

Journal of Liberal



HISTORY

Asquith returns

Hugh Gault

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

Michael Meadowcroft

Robert Maclennan Life and career

Tim Hughes

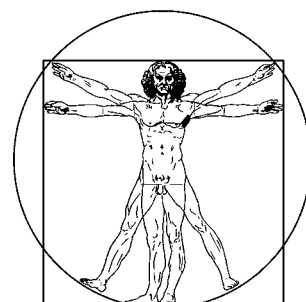
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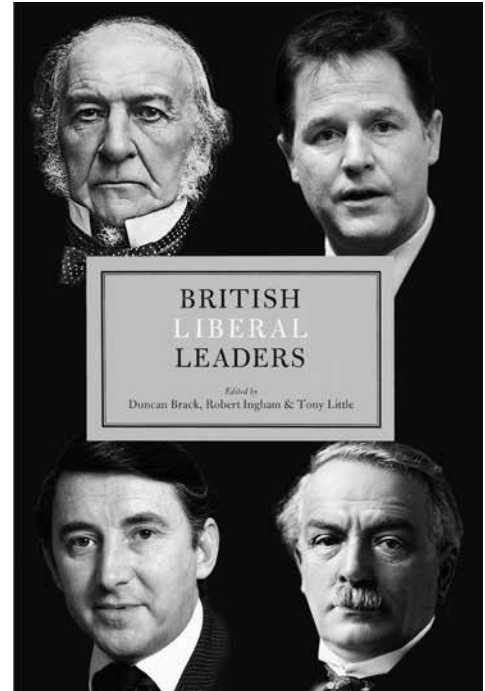
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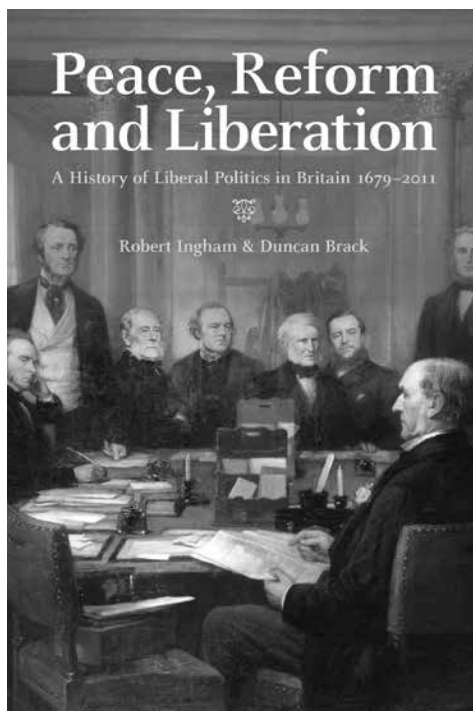
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Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of
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Liberal History News

Spring 2020

Editorial

Welcome to the spring 2020 issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*. We apologise for the late arrival of this issue, a consequence of the disruption to editing and printing schedules caused by the coronavirus epidemic.

We have marked the epidemic in a more historical fashion, however, by looking back at the last Liberal Prime Minister's brush with Spanish flu in 1918. At least, if Lloyd George had succumbed, he would have left behind him a cabinet considerably fuller of talent than the UK's current crowd!

Several other pieces in this issue also remember former leaders. Hugh Gault looks back a century at the Paisley by-election which marked Asquith's return to Parliament. Michael Meadowcroft commemorates Robert MacLennan's leadership of the SDP, and we reprint John Major's moving address to last year's memorial service for Paddy Ashdown.

In our other main article, Tim Jones analyses the legacy of Chartism for Liberalism, through a case study of Northampton politics in the 1860s and '70s. I hope you enjoy these articles, and our meeting report and book reviews – and stay safe and healthy.

Duncan Brack (Editor)

Corrigenda

In our report on the History Group's meeting on 'Liberalism in the North' in *Journal of Liberal History* 104 (autumn 2019), page 41, the reference to 'elections such as David Austick in Richmond in 1974' should have been to David Austick in the Ripon by-election in 1973'.

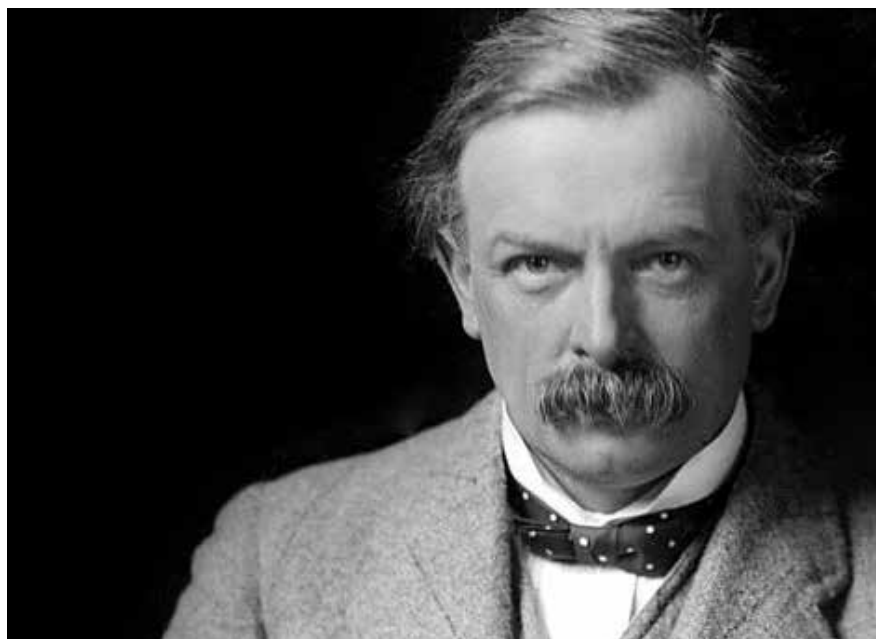
Lloyd George and Spanish flu

The most treasured possessions inherited from my grandfather are undoubtedly two blue volumes that have been with me for most of my life, *The War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*. Lloyd George was my grandfather's political hero and so he became mine too. As a teenager I read the *Memoirs* avidly and they were probably the reason that I became a historian. They were, of course, very much a personal view and not necessarily to be relied upon as an accurate account of all events. But they were the words of Lloyd George.

One of the remarkable things about the *Memoirs* is that, while dealing with grave matters and costly military campaigns, they are largely silent on Lloyd George's own brush with death. The recent illness of Boris Johnson has inevitably drawn comparisons with Lloyd George's contraction of 'Spanish flu' in September 1918. Lloyd George was the same age as our current Prime Minister and, like Johnson, had taken

over the premiership at a time of a national crisis. Lloyd George's illness was particularly poignant. Just as the Liberal premier was on the verge of a great victory at the end of a brutal war, his own life was in serious danger. At the time, few knew how seriously matters had become.

Even today, the details are somewhat vague and some recent media articles have relied on quite a lot of conjecture. What we do know is that when Lloyd George went to Manchester on 11 September 1918 to receive the Freedom of the City, it soon became clear he was very ill. Rather than stay in a Manchester hospital, he was cared for by doctors in a committee room at Manchester Town Hall. Equipment was brought in from outside and he was placed on a respiratory aid. Although these aids were crude by today's standards, doctors of the period had considerable experience of dealing with respiratory illnesses, as these



were extremely common during these times. Lloyd George was confined to his committee room bed for over a week. His wife and close colleagues feared for his life.

The newspapers were given only a few details; reports indicated that the Prime Minister had a 'chill'. Although the war was coming to an end, the long-term incapacity or death of Lloyd George could have changed the political dynamics of armistice negotiations. Germans read *The Times* too.

Britain was fortunate in having contingency plans. In 1916 Lloyd George had established a small war cabinet to take more effective control of the war effort. In September 1918 it included the political heavyweights Lord Curzon, Andrew Bonar Law, Austen Chamberlain and Jan Smuts.

Later anecdotes suggest that Lloyd George was not a good patient. He was apparently frustrated and irritable and desperate to return. In the end, determined to get back to Downing Street, he travelled back to London by train, with medical teams in attendance at his side. Some reports suggest he was still on a respiratory aid. His return was short-lived, however, and he was soon forced to take his doctor's advice and spend more time to recuperate in the country. In due course he came back to head the momentous armistice negotiations and lead the 'Lloyd George coalition' into the general election that split the Liberal Party.

Had Lloyd George died tragically in September 1918, his national reputation would have been secure and

unquestionable. He would have been the man who had introduced national insurance and old age pensions and who had 'won the war'. However, subsequent events somewhat clouded his reputation, at least amongst rival Liberals. His decision to fight the rushed 1918 general election in coalition with the Conservatives split the Liberal Party for a generation and hastened its decline. The twentieth century became, to borrow the words of historian Stuart Ball, a 'Conservative century'.

Inevitably, a somewhat dark thought emerges. Had Lloyd George succumbed to Spanish flu in 1918, it is not too fanciful to believe that a new leader – possibly even Churchill – could have reunited the Liberal Party. Perhaps the party would have resisted the rise of Labour – a party that still only polled 20 per cent of the vote in 1918. My grandfather may have spent his life supporting a party of government, rather than living through a series of Liberal false dawns from 1929 to 1983.

But for all his flaws, Lloyd George was still our hero. Few men had a greater impact on twentieth century Britain and fewer still could articulate Liberal values as trenchantly and passionately as the great man. The *War Memoirs* are still treated with reverence. My grandfather was fortunate to live in an age of heroes, in the age of Asquith, the last Liberal leader to win a general election, in the age of Lloyd George.

James Moore

Jeremy John Durham Ashdown grew up in India and Northern Ireland, but became known as Paddy at Bedford School because of his broad Irish accent. The accent faded, but the name stuck. At 18 Paddy joined the Royal Marines and later the Special Boat Service. His military career shaped his approach to life and politics – and so did his wife, Jane. Paddy and Jane met at the age of 19 when Paddy burst into the wrong room of the hotel while she was only half-dressed. She told him it didn't matter. It obviously didn't. They married young and had two children, Kate and Simon, and four grandchildren. Paddy and Jane were married for 57 years, and she was with him along every step of his extraordinary career.

