. Having lost Newcastle East (from the withdrawal of the Conservative candidate – all whose votes went to the Liberal) at the December 1923 election, he then won a by-election in Burnley on 28 February (thanks to the withdrawal of the Liberal, whose votes went to Henderson.) He had been kept in the frame by MacDonald and he had insisted on heading a 'service' department and became home secretary. Henderson was very much a party loyalist and, after the wartime coalition, had taken on the task of getting the party organised; this included acting as chief whip for four years from 1920. Ben Spoor was a poor replacement.

Given the parliamentary arithmetic, it was necessary to cooperate closely with the Liberal chief whip even to keep the House sitting. This was simply not done. It is represented in the histories as a deliberate tactic but I suspect that it was simply a consequence of the gaps and failures of the Labour whips' office. You might well ask why the other Labour whips did not grasp the situation, well, *The Times* commented on 6 August 1924 on 'Bad party staff work':

> The Whips' Room has been heavily handicapped this Session by the continuous absences of Mr Ben Spoor, the Chief Government Whip, and by the breakdowns in health of two other Whips, Mr Tom Griffiths and Mr Tom Kennedy, but it has been obvious to those who have been watching events that the Whips have exercised little influence over the rank and file.

Also Beatrice Webb was less restrained in her diary comments (13 March 1924) 'Ben Spoor, never a forceful personality, is weakened by malaria and has been absent most of the session … These senior whips – with the exception of Tom Kennedy who is admirable – either do not attend to the business or fumble it badly.'[39] And Tom Jones, senior Cabinet official, wrote in his diary, '… the position of business in the House almost hopeless, owing to the incompetence of Clynes and the inexperience of the Labour Whips.'[40] The Liberal chief whip, Vivian Phillipps, made the same complaint:

> The Government Whips were the last word in incompetence. They would put down motions for the suspension of the eleven o'clock rule without consulting me as to whether a sufficient number of our people would be able to stay after eleven o'clock

'The Government Whips were the last word in incompetence. They would put down motions for the suspension of the eleven o'clock rule without consulting me as to whether a sufficient number of our people would be able to stay after eleven o'clock to see them safe in Divisions.'

> to see them safe in Divisions. They would make arrangements with the Tories about the business to be taken on this or that day and would leave me in complete ignorance of the arrangement until the House met.[41]

Moving forward, to complete the sad story of Ben Spoor, he continued as chief Labour whip into the next parliament, following the election of 29 October 1924 with a Conservative majority of over 200, finally resigning on 9 March 1925 'owing to ill health'.[42] Arthur Henderson took over once more and proceeded to reorganise the whole operation. Spoor wrote a number of press articles early in 1926 calling for cooperation between Labour and Liberal parties. In terms redolent of the debate in May 2017 on a Progressive Alliance against the Conservatives, he argued that 'Clynes[43] has closer community of interest with Wedgwood Benn[44] than he has with John Wheatley,[45] and that Ramsay MacDonald[46] is ultimately nearer to Walter Runciman[47] than he is to, say, Neil McLean.[48] If we only have the courage to face facts it is possible that within the next few years a really united people's party may be evolved and an alternative government to the present one secured.'[49] On 23 February 1926, the Press Department of the Independent Labour Party issued a statement:

> The National Council of the Independent Labour Party has considered recent articles by Mr Ben Spoor, MP, on the relations of the Labour Party and the Liberal Party and the attitude of the ILP, and has informed Mr Spoor that they represent a view so divergent from that of the ILP that it would be desirable, in its view, that his official connection with the party, as one of the Members of Parliament for whose candidature the ILP is responsible, should not be continued.[50]

Freed from the Trappist vow of chief whip and now of party discipline, he nevertheless rarely spoke in the House thereafter. In four years he made just ten speeches and asked three Oral Questions; his last intervention was a Written Question on 23 May 1928. The following month he announced his intention to retire at the forthcoming election – because of 'persistent ill-health and private reasons.' But he didn't reach the 1929 election, dying on 22 December 1928.

He died in the Regent Palace Hotel and the subsequent inquest is very stark. The chambermaid testified that she had had to put him to bed on a number of occasions, as on the afternoon of 21 December as 'he was obviously ill.' The following morning she found him dead. The pathologist reported heart and liver disease 'accelerated by chronic alcoholism.' The Coroner remarked that Spoor 'had been certified insane' because of his drinking and gave a verdict of death from chronic alcoholism. If he had been certified insane it is odd that the House had not expelled him, as per Charles Leach in 1916.[51] Such was the sad end of Ben Spoor, a formerly respected Labour pioneer.[52]

In the midst of all the Liberal and Labour machinations of early 1924, Bolton (Bobbie) Eyres-Monsell had been promoted to Conservative chief whip in 1923 and served until 1931. He and Baldwin carried on quietly, keeping his Conservative flock in order and undermining the Liberals.

One has to remember that this administration only lasted nine months so that everything is telescoped. The welter of comments and statements give the impression that they are spread over years, but not so. The stresses and strains were day to day and week to week. Just as MacDonald intimated in advance, the government was, indeed, defeated in twelve divisions before being defeated in the final division,[53] which was regarded by MacDonald as a vote of confidence; some of the defeats were on quite significant issues, such the Rent and Mortgage Restrictions Bill, the Housing Bill and the London Traffic Bill. Curiously, given the different arithmetic, the government was defeated in the Commons more times than in the Lords. Even so, the day-to-day pressures of government, particularly for such inexperienced ministers, are not sufficient reason for the Labour leadership failing to recognise that the party machinery was failing and realising that drastic action was required.

It is important to examine the character of the man who had assumed the historic task of being the first Labour prime minister. First, we need to realise that he only became leader[54] by five votes, deposing J. R. Clynes in 1922. This had repercussions in that MacDonald felt that he had to appoint Clynes as his deputy in 1924 and, given that MacDonald was his own foreign secretary, he was often absent abroad and Clynes had to deputise. However, the only person who thought that Clynes performed well in the post was Clynes.[55]

There was no sign whatever in MacDonald's background of an antipathy towards the Liberals; indeed, he had had considerable involvement with Liberals:

- 1889 – member of the National Liberal Club (until 1895)
- 1894 – member, and secretary and treasurer of the Rainbow Circle from its beginning up to 1900.56 He attended a Circle meeting on 5 March 1924 as prime minister.

- 1903 – concluded and enforced the Gladstone–MacDonald pact under which thirty-one Labour candidates were given straight fights with the Conservatives in return for Labour candidates withdrawing in favour of Liberals in other seats.57

Also his electoral record is significant. From 1906 to 1924 – up to the election following the 1924 Labour government – he was given straight fights and never had to fight a Liberal candidate in nine contests.

This is not the record of a Labour politician with a grudge against Liberals. (It is interesting that Philip Snowden, who had not had any particular involvement with Liberals, was more sympathetic and wished the government to continue. But then Snowden did not get on with MacDonald). So why the considerable provocations that offended the Liberals? Liberal MPs understandably complained that while they were incarcerated in the House voting through Labour legislation, the Labour Party in the country was adopting candidates in their seats. It was intolerable. Where were the whips? Who was going to take up the enforcer role that MacDonald had carried out in 1903 following his electoral arrangement with Herbert Gladstone? The answer is no one.

The situation became worse and the entrenched anti-Liberals in the Labour Party, mainly but not entirely on the Left, exploited the lack of internal Labour discipline as an opportunity for free hits against the Liberals who were taking a highly responsible attitude to being present in parliament to maintain the government.[58] It was eventually agreed that Liberal MPs would consult their constituents during the Easter recess. As part of this, in the course of a long speech to his constituents on 22 April 1924, Lloyd George came out with a vivid ironic image, in effect a warning shot across the Labour bows:

> [Labour says] Liberalism is in the way. It has to be killed. There won't be any election for two or three years, so we are allowed to live for a little longer. We must make the best use if our time, and meanwhile we must help Labour. Liberals are to be the oxen to drag Labour over the rough roads of Parliament for two or three years, and at the end of the journey, when there is no further use for them, they are to be slaughtered. That is the Labour idea of co-operation.[59]

The significance of this speech was clear. But despite the clearly expressed Liberal concerns, Labour put up a candidate – for the first time ever – in the Oxford by-election of 5 June effectively causing the loss of this Liberal seat to the Conservatives.

There were other inflammatory speeches, Labour cosying up to the Conservatives,[60] MacDonald whingeing to C. P. Scott,[61] knowing it would get back to the Liberals,[62] and the Red Clydesiders urging more socialist measures.[63] These latter were, in fact, paper tigers. The success of John Wheatley was a constant reprimand to them and an example of how to make government work, but they had to make their point.[64] (It was their acknowledged leader James Maxton who made the famous quote that 'if you can't ride two horses at the same time, you shouldn't be in this circus.'[65]) Similarly, Asquith's initial comment that a Labour government would be in hock to the Liberals was very insulting and it was a constant Labour complaint that the Liberal grandees were very condescending, as no doubt they were.[66] (Of course, Labour had huge problems with protocol and dressing up etc. in which ex-Liberal, now Labour, fellow ministers such as Haldane were even more patronising). But here again, it is up to the whips to say, 'Look, don't worry – we have to say all these things to keep the party happy. It doesn't mean anything.' Apparently no one said this.

The frustrations continued unabated on both sides through the months and became noticeably worse following the party speeches made over the Easter recess, the significance of which were not heeded. It is a salutary exercise to read through the 1924 volume of the *Liberal Magazine*. It was early on in the session following the recess that the rapprochement and, more importantly, the trust between Asquith and Lloyd George was undermined.

On 22 May the Conservatives had put down a motion a motion to reduce the minister's salary by £100 – the curious House of Commons way of saying that the minister is incompetent – because no measures to reduce unemployment had been brought forward. The Liberals made it known that they would await Ramsay's speech before deciding how to vote. This would ensure – as it did – that there would have to be a constructive speech rather than a political harangue. After MacDonald's positive speech the Liberal MPs met and Asquith said that in view of the tone and content of his speech he was prepared to return to the chamber and to say that the Liberals would support the government and vote down the Conservative motion. The chief whip, Phillipps, stated that this seemed to be the prevailing view. Then Lloyd George spoke; he disagreed and felt that Ramsay's speech had not allayed his doubts. However, he was determined to support Liberal reunion and to be loyal to Asquith and would therefore follow the Asquith line. So far, so good.

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Then, when Asquith had thanked him, Lloyd George said that unfortunately he had a dinner engagement and could not be present for the division. He left the meeting. Phillipps relates that a dozen or so Liberal MPs said to him that he must see Lloyd George and persuade him to attend and vote. Phillipps reluctantly went to see Lloyd George, just as he was leaving for his dinner:

> He was frankness itself. He did not want to go against the party, but as for actually voting with the Government, that was more than he could stand. Nothing would induce him to do it.

Phillipps states (and one needs to bear in mind his long antipathy to Lloyd George):

> This was the beginning of a feeling of distrust and suspicion of him which was a continuing source of difficulty in our work during the remainder of the Session.[67]

The government staggered on after the summer recess with much of the business being non-controversial. We can therefore fast forward to the final bizarre circumstances that led to the fall of the government. Looming on the horizon – again apparently without warnings from the whips as to the likely consequences of bringing something controversial forward without fixing support in the lobbies – was the Russian Treaty, and it is stated in most histories that, although, as we shall see, the government fell on a different and relatively trivial issue, it was the tabling of the Russian Treaty which was the real breaking point. I disagree. The 1923 Liberal manifesto stated clearly:

> [We] would welcome the reopening of full relations with Russia.[68]

and this wording gave ample room to manoeuvre. Indeed, it was not even the loan to Russia itself that would have brought inter-party difficulties but only the government's guaranteeing of it.[69]

As it happens the substantive issue never arose. A comedy of errors ensued whose momentum none of the key players seemed able to arrest and which finally destroyed the first Labour government. Labour's attorney general, Sir Patrick Hastings,[70] was an eminent lawyer but certainly not an experienced nor savvy politician. The events themselves are convoluted but can be summarised starkly for the sake of focusing on their impact on the government's frailty. The editor (acting editor, as it later turned out) of a Communist weekly paper, the *Workers' Weekly*,[71] John Campbell,[72] wrote a front-page editorial urging British soldiers not to shoot fellow workers. Sir Patrick, as the government's chief law offer, gave his opinion that this was seditious and treasonable. The director of public prosecutions therefore decided to prosecute Campbell under an ancient law, the Incitement to Mutiny Act of 1797.[73]

Sir Patrick had no sense of the political furore that would follow from his action. To the government's horror it was soon publicised that, not only was Campbell only a stand-in editor, but also he was a decorated First World War veteran who had been grievously injured in both feet. It didn't take much in the way of representation from MacDonald and others in the government for Sir Patrick gracefully to withdraw the prosecution. This was, of course, naive in that it left him open to accusations that there had been political pressure on the legal process – which was, of course, entirely true, even if justified. Foolishly MacDonald told the House he had not intervened, even though he had, and even though Sir Patrick Hastings volunteered to take full responsibility.

