

1920 Paisley by-election

Hugh Gault analyses the by-election, a hundred years ago, which returned the Liberal leader Asquith to the Commons.

Asquith's return to parliament



H. H. Asquith and
Margot Asquith in
1920

at the 1920 Paisley by-election

AFTER MORE THAN thirty years as the MP for East Fife, Asquith was defeated there in the 1918 coupon election. Under pressure to be re-elected, Asquith waited until January 1920 before he allowed his name to be put forward in Paisley on the death of the sitting Liberal MP. The Paisley Liberals faced the dilemma of finding a local candidate who would combine the Liberal and Unionist votes against Labour or, if they nominated Asquith, guaranteeing that the by-election would be a three-cornered contest. Unable to decide, the Liberal Executive turned it over to the Association as a whole who narrowly came down in Asquith's favour. Labour were the favourites in the by-election, not least because they had secured the Irish vote. Yet, with the support of Unionist newspapers and the collapse of the Unionist vote, Asquith came top of the poll, the irony of an anti-Coalition candidate being returned by a Coalition vote being noted. As in East Fife, however, Asquith neglected the constituency and by 1924 had alienated many of his previous supporters in Paisley.

Background

In the coupon general election immediately after the First World War in December 1918 the Lloyd George Coalition returned 485 MPs out of 707, comprising 338 Conservatives, 137 Liberals and 10 Labour (standing as the National Democratic Party).¹ There were 149 opposition MPs, among whom were the 'Wee Free' Liberals, reduced to 26, as well as 73 Sinn Fein MPs who did not take their seats. Asquith (1852–1928), the man Lloyd George had replaced as Prime Minister in 1916, lost his seat in East Fife after more than thirty years as its MP, comprehensively defeated by 2,000 votes by the Unionist Alexander Sprot. Sprot's candidacy had not been endorsed with the coupon for even the Coalition thought Asquith should be in the House of Commons, yet the *Morning Post*, a Conservative newspaper, described his defeat as 'an independent demonstration [that] was one of the healthiest and most salutary things ever done in politics'.²

Sir Donald Maclean stood in for Asquith as leader of the Liberals in the Commons, but this was not a situation that could continue indefinitely. Maclean's position was equivocal for it was questioned whether he spoke as the Liberal authority or whether Asquith retained the final say, and it was thought that in any case the House of Commons 'lost prestige for the lack of an Opposition able to stand boldly up to the government'³ in the absence of Asquith. Inevitably, Asquith was under pressure to find another seat or relinquish the Liberal leadership, and though he must have missed the House he had been in since 1886, he did not rush to return. The Liberals won three of the first six by-elections in 1919, all at the coalition government's expense, but failed to win any of the other fourteen. There was no obvious way back for Asquith who had found the last three years bruising but itched to challenge Lloyd George directly in the Commons.

The Paisley candidates

The first Liberal seat to become vacant was in the industrial constituency of Paisley where the sitting MP Sir John McCallum died in January 1920.⁴ He had been in indifferent health for the previous six months – a heart condition restricting his political workload for much of that time – but, under the impression that he was recovering, had aggravated matters in early January.⁵ The immediate cause of his death on 10 January was recorded as a cerebral thrombosis five days earlier.

McCallum had held the seat since 1906 but his majority had declined in the three subsequent elections and in 1918 he had been within 106 votes of losing to the Co-operative Party candidate John Biggar (1874–1943), contesting the seat for the first time. The vote had split three ways in 1918 with little more than 300 votes separating McCallum from the National Democratic candidate who came third.⁶ Whereas McCallum was a soap manufacturer well known in the town, Biggar was not a Paisley local. According to an interview

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Asquith's return to parliament at the 1920 Paisley by-election

Yet the newspaper was also aware that Paisley Liberals would be honoured to have an ex-premier standing. They would have to weigh this against the possibility of defeat in what was now a marginal seat, one that they had come close to losing in 1918. The dilemma was whether Asquith would bolster the Liberal campaign or weaken it.

he gave to *Forward*, the radical weekly newspaper then edited by Tom Johnston (a future Secretary of State for Scotland), Biggar was a member of the Milngavie branch of the Independent Labour Party and had been a member since the party was formed. He was a Labour representative on Glasgow Education Authority, having previously been on the Glasgow School Board, and would take the Labour whip if elected – as did the only existing Co-operative MP in Parliament. Biggar expected to be the automatic progressive candidate in the by-election, arguing that a 'representative committee has been formed of all the progressive bodies in the town' in his support.⁷ However, this belied the tensions between the ILP and the Labour Party so that, while the ILP had held their Scottish Divisional Conference in Paisley the day McCallum died, with nearly 75 per cent of the 200 delegates voting to continue the alliance with Labour and thus maintain the appearance of a united front,⁸ other Socialists did not entirely approve of Biggar and were discussing a fortnight later whether he was sufficiently radical or whether they should run an additional candidate.⁹ This subtext to the by-election would remain for some time and must have affected Biggar's campaign. Despite his claims in the *Forward* interview, he was standing on this occasion as a Labour/Co-operative Party candidate.¹⁰

Paisley was far from a safe Liberal seat, if such there be anywhere by that point, but within days of McCallum's death the *Paisley Daily Express* was alive to the possibility of Asquith being parachuted in:

London correspondents who don't properly understand the position in Paisley continue to harp on the Asquith string ... All this seems to arise from the old-time tradition that this Burgh was a safe Liberal seat. But the circumstances are now changed, for both the old constitutional parties have to reckon with Labour, which is powerful and well-organised.¹¹

The evidence for this was not hard to find. The population of 87,000 included a large Irish community of 2,500¹² and, while McCallum had received official endorsement from the United Irish League in 1918, this had been contentious and was expected to transfer to Biggar. In addition, more than 15,000 (nearly 40 per cent) of the electorate of 39,000 were women who had voted for the first time in 1918 and, while their voting intentions could not be guaranteed, were just as likely to vote

for Biggar as any other candidate. Given the composition of the constituency, Biggar was the clear favourite next time. Furthermore, were Asquith to stand, another factor would come into play for, as the *Paisley Daily Express* report continued:

The advent of Mr Asquith we know without doubt would precipitate a triangular fight, for the Unionists would certainly bring forward a candidate to oppose him.¹³

Yet the newspaper was also aware that Paisley Liberals would be honoured to have an ex-premier standing.¹⁴ They would have to weigh this against the possibility of defeat in what was now a marginal seat, one that they had come close to losing in 1918. The dilemma was whether Asquith would bolster the Liberal campaign or weaken it.