After the military came more public service in the foreign and intelligence services. But in the turmoil of the 1970s, politics was calling, so Paddy and Jane returned to her native Somerset where at the second attempt Paddy won Yeovil for the Liberals. Paddy could have joined either of the bigger parties and served in high office, perhaps the highest. But he didn't. He joined where his heart was, and within five years, this spontaneous optimist was leading the newly formed Liberal Democrat party.

As a party leader, Paddy was energetic, original, decisive and always impatient. Patience was never a virtue in any corner of Paddy's life. He could also be infuriating. But no one was ever angry with Paddy for very long. He was always an internationalist, wedded to reason and consensus and dismissive of tribal politics. A man for ideals, not shabby deals.

In the 1990s, as now, Europe was controversial. It sometimes caused acrimony – well daily, actually. Paddy could have exploited this, but he never did. Where he agreed with me on Europe he voted with me. It was the behaviour of a national leader, not a political opportunist. When he was called a careerist, once, his putdown was a joy. 'A careerist, me? Don't be daft. I'm a Liberal Democrat!'

Paddy was never a typical politician, and rarely predictable. In elections, most candidates canvass and leaflet – not Paddy. Drawing on his

In memoriam: Paddy Ashdown

On 10 September 2019, Westminster Abbey hosted a service of thanksgiving for the life and work of Paddy Ashdown, who died on 22 December 2018. Speakers included former deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, the grand mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina Husein Kavazovic, the Commandant General of the Royal Marines Major General Matthew Holmes, Paddy's sister Alisoun Downing, former Rector of Norton-sub-Hamdon Reverend

Peter Thomas and Baroness Greender. The main address, given by Sir John Major, is reproduced here.

~

Some people may be surprised that I, a lifelong Conservative, should be delivering a tribute to a former leader of the Liberal Democrats. They shouldn't be. Paddy was a political opponent who became a friend to cherish.



military training, he conducted a ground campaign and in 1997 led his party to their best result for decades.

In 2001, Paddy stepped down from politics and the following year found a new challenge as the United Nations High Representative in Bosnia, a country he came to love, and called the little jewel of Europe. In that role, he created a single, coherent, military force, a single intelligence service, an effective council of ministers, a customs service, a single judiciary, and his administration began to indict war criminals. One could see in that what he might have achieved as a minister of the crown in our own country. So successful was he that Serbian criminals put out a contract on his life for €2 million. His response? 'It's not enough!' One threat was to blow up a petrol station next to his office, and Paddy with it. At a meeting, Paddy asked: 'Has anyone here ever tried to blow up a petrol station?' There was silence. 'Well, I have, and it isn't easy!' The meeting rapidly broke up.

Paddy was as energetic in private as in public. He had a non-political hinterland, and he embraced it. That enthusiastic, though of course impatient, gardener: he planted vegetables in rows like marines on parade and soft fruit in serried ranks. I dare say he harvested them from the right and by the right, numbering as he went along. Each year, he entered his beans and onions in the village show. They never won. Nowadays, Jane presents the Ashdown Cup to the winner.

His do-it-yourself efforts were totally Heath Robinson. He was far too impatient to prepare properly, so his shelves were crooked. He built a pergola covered in wisteria, honeysuckle and grapevines. It certainly looked the part. It wasn't. The grapes were inedible, loved only by the blackbirds.

But Paddy did have a talent for writing. He wrote eight books that merit a place on anyone's shelves, crooked or not. All his life, Paddy loved not only poetry, as we have heard, but classical music. And he played Brahms and Beethoven and Mozart very often and very loud – so he wasn't very pleased when the teenaged Simon discovered pop music and the guitar. No doubt Paddy would have been much happier if Simon had learned the harpsichord or the crumhorn – much more to his taste.

In recent years, during more tranquil days, Paddy enjoyed walking with his rescue dog Apple, often stopping for a drink at the local pub, where he would sit on the bench outside, talking to anyone and everyone who joined him. Although a loving grandfather to Josie, Annie, Lois and Matthias, the ever-youthful Paddy didn't much like being called granddad. So they named him Fred – and Fred told them, as he had told Kate and Simon a generation before, to push yourself daily and never give up. It was how he had lived.

It is impossible to do credit to the wide range of Paddy Ashdown's life

in just a few moments. It was in many ways quite extraordinary. But fate was perverse. Paddy left us too soon, his life cut short long before he had wearied of it. His energy, his joy of family, his despair at some aspects of modern politics and policy, remained undimmed.

Not one moment of Paddy's life and time was ever wasted. Proof of that is here today. This great abbey is filled by many who shared his life in one capacity or another. First and foremost, Jane and his family, around whom Paddy's life revolved. Parliamentarians from all parties, service personnel from the Royal Marines and the Special Boat Service, senior officials and colleagues from the Foreign Office and the intelligence services, distinguished guests from Bosnia and friends from everywhere, not least his constituency and his village – all here to pay tribute to this astonishing man.

All who knew Paddy can remember him as he was, always pursuing some cause – often difficult, sometimes impossible – causes often achieved, sometimes not. But if a mountain was there to climb, you may be sure that Paddy would have tried to climb it.

After you lose someone you care for, memories are a comfort that live on. Jane will always be able to summon up that boisterous young marine who shared so many years of her life and who grew into the elder statesman we all remember today. Kate and Simon will remember the loving father who encouraged them to embrace life and always look forward and never look back, and Josie, Annie, Lois and Matthias, to whom he will forever be the ever-energetic Fred. And we – each and every one of us present here today – will always remember the Paddy that we knew.

Paddy never claimed to be a saint. But he was a good man. Bigotry and injustice had no place in his world. Decency and fairness did. And he fought for them all of his life. Such men are rare. We have always needed them, and we need them still. But, Paddy, your last mountain has been climbed. Your duty is done. At ease, Paddy, at ease.

On This Day ...

Every day the History Group's website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three. To see them regularly, look at www.liberalhistory.org.uk or www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup or follow us at: **LibHistoryToday**.

March

1 March 1831: Lord John Russell presents the first Reform Bill to the House of Commons. The government proposed to abolish 168 seats, including Old Sarum, Bossiney, Lostwithiel and Wendover, and to create 106 new seats in mainly northern industrial towns and cities such as Manchester, Leeds, Huddersfield and Wolverhampton. Writing the following day, Lord Grenville noted in his diary, 'Lord John Russell rose at six o'clock and spoke for two hours and a quarter – a sweeping measure indeed, much more than anyone had imagined.'

April

16 April 1894: Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, introduces his second Budget. More money was required to pay for an increase in the size of the Royal Navy, and Harcourt funded this through a penny increase in income tax and extra duty on spirits and beer. His most important innovation was the introduction of graduated death duties to be paid on the consolidated value on an estate. Harcourt steered the finance bill through the House of Commons, demonstrating great skill in the face of considerable opposition. This budget was possibly Harcourt's greatest triumph and was one of the most important finance measures of the nineteenth century.

May

20 May 1798: Radical Whig Charles James Fox, speaking to Whigs at Freemason's Tavern, provokes the ire of his Tory arch-rival William Pitt the Younger, as well as his dismissal from the Privy Council, with a toast to 'Our Sovereign Majesty the people'.

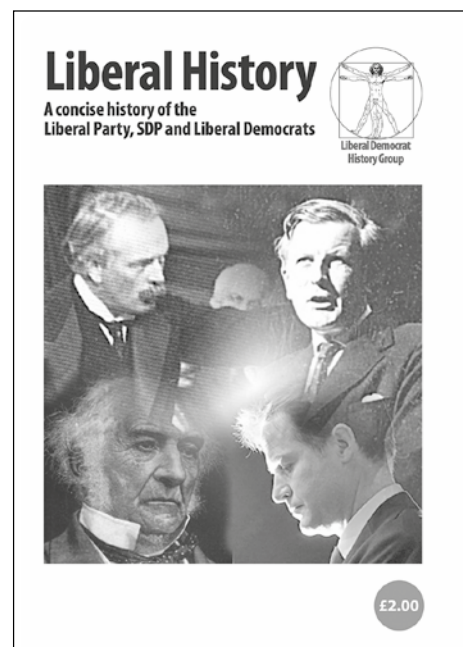
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1920 Paisley by-election

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

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.

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

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. 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.



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.

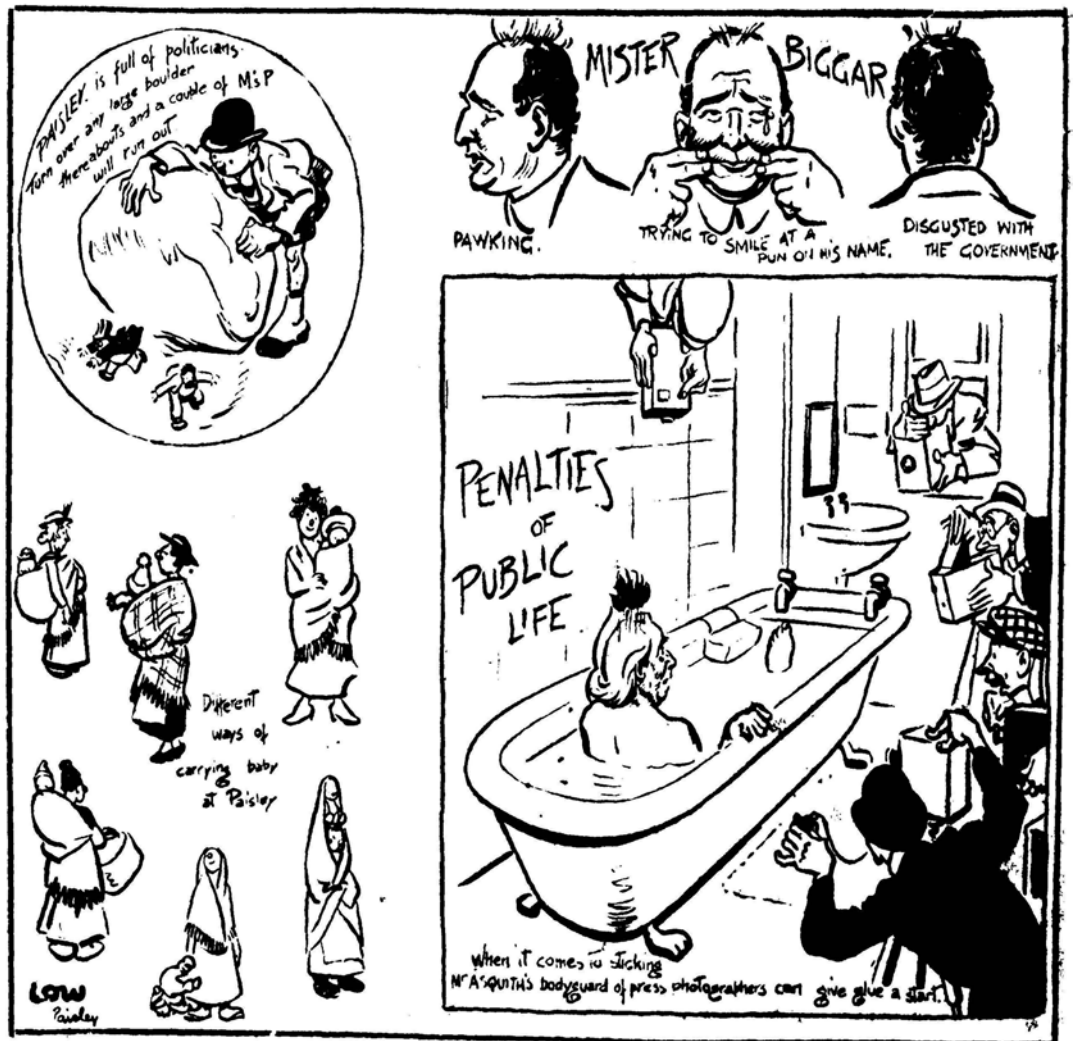
Different ways of carrying baby at Paisley