A Private Notice question from the Conservative MP, Sir Kingsley Wood,[74] essentially censured the government for its action on the Campbell case. This clearly put the Liberals in a dilemma. The last thing they wanted was an election and so, as a way out, they put down a fairly bland motion asking for a parliamentary enquiry to examine the facts. The Tories saw their opportunity – and took it. In the course of the debate, the government said, foolishly, given that they were only dealing with procedural matters rather than the substantive issue, that it would regard both motions as issues of confidence, so the Tories withdrew their motion and said they would back the Liberals' proposed committee of enquiry. The Liberals could hardly avoid supporting their own motion and so they were duly impaled. The received truth is that the Liberals had decided to turn the government out but this is the opposite of the case. The Liberals tried every way to prevent it happening. For instance, Asquith made the magnanimous gesture of giving up any Liberal places on the proposed committee of enquiry. It was of no avail.

Much is down to MacDonald personally. He was desperately tired and he preferred not to have the embarrassment of facing the Commons to explain his errors and omissions on the Campbell case. He seemed to have fulfilled his statement of 14 February:

> Dealing with the kind of defeat on which the Government would resign, Mr MacDonald said that it was impossible to give a precise definition, but added:

As it happens the substantive issue never arose. A comedy of errors ensued whose momentum none of the key players seemed able to arrest and which finally destroyed the first Labour government.

The evidence is strongly that the Labour leadership did not intend to end the government after such a short and largely unproductive period. Further the evidence is also that its image of an effective administration was continually and unnecessarily harmed by the lack of competence of its parliamentary administration.

> 'I can assure the House of this, and about this there need be no fear, that the Government will not remain in office five minutes after a Division in the House has deprived it of its dignity.'[75]

However, it was *his* dignity that had been impugned – and that, apparently, was enough.

It certainly wasn't the case either that the Labour government was keen to end its life. Arthur Henderson was out of the country and was 'dismayed at the Prime Minister's sudden decision to throw in his hand';[76] more significantly, the House adjourned after Asquith's speech so that the Cabinet could consider the situation. Chief Liberal whip, Vivian Phillipps, sets out the sequence of events:

> The Cabinet conclave went on for about two hours. After it had been sitting for about an hour I received a message asking me to go round to the Prime Minister's room where a leading member of the Government would be waiting outside to have a word with me.
>
> The 'leading member' turned out to be Jim Thomas. He told me that the Cabinet was very divided. 'Did I think anything could be done to avoid a smash?'
>
> I said that I thought it would be a great mistake to rush at a decision, and that it would be wiser for everyone to sleep over the matter when a calmer view of things might prevail on the following day.
>
> I suggested that if this course of action commended itself to the Government, they might announce when they returned to the Chamber, that they proposed to ask the House to adjourn the debate until the following day, when the Prime Minister would ask the leave of the Speaker to make a statement.
>
> Jim Thomas appeared to think this a good idea and asked me, 'Would Asquith agree to such a proposal?' I replied that he could accept it as an understanding from me that if the Government decided to defer their decision to the following day, the Liberals would raise no objection, and that I would arrange at once with Asquith for him to be at the House not later than 10 o'clock [that evening].
>
> He seemed to be much relieved, and left me with the impression that my suggestion would be accepted by the Government.
>
> Nothing more was heard until the Cabinet returned to the Chamber shortly after ten, when, to my surprise and to that of my leading colleagues whom I had kept informed of these latest developments, the Government put up Thomas to denounce our proposal for a Select Committee with bell, book and candle![77]

And so the government fell and MacDonald's request to the king for a dissolution and a fresh election was acceded to. Lloyd George refused to make proper provision from his huge personal fund – around £150 million today – amassed largely from selling honours. He was only prepared to fund 300 candidates. Herbert Gladstone, the party chairman, scraped enough funds together to get 340 candidates into the field. Only forty were elected. A brief flurry under Lloyd George's leadership in 1929 increased that to fifty-nine but it was still pitiful. The decline had been fast and furious, from dominance to marginalisation in just nine years from Illingworth's death whilst in office as the Liberal government's chief whip. Labour suffered a similar serious defeat in a typically unpopular early election in 1924, assisted by the Zinoviev letter,[78] which later turned out to have been a forgery, but the party was back in office in 1929, this time as the leading party, though without an overall majority.

Conclusion

It is not in doubt that the Labour leadership had it in mind to manoeuvre to use the political situation to choose their moment to have a fresh election with the aim of killing off the Liberal Party, but the question is when and on what issue? It did not envisage at the beginning of the parliament that it might bring down the Labour Party at the same time. The evidence is strongly that the leadership did not intend to end the government after such a short and largely unproductive period. Further the evidence is also that its image of an effective administration was continually and unnecessarily harmed by the lack of competence of its parliamentary administration. Thomas Jones, from his position as a very astute observer within the Cabinet secretariat, summed it up: 'The two Whips, Vivian Phillipps and Ben Spoor, were largely to blame for the present estrangement.'[79] It is just possible that, if the 1924 parliament had set off with better intent and with effective and cooperative Labour and Liberal whips, and had thus continued, having found a basis for cooperation, there might have been the foundation for a very different politics in the ensuing years. It was certainly not inevitable for it to have foundered on such a capricious and unprepared issue. The obvious question one continually asks is, why did the leaders of both parties fail to notice the failings of the whips and rectify

the situation? But, they did not do so and the lessons remain:

- First, political organisation requires efficient and effective whips, managing parliament and liaising with the party in the country. There was an abject lack of awareness of this role, which generally is still the case today.
- Second, party unity is crucial. The split between Asquith and Lloyd George was highly damaging to the Liberal Party from 1916 right through to at least 1935.
- Third, a party without a class base is always more vulnerable under pressure. It has regularly to make the intellectual case for its policies and its actions. It is particularly difficult when there is a government without a parliamentary majority, or with only a narrow majority. Throughout post First World War history a premature general election has been a setback for the Liberal Party – 1924, 1931, 1951, 1966, Oct 1974 and 2017 were all electorally bad for the party. Those who in 2010 favoured allowing the Conservatives to become a minority government should reflect on this.
- Fourth, history is important and the history of the nine months of the 1924 parliament is worth studying and learning from.

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1 Eric Alexander, *Chief Whip: The Political Life and Times of Aretas Akers-Douglas, First Viscount Chilston* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).
2 Sir Charles Mallet, *Herbert Gladstone, A Memoir* (Hutchinson, 1932).
3 Viscount Gladstone, *After Thirty Years* (Macmillan, 1928).
4 Vivian Phillipps, *My Days and Ways* (privately published, 1943).
5 Tim Renton, *Chief Whip: The Role, History and Black Arts of Parliamentary Whipping* (Politicos, 2004).
6 Gyles Brandreth, *Breaking the Code: Westminster Diaries* (2nd edn, Biteback, 2014).
7 Helen Jones, *How to be a Government Whip* (Biteback, 2016).
8 Frank Gray, *The Confessions of a Candidate* (Martin Hopkinson & Co, 1925). Gray's experience of parliament was curtailed to a mere seventeen months, being unseated on petition for election expense irregularities. The consequent by-election in Oxford on 5 June 1924 was a source of friction between Liberal and Labour parties, as the intervention of the first ever Labour candidate cost the Liberals the seat, despite having the famous sportsman, C. B. Fry, as the candidate.
9 John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
10 *The Liberal Magazine*, vol. 32 (Liberal Publication Department, 1924).
11 David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (new edn, Odhams Press Ltd, 1938), p. 448.
12 Whitley to Asquith, 9 Jan. 1915, J. H. Whitley Papers, University of Huddersfield.
13 Roy Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party, 1895–1970* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971), p. 168. Lloyd George was aware of Phillipps's attitude to him; see C. P. Scott, *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911–1928*, ed. Trevor Wilson (Harper Collins, 1970), p. 451.
14 Bolton Eyres-Monsell, 1881–1969; MP 1910–35; Viscount Monsell, 1935.
15 Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), p. 274.
16 See his entry in S. V. Bracher, *The Herald Book of Labour Members* (Labour Publishing Co., 1923), p. 173.
17 The ILP predated the Labour Party, being formed in 1893. Although affiliated to the Labour from 1903 to 1932, it maintained a separate mainly left-wing existence within the Labour Party.
18 For a description of the Coupon Election and the capricious nature of the despatch of coupons, see Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 168 ff.
19 See Roy Jenkins, *Baldwin*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1984).
20 See Robert Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister: The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law 1858–1923* (Eyre and Spottiswood, 1955).
21 *Liberal Magazine*, Dec. 1923, p. 706.
22 See David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (Jonathan Cape, 1977).
23 Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 175 ff. for a vivid account of the proceedings.
24 David Dutton – *A History of the Liberal Party* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 93–4 – suggests that Asquith originally considered this tactic but that Lloyd George was unconvinced and when the meeting reconvened Asquith had turned against it.
25 Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 175.
26 Douglas was writing before David Steel's promotion of the Social Democratic Party in 1983 and 1988 as equal in importance to the Liberal Party, and the consequential withdrawal of Liberal candidates and eventual merger, which the present writer regards as equally disastrous.
27 Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary,* vol. i: *1916–1925*, ed. Keith Middlemas (Oxford University Press, 1969).
28 Jenkins, *Baldwin*.
29 The ten are named in Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 176. They were an inchoate group and the only common thread was their deep-seated anti-socialist views. At the October 1924 election, five of them went to the halfway house towards the Conservatives of standing as 'Constitutionalist' but, in the main, still taking the Liberal whip thereafter. Only one, H. C. Hogbin, actually defected to the Conservatives.
30 See Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Clydeside (accessed 1 June 2017); also William Knox (ed.), *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918–1939: A Biographical Dictionary* (Mainstream Publishing, 1984). For Wheatley, see note 38 below.
31 Hansard, HC (series 5) vol. 169, col. 746 (19 Feb. 1924).
32 Viscount Rothermere (Harold Harmsworth), 1868–1940; peerage created 1914.
33 F. E. Smith, 1872–1930; MP Liverpool Walton 1906–18 and Liverpool West Derby 1918–1919, when created the first Baron Birkenhead.
34 Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–24* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 366.
35 Scott, *Political Diaries*, p. 461.
36 Beatrice Webb, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, vol. iii: *1905–1924, The Power to Alter Things*, ed. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie (Virago, 1984), p. 24.
37 Arthur Henderson, 1863–1935; MP Barnard Castle 1903–18, Widnes 1919–1922, Newcastle East January–December 1923, Burnley 1924–1931, Clay Cross 1933–1935.
38 Stephen Walsh, 1859–1929; MP Ince 1906–1929.
39 Beatrice Webb, *Diary*, vol. iii, entry for

13 Mar. 1924.

40 Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, entry for 20 Mar. 1924.

41 Phillipps, *My Days and Ways*.

42 *The Times*, 10 and 11 Mar. 1925.

43 John Robert Clynes, 1869–1949; MP North East Manchester 1906–18, and Manchester Platting 1918–31 and 1935–45.

44 William Wedgwood Benn, 1877–1960; Liberal MP Tower Hamlets St Georges 1906–18, and Edinburgh Leith 1918 to March 1927, when resigned to join Labour Party. Labour MP Aberdeen North August 1928–31 and Manchester Gorton February 1937–42, when created Viscount Stansgate.

45 John Wheatley, 1869–1930; MP Glasgow Shettleston 1922–30.

46 James Ramsay MacDonald, 1866–1937; MP Leicester 1906–18, Aberavon 1922–29, Seaham 1929–35, Scottish Universities 1936–7; prime minister January–November 1924 and 1929–35.

47 Walter Runciman, 1870–1949; MP Oldham 1899–1900, Dewsbury 1902–18, Swansea West 1924–9, St Ives 1931–7, when created Viscount Runciman.

48 Neil MacLean, 1875–1953; MP Glasgow Govan 1918–1950.

49 Reported in *Liberal Magazine*, Mar. 1926.

50 Ibid., and *Glasgow Herald*, 24 Feb. 1926.

51 J. B. Williams, *Worsted to Westminster: The Extraordinary Life of Rev Dr Charles Leach MP* (Darcy Press, 2009).

52 *The Times*, 24 and 27 Dec. 1928.

53 See table in Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government*, p. 120.

54 Technically 'Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party' 1906–21 and 'Chairman and Leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party' 1922–70.