Asquith may have had similar doubts himself, but such were the other pressures that he could not keep hawking in the hope of a solid Liberal seat falling into his lap. Consequently, despite his reservations, Asquith let the local Liberals know that he was prepared to be nominated 'if a substantially supported invitation' from the local Liberal Association was forthcoming.¹⁵ The Liberal Executive, however, were acutely aware of the real dilemma they faced. This was similar to that posed by the *Paisley Daily Express* but carried with it further subtleties for the Executive: if Asquith was adopted, 'a triangular contest ... [was] inevitable', for while the Coalition Liberals might defer to him, the Unionists were determined 'not to let him have a straight fight with Labour';¹⁶ on the other hand, rejecting Asquith was tantamount to giving up their existence as independent Liberals, throwing in their lot with the Coalition and perhaps consigning the Liberal Party to history. An Edinburgh advocate J.C. Watson and J. Clark from the local Coats combine were considered,¹⁷ but the Executive proved unwilling, or at any rate unable, to prefer them over Asquith even should they stand as a 'Coalition candidate uniting the Liberal and Unionist vote'.¹⁸ Consequently, the matter was turned over to the Liberal Association to resolve what might have been an 'epoch-making decision'.¹⁹ On 21 January, less than a fortnight after McCallum's death, it was Asquith who the Association selected by ninety-three votes to seventy-five over the local man.²⁰ The invitation to Asquith that followed was unanimous, thereby more than meeting Asquith's demand for substantial support and omitting the information that

the Association had been within nine votes of a dead heat.

Although the *Westminster Gazette* thought the Unionists might still stand aside for Asquith,²¹ the local Paisley intelligence proved more accurate: they had been prepared to leave the field free for a local candidate shared with the Liberals for they judged this the best means of defeating Labour, but the Unionists were not inclined to do so for Asquith.²² However, 'finding a local man who would meet their requirements' was not straightforward. Another Clark from the prominent textile family had first been approached but had declined, as had another local who refused to stand against Asquith. It looked therefore that they might have to go outside Paisley to find a Coalition representative, with their meeting on 23 January initially appointing a search committee to find someone. But, rather than delay matters further, one of the Unionists attending the meeting – J. A. D. MacKean (1849–1932), a member of the Paisley Corporation, treasurer of the Burgh and starch manufacturer – agreed to be nominated.²³ As the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* would later put it in MacKean's obituary, 'so keen was [he] that the principles of the coalition government should have a spokesman' that he put himself forward, stepping 'into the breach to maintain the cause'.²⁴

According to the *Times* this was a local decision, neither supported nationally nor forbidden.²⁵ Although Firth described it as a blunder in his article for *Fortnightly Review* after the by-election,²⁶ the *Westminster Gazette* was clear that it was a calculated risk rather than one based on principle:

... the Paisley Unionists will rather risk the election of a Labour candidate than stand aside for a straight contest between Liberalism and Labour. Their party always has profited by three-cornered contests and it will continue to seek such profit.²⁷

As MacKean explained to the *Morning Post*, he was standing as a Unionist only because the Liberals had not selected a Coalition candidate who could have beaten Labour.²⁸ The *Morning Post* claimed MacKean was

likely to receive the support not only of Unionists, but also of Liberals who are enthusiastic for Mr Lloyd George, and think the time has not yet arrived for breaking up the Coalition. Mr MacKean is one of the strongest candidates that his side could put into the field.²⁹

Even allowing for the hyperbole of the last sentence, it was apparent that the stakes were high once Asquith had received the Liberal nomination. MacKean had been comprehensively defeated on the one previous occasion he had contested Paisley,³⁰ but the *Morning Post* had printed a leading article the day before excoriating Asquith for his responsibility for the war, an allegation that MacKean would repeat throughout the campaign.³¹ The *Morning Post* article judged Asquith 'complacently oblivious of the danger which nearly overwhelmed him and his country' and concluded that, rather than standing in Paisley, he should be defending 'charges of bringing the country to the verge of ruin by the neglect of the most ordinary precautions'.³²

MacKean had joined the Unionists in 1886 when the Liberals split over Irish home rule³³ and Asquith's advocacy of home rule would have been one of the most potent reasons why the Unionists felt unable to give him a clear run. Another was that Asquith was believed to be out to smash the Coalition.³⁴ But MacKean had baggage of his own, having criticised the Coalition for extravagant spending in 1919 but now claiming to support them.³⁵ Furthermore, he gave the Asquith campaign 'many openings',³⁶ not least in preferring personal animosity to argument.³⁷ This would have confused his potential supporters as the prospect of another Socialist candidate must have alarmed Biggar's. Although this latter candidacy failed to materialise in 1920, it was indicative of the local division between the Labour and Co-operative parties as to who had the right to be nominated in the seat and to what end. In the meantime, Biggar's claims to be an 'out and out Socialist' were ridiculed while his supporters complained that 'the Socialists [would] simply [be] making a present of the seat' to Asquith if they were to put up another candidate.³⁸ Such disputes must have proved a bonus for Asquith, not least in turning off the non-political electors of Paisley who might incline towards national reputation in the absence of any more tangible evidence. Nor was Asquith weighed down by his local record as he had been in East Fife.

Yet only on nomination day did it finally become clear that there would be no fourth candidate and that the election would be contested by Asquith (proposed by McCallum's widow and seconded by a Paisley draper), the Glasgow-based Biggar (nominated by two Paisley men), and the local man MacKean (nominated by William Hodge Coats and John Robertson, both substantial Paisley manufacturers). All three could hardly have signalled their appeals

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Low's First Dispatch from the Paisley Front.

'Low's First Dispatch from the Paisley Front' – cartoon by David Low from *The Star*, 29 January 1920

'The "Star" cartoonist has donned kilts and gone to Paisley. Now let everyone LOOK OUT!

Representative types in Paisley: Liberal; Coalish; Labour

Haggis – Porridge This is a sort of seismograph record of the Paisley accent

This is Mr. Biggar, the other candidate. Some say a "dark horse" Bolsh candidate will burst forth shortly.

There is also a Coalisher called Mac-something, but he doesn't matter!

Mr. Asquith made his own hair curl with indignation last night

Remarkable whisker formation at Mr. Asquith's meeting

The hotel is full of statesmen but the "Star" hasn't found a comfortable drain.'

(British Cartoon Archive, Special Collections & Archives, University of Kent / David Low / Solo Syndication)

more transparently, with Asquith the continuity and sympathy candidate, and both he and Biggar doing their best to redress their out-of-burgh background.