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)

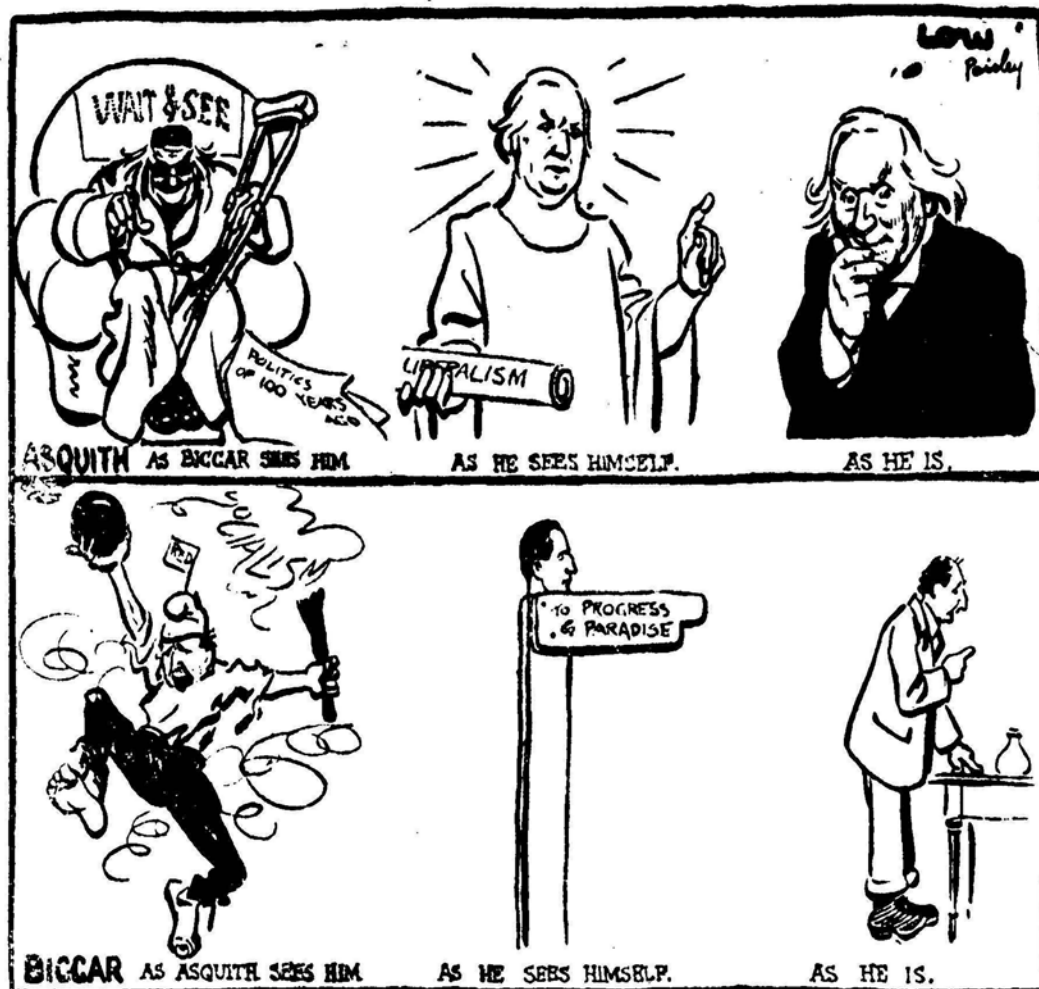
Liberal–Labour’ one.⁴⁶ However, as the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* commented:

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 Bolshevik 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.

Hugh Gault is an independent writer and historian. His latest book, 1900 Liverpool Lives: The Threads That Bind, was published in spring 2019.

As Firth put it, Asquith should 'beware the omen of the Paisley shawl which was always designed to be the comfort of declining years'. 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.

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



Appreciation

Michael Meadowcroft looks back at the life and political career of Robert MacLennan, the third leader of the SDP and first (interim co-) leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Robert MacLennan (Lord MacLennan of Rogart)

Robert Adam Ross MacLennan, Lord MacLennan of Rogart, born 26 June 1936, died 18 January 2020. Married 1968 Helen Noyes (née Cutter) who survives him, as do their children, Adam and Ruth, and a stepson, Nicholas.

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ROBERT MACLENNAN WAS a politician of exquisite paradoxes: a man of immense principle and steadfastness and yet lacking in political judgement on a great many individual issues. He was a man who had a deep appreciation for the fine arts and for music and yet he gave the appearance of stern aloofness. He was manifestly shy and was nervous about difficult speeches but his commitment to deeply held beliefs forced him to step forward. He was possessed of a deep sense of duty which impelled him into politics; but, in reality, he was never a natural politician. Even the fact of being known to most friends and colleagues as 'Bob' was slightly curious – his serious demeanour and his lawyer's forensic approach would more naturally have suggested 'Robert'. The final paradox was that having defeated George Mackie, the sitting Liberal MP for Caithness & Sunderland,¹ in a hard-fought campaign, by the slender majority of just sixty-four votes in 1966, the two became friends and allies, particularly as Liberal Democrat colleagues in the House of Lords.

To his family, friends and those who worked for him, Bob MacLennan was clearly a warm and personable individual, and all the personal comments following his death bear this out. It is when one has to assess him as a politician, particularly in that highly fraught period following the 1987 general election, that the difficulties arise.

The Butler and King book on the 1966 election² described Bob MacLennan as the ideal Labour candidate for the massive and sprawling constituency of Caithness & Sutherland. In addition to MacLennan's appeal to the Scottish

respect for lawyers,³ his father was a respected and titled gynaecologist and the family had an association with the little Sutherland village of Rogart. He was helped by the development of the Dounreay nuclear power station in the constituency which produced an influx of working men more inclined to vote Labour. He later remarked to a colleague that had he not won in 1966 he would have given up the idea of a political career.

Within a year he had gained the first step in a parliamentary career by becoming parliamentary private secretary to George Thomson, Commonwealth Secretary, followed by two junior ministerial posts. He was a consistent and committed supporter of British entry into the European Common Market (the European Economic Community (EEC)), later the European Union, and was one of the sixty-nine pro-Europe rebel Labour MPs, led by Roy Jenkins, who in 1971 voted for Edward Heath's paving bill to join the EEC, against the Labour whip. At the time he was committed to remaining within the Labour Party and hoped that Roy Jenkins would gain the leadership. In 1973, Dick Taverne, Labour MP for Lincoln, had finally made up his mind to resign from the party and to force a by-election (which he won) but he states that, at the last minute, Bob MacLennan 'came perhaps nearest of anyone to shaking my determination, with his quiet but forceful arguments'.⁴

In 1979, after Labour's defeat in the general election – as the party continued its slide to the left and the efforts to manipulate the rules for the election of the party leader – MacLennan was an early supporter of Jenkins' moves to set up what became the Social Democratic Party, although he did make an approach to join the Liberal Party, being 'strongly discouraged' by David Steel.⁵ Although, according to David Owen he vacillated over leaving Labour, he was one of the first tranche of Labour MPs to join the SDP on its formation in 1981 and was on its steering committee.⁶ He was the chief architect,

together with William Goodhart, of the SDP's constitution, skilfully drafted to maintain a balance between the rights of MPs and of party members. Many features of the SDP constitution – some may say too many – were imported into the Liberal Democrats' constitution seven years later.

He easily held his seat at both the 1983 and 1987 elections and played an active role in parliament as an SDP and an Alliance spokesman; but it was in the struggles over the creation of the merger between the SDP and the Liberal Party, following the 1987 election, that Maclennan demonstrated the personal and political dilemmas that manifested the different aspects of a tortured personality, torn between a duty to his party and a need to follow his conscience. In effect he went from being the SDP MP most opposed to merger – even including David Owen – to being the party leader who, in effect, forced it through.

David Owen's relationship with Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers – his three colleagues in the SDP's Gang of Four – was always fraught, largely because Owen believed that the party should have a distinct focus and thus lead the political agenda, whereas the other three saw that the only way to change politics was to work closely with the Liberals. As leader throughout the 1983–87 parliament, Owen single-handedly drove the party with remarkable energy and attention to detail; however, following the disappointing result of the 1987 election, Owen regarded David Steel's attempt to bounce the two parties into a single, merged entity as unacceptable. With his parliamentary colleagues John Cartwright and Rosie Barnes, he set about ensuring that the SDP would stay out of the merger even though the vote of SDP members over the summer had favoured merger, and resigned as leader in August after the result of the vote was declared. He encouraged the SDP to split so that those who favoured merger with the Liberals could do so, while those who, like Owen, wished to have a separate SDP still had a political home. This left just two SDP MPs, Charles Kennedy, who favoured merger, and Bob Maclennan – who had opposed it but accepted the party vote – out of his calculations. Owen calculated that, as the SDP constitution laid down that the party leader had to be a member of parliament, neither of them would take this on, thus leaving him a clear run. However, Charles Kennedy urged Maclennan to take on the role. He agreed and, after the Liberal Assembly had agreed to the principle of merger in September, opened negotiations over the form of the new party.