55 J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs, 1896–1924* (Hutchinson, 1937). For a different view, see Richard Lyman, *The First Labour Government, 1924* (Chapman and Hall, 1957); Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, p. 425; Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government*, p. 117; Chris Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain 1922–1929* (Macmillan, 1975), p. 208 (quoting Beatrice Webb,); and Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, pp. 264 and 273.

56 The Rainbow Circle was a Liberal–Labour dining club. Its proceedings are tabulated in Michael Freeden (ed.), Minutes of the Rainbow Circle, 1894–1924 (Royal Historical Society, 1989).

57 The best accounts of the MacDonald–Gladstone pact of 1903 are in F. Bealey and H. Pelling, *Labour and Politics, 1900–1906: A history of the Labour Representation Committee* (Macmillan and Co, 1958), pp. 125–59, and in Philip Poirier, *The Advent of the British Labour Party* (Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 187–95.

58 For a powerful account of this period see chapter 14, 'Liberals and Labour' in Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (William Collins, 1966).

59 Reported in full in *Liberal Magazine*, May 1924, pp. 269–74.

60 See for instance *Liberal Magazine*, Jul. 1924, p. 391.

61 Charles Prestwich Scott, 1846–1932; editor of the *Manchester Guardian* 1872–1929; MP Leigh 1895–1906.

62 See Scott, *Political Diaries*, p. 454.

63 Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (John Donald, 1983), pp. 204–18.

64 In fact John Wheatley's Housing Act is generally regarded as the one lasting success of the 1924 Labour government. See *Liberal Magazine*, Jul. 1924, pp. 386 ff. and 424 ff.

65 *Daily Herald*, 12 Jan. 1931.

66 See Ramsay MacDonald's discussion with C. P. Scott: Scott, *Political Diaries*, pp. 453 and 460.

67 Phillipps, *My Days and Ways*, p. 196.

68 F. W. S, Craig, *British General Election Manifestos, 1918–1966: Conservative, Labour, Liberal* (Political Reference Publications, 1970), p. 26.

69 See *Liberal Magazine*, Nov. 1924, pp. 665–8.

70 Patrick Hastings, 1880–1952; MP Wallsend 1922–1926 (resigned).

71 The *Workers' Weekly* was the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, established in February 1923. The publication was succeeded by *Workers' Life* in January 1927 following a successful libel action against the paper. This was in turn replaced by *The Daily Worker* on the first day of January 1930.

72 John Ross Campbell, 1894–1969; in the First World War he served in the Royal Naval Division; he was wounded in action and awarded the Military Medal for bravery.

73 Even whether he had authorised the prosecution was challenged. The whole confused situation is set out in Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, pp. 287–9, and 292–7.

74 Howard Kingsley Wood, 1881–1943; MP Woolwich West 1918–43.

75 Hansard, HC (series 5) vol 169 cols. 1094–95 (14 Feb. 1924).

76 Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Arthur Henderson – A Biography* (William Heinemann, 1938), p. 252.

77 Phillipps, *My Days and Ways*, p. 123.

78 This was a letter, dated 15 Sep. 1924, purporting to be from I. K. K. Zinoviev on behalf of the Executive Committee, Third Communist International, Presidium, to the Central Committee of the British Communist Party. It urged the latter to prepare for direct action against a future bourgeois government and offered practical help. It was particularly damaging when it suggested that there were elements within the Labour Party also sympathetic to such a course of action. See Lewis Chester, Stephen Fay and Hugo Young, *The Zinoviev Letter* (Heinemann, 1967).

79 Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, p. 278.

Coalition before party?

Reviews

David Laws, *Coalition: The Inside Story of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government* (Biteback Publishing, 2016); David Laws, *Coalition Diaries 2012–2015* (Biteback Publishing, 2017)
Review by **Duncan Brack**

Although a number of former Liberal Democrat ministers have now published books dealing with their role in the Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition government of 2010–15 (we reviewed Norman Baker's and Lynne Featherstone's in *Journal of Liberal History* 93), David Laws is the only author to have published solely on the coalition. Laws was a member of the Liberal Democrat coalition negotiating team in 2010, and then Chief Secretary to the Treasury for two and a half weeks until forced to resign over expenses claims. He returned to government in September 2012 as schools minister and minister at the Cabinet Office, though in the interim period he had remained close to Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg.

His first book, *Coalition*, is his summary of what happened throughout the lifetime of the government; it is primarily descriptive rather than analytical, though it does end with a chapter examining how the coalition worked and what went wrong for the Liberal Democrats. *Coalition Dairies* comprises edited extracts from the diary he kept from early 2012. It doesn't contain all that much significant additional material, but it's a very enjoyable read, more emotional and more revealing than *Coalition*, and illustrates well the day-to-day pressures faced by Liberal Democrat ministers in government. Although, at a combined length of almost 1,200 pages, the books can be rather heavy going, both *Coalition* and *Coalition Diaries* are well worth reading. *Coalition* is essential for anyone seeking to understand what happened between 2010 and 2015, and *Coalition Diaries* adds colour and flavour.

So what do we learn from these books? Laws' conclusions broadly support our findings, in the two special issues of the *Journal of Liberal History* we published on the coalition (issue 88, on the coalition in general, and issue 92, on the policy record): that in terms of government function, the coalition worked reasonably well, better than had been expected at its outset; that it delivered a considerable number of policy outcomes that a Conservative majority government would not have, and that it stopped an even larger number of Tory initiatives; but that nevertheless, the Liberal Democrats made a number of key mistakes that contributed to the catastrophe of the 2015 election – though in reality the party would have suffered electorally even if it hadn't made a single error. These books add significant levels of additional detail to the analysis in our two issues of the *Journal*.

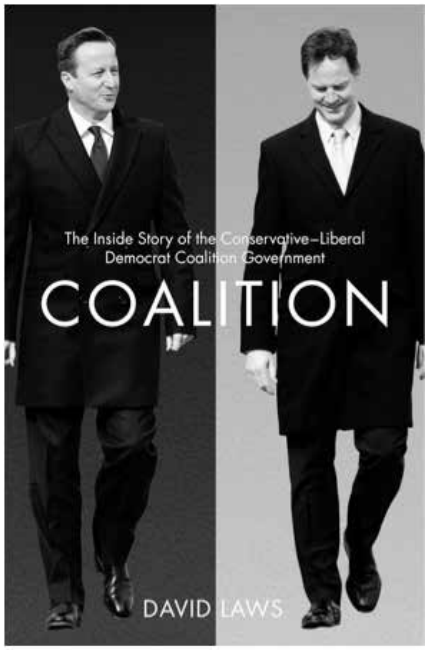
The workings of the coalition

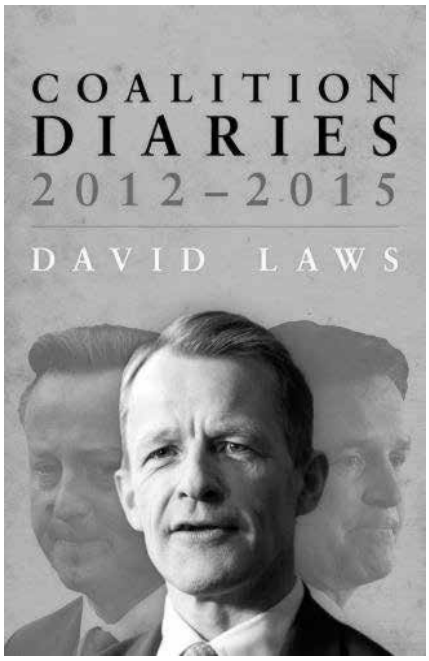
As Laws observes, the coalition worked better than almost everyone expected. He identifies a number of reasons: the generally good relations between the leaderships on both sides, the fact that both parties had previously been in opposition, and shared many views on the failings of the Labour government; and the fact that the key decision-making structures – the 'Quad' of Clegg, Laws' replacement as Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary Danny Alexander, Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, together with bilateral meetings between Clegg and Cameron – in some ways effectively delivered a government of equals.

Behind the scenes, things didn't work so smoothly. Laws chronicles the steadily more evident divisions between the parties, fuelled by Cameron's accelerating slide to the right and determination to use the coalition as a staging post to an outright Tory victory in 2015. In contrast, Liberal Democrat ministers' tendency to put coalition before party, particularly for the first twelve months or so, was one of the mistakes the party made, and contributed to their eclipse in the public view – polling after the 2015 election showed not so much that the public disliked what Liberal Democrats had done in coalition but had no real idea that they'd done anything; they saw it as basically a Conservative administration. This is not a conclusion Laws draws, but it is borne out by several of his observations. Even where Liberal Democrat ministers clearly did make a difference, often by stopping Tory initiatives, this was not visible to the wider public.

Laws identifies welfare and tax policy as particular flashpoints, with Clegg increasingly finding himself defending the welfare budget against Cameron and Osborne (far more effectively than Iain Duncan-Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions). There are repeated references to the Tories' lack of interest in the poorest. After the disastrous reception of the 'omni-shambles' Budget in March 2012, Clegg observed to Laws that both 'Osborne and Cameron have shown an extraordinarily tin ear to their greatest vulnerability – that they only care for the rich and not for everybody else' (*Coalition*, p. 131).

The Liberal Democrats' vetoing of the constituency boundary review after Conservative rebels killed reform of the House of Lords in July 2012 is a marked example. Clegg's private threats in advance of the vote on the Lords sent Cameron and Osborne apoplectic; Cameron predicted that he would lose the 2015 election without the new boundaries, and that 'he would be savaged by the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph*' (*Coalition*, p. 158). (Cameron's





obsession with looking good in the right-wing press is another constant theme.) But as Laws pointed out, this was 'the only thing the Tories understand – clear threats and the exercise of power' (*Coalition*, p. 153). In the end both measures fell, the Tories calmed down and the coalition carried on.

By 2013 Cameron and the Tories, panicked by the growth in support for UKIP, were becoming even more difficult to work with; as Clegg said to Laws, 'being in coalition with the Conservative Party feels like being stuck in a cage with a huge, mad gorilla' (*Coalition*, p. 388). Laws describes well the Tories' abandonment of their – never very convincing – commitment to green issues in the face of rising energy prices, local Tory opposition to wind farms, lobbying by construction firms opposed to the zero-carbon homes standard and, probably most importantly, Labour leader Ed Miliband's proposal for an energy price cap. After Cameron hinted several times that the government would reduce the levies on electricity bills that paid for renewable energy and energy efficiency measures – in defiance of the agreed coalition line – Clegg had to threaten him effectively with ending the coalition: 'This has got to change. I am sorry – I have no intention of being a prisoner in my own government' (*Coalition*, p. 378). By late 2013, energy and environmental policies had become the single biggest source of disagreement within the coalition.

Another common feature was the Tory propensity to oppose Liberal Democrat measures in private and then, when Clegg and his colleagues stood firm, announce in public that it had been their idea all along – for example over the increases in the personal income tax allowance. As Laws said, however, 'The Tories are doing what politicians do. In future, we need to get their first ourselves. It's no use playing by the rules when the other team has torn up the rule book.' (*Coalition*, p. 398) But later, when the same thing happened over the early years pupil premium, and the eventual compromise was for Clegg and Education Secretary Michael Gove to announce it jointly, Laws commented that this was: 'hardly ideal, but what mattered to me more than anything was the policy substance itself' (*Coalition*, p. 402) – a good example of a Liberal Democrat minister putting government before party.

The psychology of coalition

Both of these books illustrate two important reasons why the Liberal Democrats struggled to maintain their identity in coalition. First is the tendency of ministers to 'go native', to be captured by their departments. All ministers in all governments are prone to this; the business of government is so vast that inevitably they know less about their department's activities than their civil servants – particularly where they haven't shadowed the department in opposition – and unless they are exceptionally able and exceptionally determined, often end up adopting the departmental line in most if not all respects. The second reason is similar: the desire of ministers to get on with their ministerial colleagues regardless of party. People working closely together under pressure, sharing common objectives – the success of the government was clearly in both parties' interests – almost inevitably come to develop a degree of respect for each other and a desire not to damage their future relationships. But in the case of a coalition, this is more likely to mean the smaller partner giving in to the larger than vice versa.