The campaign

One of the cartoonist David Low's first assignments in Britain was to cover the by-election for the *Star*. Not long off the boat from Australia, Low was appalled by the poverty he found:

There was nothing like this in the Dominions. I had never seen real poverty and degradation before. ... I was filled with rage and disgust ... at the blind stupidity that allowed such things to be.³⁹

Early twentieth century Paisley is often thought of mainly as a textiles town, but at the

end of the nineteenth century the bulk of the town's workforce was employed in five shipyards, thirteen marine and general engineering works, twelve chemical and soap factories, and in fireclay and food firms.⁴⁰ The economy was therefore more broad-based with textile manufacturers co-existing alongside shipbuilders and engineering in particular. Indeed, it was the poor quality of much of the housing that was as notable, with 50 per cent of houses overcrowded in 1919. Evidence to the Royal Commission on Housing in Scotland that year concluded that at least another 1,500 houses were required, for more than 3,000 houses had been identified as overcrowded by housing inspectors.⁴¹

The *Star*, like the *Daily News*, the newspaper that Low thought he would be joining, was generally Liberal but friendly to Labour, and Low is clear that in this instance he would have voted for the latter.

A key characteristic of the by-election was that Biggar, standing on a joint Labour/Co-op Party ticket, was endorsed during the campaign by nine men who had previously sat on the Liberal benches, including Bertie Lees-Smith, Charles Trevelyan, Josiah Wedgwood and Arthur Ponsonby.⁴² That they had transferred their allegiance to Labour indicated to the electorate that they had moved on from the Liberalism that Asquith represented, while Asquith, aware that he had to challenge this implication directly, claimed in a speech on 5 February that during the First World War it was these Liberal defectors who had given the impression the nation was divided, whereas responsible Labour leaders (such as Arthur Henderson, J. H. Thomas and J. R. Clynes) had shown it to be united.⁴³ The ex-Liberals had therefore compounded a lack of patriotism with an absence of principle. In the speech, entitled 'Replies to his critics', Asquith

derided the Labour manifesto claim 'that it is unlikely that Mr Asquith will ever lead the British people into new paths of democracy', accusations of 'secret treaties', such as that with Italy which had seen it fighting alongside Britain, France and Russia, and the assertion that nobody was 'more profoundly distrusted ... in Ireland'. Asquith doubted this last could be remotely true given the time he had devoted to Irish self-government.

In an interview for the *Daily News* at the start of the campaign, Biggar stated that any prospect of Liberal-Labour rapprochement was illusory.⁴⁴ As Firth put it, Labour 'despises Liberalism as a creed outworn'.⁴⁵ Ponsonby, for example, had declared that 'if Liberals were present in a Labour administration they would destroy all prospect of the social reconstruction and international reconciliation in which Labour believed'. He had even gone so far as to argue 'Better a Tory government than a

'Points from Paisley'
– cartoon by David Low from *The Daily News*, 5 February 1920

'Paisley is full of politicians. Turn over any large boulder thereabouts and a couple of MPs will run out.'

Mister Biggar: pawking; trying to smile at a pun on his name; disgusted with the government.

Different ways of carrying baby at Paisley

Penalties of public life: when it comes to sticking Mr. Asquith's bodyguard of press photographers can give glue a start.'

(British Cartoon Archive, Special Collections & Archives, University of Kent / David Low / Solo Syndication)

THE DAILY NEWS, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1920.

POINTS FROM PAISLEY.



Asquith's return to parliament at the 1920 Paisley by-election

'O, wad some power the giftie gie us!' – cartoon by David Low from *The Star*, 6 February 1920

Asquith as Biggar sees him ('Wait and see – politics of 100 years ago')

As he sees himself (Liberalism)

As he is

Biggar as Asquith sees him (Red socialism)

As he sees himself (To progress and paradise)

As he is

(British Cartoon Archive, Special Collections & Archives, University of Kent / David Low / Solo Syndication)

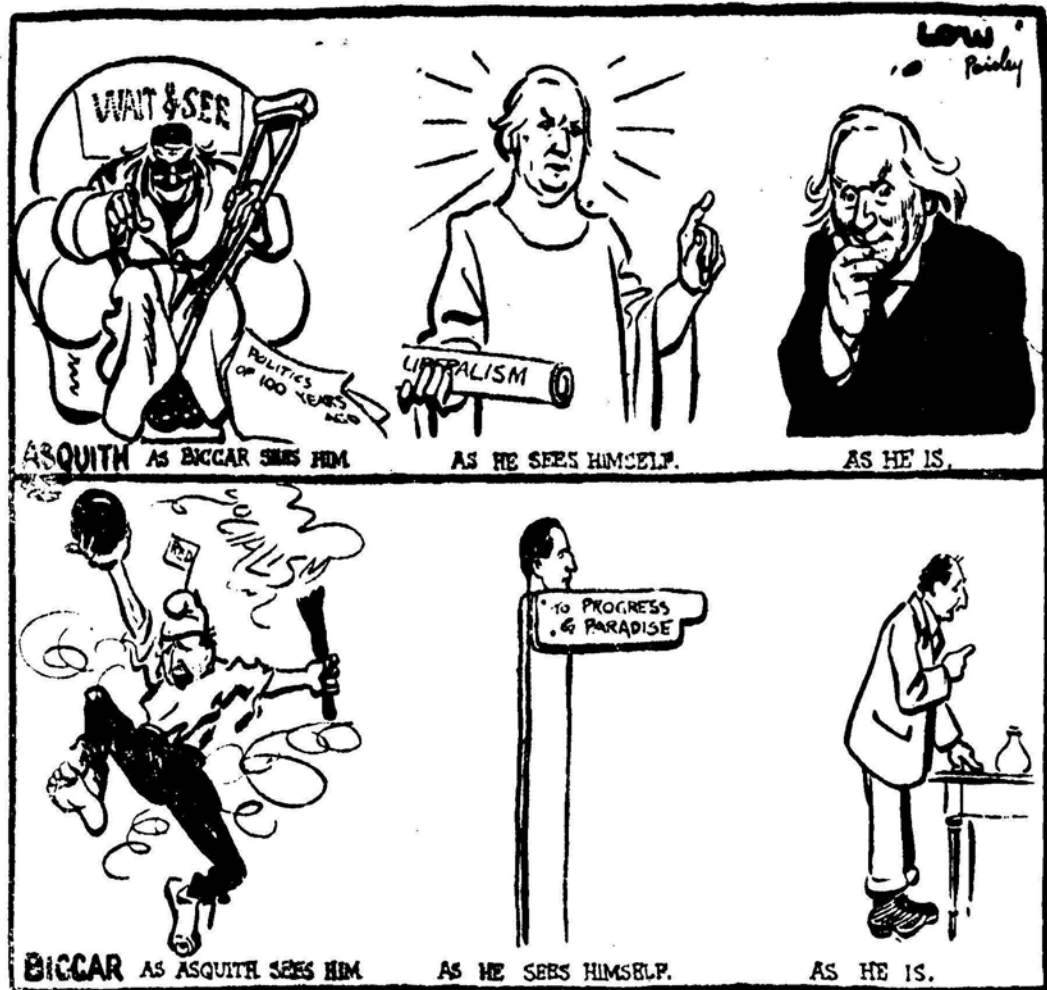
Liberal–Labour' one.⁴⁶ However, as the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* commented:

If speech-making does it, Labour should win the day; but, fortunately, there are other deciding factors in an election, and none more potent than the silent elector who troubles little with political meetings and is a bit of a problem to the canvassers. Watch their votes.⁴⁷

Initially Biggar had a head-start with his first meeting for 3,000 people on 20 January at the Town Hall.⁴⁸ The following week the Paisley Trades and Labour Council asked him to augment his factory gate meetings with one for night-shift workers on Sunday 1 February.⁴⁹ Other Biggar meetings were addressed by Labour notables such as Ramsay MacDonald (then in the middle of four years out of parliament having been defeated in Leicester West in 1918), the trades union leader Robert Smillie and the Labour MP who had campaigned

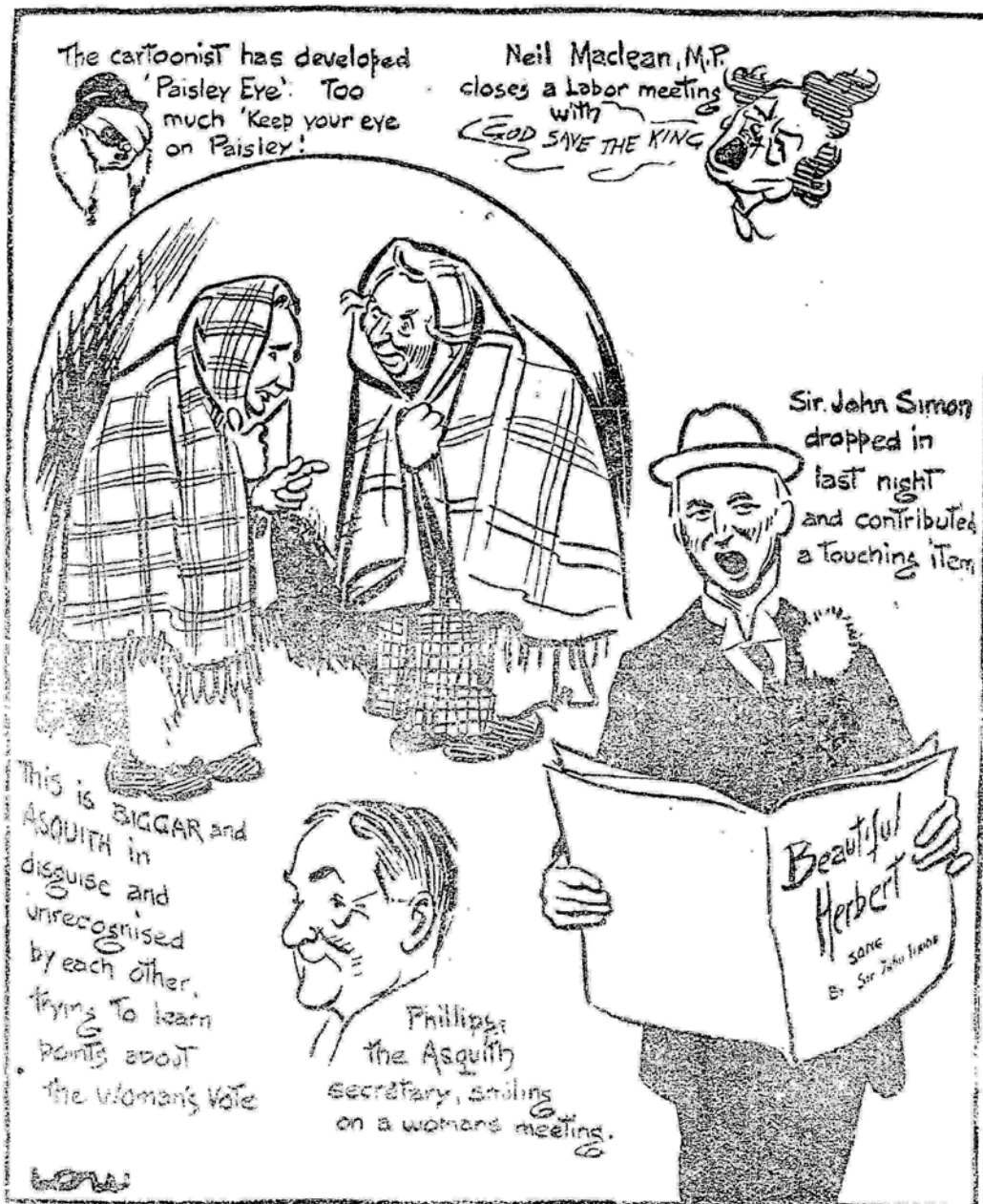
for women's suffrage, Frederick Pethick-Lawrence.⁵⁰ G. B. Shaw and Beatrice Webb were among the leading Fabians who opposed Asquith,⁵¹ while Tom Myers, who had won Spenn Valley for Labour in a by-election the previous December, defeating the Liberal Sir John Simon in the process, gave a 'stirring indictment' of Asquith when he spoke in Glasgow at the end of January. 'The great failure of Liberalism', he argued, 'was that it could not apply principles of individualism to the economics of Collectivism' with Asquith condemned for not opposing conscription and for being premier when the suffragettes were force-fed.⁵² Biggar argued for nationalisation of the mines, railways and land, the latter a cause that Lloyd George had come close to espousing some years previously, and against the continuing intervention of foreign troops in Russia. His chances may have been hampered though by the by-election coinciding with a strike at a local Co-operative boot factory.⁵³

THE STAR, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1920.



"O, wad some power the giftie gie us!"

THE STAR, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1920.



Paisley Peeps.

'Paisley Peeps' – cartoon by David Low from *The Star*, 7 February 1920

The cartoonist has developed 'Paisley Eye'. Too much 'Keep your eye on Paisley'!

Neil Maclean, M.P. closes a Labor [sic] meeting with God Save the King.

This is Biggar and Asquith in disguise and unrecognised by each other, trying to learn points about the women's vote.

Phillips, the Asquith secretary, smiling on a women's meeting.

Sir John Simon dropped in last night and contributed a touching item (Beautiful Herbert song).'