Maclennan was seen by everyone as a committed opponent of merger with the Liberal Party. David Owen saw him as 'robustly opposed to merger' and states that Maclennan told him that he 'would leave politics rather than join a merged party'.⁷ Crewe and King in their definitive book on the SDP describe Maclennan as 'speaking out more vigorously against merger than anyone else'.⁸ What turned Maclennan into the leader determined to create a merged party – as far as possible akin to an 'SDP Mark 2'? First, it was, typically, a matter of conscience and loyalty to accept the party's vote and to take on its mandate; but, secondly, and much more significantly, it became increasingly apparent that his aim was to produce from the negotiations a party that would be sufficiently aligned to David Owen's well-known blueprint for the SDP as to bring him back into the mainstream and thus enable the third force to succeed. This personal Maclennan crusade was not apparent to the negotiating teams at the beginning and, in fact, it only began to dawn on the Liberals when the SDP were insisting that the inclusion of a commitment to the UK's membership of NATO had to be included in the new party's constitution, which would itself be modelled on the SDP's original version, as largely drawn up by Maclennan. His aim was exposed publicly in the evening of 18 January 1988, immediately after the successful conclusion of three and a half months of negotiations, by his capricious and perverse sudden expedition – accompanied by the hapless Charles

Appreciation: Robert MacLennan

Kennedy – to Owen’s home to beg Owen to join the new party. If he had had even a modicum of political judgement, he would have known that this was bound to be a fruitless mission that would humiliate him and his cause.

MacLennan was completely unsuited to the rough and tumble of leadership and the unremitting demands it made for immediate comment and for maintaining a semblance of unity amongst unruly and unhappy colleagues. And the need to lead the SDP team in the inevitably incendiary and perilous merger negotiations with the Liberals multiplied his problems. Comments at the time and subsequently were unkind but accurate. Alan Beith described him as ‘an awkward speaker, not an obvious leader, and a difficult and strangely emotional negotiator.’⁹ Shirley Williams said that he was ‘thin skinned . . . not cut out for the sour and savage politics of the 1980s.’¹⁰ David Steel was more diplomatic, saying that he ‘belonged to a more genteel era.’¹¹ Des Wilson was typically forthright: ‘The SDP elected Robert MacLennan as their leader, a bizarre choice . . . an uptight, tortured-looking character, [who] had no leadership qualities whatsoever.’¹² At the end of it all, David Owen commented, ‘the embarrassment of Bob’s leadership [is] mercifully over.’¹³

MacLennan’s behaviour during the almost four months of negotiation was sometimes very strange and occasionally bizarre. He swung between giving ultimatums and suddenly giving way. There were even genuine concerns about his mental stability. When the former MP John Grant resigned from the SDP negotiating team late in the process, saying that there was ‘no meeting of hearts and minds’,¹⁴ MacLennan broke down in tears and said, ‘I can’t go on.’ He then walked out slowly, followed one by one by the rest of his stunned team.

When the constitutional details were completed, including the controversial preamble, NATO and all, there remained the question of a joint policy statement as a key accompaniment, which had, in effect, lain on the table during the long negotiations on everything else. The Liberals were relaxed about this, delegating it to the two leaders, believing, with the experience of the joint 1987 election manifesto, that an acceptable document could be put together swiftly with a consensus of the negotiators on board. This proved to be exceptionally naive. MacLennan laid great store by this document, which he saw as the means of setting out an Owenite prospectus that would draw Owen into the party. Two aides were tasked with writing a forthright policy statement. They consulted widely and,

at this point no alarm bells rang to disabuse the Liberals from believing that the outcome would be broadly acceptable. In any case, David Steel would have to sign it off and would thus prevent anything unacceptable appearing. This view did not take into account Steel’s notorious antipathy to giving detailed attention to lengthy policy papers and the final document was thus essentially a MacLennan draft. Once key Liberals had seen it, they immediately realised that much of it was completely unacceptable, including a hawkish defence policy, the extension of VAT to children’s clothing and support for civil nuclear power.

MacLennan refused to accept this and insisted that it had to go forward, making various threats, including that he would present it alone. Eventually he was forced to realise that his document was not acceptable, whereupon he collapsed into tears and had to be physically prevented from leaving the meeting. It took Charles Kennedy twenty minutes to calm him down in a quiet corner of the room and to persuade him that another document could be quickly written that would keep merger on track. Three senior members from each side produced a somewhat more anodyne version, and thus the whole process to form the merged party was finally signed off – and MacLennan called John Grant to ask him set up an immediate meeting with David Owen. Grant got the impression from MacLennan that he was about to reject the whole package and duly briefed Owen along this line. To Owen’s astonishment, MacLennan’s mission was to commend the package to Owen and to invite him to sign on to it. After a few brief minutes MacLennan and Kennedy were shown the door and a furious Owen immediately briefed the press on what had transpired, saying that the visit ‘reeked of insincerity’. Owen believed that MacLennan was close to a nervous breakdown.¹⁵

The merger was concluded with votes of both parties in January and February, and the Social & Liberal Democrats was formally launched on 3 March 1988. MacLennan announced that he did not intend to be a candidate for the leadership of the new party and became a loyal supporter of Paddy Ashdown. He embarked on a much more congenial and productive role in parliament and in the party. He was elected as party president in 1994 and was a key figure in the development and success of the party in the country. In parliament he became the party’s spokesman on the arts and on home and constitutional affairs – both subjects on which he had personal interests and practical views. Above all, Ashdown used MacLennan for what was one of

Robert MacLennan was a politician of exquisite paradoxes: a man of immense principle and steadfastness and yet lacking in political judgement on a great many individual issues.

the very few benefits that came out of his relationship with Tony Blair. He was appointed to work with Robin Cook on constitutional reform proposals. These were launched in March 1997 and included freedom of information legislation, devolution to Scotland and Wales (with proportional representation elections), an elected authority for London, removal of the hereditary peers from the House of Lords, proportional representation for the European Parliament elections, and a referendum on voting reform for Westminster elections.¹⁶ Most of these were enacted after Labour's victory in 1997, and Maclennan joined the Joint Cabinet Committee reviewing a range of constitutional items.

Bob Maclennan retired from the House of Commons in 2001 after thirty-five years as the MP for his huge Highlands constituency. It was a tribute to his relationship with his constituents that he was elected under three different political labels. He was immediately created a Liberal Democrat life peer and continued to use his interests and experience in European matters.

The trials and tribulations he suffered in the later years of the SDP were certainly un congenial for such a thoughtful and gentle man, but they stemmed directly from his sense of duty. A senior party officer shrewdly said of him that 'his career has often been more successful than visible' and that he was 'more of a renaissance man than a career politician.'¹⁷ Shirley Williams described him as 'a serious man and an extraordinarily conscientious one.'¹⁸

His last years were blighted by dementia but he will be remembered as a friendly, intelligent and sensitive colleague and friend.

Michael Meadowcroft – Liberal activist since 1958; Liberal MP, Leeds West, 1983–87; elected Liberal

Party President, 1987; political consultant in 35 new and emerging democracies, 1988–2016.

- 1 The constituency had been held (1922–45) by the Liberal leader Sir Archibald Sinclair, later Lord Thurso, and was held until 2015, following Maclennan's retirement, by John Thurso, Sinclair's grandson.
- 2 D. E. Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1966* (Macmillan, 1966), article on the constituency by Ian Grimble.
- 3 He had been called to the Bar, Gray's Inn, in 1962.
- 4 Dick Taverne, *The Future of the Left: Lincoln and After* (Jonathan Cape, 1974), p. 84.
- 5 David Torrance, *David Steel: Rising Hope to Elder Statesman* (Biteback, 2012), p. 136n.
- 6 David Owen, *Time to Declare* (Joseph, 1991), pp. 203, 472 and 487.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 709 and 726.
- 8 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995), p. 388.
- 9 Alan Beith, *Alan Beith: A View from the North* (Northumbria University Press, 2008), p. 114.
- 10 Shirley Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves* (Virago, 2009), p. 316.
- 11 Torrance, *David Steel*, p. 236.
- 12 Des Wilson, *Memoirs of a Minor Public Figure* (Quartet Books, 2013), p. 248.
- 13 Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 736.
- 14 Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves, *Merger – The Inside Story* (Liberal Renewal, 1989), p. 95.
- 15 Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 738.
- 16 Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan, *Looking Back, Looking Forward: The Cook–Maclennan Agreement on Constitutional Reform, Eight Years On* (New Politics Network, 2005).
- 17 Helen Bailey, entry for Robert Maclennan in Duncan Brack (ed.) *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (Politico's Publishing, 1998).
- 18 Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves*, p. 316.

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Chartism and Liberalism

Tim Hughes analyses the relationship between Chartism and the radical Liberal politics of the 1860s and 1870s through a case study of politics in Northampton.

Northampton and the de

The Six Points OF THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER.

1. A VOTE for every man twenty-one years of age, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for crime.
2. THE BALLOT.—To protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.
3. NO PROPERTY QUALIFICATION for Members of Parliament —thus enabling the constituencies to return the man of their choice, be he rich or poor.
4. PAYMENT OF MEMBERS, thus enabling an honest tradesman, working man, or other person, to serve a constituency, when taken from his business to attend to the interests of the country.
5. EQUAL CONSTITUENCIES, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing small constituencies to swamp the votes of large ones.
6. ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since though a constituency might be bought once in seven years (even with the ballot), no purse could buy a constituency (under a system of universal suffrage) in each ensuing twelvemonth; and since members, when elected for a year only, would not be able to defy and betray their constituents as now.