Both tendencies are well demonstrated in the books, usually implicitly rather than explicitly. During Laws' brief tenure as Chief Secretary, for example, he clashed with Business Secretary Vince Cable during the negotiations to identify the initial package of cuts the coalition announced soon after taking office: 'He had been our Treasury spokesman until May 2010, and at that time he had been very "gung-ho" for cuts … But by the time he came to see me at the Treasury, he seemed to have gone native overnight.' (*Coalition*, p. 34)

A more striking example came in February 2012, when in a meeting of the Quad, Danny Alexander sided with Cameron and Osborne against his own party leader over cutting the top rate of income tax from 50p to 40p (on the grounds that it could be compensated for by other taxes on the rich such as a mansion tax – though why Alexander thought the Tories would ever concede that is a mystery). He did it again in September, failing to support Clegg's desire to implement the Dilnot Report on the costs of social care. In 2014 Laws records him wanting to make a speech advocating a fully balanced budget in the next Parliament, with no borrowing allowed even for infrastructure investment. In November 2014, 'Danny is still maintaining that there is a "huge prize" for us if we sign up to the new Osborne plan – as he claims that this would all be seen to be our great success' (*Coalition Diaries*, p. 427). As Richard Reeves, one of Clegg's special advisers, put it in May 2012, 'Alexander had 'become the Treasury's representative to the Liberal

Democrats, when it was supposed to be the other way round' (*Coalition*, p. 144).

Another example is provided by Liberal Democrat debates over whether they should veto the review of constituency boundaries. Laws recounts a heated discussion in July 2012 when several ministers and special advisers urged the party not to kill the boundary review, or at least not straight away: 'they were worried in particular about coalition relations if we just "blew up" boundary reform' (*Coalition*, p. 154). Laws strongly argued for sending a signal to the Tories that the Lib Dems meant what they said; fortunately, Clegg came down on his side.

In March 2015 Clegg agreed to the inclusion in the Budget of the Tory proposal for significant cuts in taxes on savings, at the cost of the Liberal Democrat proposal to increase free childcare for all families. The Tory counter-proposal was to raise it only for the children of working parents (Cameron's main argument for this was that Paul Dacre, editor of the *Daily Mail*, 'would go mad. He doesn't think that mothers of young children should go out to work' (*Coalition*, p. 498)). Laws, and Jonny Oates, Clegg's chief of staff, were deeply opposed to this trade-off, and Clegg himself worried that: 'Have I done the right thing, or have I let the Tories walk off with it all? Have I given the Tories a trampoline into the election?' (*Coalition*, p. 497). In the end Laws threatened to resign as party spokesman on education if the childcare offer was not made universal; the Tories would not budge, so the childcare proposal was dropped entirely, just hours before the Budget statement went to print.

Although there are several examples of this tendency, it would be wrong to pretend that Clegg and his colleagues were simply a push-over; there are more cases where the Liberal Democrats successfully dug their heels in. In 2012, for example, Clegg refused to support Cameron in a coalition row over a possible independent enquiry into whether Jeremy Hunt, then the Culture Secretary, had broken the ministerial code by colluding with the Murdoch media empire to allow NewsCorp to take over BSkyB. As Clegg said to Cameron: 'One of the things that I have learned to appreciate and admire about you, David, is your ruthless protection of your own party's interests. I have put the coalition interest ahead of the party interest too much. You made this decision not to refer Hunt over a possible breach of the ministerial code without even bothering to consult me. I am learning from you. Look at it that way.' (*Coalition*, p. 162). In late 2012 he threatened to veto the Autumn Statement altogether unless the Tories dropped their proposal for major cuts in benefits. 'At this suggestion David Cameron had looked shocked. The eyes of the Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood, had bulged visibly.' (*Coalition*, p. 232.) Had the public at large known about these kind of exchanges, they would have had a considerably more positive view of Clegg than they did in reality.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that in any future coalition the party will need someone with the explicit responsibility of scrutinising all coalition decisions, before they are made, with an eye to maximising Liberal Democrat interests across the entire government agenda. This is a tricky balance to strike: this person needs at the same time not to need to worry about upsetting relations with the party's coalition partner and also to have the authority to be able to veto proposals. After his return to government, Laws' role at the Cabinet Office was designed to enable him to do this, and he lists many examples of Conservative proposals he held up or vetoed. In March 2015 he listed eight separate proposals he was blocking, sometimes because they were objectionable, sometimes to gain leverage over Liberal Democrat proposals he wanted to push through (*Coalition Diaries*, p. 479). As he observed, 'In coalition, "no" is a far more powerful word than "yes". And when the other side of a coalition is determined not to do something, there is not much that you can do about it – unless you are prepared to trade something else off against it.' (*Coalition Diaries*, p. 456).

Laws does not, however, consider whether the coalition's decision-making structures themselves undermined the Liberal Democrat profile. He comments on the accidental emergence of the Quad as the key coalition decision-making body, but does not discuss what impact this may have had compared to the original notion of a much larger Coalition Committee, involving more ministers from each side (*Coalition*, p. 45). The Quad was clearly a more efficient decision-making body, but the fact that it included two Treasury ministers, Alexander and Osborne, together with Alexander's tendency to support Tory austerity objectives, had the effect of strengthening the hand of the Tories and the Treasury, and weakening that of the Liberal Democrats.

Personalities

One recurring thread throughout both books – though I don't think Laws intended this – is just how dreadful a Prime Minister David Cameron was. Time after time Cameron vetoes any proposal which might hurt Conservative voters or party funders, regardless of its merits. He even opposed his own 2010 manifesto proposal for a £50,000 cap on political donations.

On top of this was Cameron's own lack of direction. As early as February 2012, Laws recounts how 'astonishingly disillusioned' one of Cameron's own special advisers was: 'I'd expected to find a Prime Minister who was strategic, modernising and focused on the big issues. Instead, Downing Street is utterly dysfunctional and Cameron is obsessed only with tactics, the media and opportunist interventions.' (*Coalition Diaries*, p. 1). By April 2013 Clegg claimed that he had lost all respect for Cameron. 'He's extremely petulant and difficult over issues like this [the 'snooper's charter' proposals], and utterly shallow in his engagement with policy … I have more time for George Osborne, who may be an arch-Tory but who at least goes out of his way to understand other people in politics and the way they see things. Cameron is not like that at all. He thinks he can bully people into things in a rather unattractive way.' (*Coalition Diaries*, p. 113) A month later Clegg even wondered whether the Liberal Democrats would have gone into coalition at all if they had known: 'what the Tories were going to be like, and if we'd known how right-wing they would become. I had a telephone call with Cameron yesterday and frankly as far as I'm concerned he's lost any credibility as Prime

Minister of the United Kingdom. The way in which he discusses issues and the superficial way that he deals with important matters is just unbelievable.' (*Coalition Diaries*, p. 125).

In July 2013 Clegg observed that: 'Cameron does have a lot of emotional common sense, and good abilities as a political leader. But I really don't know what he stands for, other than keeping the Conservative Party in power.' (*Coalition*, p. 312). After the Scottish independence referendum was defeated in September 2014, and Cameron announced his intention to examine the possibility of devolving powers to all parts of the UK (thus betraying his referendum campaign promise to devolve more powers to Scotland unconditionally), Clegg commented that: 'I used to disagree with the Conservatives but at least respect them. But now I have contempt for what they have done. It is so bloody short-termist and short-sighted.' (*Coalition*, p. 449). This had followed a conversation with Cameron in which Clegg had warned that the Tory approach risked the break-up of the UK. Cameron's response was eye-opening: 'Look, Nick, I just don't care. We've only got one Conservative MP north of the border. Let Labour sort it out. It's now their problem.' (*Coalition*, p. 449)

If there's anyone who comes out worse from *Coalition Diaries* than Cameron, however, it's Michael Gove, Education Secretary until 2014. Entry after entry records fundamental disagreements between Gove and Laws over education policy – including, for example, Gove's efforts to pour money into his free schools policy regardless of outcomes, and his belief that local authorities should have no serious role at all in delivering education. More entertainingly, they also demonstrate how utterly bonkers he could be. In November 2013, for example, Gove attempted to exempt academy schools from the duty to provide free school meals, a Liberal Democrat policy about to be introduced. Laws attempted to discuss the matter with him, but Gove simply refused, even to the extent of hiding in the toilet to avoid meeting him. A few days later Gove gave orders that the desk reserved for Matt Sanders (Clegg's special adviser responsible for education policy) be removed. He also appeared to be largely unable to restrain his – if anything, even more demented – special adviser Dominic Cummings (who was later to run the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum), whose antics included 'leaking' fictional documents from the Department for Education designed to discredit Clegg and Laws. It was behaviour such as this that eventually persuaded Cameron to move Gove from Education in July 2014.

Liberal Democrat mistakes

One of the main errors the Liberal Democrats made in coalition was of course the botched handling of the increase in university tuition fees. Laws' recounting of the episode in *Coalition* (pp. 49–63) is mostly a good one, though he omits any mention of Cable and Clegg welcoming the Browne Report, which made the case for increases in tuition fees (though without a cap, which the coalition introduced) as soon as it came out – which made it look as though the Liberal Democrats were not only prepared to ditch their election pledge to oppose any increase in fees but to be positively enthusiastic to do so.

Laws identifies two main errors that led to the disaster. First, he blames the party for sticking to its policy of abolishing tuition fees when Clegg proposed dropping it, in 2008–09. Second, he blames the Liberal Democrat leadership, including himself, for not thrashing out an alternative position when it became clear, in October 2010, that Cable's initial idea of a graduate tax was running into severe practical difficulties: 'With a divided party and plunging poll ratings, this was the moment to decide to veto any rise in fees' (*Coalition*, p. 60). With the benefit of hindsight, the party should have insisted on its policy in the coalition negotiations; the inclusion instead of a provision to let Liberal Democrat MPs abstain on any proposal to increase fees was not just worthless but damaging. But, as Laws recalls, the negotiating team had decided months before not to press for it because neither Labour nor the Conservatives would support it – not, perhaps, the best approach in trying to reach an agreement with political enemies. Laws makes a good case of explaining why the policy wasn't in reality a good one, given the pressure on public finances, but that argument with the party had already been lost. Given that opposition to tuition fees was one of the very small number of things many voters knew about the Liberal Democrats, and given the pledge that all party candidates had made to vote against an increase in fees, abandoning it was a huge political mistake.

The NHS reforms were probably the second-most serious policy error the Liberal Democrats made, though the mistake here – shared with David Cameron – lay in not strangling Health Secretary's Andrew Lansley's lunatic proposals at birth when he submitted them three weeks after the election, especially given the coalition agreement's explicit commitment to: 'stop the top-down reorganisations of the NHS that have got in the way of patient care'. Laws blames a lack of attention from Cameron and Clegg, too busy sorting out the workings of the coalition in its first few weeks, together with Cameron's lack of interest in policy detail. The result was two years of a controversial and politically damaging reorganisation and a worse functioning NHS thereafter. As Clegg said in 2012, 'I should have pulled the rug out from under the NHS reforms and just killed them dead in 2010. I was trying too hard to work in a cooperative way with the Tories in that first six months of the coalition.' (*Coalition*, p. 75)

Laws does not include economic policy in the list of Liberal Democrat mistakes, but there's a strong case for thinking it was one. During the coalition negotiations the Liberal Democrats effectively abandoned the position on which they had fought the election – for an economic stimulus based on infrastructure investment and a smaller reduction in current spending than the Tories had argued for – and simply adopted the Conservative position wholesale. Partly one can blame the Greek debt crisis, which exploded the day after the 2010 election, but it can also be attributed to the Tories' success at winning the argument over who was to blame for the economic crisis (later aided and abetted by Liberal Democrat ministers, who were happy to join in on piling the blame

on Labour). The end result was that the coalition ended up adopting a policy for austerity which the electorate expected from the Tories but not from the Liberal Democrats.

Throughout the coalition, however, Liberal Democrats came to realise that austerity was biting too deeply, and – with the exception of Alexander – increasingly opposed Tory proposals for further cuts. Vince Cable in particular did this publicly, for example in an article in the *New Statesman* in March 2013 and in a speech just before the Liberal Democrat conference in September 2013 – much to the irritation of Clegg, who felt that this made it impossible for the Liberal Democrats to gain any political credit for the signs of economic recovery that began to be evident from 2013. In reality, this might have been impossible anyway; experience from coalitions in other countries show that voters usually credit the party of the Prime Minister with any economic good news.

One further mistake that Laws does recognise was the decision not to put Liberal Democrats in charge of any major spending departments, which contributed to their eventual invisibility. In May 2012, Clegg contemplated the possibility of taking on a big department, such as Business or Education: '"the problem is", said Nick, "that nobody knows what a Deputy Prime Minister actually does"' (*Coalition*, p. 144). In March 2015, Laws records a discussion over Liberal Democrat demands for another coalition with the Conservatives after the election; this included arguing for something 'very big' in exchange for the Euro referendum they assumed the Tories would push for, such as two mainstream public service departments, perhaps health and education (*Coalition Diaries*, p. 481).