(British Cartoon Archive, Special Collections & Archives, University of Kent / David Low / Solo Syndication)

By 25 January, Asquith was based nine miles away at the Central Station Hotel⁵⁴ in Glasgow with his wife, daughter and secretary, and between then and the by-election on 12 February Asquith held four or five meetings each day,⁵⁵ with sixteen of his major speeches (one each day apart from the two Sundays) collected together in book form and published later that year.⁵⁶ Even in print they manage to convey Asquith's charm and his powerful hustings performance, with his final speech the day before the poll concluding with the injunction 'Be true to Liberalism and I will be true to Paisley'.⁵⁷ According to Macdonald, this book would come to dominate Liberal policy throughout the

1920s.⁵⁸ Asquith had the help of Glasgow University students with canvassing, an effective strategy for, as the *Paisley Daily Express* noted,

The streets [were] littered with paper [indicating] the extent to which electioneering literature is being circulated.⁵⁹

Asquith's election agent was an experienced local solicitor and his friend Sir Donald Maclean spoke for him early in the campaign, but otherwise Asquith's campaign received only limited assistance from elsewhere.

The election would turn on a number of issues that could be seen as indicative of their

THE STAR. WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3, 1920.



Uncaptioned cartoon by David Low from *The Star*, 3 March 1920

'Feminine charm plays such an important part in electioneering nowadays that we must expect anyone to see that Miss Trilly Tickletoe come forward and sing her appeal to the electors.

(Low and his Bolshevick ballet, or the tragic extravaganza *The Financial Situation*.)

When the cartoonist stands for Parliament he will have a complete song-and-dance chorus.

(British Cartoon Archive, Special Collections & Archives, University of Kent / David Low / Solo Syndication)

time. Firstly, the campaign was fought by male candidates, but the women's vote would be pivotal. Asquith was in a particularly difficult position in this regard for he had long opposed women's suffrage. He confronted this head on, opening his speech on 31 January:

That women have come in such numbers to hear what I have to say is not only an indication of their keen political interest, but, so far as I personally am concerned, is perhaps an act of political generosity; for undoubtedly, as you will remember, there was a

time, now a very remote time, in which I did not see my way to join those who were in favour of giving women the vote.⁶⁰

Asquith added that the war had changed his mind and that women should now be enfranchised on the same basis as men (i.e., at the same age – which did eventually happen in 1928). Some have questioned Asquith's sincerity,⁶¹ but his *mea culpa* might not have been sufficient in any case had his daughter Violet Bonham Carter not proved a huge campaigning asset in winning over the women's vote.⁶² She had, in effect, generated this aspect of the campaign herself, aware that 'the women's vote is the dark horse & that Labour is stealing a march on us every hour'.⁶³ Such was the Unionist alarm at Violet Bonham Carter's impact that Nancy Astor was called in to help MacKean.⁶⁴

Secondly, Asquith was himself close to seventy years old and MacKean three years older. Biggar in his mid-forties must have appeared almost youthful by comparison, though while this would have the advantages of energy could also enable his opponents to portray him as callow and inexperienced. Violet Bonham Carter was aware that age might be considered a factor in her father's case, raising it herself – taking it 'tightly by the throat', as she put it – when Asquith was introduced to the Liberal Association on 28 January.⁶⁵

This was overlaid by Biggar and MacKean questioning whether they would be better placed to represent Paisley's interests while Asquith's focus might be on his national political rehabilitation. Asquith himself admitted that he didn't know the affairs of Paisley, and that he didn't have 'intimate acquaintance' even with those of Scotland, but he argued that he should be elected 'because I am qualified to represent you on all those larger and wider questions of general legislation'.⁶⁶ Only by electing him could the country be saved from the 'imminent, formidable, financial dangers which confront it ... and which are the real ... obstacles to ... true social reform'.⁶⁷ As further evidence that Asquith was the continuity candidate with the right values, three of Gladstone's sons appeared on his behalf as did his own son Brigadier Asquith, DSO.⁶⁸

A variant of the age issue was Biggar and MacKean damning Asquith as living in the past while they were focused on the present. Biggar described him as 'behind the times' and MacKean judged him a Rip van Winkle who had failed to keep up with change.⁶⁹ In an article headed 'Paisley Uber Alles', *Forward* described Asquith as 'a mumbling of the old

bones', continuing: 'He belongs to a type that is becoming extinct, which the times have passed by'. It added, '... Paisley is asked to choose Mr Asquith on the strength of his past; it is all he has got'.⁷⁰

Asquith's political longevity, therefore, might act in his favour if he could convince the Paisley voters that he understood their concerns, but it might equally count against him if he expected them to defer to his judgement. He argued that he had never betrayed the faith or trust of the Liberal Party's supporters and the electors of Paisley should therefore have confidence in him.⁷¹ He held another meeting for women on 7 February while individual speeches focused on, for example, industrial issues, housing and Ireland (on which he had always been a home ruler). Asquith used the latter speech to advocate Dominion status for Ireland, a stance that would appeal to the Irish in Paisley even if the coalition government thought it insanity, while also distancing him from the Unionist MacKean. The United Irish League now supported Labour and Asquith 'resented and denounced what he saw as the Irish defection'.⁷² *Forward* countered by asking 'What are [Asquith's] pledges worth?', arguing that the Irish should 'Vote Straight and Vote for Labour'.⁷³

Asquith attacked the government over several of its policies (not least that of 'trying to grind Germany into the dust' over reparations), an electoral strategy designed to capture the moderate Tory vote as well as secure the Liberal one.⁷⁴ The editor of the Liberal *Daily News*, A. G. Gardiner went so far as to claim that he expected an Asquith victory to demonstrate the 'national resentment against that criminal hoax' the last general election.⁷⁵

The *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* indicated its preference by invariably discussing the MacKean campaign first, followed by Asquith's and then Biggar's. On 7 February it considered how each candidate dealt with hecklers at their meetings, with MacKean praised for his humour that came straight to the point, while it judged Asquith as 'cool and collected' and deprecated Biggar for being too blunt.⁷⁶ In case this did not differentiate MacKean and Asquith sufficiently, another article on the same page commented that:

A single hearing of the prosaic, professional politician known as [Asquith] has been an almost sensational disillusionment ... revealing abilities of a kind that refrigerate enthusiasm.

Asquith added that the war had changed his mind and that women should now be enfranchised on the same basis as men (i.e., at the same age – which did eventually happen in 1928). Some have questioned Asquith's sincerity, but his mea culpa might not have been sufficient in any case had his daughter Violet Bonham Carter not proved a huge campaigning asset in winning over the women's vote.

Asquith's return to parliament at the 1920 Paisley by-election

The newspaper noted that the contrast with MacKean was very marked, a judgement it repeated in MacKean's obituary in 1932 when it described him as 'in his element [with hecklers] for he had a gift of ready repartee ...'.⁷⁷

For her part Violet Bonham Carter described the overall campaign as:

... the strangest and most memorable experience of my life. I can only describe it as a nightmare with streaks of ecstasy. ... I spoke once or twice every day the whole time we were there – & the blaze of publicity we lived in prevented one ever repeating a sentence. ... [T]he Paisley people were wonderful material to work upon – an extraordinary combination of cool heads & warm hearts.⁷⁸

Macdonald concludes that [the result] was 'a conscious statement in favour of "pre-war" principles in a post-war world'. Alternatively, it might be suspected that MacKean's campaign foundered on the Irish and worker votes and, while Biggar was more popular with these groups, Asquith's campaign had been sufficiently canny to appeal to Unionist and Conservative voters who sought to keep Labour out.