The original People's Charter from 1838

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES the nature of the relationship between Chartism and the Radical Liberal politics of the 1860s and 1870s. It argues that a democratic tradition remained as a dynamic political force

rather than leaving an inert or subdued Chartist legacy. This tradition, being a catalyst to the coalescing of parliamentary and subsequently popular Liberalism around Gladstonian Liberalism, remained separate and distinctive; for

democratic radical tradition

while Gladstonian Liberalism was progressive it was not democratic.

Northampton was a town with a strong Radical tradition and one where the different factions within Radicalism came into conflict. Northampton also offers a certain clarity, lacking in some contexts, when examining the Chartist tradition, in that they did not renounce their Chartist pasts, as some have argued happened nationally, but took pride in them.¹ The debate around continuity or discontinuity often focuses around class, however the argument here will focus on individual activists and ideology.² It will be argued that to look for ‘dissonance and dissent on the part of the former Chartists’ underestimates the ideological differences within Radicalism. There is less a ‘transition into Liberalism’, as some have argued, than an accommodation between different concepts of Radicalism around broad policy aims that in themselves cannot define Radicalism.³ An example of this that will be considered later is attitudes to extending the franchise which, taken as a broad aim, can hide fundamental differences of principle that distinguish the democratic Radical tradition.

Studies of Radical Northampton tend to focus on Charles Bradlaugh, MP for Northampton 1880–1891, and have argued that Bradlaugh, in his failed election campaigns of 1868 and 1874, gave ‘the first impetus to Radicalism in Northampton’; and it is not hard to understand why he was credited with this role.⁴ He was a highly charismatic figure who received a great deal of national attention even prior to the parliamentary controversies over his swearing of the oath in parliament in the 1880s that cemented his role in parliamentary history. However, I believe his value to historians studying the nature of Radicalism in the 1860s and 1870s lies not in his beliefs but in his acting as a prism separating out the different strands of Radicalism that already existed within Northampton liberalism. A figure who, because of the reaction to his atheism and secularist beliefs, allows us to examine a Radicalism separate

from Radical Nonconformity to which it has become at times too closely associated. The focus will shift from Bradlaugh to individuals who specifically demonstrate the continuity of the Chartist tradition in order to rectify this.

While this article is not meant as a study of Chartism, it may be helpful to remind readers of the Chartist objectives which were set out in their Six Points. Chartists demanded universal male suffrage for those aged over 21, with some also advocating votes for women. They advocated equal electoral areas or constituencies; annual elections, which was thought would counter corruption; abolishing property requirements for MPs, which along with payment of MPs would encourage working-class candidates; and the secret ballot, or the ballot, which again would counter corruption and be less intimidating for working men who thought differently to their employers. A working-class movement, it presented three major petitions to parliament, the last in 1848.

Northampton had a Chartist tradition; it even provided the first historian of Chartism.⁵ Key Chartists become prominent figures in the development of the Liberal Party in the town and this on the surface supports a narrative of continuity between Chartism and Liberalism. It also pre-empted the divisions over religion that emerged in Northampton among those that would describe themselves as Radicals in the 1870s. The Chartists in Northampton diverged over religion in 1848 when the Northampton organisation fractured with Nonconformists supporting the Liberation Movement.⁶ The Liberation Movement had as its focus the ending of Church rates and ultimately the disestablishment of the Anglican Church. An element of the Nonconformist tradition therefore also developed in Northampton out of Chartism while continuing to remain within the broader Radical dialogue.

Nonconformity was not, however, the dominant strand within the Chartist narrative in Northampton politics. One figure in particular was seen as the standard bearer of Chartism

This article argues that a democratic tradition remained as a dynamic political force rather than leaving an inert or subdued Chartist legacy. This tradition, being a catalyst to the coalescing of parliamentary and subsequently popular Liberalism around Gladstonian Liberalism, remained separate and distinctive; for while Gladstonian Liberalism was progressive it was not democratic.

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within Northampton and that was Joseph Gurney. He had stood as a Chartist candidate in municipal elections in 1849, 1850 and 1855; he was also a founding member of the Northampton Secularist Society in 1854. He would eventually become the first Radical mayor of Northampton. He should be viewed as representing the pragmatic side of Chartism, one willing to proceed gradually seeking compromise and accommodation within the Liberal movement. He represents a continuity in the transition from Chartist to Radical Liberal candidates in his being able to write how,

I may state that I proposed Mr Bradlaugh; I was also the first to introduce the name of Mr Gilpin to the electors of Northampton; at two previous elections I proposed Mr JT Lockhart; and at a still earlier date I was one of the committee which brought Dr Epps forward.⁷

[Dr Epps and J. T. Lockhart were Chartist candidates; Gilpin and Bradlaugh were Radical Liberals.]

Gurney's obituary would describe him as:

... a stronger Chartist than the Chartists, a greater Radical than the Radicals, a more advanced Socialist than the Socialists. Not the Socialists of to-day, but Socialists of Robert Owen's stamp, who believed in volunteer Socialism, and not the clockwork regulation of every individual of the State.⁸

However, it must be noted that while Gurney's Chartist credentials were never challenged and, indeed, they were continually referenced both by himself and others throughout his career, he did not vote for the Chartist candidate, Dr M'Douall, in 1841. Gurney voted for the Whig, Vernon Smith, alongside the Radical Raikes Currie.⁹ He is also absent from the coverage of Chartist meetings in the *Northampton Mercury*. Gurney traced his political career to 1830 and the agitation leading to the Great Reform Act of 1832, when he had 'wanted a wider extension of the suffrage and the ballot.'¹⁰ By 1833, he had become the Northampton Secretary for the Society for the Abolition of the Taxes on Knowledge. He was therefore politically active throughout the time of the Chartist agitation in Northampton. To see Gurney as the torch-bearer of the Chartism in Northampton was therefore to say that he represented a political tradition separate from the politics of personalities, which seemed to dominate the latter Chartist period nationally. His failure to vote

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for Dr M'Douall may be because Dr M'Douall was associated with the more aggressive, physical-force Chartism; or it may be the way Dr M'Douall aligned himself in the election with the Conservatives which caused many Chartists to throw 'themselves into the arms of the Whigs, in sheer disgust'.¹¹ It would be tempting to trace his Chartist radicalisation to a court case involving bailiffs employed by the vicar of All Saints in August, 1849 to collect the vicar's rate from Mrs Gurney. Certainly two of the other Chartist candidates from the November 1849 municipal election were involved in this incident and its timing would be convenient, but it probably only signifies that the Chartists in 1849 represented a relatively tight group who found themselves in conflict with the established church.¹² While a Chartist tradition continued it should be seen as representing a legacy of ideas, the democratic tradition, taken up by Gurney and others in the twilight of Chartism as a movement.

Another key figure within the Radical democratic tradition was John Bates who was an important catalyst within Northampton Liberalism. In his obituary he was described as, 'an advanced Radical ... not connected with any of the existing political organisations'. This is a little disingenuous as he regularly attended ward meetings of Liberal electors and sought to stand as a Radical candidate in municipal elections with official Liberal backing. A news-agent, whose 'outspoken utterances on political topics on many occasions gained for him a numerous following of supporters, and his written comments on town matters, which he frequently exhibited in his window, led to his attaining considerable notoriety.'¹³ During his career he had stood as a Chartist candidate alongside Gurney in 1850 and later became an active member of the Board of Guardians, the Improvement Commission and the School Board, with Radical support. He stood on two occasions as an independent Radical in 1860 and 1862 when divisions emerged between the Radicals and official Liberalism. He was also a key figure in the introduction and promotion of Bradlaugh as a Liberal candidate for Northampton. The West Ward passed a motion to 'express its sense of the loss which the cause of Radicalism has sustained' on his death.¹⁴

In 1852, Northampton elected the Whig, Robert Vernon Smith and the Radical, Raikes Currie to parliament. In this respect Northampton followed the classical pattern of a Whig standing with a Radical that seemed typical of parliamentary Liberalism, with the cornerstone of its power based around the two-member

urban constituency. In the election of 1852, Chartism was still a distinct political entity. John Ingram Lockhart stood as the Chartist candidate in the general election receiving 106 votes, while Gurney, as a Chartist candidate in the municipal elections of 1855, received 69 votes. Even considering the restricted electorate these are not large votes. It is not however the purpose of this article to examine the breadth of support for the democratic Radical tradition but to examine its development and distinctive ideology.

There is evidence of an early attempt at convergence in mid-1850s Northampton between the radicalism of Chartism and the middle-class radicalism of Northampton's Radical MP, Raikes Currie. In 1855, on joining Lord Palmerston's cabinet, Vernon Smith, Northampton's Whig MP, had to stand for re-election. The Conservatives decided not to force a contest, but the Chartists put forward Lockhart as a candidate. This was not an unusual tactic from the Chartists, who would put forward a candidate at the hustings and then often withdraw them from the contest. This had the effect of giving a voice to non-voters, whom they wished to enfranchise, as well as making a point regarding their broader support. The manner in which local Chartists conducted the proceedings in 1855 and created the New Reform Association suggest that they sought something more than this, an alliance or convergence with the middle-class Radicals.

The New Reform Association was described as being formed 'by the Chartist body of the town'. With Joseph Gurney in the chair, it met in October 1855, for what the *Mercury* patronisingly described as a *soirée*.¹⁵ It is unclear how established the association was. There is evidence of a meeting on the question of the Ballot earlier in the year but there is no mention of the society then.¹⁶ The Chartist roots of the organisation were however made explicit. The meeting drew to a close with Bates stating,

... that terms had been offered by the Chartist body to the Whigs, to the effect that one member of the Association and two candidates of the same principles should be put up at the coming municipal elections, and supported by the Whigs, who, in return, were to receive the support of the Chartist body. The Whigs, however, had refused these terms, and war to the knife was, therefore, to be declared against them.

The meeting's outward purpose was to promote the secret ballot. It is however clear that

the meeting was designed as an attempt to bring together the middle-class Radicals and the Chartists in an electoral alignment. Gurney thought he had negotiated the presence of the local Radical MP, Raikes Currie (MP for Northampton 1837–57). He had been invited but did not attend as he felt it inappropriate to attend a meeting where Lockhart was present. John Ingram Lockhart had been the Chartist candidate for Northampton in 1852, standing as an alternative to Vernon Smith. Raikes Currie's son did attend, warning them that, 'They who advocated disunion, were playing the game of the Tories who, whatever they might say, were the sworn enemies of all progress and popular privilege. They openly avowed that they looked for success through disunion among the Liberals.' He appears to have recognised the New Reform Association as a Radical organisation and talked of unity rather than convergence or assimilation. Gurney did not manage to spring the trap and bring together the middle-class Radicals and the Chartists, but his approach was not totally rejected.