I expect Laws wouldn't share all of my judgements above, but I agree with the conclusion with which he ends *Coalition*: that probably, even if all the mistakes had been avoided, the result in 2015 would not have been all that different. 'The truth is that we took one really big decision and one really big decision only. That was to go into coalition in May 2010, rather than attempting a confidence and supply agreement with the Conservatives, or trying to knit together a multi-coloured coalition with the Labour Party and others.' (*Coalition*, p. 570). He does not, however, answer the question of whether, in the long run, it was worth it. While he defends the decision to enter coalition, and what Liberal Democrat ministers achieved, he observes that: 'what we cannot yet know is what price we will pay in future influence because of the setbacks we suffered as a consequence, and therefore what the net balance of overall advantage to the Liberal cause will be' (*Coalition*, p. 572). Nevertheless, 'for myself, reflecting back on my time in politics and on the Liberal Democrat achievements in government of which I remain proud, I join with other colleagues in concluding that for me, losing my seat on 7 May was a price I was and am willing to pay.'

Whatever the outcomes, David Laws was at the centre of Britain's first peacetime coalition for eighty years, and his story is required reading for any student of Liberal Democrat politics.

Duncan Brack is Editor of the Journal of Liberal History. *In 2010–12 he was a special adviser to Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change.*

Both books *are available to readers of the* Journal of Liberal History *at a special discounted price; see inside front cover.*

Votes for women

Report: The Liberal Party and Women's Suffrage

Conference fringe meeting, 9 March 2018, with Krista Cowman and Jo Swinson MP; chair: Elizabeth Jewkes

Report by **Astrid Stevens**

This year marks one hundred years since the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed under Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George, beginning the enfranchisement of women. However, while the vast majority of Liberal MPs supported the change, this support was not unanimous. The party had been divided for many years over the issue, and the previous Asquith government had obstructed reform. Opponents argued both that politics was not the 'proper sphere of women' and that women, if enfranchised, would be more likely to vote Conservative. The divisions within the Liberal Party over votes for women, the stance taken by the Asquith government and the impacts on the party of the debates over women's suffrage, were the subject of the Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting on Friday 9 March, 2018, at the spring Liberal Democrat conference in Southport. With Elizabeth Jewkes (vice-chair of Liberal Democrat Women) in the chair, speakers were Krista Cowman and Jo Swinson.

Krista is professor of History at the University of Lincoln, where she researches women's political activism in the twentieth century; she was also historical advisor for the 2015 film *Suffragette*. Jo is deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats, MP for East Dunbartonshire, a former government minister, and author of *Equal Power: And How You Can Make It Happen* (which examines the extent of gender inequality and how we could become a truly gender-equal society).

Krista Cowman opened by discussing women's role in the Liberal Party at around the time when the women's suffrage campaign was at its height, from the perspective of grass-roots politics and women's activism. A key date in the history of women's political involvement in Britain was related not to women's suffrage, but to the capping of electioneering expenses introduced by the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act in 1883. Election work increased because 60 per cent of adult men now had the vote (and therefore needed to be identified, registered and canvassed), and new constituencies had been created. More women were drawn into the donkey work of elections and campaigning.

In 1884, the Conservative Party opened the Primrose League to women, appealing to the values of Empire, Queen and Country. For the Liberal Party, the independent women's Liberal associations across the country united into a Women's Liberal Federation in 1887, more specifically party-oriented than the Primrose League. The Women's Liberal Federation prioritised political education, aiming to enlist women's sympathies on the side of Liberal principles. It developed a wide range of educational literature, and facilitated a network of skilled speakers, who promoted such ideas as that politics was a womanly as well as a manly duty, and that women should learn about politics to defend themselves against laws that interfered with their lives. At its peak in 1912, the Women's Liberal Associations collectively represented 133,215 women across 837 local branches.

Increased political education and activism led Liberal women more overtly into public life. By the end of the nineteenth century, women did have local votes for some councils, as well as for the Poor Law and School Boards. Women's candidacy for election had been assured from the 1870s and proved in law, but women councillors were rare before 1919, and party-endorsed women councillors even rarer. Most women at this stage stood as independents, and even when a local party began to endorse women candidates, there were reservations.

As the pro-Liberal *Liverpool Review of Politics* argued: 'Women have also been, in some cases, elected to School Boards and other public bodies, and have discharged the functions associated with such with gentleness, intelligence and tact. However, while woman nobly plans to warm and comfort and command, maybe of the most beneficent services as representatives of the Poor Law system to women and children, petticoats and street-paving politics are strangely incongruous. Neither in municipal administration nor in the conduct of affairs of local District Councils is the feminine element countenanced.'

Divisions over whether or not women could be party candidates reflected a deeper divide in the Women's Liberal Associations over the question of women's suffrage. In 1889, the Federation had voted down a motion to make suffrage part of its aims, by 173 to 90 votes, because they felt it was too contentious, but the motion kept coming back, promoted by a progressive group on the National Executive. Suffrage was finally adopted as an objective of the Women's Liberal Federation in 1892 – the year in which Emmeline Pankhurst withdrew her candidacy for the committee of the Executive because she had just joined the independent Labour Party.

The next problem was whether or not suffrage should be a 'test question', with Federation support withdrawn from any candidate who openly opposed women's suffrage. The issue was contentious, and became even more controversial when the militant suffrage campaign kicked off. During the election campaign of 1905–6,

Christobel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney were arrested following their interruption of a Liberal Party meeting in Manchester. Christobel campaigned in a by-election with the policy slogan 'Keep the Liberal out', and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) campaigned against any government candidate, regardless of that individual's stance on suffrage. The emergence of militancy in the suffrage campaign coincided with the election of a Liberal government.

Suffrage came to dominate the agenda of local and national Women's Liberal Association meetings, and militancy began to affect the Federation's relationship with the Liberal Party. Some, such as Nessie Stewart-Brown, were strong advocates for party loyalty, while one woman resigned from council saying 'I'm tired of working for Liberals when Liberals will do nothing for women'.

The Federation finally split on the issue in 1913, and a Liberal Women's Suffrage Union was set up. Some women joined that; others left the party altogether to move into the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, many of them going into the Labour Party after the war. When the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies decided to help the Labour Party at elections, many women Liberals moved to the Women's Citizens Associations, which aimed to keep women's suffrage prominent in the minds of women municipal voters by focusing on political education. Between 1912 and 1914, sixty-four local associations and 10,000 members left the Women's Liberal Federation.

After reduced activity during the First World War, the Federation and the local associations ceased to be separate auxiliary organisations, and women were allowed to become equal party members for the first time. In 1927, the Liberal Party appointed an official women's organiser, with a desk at headquarters. Of the six women who sat as Liberal MPs in the party's history, four of them (Margaret Wintringham, Vera Terrington, Hilda Runciman and Megan Lloyd George) were elected before 1929. Unfortunately, the party's electoral fortunes began to decline at precisely the point when women got their equal position, with women in the Liberal Party who were really at ease with their position as women and as political activists.

Jo Swinson opened her presentation by observing that history is largely written by men, and that this has always been the case. In the course of researching her book, Jo had learned of a recent proposal to the BBC for a story about prominent women throughout history, which the BBC had dismissed because they said it would be a 'succession of kings' mistresses'. Aside from the fêting of a few warrior women, very often the stories of women have not been told at all. Looking at our public infrastructure, the pages of our history books, the people commemorated in statues and paintings, or the obituaries in the press, these are predominantly male, and that sends out a very clear signal. If we think that history is gender-neutral and objective, we are missing a point.

One argument suggests that men have just been doing more things of significance, and that the imbalance will change with time. But Jo thinks we shouldn't kid ourselves that this is the case. Who is deciding what is significant? Women have played unsung roles throughout history, and in politics, but those stories have not been told in the same way as for men. Some recent Hollywood films about wars in the twentieth century have been controversial because of the 'whitewashing' of history; we are not telling the stories properly if we do not recognise the contribution made to the armed forces by people from all around the Commonwealth, with all different

types of coloured skin. It is the same with women.

The Liberal History Group has produced pamphlets to make sure that those stories have been told about women in our party. But a recent Twitter exchange highlighted that an article on the party website outlining the history of the party didn't mention Kirsty Williams (our current serving government minister) nor key by-election winners, and that few women were mentioned there at all.

A hundred years ago, women got the right to vote. But legal rights are only the beginning of creating a change within society, because attitudes take much longer to change. It is understandable that when women were given the vote, there was a unit set up in the party specifically to campaign to them, and to find the 'woman aspect' to every bill. No doubt if we get votes at 16, we'll do the same: 'How do we appeal to 16- and 17-year-olds, and what are the youth issues?'

A hundred years on, there is still much discussion about women's issues. There *are* some women's issues (for example, period poverty affects women and girls more than it does men), but there are similarly some men's issues which have been overlooked in parliament. We should be thinking about men's issues *and* women's issues, but we don't – we generally think there are issues, and then there are women's issues. We were in that mindset when women got the vote, and we still are. Men's issues have not been championed by MPs because for many men, gender is invisible. But if you are a woman experiencing gender inequality on a regular basis, then it isn't invisible.

For a long time in politics, certain subjects were deemed appropriate for women to speak about, such as health or education, and these would be the ones given to women ministers. We have never had a woman as Chancellor, nor as Defence Secretary. When the post of Defence Secretary last became vacant, despite there being a very well-qualified woman who had been junior minister in the Department for the Ministry of Defence, the position went to somebody without that background or experience, who was deemed more appropriate because he was a bloke. When men are appointed to the position of Lord Chancellor without having a background of legal experience, few objections are raised – but when Liz Truss was appointed, this was suddenly an issue.

Jo recalled being shocked in 2005 by reading of the overt sexism experienced in the House of Commons by women MPs. Many had been elected in 1997 (when the number of women MPs exceeded one hundred for the first time). Eight years on, the sexism seemed less overt than it had been in the 1990s. But Jo and her fellow women MPs concluded that there is no meritocracy, and no sense of putting people with the right talents into the most effective positions. Reshuffles are more haphazard, based on who has the ear of the leader and where the political power is, so they are quite hard to navigate. And this leads to women being overlooked, time and again. When the Liberal Democrats were in government, we didn't appoint a single woman to Cabinet, despite having plenty to choose from. That kind of message does tell you something. We weren't even appointing women to Cabinet in the same proportion as in the parliamentary party. And a lot of politics is done in informal circles of advisers, who can be more homogeneous than even a parliamentary party in terms of gender, race and opinion. 'Group-think' is no better for political decision-making than it is for business decision-making.

A hundred years on from the suffragettes and suffragists, much work is needed to unpick more than a century of assumptions, stereotypes and pigeonholing of women's issues and women's committees. Looking at the challenges of history shows where we've come from, but also helps us to recognise how far we have to go in the future.

A comment from the floor raised the point that, despite a limited number of women in the party being active in senior formal posts, a large number have been staggeringly influential. This reminded Jo of the 2001 conference debate on all-women shortlists, when a group opposed to the idea had concluded that spokespeople against such shortlists needed to be women in the party, and not men. Jo herself summated the amendment that ultimately stopped the party from adopting such shortlists. But after the decision had been made, she was disappointed to find that quite a few of the men who had argued against all-women shortlists were also not prepared to contribute to alternative efforts aimed at getting women more involved, such as training, mentoring, getting women to stand for parliament, or encouraging them to speak at conference. Krista commented that women's lives tend to get struck from the historical record, and that there are large numbers of politically active women whose stories we just don't know – even for some very prominent women politicians: 'People can, mainly, name Nancy Astor at a push, but they struggle to name Margaret Wintringham (who was the second woman, and the first British woman, elected), and there are numbers of these pioneering women who just never figure.'

Asked whether the methods used by the suffrage campaign a hundred years ago still apply today, Krista said that rights are very rarely given by the privileged and the powerful, so you can't just expect that things will get better; you have to organise to *make* things better. And sometimes rights have to be taken. Pardoning the suffragettes now (as some have called for) would be wrong, because it was a very deliberate political choice that those women made, and they knew what they were doing. The campaign for a pardon, well meaning though it is, takes all the fire out of the suffragettes' actions. Jo agreed, adding that it would also be better to campaign for something that would result in improvement in the lives of women today. From the women's suffrage campaign, Jo picked disobedience as something we could learn from. We should remember that the suffragettes were hated by many, including many women; they were beaten, groped, and force-fed in a way that we now recognise as torture. When you speak out for equality, and for people to have rights that they are not currently afforded, it feels uncomfortable, and it attracts vitriol, but that doesn't mean that you're wrong. Pushing the boundaries of the rules is necessary in order to provoke change. And you need to remember that misrepresentation of your efforts in the press is

a deliberate tactic, either conscious or culturally embedded, to make you look stupid and your ideas ridiculous.