The result

There was a two-week delay between the poll on 12 February and the count, with Asquith decamping to London as soon as the polls closed and only returning to Paisley for the count.⁷⁹ Yet if Koss was clear why Asquith chose Paisley,⁸⁰ it might still be questioned why Paisley chose Asquith, for that was the outcome, which on a vastly increased turnout (77.6 per cent compared to 57.6 per cent in 1918) saw the Liberal vote almost double to 14,736 with Asquith's majority 2,834 over Biggar, whose vote had itself increased by nearly 4,500 to 11,902 in little over a year.⁸¹ The corollary was that the third-party vote collapsed, an outcome that Asquith had predicted, and MacKean lost his deposit.⁸² Macdonald concludes that this was 'a conscious statement in favour of "pre-war" principles in a post-war world'.⁸³ Alternatively, it might be suspected that MacKean's campaign foundered on the Irish and worker votes and, while Biggar was more popular with these groups, Asquith's campaign had been sufficiently canny to appeal to Unionist and Conservative voters who sought to keep Labour out. *Forward* had predicted after the polls closed that Biggar's election would depend on whether the Tory vote 'slumped' to Asquith.⁸⁴

In addition, Asquith's speeches and reputation had done just enough to convince women voters that he was the most likely to secure reform, a perspective that Violet Bonham Carter's initiative and hard work reinforced.

The *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* expressed surprise that their preferred candidate MacKean had come such a 'poor third', but not at the overall result.⁸⁵ MacKean agreed that some voters had deserted him, voting for Asquith to keep Labour out, with many rushing to do so on the final day, while some who had voted for the Coalition and Lloyd George in the aftermath of the First World War had reconsidered, transferring their allegiance to Asquith in the by-election. Biggar's explanation was that 'the capitalists had united to keep Labour out' and that 'so far as the workers are concerned there is no difference between the Liberal and Tory candidates'. Tellingly, however, 'in this election the Liberal has been chosen because he is the abler to defend that policy [maintaining the privileges of landlordism and capitalism]'.⁸⁶ *Forward* added in their March post-mortems Ramsay MacDonald's view that Asquith had won on an anti-Labour combination, together with the conviction that as a former leader he 'should be returned to the House of Commons'.⁸⁷

The newspaper's immediate conclusion was that:

... the Paisley election furnishes another example that political principle does not count for much when there are other and more plausible considerations thrown into the election.⁸⁸

Three weeks later the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* added Lloyd George's view that there was 'absolutely no doubt that thousands of Unionist and Coalition Liberals had swung round at the last moment in order to keep Labour out', and Asquith had in effect received the coupon from six Unionist peers who supported him (including Northcliffe and Robert Cecil). Lloyd George argued that Asquith was wrong to say he had won because he 'sold the

Paisley, general election, 14 December 1918			Paisley, by-election, 12 February 1920		
Candidate & party	Votes	%	Candidate & party	Votes	%
J. M. McCallum (Lib)	7,542	34.0	H. H. Asquith (Lib)	14,736	48.4
J. M. Biggar (Co-op)	7,436	33.5	J. M. Biggar (Lab/Co-op)	11,902	39.1
J. Taylor (Co NDP)	7,201	32.5	J. A. D. MacKean (U)	3,795	12.5

pure unadulterated milk of Liberalism. It was not so.' Rather the peers had judged Asquith the most 'distinguished defender of the fabric of society', and their support, together with that of Unionist Glasgow newspapers who wanted to defeat the Socialists, was enough – drawing votes from MacKean in the process.⁸⁹ *Forward* also remarked on the irony that though Asquith had stood as anti-Coalition, 'he was in reality returned by a Coalition vote'.⁹⁰

The aftermath

According to Firth, 'before Paisley [Asquith] stood in danger of total eclipse ... a spent force and [people were saying] that his day was done'. The result enabled Asquith to 'rehabilitate himself; but [could] he restore the Liberal Party?'⁹¹ The answer proved to be a resounding 'no'. As Searle puts it, 'Disillusion with Asquith's tired performances soon set in'⁹² – performances that, with the single exception of his condemnation in October 1920 of the Black and Tan reprisals in Ireland, lacked any fight or fire. By mid-1922 Harold Laski recorded that he was 'generally recognised as hopeless', but Asquith's great personal charm, together with the lack of any obvious alternative as Liberal leader, kept him in place.⁹³ In November 1923 the Asquithian and Lloyd George wings of the Liberal Party came back together, but Lloyd George was no more trusted than before and it was assumed he would join up with the Conservatives again as soon as he could. Meanwhile, a remote Asquith rarely appeared in parliament and left much of the hard work of leadership to his friend Maclean.

Asquith went on to win the next two elections in Paisley in 1922 (when there was an ILP landslide in neighbouring Glasgow⁹⁴) and 1923, before losing the seat to Labour in 1924, an election in which Labour lost seats nationally, but the Liberals were trounced, reduced from 159 to 40 seats overall.⁹⁵ In Paisley 'a group of leading businessmen [had] ... publicly [withdrawn] their support for Asquith and United Free Church clergymen were said to be abandoning the Liberal Party in vast numbers'.⁹⁶

That this should prove the outcome was in many ways inevitable. Asquith had been a poor local MP in East Fife, speaking in the constituency only three times in three years between May 1915 and May 1918 and judged to have 'neglected the seat to the point of contempt' after being ousted as Prime Minister at the end of 1916.⁹⁷ Ball describes him as 'a politician out of his depth ... arrogant, with an excessive assurance of his own indispensability'.⁹⁸ Defeat

at Paisley would have consigned Asquith to an indefinite period out of parliament – perhaps for ever, for there was no safe seat that was going to be found for him as an alternative.⁹⁹ But it was not apparent that his attitude and approach as a constituency MP had been altered by defeat in East Fife and if he had failed to learn the lessons, why should he treat Paisley any differently? Asquith had exerted himself to win the campaign but there was little evidence that he would put much energy into nurturing the constituency.