At the meeting Mr Whitehurst from the Ballot Society advocated the secret ballot as a means towards reform and a vehicle for electing more Radical Liberals like Layard, Roebuck and Cobden. He pointed out that Vernon Smith, who had been the MP for Northampton since 1831, had voted against the ballot: one of '10 Whig members, 13 members of the Government, and 236 Tories.' Lockhart spoke as a prospective candidate, outlining a Radical platform and criticised Vernon Smith for not voting for 'a single thing they desired him to vote for.' This suggested that there was an acceptance of Liberalism as a vehicle for change and that the problem was factional.¹⁷

In the municipal elections of November 1855, Joseph Gurney stood as a 'representative of Democracy and Popular Rights' and the Northampton Reform Association, to 'test public opinion' and challenge 'the leaders of the Whig Party'. Unlike in 1849 and 1850, he stood alone and not as one of a slate of Chartist candidates. The Liberal candidates stood as 'true Liberals, Friends of Economy, and Advocates of the Poor Man's Rights to the Franchise'. There might seem little ground between them. Gurney, however, advocated a programme of local meetings for the people to voice their opinions on political matters as well as petitions to parliament by the municipal council. These would become commonplace later but represented something aspirational at this point. Following the election, a further leaflet

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from Gurney addressed his voters, emphasising the scale of corruption in the election, and called out for the ballot ‘which we believe to be the only safeguard against such vile practices.’ This would be Gurney’s mantra for the next fifteen years.¹⁸

The failure to realign the borough politics of Northampton in 1855 seemed to move Gurney towards compromise. In 1856, after a disputed election, Gurney was elected to the Improvements Commission, which managed many of the practical affairs of the town.¹⁹ Soon afterwards, in 1858, Gurney was elected to the West Ward as a Liberal. For D’Arcy, who produced the most comprehensive study of Northampton in this period, this move came about through the sharing of common ground over franchise reform and the need for the secret ballot.²⁰ He too referenced the two meetings above. However, suffrage and the ballot did not define Radicalism but only set out headings under which Radicals and liberals could come together. There remained a fundamental difference between those Radicals who held to democratic ideas and saw the limitations of these issues as concessions and those who saw franchise reform as involving necessary concessions to progress without any underlining principle. Gurney’s move into municipal Liberalism was pragmatic, but he maintained his Chartist identity and principles. While Radicalism may be ‘characterised by a broad emphasis on pragmatism’ it does not define its beliefs, and there remained clear ideological divisions.²¹

The *Mercury*, approaching the municipal elections of 1858, noted,

The bundle of sticks loosened, and the scattered material served to warm the Conservative hearth. However, there seems no fear of a repetition of this sort of thing ... We do not remember any Ward meetings where there was such unanimity.²²

The ‘bundle of sticks’ was not simply a metaphor for Liberal diversity. While its exact nature was somewhat secretive, it appears to have been a closed meeting of key Liberal supporters. A year later, in response to being goaded in the Conservative Northampton Herald for being a Whig organisation, a member did offer an explanation in a letter to the *Mercury*:

It is a brotherhood of men who meet to exchange ideas... It is composed of men of all grades ... not the least part of which is formed from the working classes ... [it]

Northampton
Liberals and Radicals
– from top:
Joseph Gurney
Charles Gilpin
Raikes Currie

Northampton
Liberals and Radicals
– from top:

Charles Bradlaugh
Anthony Henley (3rd
Baron Henley)
William Shoosmith

includes in membership about two hundred liberal men of Northampton.²³

It appears to have been the manifestation of official Liberalism in Northampton and Gurney became a member, presumably in his role as a Liberal councillor, and addressed their annual dinner in December 1858.²⁴ In this sense, at the very least, Chartism seems to have infiltrated official Liberalism.

In the national context, by 1860 Gladstone had emerged as a figurehead for progressive Liberalism. For the Northampton MPs, he managed to encompass both the moderate Radicalism of Gilpin and the ‘Radical’ Whiggism of Lord Henley. Gilpin had built his Radical credentials, not least with Gurney, on a commitment that he would report back annually to his constituency. Here is the concession that Chartist pragmatism required. It was this which in December 1860, brought the ‘Bundle of Sticks’ and United Liberal Association together, to hear reports from their MPs. The theme of the evening was unity. Core policies of franchise reform, the ballot and opposition to church rates offered a solid platform on which to stand, but the evening also presented a coherent sense of history: a Whig history. The chairman welcomed, ‘those descendants of the old Puritans’ before him, ‘disloyal only once, and that was to a tyrant.’ The moderate Liberal councillor, J. M. Vernon ‘mentioning Cromwell, for whom he hoped a place would soon be found in Westminster Abbey.’ This is not a Republican iconography for, while Cromwell killed a king, he also fought for the rights of parliament. The Whig narrative continues on to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 where parliament and the Whigs assert themselves again in the name of parliament. It was a more Radical councillor, William Shoosmith who gave the toast, ‘The People – the only source of legitimate power’, after confessing that he would not do away with the monarchy if he were able, just in case there was any confusion. All of this was carried out in front of pictures of Earl Spencer and Lord Palmerston.

Of the MPs, it was Gilpin, the Radical member, who made the first speech. He went through the Liberal government’s record. Gladstone’s repeal of the paper duty was central to this call for unity.

I now come to one subject, which might very well be called one of our demerits; I allude to our failure to carry the abolition of the paper duty through the House of Lords. (Hear, hear.) I allude to the



unjustifiable act of the House of Lords – ('hear, hear,' and cheers) – the 'gigantic innovation,' as Mr Gladstone called it, the constitutional outrage, as I believe it to be, of assuming to themselves a power to which, as an irresistible body, they have no right, and a power which I hope they will yet be told they shall not retain – (hear, hear, and cheers) – the power of taxing or the retaining of taxes by their own free will upon the people of England.²⁵

Here was fertile ground for Lord Henley, the Whig, to develop. Lord Henley initially conceded that he was against the cost of raising income tax to abolish paper duties, voting for it reluctantly. Retrenchment (the cutting of government expenditure) was a core principle across the Liberal spectrum, even if paper duties had a greater significance to a Radical audience who sought a cheaper regional press. However Whig identity was based around a suspicion of the centralisation of monarchical power. He spelled it out to his audience: 'I consider that the Lord's refusal to join in the abolition of a tax – a money bill – is equally contrary to the constitution, as for the Queen to put her veto upon a Bill of any sort.' Although the meeting appears unaware of Palmerston's opposition to the ending of paper duties, the narrative brings Whigs and Radicals together.

Henley then addressed the Radicals in his audience:

I do not think we can look to Mr Bright for advancing the position of the Liberal party in the House of Commons at present. Whether it is that in his zeal and eagerness for Liberal measures he has asked rather too much – I think probably that is the case; in the speeches that he has made he has rather frightened the great body of moderate men, and driven them away from his support.²⁶

This might not be what some Radicals would want to hear, but in Gladstone he has a new champion to offer. Lord Henley continued, 'Well, then, to whom are we to look? Why there is but one name to which we can really look, and . . . I need hardly tell you that the name of that gentleman is Mr Gladstone. (Loud cheers.)' For Lord Henley it was one of 'the most unified meetings I have ever seen in Northampton.'

During his speech, the Radical Gilpin confirmed his authenticity by publicly sharing a joke in an aside with the totemic Gurney regarding church rates. At the end of the

meeting Gurney spoke and, according to the *Mercury*, 'touched upon the ballot, extension of the suffrage, coast defences, and other topics, stating his differences from preceding speakers, and justifying his grounds of objections.'²⁷ This isn't developed by the *Mercury*. It would be fascinating to know what those differences were. What is clear, though, is that Gurney's Radicalism remains distinct.

Gladstone emerges here less as the champion of Radicalism and more as a unity figure who played to the Radical audience but fitted into the Whig narrative much more easily than alternatives like Bright.²⁸ This is not to argue that Gladstone was a Whig or even, in the longer term, a figure who would protect Whig values. Russell, however, may well have believed he was at the time and this would explain his willingness to see Gladstone succeed him, as well as his later sense of betrayal. We are also yet to see the emergence of Gladstone's close courting of the Radical *Telegraph*.²⁹ We do however see Gladstone being utilised in this way, certainly in Northampton. Lord Henley can safely play the Radical orator:

You must be unanimous, and all work together. You must petition, you must make speeches, you must do everything in your power that there is not that apathy which our enemies cast in our teeth. It is because of that apathy that so little has been done during the past session.³⁰

Without this, for Lord Henley and most of the Commons there was no call for or need to concede reform. When that call does come, Henley proves less accepting.

In contrast with Lord Henley, Gilpin was the national face of Northampton Radicalism and remained credible across the Radical spectrum. He was able to anchor this around the emergent 'people's William' of the early 1860s. Gilpin's Radicalism was however more guarded than he made it appear. When the Northampton branch of the Reform League campaigned for manhood suffrage and planned a Great Reform Demonstration in Northampton, Gilpin wrote to the demonstration committee to make clear that he advocated a more modest proposal: household and lodger franchise alongside the secret ballot. He did however attend the demonstration, unlike Henley. Indeed, he noted, 'The Whigs won't have it if they can help it; but the people will have it, and we will get it.'³¹ Gilpin's reluctance to embrace the calls for manhood suffrage defined his Radicalism as different from the democratic Chartist tradition. His

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resorting to anti-Whig rhetoric demonstrated the point of reference they held in common: the rhetorical other. This must appear a little forced coming from a Radical sitting in tandem with a Whig and one who would stand by Lord Henley when other Radicals, like Bradlaugh, came forward as alternatives.

