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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