Asquith visited Paisley in May and December 1920 and addressed a rally at the Town Hall in July 1921.¹⁰⁰ After that, however, he seems to have reverted to type. The Liberal Association Minute Book records that he sent his apologies for the AGMs in March 1923 and 1924, adding on the latter occasion that he hoped to 'see them face to face shortly'.¹⁰¹ He did not and in June 1924 sent his private secretary to answer questions on his behalf. His tacit support for the short-lived Labour government of 1924 had provoked at least one member of the Executive to resign, arguing that 'the Liberal Party in the House of Commons was more concerned with tactics than with principles'.¹⁰² In other words, the electors had been hoodwinked. A win in the 1924 general election in Paisley might have been beyond Asquith's abilities in any case, but his neglect of the constituency had not helped. Gardiner, no longer the editor of the Liberal *Daily News* but still a Liberal himself, described this as 'the final and humiliating blow ... which ended [Asquith's] career in the House of which he had been the most illustrious figure'.¹⁰³ Asquith had been in parliament for nearly forty years, but his contemporaries included Gladstone, Balfour, Baldwin and Lloyd George, so he may have been one 'illustrious figure', but certainly not the most. Like these colleagues, Asquith came back from the wilderness of being defeated as premier and unlike them he also had to contend with electoral defeat. However, he no longer had the energy or determination to make the most of his comeback. As Firth put it, Asquith should 'beware the omen of the Paisley shawl which was always designed to be the comfort of declining years'.¹⁰⁴ The Paisley by-election proved a false dawn for Asquith and the Liberal Party; and the town itself, which required a physical rehabilitation (of its housing, for example), could do little but mark time politically.

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Asquith's return to parliament at the 1920 Paisley by-election

- 1 The National Democratic Party proved short-lived, with not all ten MPs standing in the next general election in 1922 and the few that did stood under different banners. All were defeated. See Roy Douglas, 'The National Democratic Party and the British Workers' League', *The Historical Journal*, 15 (1972).
- 2 *Morning Post* [MP], 23 Jan. 1920, p. 6.
- 3 J. B. Firth, 'The return of Mr Asquith', *Fortnightly Review*, 107 (1920).
- 4 Sir John McCallum's obituary appeared in the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* [PRG], 17 Jan. 1920, p. 3.
- 5 *Paisley Daily Express* [PDE], 12 Jan. 1920.
- 6 F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918–1949* (3rd edn., Parliamentary Research Services, 1983).
- 7 *Forward*, 17 Jan. 1920, p. 5.
- 8 PRG, 10 Jan. 1920, p. 3.
- 9 PDE, 22 Jan. 1920; PRG, 24 Jan. 1920, p. 3.
- 10 As he did in the two subsequent elections in 1922 and 1923. On the latter occasion the ILP fielded their own candidate who polled 3,685 votes that might otherwise have gone to Biggar.
- 11 PDE, 14 Jan. 1920.
- 12 *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 20 Jan. 1920 [APJ].
- 13 PDE, 14 Jan. 1920.
- 14 PDE, 16 Jan. 1920.
- 15 *Daily News* [DN], 19 Jan. 1920, p. 1.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 APJ, 19 and 20 Jan. 1920. Mrs W. H. Coats and the manager of Anchor Mills, Oscar Clark, had been suggested previously. DN, 15 Jan. 1920, p. 2.
- 18 DN, 20 Jan. 1920, p. 1.
- 19 PDE, 21 Jan. 1920.
- 20 PRG, 24 Jan. 1920, p. 3; Catriona Macdonald, *The Radical Thread: Political Change in Scotland. Paisley Politics, 1885–1924* (Tuckwell Press, 2000).
- 21 *Westminster Gazette* [WG], 21 Jan. 1920, p. 7.
- 22 *The Times*, 20 Jan. 1920.
- 23 PDE, 23 Jan. 1920.
- 24 PRG, 23 Apr. 1932.
- 25 *Times*, 24 Jan. 1920.
- 26 Firth, 'Return of Mr Asquith', p. 537.
- 27 WG, 23 Jan. 1920, p. 7.
- 28 MP, 27 Jan. 1920, p. 7.
- 29 MP, 24 Jan. 1920, p. 8.
- 30 Losing by over 3,000 votes to McCallum in 1906.
- 31 As Asquith acknowledged in a speech in Paisley two days before the poll: H. H. Asquith, *The Paisley Policy* (Cassell, 1920).
- 32 MP, 23 Jan. 1920, p. 6.
- 33 Macdonald, *Radical Thread*, p. 84.
- 34 MP, 27 Jan. 1920, p. 7.
- 35 WG, 28 Jan. 1920, p. 1.
- 36 Mark Pottle (ed.), *Champion Redoubtable: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1914–1945* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998).
- 37 WG, 28 Jan. 1920, p. 7. Paisley Library and Archives [PLA] B/ASQ PC8231 PAM goes further, claiming that MacKean's campaign was based on smearing Asquith.
- 38 WG, 27 Jan. 1920, p. 1. This division would become even more marked in subsequent elections.
- 39 David Low, *Low's Autobiography* (Michael Joseph, 1956).
- 40 Mary McCarthy, *A Social Geography of Paisley* (Paisley Public Libraries, 1969).
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 42 Graeme Peters, 'Victory at Paisley', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 19 (1998). Lees-Smith's entry in the DNB by Andrew Thorpe notes that 'In January 1920 he joined other former Liberals, such as Arthur Ponsonby and Charles Trevelyan, in publishing an appeal to former Liberals to vote against Asquith in the Paisley by-election'.
- 43 Asquith, *Paisley Policy*, pp. 122–3 (5 Feb. 1920).
- 44 DN, 26 Jan. 1920, p. 1.
- 45 Firth, 'Return of Mr Asquith', p. 544.
- 46 Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (Collins, 1966).
- 47 PRG, 7 Feb. 1920, p. 2.
- 48 PDE, 21 Jan. 1920.
- 49 Paisley Trades and Labour Council minutes, 28 Jan. 1920.
- 50 PRG, 31 Jan. 1920, p. 1.
- 51 Robert Kelley, 'Asquith at Paisley: The content of British Liberalism at the end of its era', *Journal of British Studies*, 4 (1964).
- 52 *Forward*, 31 Jan. 1920, p. 2.
- 53 PLA, B/ASQ PC8231 PAM.
- 54 Having failed to find rooms at St Enoch's Hotel, Asquith's first choice. WG, 24 Jan. 1920, p. 1.
- 55 Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (Collins, 1986; orig. 1964).
- 56 Asquith, *Paisley Policy*.
- 57 'A closing word', in Asquith, *Paisley Policy*, p. 145 (11 Feb. 1920).
- 58 Macdonald, *Radical Thread*, p. 229.
- 59 PLA, B/ASQ PC8231 PAM
- 60 'Women's questions', in Asquith, *Paisley Policy*, p. 46 (31 Jan. 1920). This meeting was specifically arranged for women, thereby pre-dating the similar meetings the Conservative Party held later in the 1920s; see David Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative appeal to women voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994). Asquith repeated the words about women's 'act of generosity' to Low as he sketched him: Low, *Autobiography*, p. 101.
- 61 Kelley, 'Asquith at Paisley', p. 146, f. 41 accuses him of an abiding distrust of women voters.
- 62 Many recent analyses mention this (e.g., Macdonald, *Radical Thread*, p. 231; Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 487), as do contemporary sources.
- 63 Pottle, *Champion Redoubtable*, p. 111.
- 64 WG, 29 Jan. 1920, p. 1.
- 65 Pottle, *Champion Redoubtable*, p. 110.
- 66 'Constitutional questions', in Asquith, *Paisley Policy*, p. 15 (28 Jan. 1920).
- 67 Asquith, *Paisley Policy*, p. 138 (7 Feb. 1920).
- 68 PLA, B/ASQ PC8231 PAM.
- 69 Both PDE, 27 and 29 Jan. 1920 quoted by Macdonald, *Radical Thread*, p. 229.
- 70 *Forward*, 31 Jan. 1920, p. 4.
- 71 'The Liberal record', in Asquith, *Paisley Policy*, p. 7 (26 Jan. 1920).
- 72 Ian Donnachie, Christopher Harvie and Ian S. Wood (eds.), *Forward! Labour Politics in Scotland 1888–1988* (Polygon, 1989).
- 73 *Forward*, 7 Feb. 1920, p. 4.
- 74 'The peace treaty', in Asquith, *Paisley Policy*, pp. 86–99 (6 Feb. 1920); Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 486.
- 75 Stephen Koss, *Fleet Street Radical: A. G. Gardiner and the Daily News* (Allen Lane, 1973).
- 76 PRG, 7 Feb. 1920, p. 2.
- 77 PRG, 23 Apr. 1932.
- 78 Pottle, *Champion Redoubtable*, p. 109.
- 79 Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 487.
- 80 Stephen Koss, *Asquith* (Allen Lane, 1976).
- 81 Catriona Macdonald, in Diarmuid McDonnell and Elizabeth Macknight, (eds.), *The Co-operative Model in Practice* (Aberdeen University Press, 2012), notes that 'In the 1918 General Election the Co-operative Party contested only three Scottish seats: Paisley, Clackmannan and Kilmarnock, and was unsuccessful in each. Its fight against Asquith in Paisley in 1920 was admirable: the Co-op candidate, J.M. Biggar improved on his 1918 performance and secured nearly forty per cent of the vote in a three-cornered contest.'
- 82 Jenkins, *Asquith*, pp. 486 and 487.
- 83 Macdonald, *Radical Thread*, p. 228.
- 84 *Forward*, 14 Feb. 1920, p. 5.