As the reform question developed a clear momentum, MPs such as Gilpin were able to satisfy more Radical elements by appealing to public perceptions of Gladstone. For example, Gilpin was able to address a public meeting of Liberal supporters at the Corn Exchange, in August 1864, by declaring:

I sat by Mr Gladstone whilst he was making that speech, and I can say this, that whatever else it meant, it meant this, that he knew there were hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of intelligent working men who had not the suffrage, and who ought to have it. (Loud cheers)³²

In retrospect this seems remarkably cautious in terms of numbers. This is significant as the franchise reform was still an area around which Radicals sought to unite. It also existed as one of the fault lines within the Liberal Party. It has been argued that ‘demands for the extension of the franchise were one of the most outstanding continuities in the main stream’, which is clearly the case. However, to argue that ‘Radicalism in general was democratic in its commitment to government for the people and with their consent’ holds true only for the middle-class Radicals.³³ Gurney, as part of the democratic Radical tradition, sought a greater role *by* the people and with their *participation*.

As the chosen leaders of the Radical cause, Gladstone and Bright did not share the aspirations of manhood suffrage, certainly as a short-term objective. For Radicals like Gurney and those that emerged out of the more democratic Chartist tradition, however, it did hold importance. Gilpin can get an easy cheer from the United Liberal Association by referencing ‘the future leader of the Liberal host, I mean Mr Gladstone—(cheers)’; his credibility drew on perceptions of Gladstone and his commitment being defined through his commitment to the man. He repeats this in a municipal context by mentioning ‘my friend Mr. Gurney’.³⁴

Leaning on Gladstone, Gilpin could argue:

The utterances which Mr Gladstone has given, and which he has never withdrawn, and which I trust he never will withdraw,

with reference to the extension of the franchise to the working population of the country, must and will stamp him as the people’s man, as the people’s leader. (Cheers)³⁵

Indeed, it would; but Gilpin must have been aware of the ambiguities surrounding Gladstone’s speech, even if his audience was not.

The speech which Gilpin was referring to was made in the Commons earlier in May. Gladstone was replying for the government to a bill introduced by Baines, a Radical MP, for a modest extension to the franchise. Gilpin was referring to a particular passage in the speech when Gladstone appears to advocate universal suffrage:

And I venture to say that every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or of political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the constitution.³⁶

The passage infuriated Palmerston, who as prime minister had asked him not to commit the government ‘to any particular amount of Borough Franchise’.³⁷ No doubt Palmerston had considered himself very clever with this attempt to finesse Gladstone as there had been a growing expectation that Gladstone might be moving towards a more Radical position. However, in the subsequent correspondence between them, Gladstone would deny the common interpretation of the speech, ‘I am at a loss to know how as you read my speech you can ascribe this opinion to me.’³⁸

The immediate reaction in the *Northampton Mercury* was mixed; while describing the event as ‘a memorable day in our political history’, which marked Gladstone out as a ‘future Reform leader’, it was cautious in its reporting. It quoted Gladstone as saying:

I give my cordial concurrence to the proposition that there ought to be, not a wholesale, but a sensible and considerable addition to that portion of the working classes, at present almost infinitesimal – which is in the possession of the franchise.³⁹

This is something even Palmerston would have found acceptable. The reporting of the speech included the ‘pale of the constitution’ quotation which would give such encouragement to those seeking manhood suffrage, but the paper clearly sided with a moderate interpretation of Gladstone’s meaning.

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They quote Mr Whiteside, replying for the Conservatives, that ‘The motion was nothing more than a vehicle for uttering speeches for election purposes.’⁴⁰ But they fail to report a key passage spoken by Mr Whiteside, who had been quick to pick up on the meaning of Gladstone’s words, saying, ‘I thought the words so remarkable that I wrote them down – “Every man who is not subject to any personal incapacity ought to have the franchise.” And although the right hon. Gentleman immediately afterwards went on to explain – his talent for copious explanation I take to be even more remarkable than his power of luminous exposition – these were the very words he used.’⁴¹

The *Mercury* gave greater attention to the subsequent publishing of the speech as a pamphlet. It quoted at length from the preface which clarified that:

... political danger might arise from their admission; as for example, through the disturbance of the equilibrium of the constituent body, or through virtual monopoly of power in a single class.

It was therefore far from advocating universal male suffrage or a democratic principle. It still adhered to the principles regarding the representation of interests and a balance between classes which characterised the mid-nineteenth-century parliamentary system. It concluded:

If I regret the manner in which my declaration has been interpreted, it is chiefly because of its tendency to produce in other quarters an exaggerated estimate, likely, when brought down to the dimensions of fact, to cause disappointment.⁴²

Gilpin was therefore being somewhat disingenuous in his interpretation of Gladstone even if he was in many respects a true advocate of Gladstone’s position. Matthew has described the leading Radicals in parliament at this time as ‘more interested in policy than in party, and this accorded with Gladstone’s own view’.⁴³ This may be true of those brought to Liberalism through their Radicalism but not for those whose Radicalism was an expedient vehicle for Liberal unity. Gladstone must be seen as more motivated by the growing dynamic of party and his emerging place with in it.

On the franchise the *Mercury* reported that:

Those who are least enthusiastic in favour of change ought to rate highest the disadvantages of leaving the question which

With the death of Palmerston in 1865, the expectation was that a measure of reform extending the franchise would be passed. In 1866, on a platform alongside Gilpin, were representatives from across the spectrum of Northampton Liberalism but also representatives of the London Reform League, an organisation promoting a working-class campaign for an extension to the franchise; their number included Charles Bradlaugh.

Mr Gladstone would solve with calmness and good sense, to be agitated by every demagogue.⁴⁴

Gladstone stood where Whig and Radicals generally could coalesce, a position made possible by his ambiguity and the willingness of those like Gilpin and Lord Henley to adopt the clothing of Radical aspirations.

Gilpin’s purpose in his address and tactics generally was to bring together the Radicals of Northampton under his borrowed umbrella. But at this stage the embryonic alliance of Gladstonian Liberalism sought to commit the Radicals to the Liberal cause but also to keep vague any explanation of their ideas beyond the banner slogans. Gilpin specifically brings into his speech a commitment to the secret ballot, which Gladstone did not at this point support – ‘We have an extension of the franchise to secure; we have protection to the voter to secure ...’ – but which had become the subject to which Gurney’s loyalty was tied.⁴⁵ Later Gladstone would buy Bright’s ministerial commitment with the same coinage.

Among the repeated cheers at every mention of Gladstone and Bright, a more democratic Radical voice was beginning to assert itself. With the death of Palmerston in 1865, the expectation was that a measure of reform extending the franchise would be passed. In 1866, on a platform alongside Gilpin, were representatives from across the spectrum of Northampton Liberalism but also representatives of the London Reform League, an organisation promoting a working-class campaign for an extension to the franchise; their number included Charles Bradlaugh. He was part of a more confident national assertion of a voice found at a more local level which wished to assert a more inclusive and democratic Radicalism; not one that so much represented a class as wished to see a class represented.

Bradlaugh’s secularism was not irrelevant to his emergence as a parliamentary candidate in Northampton. The first mention of Charles Bradlow (sic) in the *Northampton Mercury* appears at the end of a report, in January 1859, on the visit of Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, who had become a lecturer defending Christian values. Cooper dismisses Bradlaugh as ‘a raw young man with plenty of assurance’ when invited to meet him.⁴⁶ When the *Mercury* reports Bradlaugh’s visit to the town in March, he was dismissed as Charles Bradloe [sic] come ‘to disseminate the shallow utterances of atheism.’⁴⁷ At this point Gurney and Bates were prominent members of

the Northampton Secularist Society but they 'devoted their energies primarily to Radicalism rather than secularism'.⁴⁸ It was not secularism which brought forth Bradlaugh as a candidate for Northampton but the issue of the franchise and the workings of the Reform League.

When coming to Northampton to endorse Bradlaugh on behalf of the London Reform League, on 4th August 1868, their representative conceded that:

He knew there were many people who opposed Mr Bradlaugh on account of his views on many subjects, but they were not sending him up on religious subjects ... They were sending him up to represent the interests of the working classes of the country. He would have preferred a working man to represent them, but Mr Bradlaugh was as near a working man as they could get to represent them.⁴⁹

Given such a lukewarm endorsement, it is not surprising that Bradlaugh recognised a need to justify his candidature. He did so as one who could represent the working man, and this became the common theme in a series of speeches.⁵⁰ In Grafton Street, one of the poorest areas in the Radical West Ward, he addressed a large meeting. Here he declared that 'having been born poor himself, and mixed with working people all through his life, and having gained a position of confidence with working men throughout England, and all through his life advocated reform, believed he had a right to come and put before them his past life as a reason why he should seek to represent them.' Going on to add that he knew 'what it was to eat one meal, and not know where he was to get the means to procure the next'.⁵¹

He addressed working men's issues in relation to the vote, education and tax but did not ignore allegations he was a 'heretic'. He would go to parliament to advocate not 'theological opinions, but political views and social liberty – not to have churches built, but to advocate religious liberty' and, with an eye to the Nonconformists, 'not to be compelled to pay for the support of a church to which he did not belong.' It was a strong performance laced with humour but one designed to appeal most strongly to the Chartist tradition in the town. It also explicitly targeted Lord Henley. Interestingly he promised 'independent support to Mr Gladstone' and, while the paper describes him as 'eulogising' Gladstone, he is keen to be seen as his own man.⁵²

In a series of four lectures in August of that year, it is interesting to see who Bradlaugh was

'He knew there were many people who opposed Mr Bradlaugh on account of his views on many subjects, but they were not sending him up on religious subjects ... They were sending him up to represent the interests of the working classes of the country. He would have preferred a working man to represent them, but Mr Bradlaugh was as near a working man as they could get to represent them.'

name checking from amongst the parliamentary Radicals.⁵³ Other than Gladstone, John Bright and James Stansfeld are mentioned in all four speeches; J. S. Mill twice; and Forster and Milner Gibson once each. There may of course have been others, as we are dependent on the newspaper reports, but two of interest are Bright and Stansfeld. Bright proved problematic. He was often referenced as a byword for Radicalism which both Gilpin and Henley were prone to do. Like Gladstone, he was more nuanced than was appreciated by working-class Radicals at the time. He did not favour manhood suffrage and, while a champion of the ballot, his loyalty to Radical Liberalism would prove brittle when it came to Irish home rule in the 1880s. Of greater interest was his wishing to associate himself with James Stansfeld, MP for Halifax from 1859 to 1895. He was a figure who had sympathised with the Chartists and had spoken frequently at the meetings of the Northern Reform Union, which can be seen as the precursor of the Reform League. Stansfeld had first been elected for Halifax in 1859 alongside Sir Charles Wood. He would later be compared to Bradlaugh: 'he received similar treatment to that accorded to Mr Bradlaugh at Northampton, – being called an infidel, an atheist, and one who did not believe in the Bible.' This from the Chartist, Benjamin Wilson.⁵⁴

This became clear when a copy of a letter to Bright was published from a Northampton voter, who was seeking to draw out Bright's opinion of Bradlaugh's candidacy. Bright's reply was published alongside it:

Dear Sir, – I cannot interfere in your election matters, but I can answer the question you put to me. I do not believe you can improve the representation of your Borough by changing your members. I think Lord Henley and Mr Gilpin worthy of your confidence and support.⁵⁵

Bradlaugh made light of the intervention, publicly reading out a subsequent correspondence between the two, concluding, 'they had a constituency much more Radical than Lord Henley. Mr Bright did not know that.'⁵⁶ The *Mercury* and no doubt his opponents generally made much of Bright's cool response. As with Gladstone, the Radical hinterland misunderstood its Radical standard bearers.