Another question asked about the experience of women in other political parties, in the immediate aftermath of 1918. Krista explained how the Conservative Party did exactly the same thing constitutionally as the Liberal Party, allowing women to become full and equal members of the party, but keeping their separate organisation. However, the Conservative Party's organisation was much smaller than the Women's Liberal Federation. The Primrose League was on its way out by 1918, looking and feeling very Victorian, but the Women's Tariff Reform Association and the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association meant that the Conservatives had large groups of women who were already organised, and they appointed a women's organiser (with a desk at central office) round about 1920. The position in the Labour Party was different, because until reforms during the First World War, membership of the party had been through affiliate organisations and it had not been possible to join the Labour Party as an individual member. Larger, male unions therefore tended to be represented rather than women, although there were associated groups such as the Women's Co-op Guild and the Railway Women's Guild. Once individual membership was allowed, greater numbers of women joined, but even then their activism within the party was limited by union involvement and the block vote. Despite that, the Labour Party had appointed a women's organiser by 1918. So the Liberal Party was slower to appoint an organiser than the other parties, but had potentially the largest group at the end of the war.

In summing up, Krista commented that although the world was very different a century ago, with many changes over the course of the intervening decades, we are still fighting some of the same challenges today. In the 1920s, Margaret Wintringham's main interests in the House of Commons were equal pay, equal suffrage, and the broader participation of women in public life – and with the exception of equal suffrage, we are still talking about those topics now. Krista pointed out that before 1919 women could not become lawyers, architects, magistrates or jurors, and it was not until the '70s that women got equal pay. Jo highlighted the slow progress towards eliminating other inequalities: rape within marriage was recognised only in 1991, and even today it takes Wera Hobhouse's current bill in order to make upskirting an offence. Jo agreed that Margaret Wintringham's primary issues were still current. On the topic of equal pay, Jo was previously responsible for securing the government agreement to bring in gender pay gap reporting, and she sees votes at 16 as today's ongoing battle for equal suffrage (although not specific to women). Representation continues to be an issue, with only a third of Liberal Democrat MPs being women (approximately the average in the House of Commons), and only the Conservative Party ever having elected a woman leader. 'It's absolutely spot on that a History Group meeting considers history, but also follows that through to what the lessons are for today.'

Astrid Stevens works in the software industry, but has also been a technical author and freelance writer. Her leisure interest in history has been pursued through studies with the Open University and Dundee University.

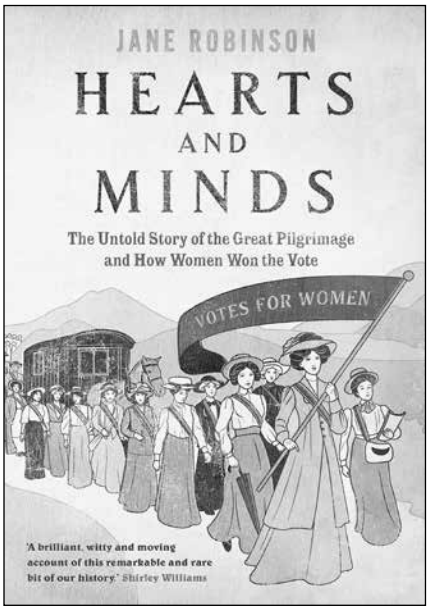
Reviews

Diane Atkinson, *Rise Up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Jane Robinson, *Hearts and Minds: The Untold Story of the Great Pilgrimage and How Women Won the Vote* (Doubleday, 2018)

Review by **Krista Cowman**

February 2018 marked 100 years since the Representation of the People Act finally gave parliamentary votes to some British women. The centenary has been marked in numerous ways – television and radio programmes, statues, local and national exhibitions, a multi-site participatory artwork – 'Processions' – in the UK's four political capitals and a relisting of several listed buildings to emphasise their suffrage connections. Unsurprisingly there has also been a publishing boom bringing new interpretations of the suffrage campaign.

These two books, published as part of the centenary events, present different facets of Edwardian women's struggle for the vote. Diane Atkinson's *Rise up Women!* is a formidable work, cramming a wealth of detail over almost 700 pages. Atkinson's sympathies lie unapologetically with the flamboyant suffragettes whose eclectic militancy spanned the decade before the First World War. A suffrage historian of thirty years experience, Atkinson was excellently placed to write this book, which goes beyond a formal organisational history of the largest militant society, the Women's Social and Political Union. Her approach is more of a collective biography, making full use of the wealth of recently digitised material also released to mark the centenary. The impact of these sources on the field cannot be underestimated. When Atkinson began suffrage research in the 1990s, revealing the names of the elusive tier of activists below the national leadership was a painfully lengthy process. The local reports columns of the WSPU's weekly journals *Votes for Women* and *The Suffragette* had to be scanned on microfilm or crumbling hard copy, and extracted names cross-checked in the local press. Searching the non-digitised census required an address (often not available) and the 100-year closure rule was outside the timeline of the militant campaign. The digitisation of local and suffrage newspapers, of birth, death, marriage and divorce records and of the census has transformed grass-roots suffrage research, bringing many more



snippets of information out of the shadows.

Rise Up Women! shows exactly what can be done when these snippets are combined into a coherent narrative. One result is a much more eclectic view of the class composition of the militant suffrage campaign. Despite almost three decades of a revisionist suffrage history that challenged interpretations of militancy as the plaything of wealthy women, the myth that working-class women eschewed the WSPU has proved remarkably tenacious. Atkinson's book shows in rich detail how many ordinary women risked imprisonment and social ostracism. We meet Jane Short (alias Rachel Peace) who served prison terms for window-smashing and arson and was a working-class embroiderer. Short was one of the WSPU's last prisoners, and her presence in Holloway at the end of the militant campaign reminds us that it continued to attract women from across all classes even in its most extreme phase. Atkinson is attuned to the diversity of militancy, covering all aspects from interrupting meetings to mass window-smashing and from coordinated disruption of church services to hunger strikes. Using different voices allows for wide exploration of the actions classed as militant, and their impact on those who carried them out, even when little more is known of their lives.

Jane Robinson's *Hearts and Minds* takes a different focus, although she retains an interest in lesser-known characters. The book centres on a single event, the 'Great Pilgrimage' organised by the constitutional National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1913. Groups of women walked from across the country on a march culminating in a rally of 50,000 in Hyde Park. Serious suffrage scholars would take issue with Robinson's claim that this is an entirely 'untold story.' Some of the ground has been covered in Sandra Stanley Holton's 1987 work *Feminism and Democracy*, and Jo Vellacott's 1993 biography of NUWSS worker Catherine Marshall gives it a whole chapter. That nobody has yet done a book-length study of the pilgrimage is probably because as a single event it may be deemed too slight for such treatment. Nonetheless Robinson has made excellent use of unfamiliar testimonies of the marchers, dispersed across record offices in Britain and the USA and now brought together to present a detailed picture of the two-month walk.

Robinson captures the hostility faced by the marchers for their public stance. Women are mistaken for suffragettes, pelted with eggs by opponents of the militant campaign, and refused food in wayside inns. Marchers in Oxford are put in serious jeopardy by a gang of local youths intent on burning down their caravan. We learn how the camaraderie of being on the road and their enthusiasm for a shared cause keeps them going in this hostile atmosphere. Unfortunately, the book overall does not retain this close focus. Despite stating that women were 'more likely to have been a 'gist' than a 'gette' (p. xv), there is much here on the WSPU, perhaps because of the difficulty of stretching the narrative over the pilgrimage alone. This shift in focus brings in numerous small errors that detract from the book's authority. Some of these may only be noticed by the most keen-eyed suffrage geek. Wolverhampton suffragette Emma Sproson would not have received 'the usual award' (p. 61) of Sylvia Pankhurst's portcullis brooch on her release from prison in 1907, as this was not designed until some years later. Others are more obvious. *Votes for Women* was not 'renamed *The Suffragette*' (p. 98), but remained with the Pethick Lawrences on their expulsion from the WSPU in 1912. The suffragette colours unveiled by Emmeline Pethick Lawrence for Women's Sunday in 1908 were consistently referenced as purple, white and green, featuring in a suffragette song of this name – not violet, white and green as a 'convenient acronym for give women the vote' (p. 70), something that was imposed retrospectively. In other areas the narrative does not expand to cover what could have been included. The large number of suffrage organisations is acknowledged but a list omits any of the occupational or religious groups and while these are occasionally referenced later in the text, their scope and spread remains unclear.

The book attempts a less formal academic style, but its footnoting is not comprehensive, and there are some surprising omissions. The section on obscure but influential early campaigner Jessie Craigen owes much to Sandra Holton's *Suffrage Days*, which does not figure in either the footnotes or the select bibliography. Neither do works on the immediate post-war period by Pat Thane or Cheryl Law, although their conclusions are reflected in Robinson's text. This makes it less useful as a scholarly work, but it remains a compelling read. Together the books suggest that a century later we still have much to learn about the lives and actions of those who helped achieve votes for women.

Krista Cowman is Professor of History, University of Lincoln. Her publications include Women in British politics, c.1689–1979: Gender and history *(Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).*

Report

The 1918 Coupon Election and its consequences

Evening meeting, 2 July 2018, with Alistair Cooke and Kenneth O. Morgan; chair: Claire Tyler

Report by **David Cloke**

Baroness Tyler opened the meeting by noting ironically that the period featured two ingredients that attendees had come to know and love: snap elections and Liberal–Conservative coalitions. Indeed, the parallels with and significance for our own time were features throughout the meeting. The evening's two speakers, Alistair Cooke (Lord Lexden) and Kenneth O. Morgan (Lord Morgan), whilst providing different perspectives on the election both broadly divided their remarks into four main areas: the run-up to and context of the election; the election itself and its significance; the immediate consequences of the election in terms of the government that was formed; and lastly the longer-term consequences for British politics.

The immediate political backdrop to the election was the Representation of the People Act 1918, the Speaker's Conference of 1916 that preceded it and the putsch against Asquith in December 1916 as a result of which Lloyd George emerged as prime minister but without a party. The Fourth Reform Act, as Lexden described it, was larger in its sweep than any of its nineteenth-century predecessors, extending the franchise further than all the other Acts put together. The Act extended the vote to all men over 21 regardless of wealth, class or housing tenure (matters over which reformers and their opponents had long haggled) and to most women over 30. The electorate numbered 21.4 million compared with 7.7 million in 1910. It was also noted in response to a question that the extent of the reform seemed to shut down any talk of further changes to the electoral system, such as the use of the Alternative Vote.

Morgan noted that the Lloyd George coalition had an 'unreal nature', dependent as he was on the votes of Unionist MPs. He needed to ensure a future for himself and his party. Morgan noted that Lloyd George recognised that the old party system was changing with the issues of disestablishment, land reform and even free trade diminishing in significance. He expected a fight between himself and Henderson, the Labour leader. Lexden reported that the Unionists had turned from the vacillating Asquith to the dynamic Lloyd George 'with intense satisfaction'. Whilst they did not share Lloyd George's deep distrust of Haig's conduct of the war in Flanders, and accepted high casualty figures with a shocking equanimity, they admired Lloyd George's vigour and virtuosity as a strategist.

Lexden spoke at some length on the reasons for the Unionists continuing to work with Lloyd George, noting that they had both low and high motives. Among the latter was patriotism, which, Lexden noted, Unionists like to claim as their special characteristic. After 1915 that meant positive enthusiasm for working with other parties to win the war and ensure that Britain remained a great power. With the latter in mind, Unionists were conscious of the spectacular victories in Mesopotamia and Palestine since 1916. Under the Lloyd George coalition the map had turned redder than ever before.

Nonetheless, Unionists recognised that the nation was deeply troubled, with acute industrial unrest and scenes of violence in Clydeside, Sheffield and elsewhere. This made it seem necessary to keep Lloyd George, and what was believed to be his special rapport with the working classes, at the helm in order to prevent a socialist revolution. The success of Labour in the 1918 election in obtaining a quarter of the vote whilst standing on an avowedly socialist programme bolstered this position.

Base party considerations also pointed in the same direction. Nothing was so obviously in the Unionist interest than a divided Liberal Party, and the deeper the division the better. There was 'no surer way of Unionist ascendancy in British politics than through a broken Liberal Party.' In Unionist minds, Lloyd George was a second Joe Chamberlain, a man who had been firmly captured by them. It was, nonetheless, an alliance sealed by great mutual admiration. Bonar Law and his main Unionist cabinet colleagues (Curzon, Balfour, Austen Chamberlain and F. E. Smith) greatly enjoyed working with Lloyd George and some of his principle lieutenants, Winston Churchill above all.