- 85 PRG, 28 Feb. 1920, p. 2.
 86 PRG, 28 Feb. 1920, p. 3.
 87 *Forward*, 6 Mar. 1920, p. 1.
 88 PRG, 28 Feb. 1920, p. 2.
 89 PRG, 20 Mar. 1920.
 90 *Forward*, 6 Mar. 1920, p. 4.
 91 Firth, 'Return of Mr Asquith', p. 542
 92 G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886–1929* (Macmillan, 1992).
 93 Wilson, *Downfall*, pp. 209, 213 and 214.
 94 Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969).
 95 Asquith and Biggar were the only candidates in Paisley in 1922, with turnout again high, at 78%, and Asquith's majority reduced to 316. In 1923 there were four candidates, turnout 77.1%, Asquith 9,723 votes and majority 1,746 over Biggar (7,977) with Conservative Shaw respectable third only 119 votes further back (7,758) while second Socialist (Cormack for ILP) polled 3,685. In 1924 on a turnout of 84.1% (highest since Dec 1906) E. R. Mitchell won the seat for Lab (17,057) with majority of 2,228 over Asquith, the only other candidate (14,829).
 96 I. G. C. Hutchinson, 'Scottish Unionism between the two world wars', p. 84 in Catriona Macdonald (ed.), *Unionist Scotland 1800–1997* (John Donald, 1998).
 97 Stuart R. Ball, 'Asquith's decline and the general election of 1918', *Scottish Historical Review*, 61 (1982).
 98 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 99 J. G. Swift MacNeill, 'The ethics and philosophy of by-elections', *Fortnightly Review*, 107 (1920).
 100 PRG Index 1919–1923.
 101 Liberal Association Minute Book 1922–1947, 13 Mar. 1923 and 21 Mar. 1924.
 102 *Ibid.*, 4 June 1924.
 103 A. G. Gardiner, 'Asquith', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 112 (1932).
 104 Firth, 'Return of Mr Asquith', p. 543.

Letters to the Editor

The Birmingham caucus

I read with great pleasure Ian Cawood's article in *Journal of Liberal History* 105 (winter 2019–20) on the role of the Liberal 'caucus' in the 1868 general election in Birmingham. I have a personal interest in the subject, as the strategist William Harris was, in addition to being the 'father of the caucus', my own great-great-grandfather.

I have just one heirloom that has come down to me, but it may be of

interest to some of your readers. It is a gold pocket-watch, inscribed: 'Presented to Mr William Harris in appreciation of his services as Honorary Secretary of the Liberal Committee in the Birmingham Election. 1867.'

The Birmingham Liberal Association had been founded early in 1865, on the initiative of Harris, George Dixon and John Jaffray. One of its achievements was to see Dixon elected to Parliament in a by-election in July 1867 – a success in which Harris was clearly perceived as having played a significant backstage role. Following his election, Dixon stood down as secretary of the BLA, to be replaced by Harris, who therefore took prime responsibility for devising the new party machinery, afterwards known as the caucus, which – as Dr Cawood explains – brought the Birmingham Liberals a resounding victory in the general election of November 1868.

Oliver Harris

Anarchism and Liberalism

I am in the process of studying the influence of anarchism (particularly the anarchist philosophy of Piotr Kropotkin) on liberalism, both in and out of the party, since the 1880s.

The focus of my PhD thesis is on New Liberalism and the period of 1886–1930 but my broader research brings me to look at groups such as the Young Liberals in the 1960s and 1970s and anything else that crops up.

Generally I look at anarchist influences on liberal approaches to specific policy areas such as land reform, anti-imperialism, pacifism, progressive evolutionary arguments and more broadly within the social sciences of sociology, town planning and anthropology.

I was wondering if you could publish this to see if anyone would like to write to me with their personal experiences in this regard, or relevant historical information they might have. While I am particularly interested in Kropotkin, I am also quite interested in the influence and distribution of all anarchist writers into Liberal networks. I have done a lot of the basic reading but I am approaching this topic as a historian of anarchism, so there are always a few gaps in my knowledge of liberalism.

Please could anyone who is interested email me at shaunjpitt@gmail.com.

Shaun Pitt