Lexden reported that the election had been conceived in the spring of 1918 as a khaki election to provide the coalition government with a mandate to see the war through to its conclusion. At that point few expected the war to be concluded before 1919 and Lloyd George himself thought that it could continue till 1920. By the July of 1918, almost a hundred years to the day of the meeting as Morgan noted, the whip for Lloyd George's Liberals, Freddie Guest, was negotiating a deal with the Unionists to ensure that the members of the coalition did not oppose each other in the forthcoming election: hence the coupon, a letter jointly signed by Lloyd George and Unionist leader Bonar Law.

One hundred and fifty-eight Liberal candidates received the coupon at the election, '100 of whom are our old guard', which Morgan argued was more than the Liberals deserved, indicating that they did pretty well out of the deal. He was interested in learning why the Unionists put up with such a generous arrangement. Morgan also argued that out of the negotiations a kind of new party came into being: the Coalition Liberals. Practically, this was necessary as the supporters of Asquith, who had generally opposed the government in the later stages of the war, retained the party machine and the Liberal Publications Department. Meanwhile another 253 Liberals stood without the coupon. According

to Lexden, this represented a breach so deep that a fully and enthusiastic united Liberal Party was an impossibility in the near future. Morgan agreed that it was a very painful schism and appeared to show Lloyd George breaking with his own party.

Morgan also noted that the choice of candidates to receive the coupon was very haphazard and itself caused a lot of bitterness. It had been said that whether someone received the coupon depended on whether they had supported the government in the Maurice debate in May 1918. However, Morgan noted that Trevor Wilson had demonstrated some time ago that this had not been the case. Of the 159 pro-government Liberal candidates, only 54 had supported the government in the debate and some had actually opposed it. One candidate even received the coupon even though he had said that he didn't want it! Conversely some Liberal candidates who did not receive the coupon supported Lloyd George as prime minister, as did some Labour candidates. Indeed, Morgan argued that it was a bit rash to be an opponent of the government in the atmosphere of the election.

In the event, the sudden change in the tide of the war in the autumn of 1918 converted the contest into a victory election. The focus of the election itself turned from war to peace. Keynes reported it as a jingoistic and chauvinistic election, whereas Morgan argued that this misrepresented what was a quiet even dull election. Nonetheless, Lloyd George stressed the importance of maintaining into the peace the unity of command that had ensured that the war had been won. He argued during the campaign that 'only unity can save Britain, can save Europe, can save the world.' As a consequence, a kind of presidential election emerged which Morgan felt let Lloyd George down.

In the run-up to the election, Morgan argued that Lloyd George's main task was to win over his fellow Liberals. This he did through a ringing speech at the Reform Club on 12 November, the day after the armistice, declaring that 'it is not revolution that I am afraid of; it is reaction that I am afraid of.' He called for a government of social reform and international leadership.

A joint manifesto was produced for the election, which, according to Morgan, had a strong Liberal tinge to it with much on social reform and reconstruction, reflecting the influence of Christopher Addison, the Minister of Reconstruction. Lexden described it as a 'substantial programme of post-war reconstruction'. There was also a special Liberal manifesto for the election produced by the historian and Minister for Education H. A. L. Fisher. Morgan added that, in his six major campaign speeches, Lloyd George spoke overwhelmingly about social reform: about a 'land fit for heroes'. He said little about 'hanging the Kaiser' or emphasising Germany's war guilt. Only in the 'off the cuff' peroration of his final speech in the Colston Hall did he call for Germany to pay the uttermost cost of the war. Morgan suggested that it highlighted the risk of straying too far from one's notes!

Lexden, meanwhile, felt that it had to be said that the prospect of punishing the Kaiser and his defeated country did seem to have been uppermost in the minds of some of the electorate, encouraged by a lurid and irresponsible press campaign.

By any standards, Lexden argued, the election itself was a landmark one. The transition from a terrible war to peace was itself momentous. So too was the scale of change in the electoral system since the previous election eight years earlier. More than three-quarters of the electorate had never cast a vote for any party in a national election. In addition to women being able to vote, a handful stood as candidates for the first time one of whom, representing Sinn Fein, was elected.

Overall, the result was an overwhelming victory for the coalition. Bonar Law declared that Lloyd George could 'be Prime Minister for life if he likes'. The Liberal part of the coalition polled 1,400,000 votes and won between 127 and 130 seats almost entirely without any Conservative or Unionist opposition. The Unionists gained 332 seats, enough for a clear majority in the House of Commons. The alternatives were, according to Morgan, not very distinguished. The opposition Liberals were almost annihilated with only thirty seats and with their leader Asquith having been defeated. Labour meanwhile polled 2,245,000 votes and gained fifty-seven seats, becoming a national party.

Morgan also noted that the character of the Unionist party in the Commons changed with many businessmen among their number who were not as reactionary as might have been expected. They had often dealt with trades unions during the war and had developed a sense of industrial partnership. The real diehards were in the constituency parties who emerged later in the parliament in the anti-waste campaign.

Morgan then went on to consider the record of the government that had been elected. He had initially reported the classic description by Keynes that it was of 'a group of hard-faced men who looked as if they had done well out of the war'. Morgan noted, however, that it was a dangerous and difficult time for any government: the collapse of great empires; a time of impending class war; turmoil in Ireland with the rise of the IRA. Overall there was a general feeling that everything was different, in part brought about by the extension of the franchise and the empowerment of the working class and of women.

Morgan argued that there was a serious attempt at social reform under the coalition government, with Addison and Fisher especially active. There was an important Education Bill, a Ministry for Health and a programme of subsidised housing. Some of these proposals proved to be the target of the later anti-waste campaign and the Geddes Axe, which, in turn, led to the sense of a betrayal of promises. Nonetheless, Morgan suggested that the reforms represented the last hurrah of New Liberalism and were an important and underappreciated phase of the party's history.

Lloyd George also sought to be relatively conciliatory towards labour and, in Morgan's view, handled the Triple Alliance's threat of a general strike better than the Baldwin government did later in the decade. He suggested that it was a result of Lloyd George's open methods of diplomacy – the beginning of 'beer and sandwiches' at Number 10.

In Ireland, meanwhile, the government pursued a dreadful policy of retaliation through the 'Black and Tans'. Despite that, in the end Lloyd George got what he wanted: a settlement that others had failed to achieve and which has survived.

Lloyd George also wanted to be a great conciliator on the international stage. He sought to reduce the reparations on Germany and to bring Russia back into the comity of nations. Ironically, the cause of his downfall was the pursuit of a much more aggressive foreign policy in support of Greece against Turkey. In Morgan's view the opposition from the Unionists came from an appeasement perspective noting that Bonar Law wrote to *The Times* that 'we cannot alone act as policeman of the world.'

Overall, Morgan argued, it was a defensible record in government, especially when bearing in mind that other countries lapsed into dictatorship. That Britain was relatively peaceful was down to the coalition. However, it came at the cost of the destruction of Lloyd George's own party – something, Morgan later noted, he had always been rather careless about even in his earliest days in Welsh politics.

The Coalition Liberals lost ground steadily to Labour from 1919. Meanwhile the independent Liberals were uncertain of their policy and had little to say in response to Labour. Despite by-election gains in Hull in 1919 and the return of Asquith at Paisley in 1920, they struggled to find a theme. According to Morgan they gave the impression of being elitist, high-minded and patrician, highlighted by the attempt to promote Edward Grey as a leader of an alternative Asquithian movement. Both wings had high hopes of reunion, but hints by Lloyd George in early 1920 that there would be fusion between the government Liberals and the Unionists terminated that prospect. Essentially, Lloyd George did not have much interest in his own party. Morgan described Lloyd George's efforts as an attempt to leapfrog the party system. Even in October 1922, when he was ejected by the rebellion of Conservative backbenchers, he was a strong coalitionist.

In his talk Lexden noted that, whilst critics of Lloyd George had always been present (he had been the Liberal the Unionists hated the most before 1914), it would take four more years of the coalition to convince a majority of Unionists that the party should face the future on its own. Among the leadership of the party the positive feelings they derived from working with Lloyd George did not lessen with the passing of the years, despite growing criticism of Lloyd George by junior ministers, backbench MPs and the party at large. Coalition became a way of life for the Unionist leadership, bringing together the best of Liberal and Unionist talent in government – they 'never wanted coalition to end'. When asked why the leadership had not been aware of the growing rebellion, Lexden stated that it was down to the extraordinary obstinacy of Austen Chamberlain who simply would not accept advice. Morgan agreed that there was a feeling of complacency perhaps exacerbated by the Tory whips themselves undermining the coalition.

For those Unionists who did not believe in permanent coalition with Lloyd George (who were increasingly a majority), the implications of the election were obvious. Their party was ideally placed to build a new political dispensation by attracting the votes of demoralised and bewildered Liberals through a genuine and deliberate promise of broad social reform and by treating Labour as a parliamentary rival rather than as a threat to the established order. Baldwin, Lexden argued, knew how to make Toryism attractive to Liberals.

Though few would have predicted it, Lexden noted that the future belonged to the Tories. In the years between the wars they won five large parliamentary majorities – no other party achieved a majority at all. The 1918 election was the first of these and a crucial staging post on the road to inter-war Conservative Party hegemony. With 335 seats they could have governed alone in a parliament that Sinn Fein refused to attend. Furthermore, it was impractical to imagine the combined forces of the opposition bringing themselves to work together. Thus, the consequences of the 1918 election were profound.

When asked what Lloyd George could have done differently morally or politically to avoid splitting the Liberal Party, Morgan replied – almost anything other than what he did. He should have recalled the remark he made on the death of Theodore Roosevelt: 'he should never have quarrelled with the machine.' Morgan did note, however, that it took two sides to make a quarrel.

David Cloke is the Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

History Group at Lib Dem conference

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A Very English Scandal

Hidden Liberal Traumas Exposed

A Very English Scandal, BBC One, 20 May – 3 June 2018
Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**

The BBC has received almost universal plaudits for its three-part drama based on Jeremy Thorpe's showmanship, high-risk behaviour, and multi-faceted political and personal life, inexorably leading to his trial for conspiracy to murder along with his former friend, David Holmes, and the two henchmen, John Le Mesurier and George Deakin. Having been at headquarters at the beginning of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership and having been Assembly Committee chair at the end of it, I was inevitably glued to the television screen. The political atmosphere of fifty years ago was vividly evoked by the drama and I certainly recognised many of the scenes depicted on the screen, including, suddenly, Mike Steele, the very effective party press officer at the time. From that point of view it was a worthwhile project and a surprisingly successful effort to bring modern history to the screen.

I have never hidden my view that Jeremy Thorpe was a poor political leader and a deeply flawed politician. In comparison with Jo Grimond, his immediate predecessor as Liberal leader, his legacy was extremely thin. During nine years of leadership Thorpe left no legacy of writing – neither books nor pamphlets. He was a showman and a charismatic campaigner with a capacity for making effective set speeches. To his credit he had a lifelong devotion to anti-colonialism – which was rightly shown in the film – and this, plus a commitment to electoral reform, was a key motivation for his attachment to the Liberal Party despite his solidly Conservative family history.

Even though the election of party leader at the time was in the sole hands of the handful of MPs, widespread consultations with party officials across the country were made – with candidates, association chairs and leaders of council groups all being 'phoned. The small 'cabal' of staff and officers at HQ opposed to Thorpe becoming leader, quite unofficially and quixotically, tried to prevent it by, for instance, trying to persuade Richard Wainwright into being considered as an extra candidate. It was futile with Thorpe the only MP dating from 1959 and with his history having been hidden.

For the party managers the difficulties with Thorpe were the eternal problem – that it is electoral suicide for a party to criticise its leader whilst in office. Consequently his autocratic, and sometimes domineering attitude towards staff, his unwillingness to apply himself to difficult political issues, his preference for gimmicks rather than the necessary slog of day-in-day-out election campaigning, his love of pretentious occasions which were at odds with the party's image, his decision to confront the Young Liberals rather than seeking to promote conciliation, and his lack of transparency over funds he solicited personally, were all almost entirely kept under wraps out of party loyalty. For instance, the party treasurer, Sir Frank Medlicott, resigned ostensibly on health grounds even though he said to me that he was not prepared to be treasurer of a party in which the leader had secret funds.

The remarkable internal party secrecy – until the Norman Scott affair broke in the media as a consequence of Scott's outbursts – even extended to the parliamentary party keeping its knowledge of Scott's allegations and the cover up within its ranks to itself and not even communicating it to party headquarters just along Victoria Street.

One error that the BBC drama makes is to suggest that the occasional party mutterings against his leadership were because of his presumed homosexuality. This is categorically untrue and it was a subject that was never mentioned. Similarly the depiction of Emlyn Hooson is extremely flawed. Emlyn was a man of much greater intellect and standing than the film's image of him. His portrayal as a sly politician always seeking an opportunity to topple Thorpe in order to take over the leadership has no basis in fact. He had certainly wanted to be leader – he stood in the January 1967 election against Thorpe – but I have gone back over my files and all the publications and I know of no evidence that he took any action with a view to causing Thorpe's resignation for selfish purposes. In fact, Emlyn's leading role in discrediting Scott at the now infamous 'star chamber' meeting with Scott had the effect of entrenching Thorpe's leadership.

The BBC drama was also in error in suggesting that George Carman had confessed to having had some homosexual tendencies. Quite apart from the irrelevance of such an inclusion, even if true, legal friends who knew Carman tell me that it was completely untrue and that, in fact, Carman was quite a predatory womaniser.

Apart from these significant errors, the nature of producing a drama inevitably led to the compression of certain events and to 'sexing up' an already lively story by quoting a number of rumours and allegations as if they were facts. Questions inevitably arise as to how and why Peter Bessell changed from being Thorpe's totally loyal right-hand man, who took great risks in covering for him, to the chief prosecution witness at the trial. The clue lies in a particular failing of Thorpe: that he demanded total loyalty, and the moment that there was any whiff of dissent then that supporter was simply cut off. It happened after Peter Bessell had fled to California to escape

from his creditors and was no longer available for Thorpe at a moment's notice and he realised that Thorpe was prepared to throw him to the media wolves. It happened similarly later on in the case when David Holmes, Thorpe's previously close friend, realised that he was being made to take the whole blame for what Thorpe saw as the incompetence of the execution of the whole plot to silence Scott. It even extended to the wholly innocent friend, Nadir Dinshaw, who finally demurred at being the conduit for diverting cash from Jack Hayward, and was then threatened by Thorpe who said that 'he would be asked to move on', i.e. suggesting that, having an immigrant past, his residence in the UK might not be secure!

The film takes the simplistic media view that because Peter Bessell's affairs were in disarray, he let the party and his family down by abandoning his parliamentary seat and by fleeing Britain, and therefore his whole political career must have been a sham. In my view this is unfair. For much of his time in parliament he was a loyal and able spokesman for the party, with whom I worked on speeches and articles. He certainly became unreliable as his personal and business affairs collapsed and he was never going to be a compelling prosecution witness. His book *Cover Up* has some errors, but it is a far more reliable record of the whole period than is often admitted.

The party's problem with Thorpe came to a head at the 1978 Liberal Party Assembly at Southport. Knowing how disruptive his presence would be, having just been charged with conspiracy to murder, the new party leader, David Steel, had extracted a promise from Thorpe that he would not attend – a commitment he proceeded to break and duly hijacked the conference. The complete party confidentiality on the behaviour of Thorpe had meant that even its candidates had been kept in the dark. One candidate, Dr James Walsh from Hove, tabled a motion censuring the party's officers for their treatment of its leader! The then three key officers, Gruff (later Lord) Evans, party president, Geoff (later Lord) Tordoff, chair of the party executive, and myself as chair of the Assembly Committee, and thus in the hot seat, met and decided to take the motion head-on and that, if carried, we would all resign on the spot. The motion was taken at a private session of the Assembly and Gruff Evans was ruthless in his detailing of the difficulties we had faced over many years, which were a revelation to delegates. Dr Walsh's motion was duly withdrawn.

Two questions remain. First, was not Thorpe as leader responsible for the huge rise in Liberal support at the February 1974 election? Not really. With his 1970 majority having dropped to just 369 votes, he was instructed firmly that he was not to set foot outside his constituency and he undertook no leader's tour at the election. In fact the general election vote was on the back of a series of five by-election victories in Rochdale, the Isle of Ely, Ripon, Berwick-upon-Tweed and, most remarkable of all, Sutton and Cheam, won thanks to Trevor Jones's campaigning skills. If anyone was responsible for the general election vote, it was he. Before this run of by-elections our poll rating barely climbed out of single figures, whereas from August 1973 to polling day it hovered around 20 per cent.

Second, was it really possible that an intelligent and highly regarded public figure could conspire to murder a person, however miserable and threatening the man in question had made his life over many years? The answer is that it *was* possible. No one, however apparently stable and sensible, is immune from becoming mentally unbalanced by the pressure of domestic circumstances, and there is no doubt that it is conceivable that eventually Jeremy Thorpe could arrive at a point where he demanded, 'Who will rid me of this turbulent Scott?' As for evidence, after the trial, and after the death of David Holmes, Andrew Newton publicised recordings he had made of telephone conversations he had conducted with Holmes which essentially admitted the conspiracy.

The BBC's drama was compelling. The acting was remarkably good. In particular Hugh Grant's absorbing of Thorpe's mannerisms and his style of speaking was astonishing. It was a well worthwhile effort to popularise a political era that many of us had endured!

Michael Meadowcroft was a Leeds city councillor for fifteen years and a West Yorkshire metropolitan county councillor for six. He was the Liberal MP for West Leeds from 1983 to 1987. He is a regular lecturer on political and local history.

Interview with David Steel

In July the *Journal* interviewed David Steel, Liberal Chief Whip 1970–76 and Leader of the Liberal Party 1976–88, about his views of the BBC series and his recollections of Jeremy Thorpe.

JLH: You helped Hugh Grant prepare for the filming, I believe?
DS: Yes, he asked me to have lunch with him some months before the event, and we had lunch downstairs in the cafeteria, introduced by Evan Harris. I'd only met him once before, but we had quite a long chat. He wanted to know about Jeremy Thorpe. Subsequently he sent me a photograph of him in a shot from the film, and I was absolutely taken aback by how good the similarity was. In fact I showed the photograph on my mobile phone to various people, saying, 'Who's that?' and they all said 'Jeremy Thorpe'. And it was Grant.

JLH: What kind of thing did you talk about? What was he interested in?
DS: He wanted to know what Thorpe was like as a person. So I gave him the best I could of my recollections of Jeremy, who was a very charismatic figure.

JLH: What did you think of his portrayal of Thorpe?
DS: I thought it was very, very accurate – astonishingly good, in fact. And, in fact, when I've seen Hugh Grant in other films, he's always played Hugh Grant. Even in the Paddington Bear ones, it was still Hugh Grant. But this

time, I think it's established him as a serious actor, it was such an accurate portrayal. He got his mannerisms and his way of speaking all correct. There were things that were not right about the script, but that's another matter.

JLH: What was wrong with the script?
DS: I can't tell whether it was the book [John Preston's *A Very English Scandal: Sex, Lies and a Murder Plot at the Heart of the Establishment* (Viking 2016)] that was wrong or the film script. But, in particular, they seem to make a bit of a villain out of Emlyn Hooson, which is not right. And the very first moment when I appear in the film, Emlyn Hooson is introducing me to Norman Scott. That's complete rubbish, because I remember very clearly that what happened was that Scott's landlady in Wales was a constituent of Emlyn's – I think possibly knew Emlyn, I'm not sure – and she arranged to bring him down to meet Emlyn. And of course, typical Emlyn, he was in court the day they came and asked me if I would meet them instead. He was also under the impression – because the woman had written to him about allegations against a colleague – that she was coming to talk about Peter Bessell. So I was ready to hear things about Peter Bessell – which wouldn't surprise me! – and then out came this story about Thorpe. But the film got it completely wrong. The film was entertainment, so I don't think it matters all that much. But it was a bit hard on Emlyn. The fact that he'd stood for the leadership against Thorpe was neither here nor there. The other thing that was odd was they showed a scene of me announcing that Thorpe was elected leader and he then wielded a sword and cut a cake. Well, that was all complete rubbish. No such thing ever happened.

JLH: What did you think of the portrayal of Peter Bessell?
DS: I thought it was again remarkably good. Bessell was always regarded by his colleagues as a bit of a charlatan, and I thought that came across well.

JLH: So it wasn't a surprise that Bessell turned up as a witness against Thorpe in the court case?
DS: Nothing about Bessell would surprise anybody. He wrote that extraordinary book and then he signed this fatal contract with the *Sunday Telegraph* – which, of course, the lawyers blew out of the water, and helped get Jeremy off.

JLH: I think there was also a problem with the cars that Thorpe was shown driving?
DS: When I received the photograph of Grant, it was supposed to be Jeremy Thorpe coming out of his car, and I looked at it and I said immediately, 'The car is wrong.' They had him driving a three-litre Rover and he didn't – he drove a Humber Super Snipe. The reason I remember it so well is because he drove me around on polling day in my by-election in the car – and I know about cars! They also had him down at his cottage driving a white Triumph Stag; in fact it should have been a white Rover 2000. It didn't affect the story, but it was just irritating and unnecessarily wrong.

JLH: One comment that people made was why on earth didn't they manage to get Norman Scott a National Insurance card?
DS: It's a very good question – and I don't know the answer. It has always struck me as peculiar that the whole thing hinged, according to Scott, on the fact that he didn't have a National Insurance card. I mean surely, if Thorpe was going to all this trouble – talking to Reginald Maudling and all the rest of it – surely he could have got him a new National Insurance card?

JLH: As portrayed in the television series, Thorpe says: 'Can't we kill him?' Do you think he actually said that at any point, or was it more like: 'Can't we just do something to get rid of him?'

David Steel and Jeremy Thorpe at the unveiling of Thorpe's portrait in the National Liberal Club

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

Europe: The Liberal commitment

The historical origins of the Liberal commitment to Europe, and the Liberal Party's, SDP's and Liberal Democrats' support for the European project and the EU, stretch back to the nineteenth century.

This fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrats' autumn conference will feature a discussion on the origins of the Liberal commitment to Europe with **Anthony Howe** (Professor of Modern History, University of East Anglia; author of *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846-1946* and editor of the collected letters of Richard Cobden) and **Eugenio Biagini** (Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, University of Cambridge; author of works on Gladstonian liberalism, the Italian Risorgimento, and Ireland).

Chair: **Baroness Julie Smith** (Director of the European Centre and Senior Lecturer in International Relations, University of Cambridge).

6.15pm, Sunday 16 September
Sandringham Suite, Hilton Brighton Metropole (no conference pass necessary)

DS: I have no idea. It is possible. Jeremy's downside was that he *was* a bit of a fantasist, and it could be that he might have said that. But certainly I was totally unaware of any such conversations. Again, one of the things that was wrong in the film was that they showed him and Peter Bessell sitting at a table for two in the Members' Dining Room. Well that's nonsense: they always sat at the oval table which the Liberal MPs occupied in the middle of the dining room, and that was where a lot of the conversations took place. Certainly not a table for two.

JLH: What did you think of Thorpe as leader?
DS: I was a great supporter and follower of Jeremy Thorpe and I thought he was a very good leader in that he enthused people, he was a great campaigner. I suppose the main criticism that can be levelled at him was that he wasn't really interested in developing the party's policy in the way that Jo Grimond had. I remember John Pardoe telling me after Thorpe's hovercraft tour in southern England that, 'You know, we had all the details about what colour wellingtons we had and umbrellas and all the rest of it …'. And at the last minute he said to Jeremy, 'But what are we going to *say*?' Jeremy hadn't actually decided what the message was going to be.

JLH: He comes over in the series, at least in the first episode, as being genuinely motivated by anti-colonialism.
DS: Oh, yes. Despite his background, which was very conservative, he was a genuine radical. It wasn't put on; it was quite genuine. He was ferocious on Ian Smith's rebellion in Rhodesia. Anything to do with the underdogs, he was on the side of the less well-off.

JLH: Was European unity a particular cause of his?
DS: Yes. He led the party into the Division Lobby at a time when it was very important and our votes made all the difference. My recollection is that somebody tried to hit him in the chamber!

JLH: On the negative side, there were the allegations about secret funds.
DS: Yes, he was very casual with money, to put it mildly. And of course that was how we fell out in the end – I said he had to resign when I discovered that £10,000 had gone from the Hayward donation to pay for buying off the Scott letters. After he had been acquitted, the party executive wanted to pursue him for the return of the money. I had a meeting with Geoff Tordoff, who was chairman of the executive at the time, and I said, 'Look, please don't do this. We've had months and months of the Thorpe thing and this will go on and on. If you can persuade the executive not to pursue him for the money, I will give you the undertaking that he won't play any part in the public life of the party again.' In other words, no peerage. That was the deal, and Geoff persuaded the executive. Subsequently Thorpe wrote to every one of my successors, right up to Nick Clegg, asking for a peerage, and I had to brief every one of my successors about the deal.