The election of 1868 in Northampton brought out these tensions within Liberalism. The working-class Radical, Chartist tradition which cohabited with official Liberalism sought to impose itself within what self-identified as

Northampton and the democratic radical tradition

a Radical town. With a greater franchise there was expected to emerge a more Radical voice representing to a greater extent the working man. This is not to see this as a majority view within Northampton Liberalism; it wasn't. The two Liberal challengers to the Gilpin/Henley ticket were very much outlier figures. There was a dearth of key local Liberals supporting their campaigns. For Bradlaugh one of the key figures was Bates, someone very much on the edge of Liberalism having stood as an independent in municipal elections, who chaired most of his meetings. Gurney did propose Bradlaugh but did not seem to have played a major role, being closely associated with Gilpin.

The agenda of Henley and Gilpin, who issued a joint address, was classical Gladstonian – retrenchment, peace and reform, with a nod to the ballot and Ireland. There was nothing there for Radicals to object to. Bradlaugh was aware of this and made explicit in his own propaganda and speeches that he was not standing in opposition to Gilpin, stating, 'I fight the fight I commenced, 'Charles Bradlaugh against Lord Henley'. Henley 'is respectably mediocre, and might well do for a county member to represent his class, but he is not the sort of man to represent a Radical borough; he is a party man, and goes with his party (the Whigs)'.⁵⁷ When accused of sowing disunity, Bradlaugh issued a leaflet challenging both Henley and the *Mercury*: it 'is the so-called respectable Whigs who have divided the borough Liberals, if divisions there be'.⁵⁸ Bradlaugh noticeably here adopted a class rhetoric in relation to the Whigs.

Another independent Radical candidate seeking Liberal support stood in the election, further showing the factional nature of Liberalism. Dr Lees, while dismissed by some of his opponents as simply a prohibitionist representing the United Kingdom Alliance, stood on a broad Radical platform. In favour of retrenchment, the ballot and further extensions of the franchise into the counties, he was clearly Radical but not unusual. However, he went further in calling for triennial parliaments and land tax reform to encourage retrenchment among the wealthy, placing him closer to the democratic Radicalism of the Chartist tradition. Indeed, he had been elected as a Chartist town councillor for Leeds in 1850. Towards Gilpin he was supportive but with more ambiguity than Bradlaugh: 'The liberal Middle-Classes have already one sound Representative – why should they want two?' His rhetoric of class antagonism unusually offered an explicit criticism of both Whig and middle-class Liberals. Gladstone could receive, 'loyal but independent support' from Dr Lees.⁵⁹

It might appear that a fraternal conflict was taking place interested in labels rather than policies. A conflict between an assortment of Radicals and the Whigs. There is something in this. We have seen already how Gilpin was willing to resort to an anti-Whig rhetoric. There is also evidence that he was sympathetic to Bradlaugh's candidature and 'regarded Bradlaugh as his political heir'.⁶⁰ He contributed £10 after the election of 1874 towards Bradlaugh's costs, a figure that may have a broader resonance given the controversy over J. S. Mill's contribution of the same sum to Bradlaugh before the election of 1868. His daughter also quoted a statement by Alderman P. P. Perry, from 1876, that Gilpin was in favour of an 'arrangement with Mr Bradlaugh'.⁶¹ Perry had himself been a municipal Chartist candidate in 1850 and had been one of the Chartists whose energies drifted to the Liberation Society after 1848. He was therefore, not surprisingly, a reluctant supporter of Bradlaugh, supporting both Whig candidates, Henley and Fowler, in the election and then the by-election of 1874.⁶²

It has been argued that the divisions in Northampton 'were not based on fundamental differences of principle, but on personalities and a desire of Radicals for a real share of power in municipal and parliamentary powers'.⁶³ This power struggle was genuine, but its foundations predate Bradlaugh's interest in the constituency. He was emblematic rather than the cause of the conflict, which transcends personalities. The Radicalism that Bradlaugh, if not Dr Lees, espoused was looking not to nudge the political discourse in the manner of a Lockhart but to seek a parliamentary representation of their ideas. While they both looked to reference the popular national exponents of a broader popular Radicalism, which may be seen to complement the Radicalism of Gilpin or even of Gladstone, they clearly took that Radical vision further and both men actually temper their support for Gladstone. However, this was not a Radicalism that was offering anything fundamentally new but was looking back to traditions linked to its Chartist roots. An assertion of a democratic Radicalism as had already been seen in Gurney's conditional relationship with Gilpin.

Lord Henley's individual address of 19 October was understandably defensive; he was the target of this new Radical confidence. The passing of the Second Reform Act left those that seemed to have opposed change facing in part an electorate they had seemed to reject. He stressed misconceptions built around 'the protest which I made against the violence used

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in Hyde Park and an accidental misconception as to the working of the Rating Clauses in the Reform Bill'. He too pledged himself to the working man. Significantly he addressed his appeal not just to the electors but to the 'Non-electors' of Northampton. He clung to the slogan of increasing the franchise, one of the key slogans which allowed the Liberals to blur their differences.⁶⁴

It is very easy at this point to become distracted by the parliamentary fight that ensued. Bradlaugh increasingly became the headline story, with deep divisions emerging over his controversial views in regard to religion. But for those that supported Bradlaugh, he was not there to promote secularism. Typical of this view was the Rev. J. K. Applebee who made clear:

I have no sympathy whatever for Mr Bradlaugh's theological opinions; but at the same time I rejoice to think that on most social and political questions I am entirely at one with Mr Bradlaugh.⁶⁵

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What is clear is the factious nature of organised Liberalism between 1868 and the next election in 1874. This development was characterised by increased organisation and electoral success for the Radicals. A Radical Association was created in the West Ward in September 1868, the West Ward being the most working-class area and also the ward in which Bates was active and Gurney a councillor. In 1869, a Radical candidate was returned in both the East and West Wards alongside a United Liberal Association candidate. The United Liberal Association would be too easily dismissed as Whig or sidestepped as Liberal. At this point the Radicals were part of the Liberal dynamic and were clearly recognised as Liberal to the extent that comments within the *Mercury* and the post municipal election meetings focus on the level of unity or disunity between the two. The United Liberal Association would be more accurately described as the representation of the Liberal elite, the outward manifestation of official Liberalism.

What the now mainly anonymous ward Radicals in Northampton represented was an attempt to democratise the politics with public meetings leading to the presentation of petitions in parliament. They sought to broaden the relevance and extend the transparency of politics with an emphasis on the importance of ward meetings in selecting municipal candidates. It was this vision of politics which characterised the Radical movement in Northampton. It was what the Chartist tradition

brought, and it was not primarily a politics of class. This tradition continued to assert its independence of official Liberalism in 1871 with Radical candidates standing against candidates of the United Liberal Association, in the East Ward. 1872 saw the foundation of the Northampton Radical Society to promote debate and the Radical District Secretaries Association to extend organisation. The Radical interest developed alongside but outside of the United Liberal Association, which was clearly not representing a united Liberal Party. The ability of the Radicals to split the Liberal vote necessitated compromise. 1873 saw the agreement that the ULA would contest the East Ward and the Radicals would contest the West Ward; in 1874 ULA and Radical candidates ran in tandem in West and East Wards. In 1875, two more Radicals were elected and Gurney become the first Radical mayor of Northampton, something he would repeat in 1879. A Radical progress which was driven from below. It was not until 1880 that a Northampton Liberal and Radical Association was set up and the Radical Association dissolved.

It does not diminish the significance of national politics to recognise how Radicals were committed to a democratic vision and saw the need to be inclusive at the municipal level. Rather it exposes the arena in which the Chartist, democratic Radical tradition, was most virulent. It was, ideologically as much as by necessity, a politics nurtured from below. It makes Bradlaugh's calls for public ballots and votes at meetings a principled rather than a strategic stance. It explains how Gurney's commitment to Gilpin had in large part been based on Gilpin making himself accountable, to the extent of reporting back to his constituency and the presentation of petitions in parliament. It also makes ideological the commitment to debate national issues at local level and to pass motions from the town council to Westminster. The *Mercury* found it necessary to address this:

We demur altogether to Mr Gurney's argument that when we elect a Town Councillor we elect him as the representative of our opinions on Imperial questions ... That, however, is not the use, but the abuse, of our franchise. To the Town Council belong the Fountain question: to Parliament the question whether women shall or shall not possess the franchise.⁶⁶

The debates around the Ballot Act stimulated this very debate. A lecture attended by a large number of women was arranged and a petition

Both represented the legacy of the Chartist tradition, a democratic Radicalism, which sought to create a more inclusive and transparent politics. Gurney constructed the bridge for this transition from Chartism towards Liberalism, Bates the reminder that it remained essentially separate. Together they represent the dilemma of the Radical. Either to seek a voice and influence from within (the choice taken by Gurney) or to hold to principles and independence (the position taken with pride by Bates).

followed advocating women's suffrage. It was seconded by Gurney and sent to Gilpin for presentation to parliament, with Henley being requested to support it.⁶⁷ Votes for women followed the logic of the democratic Radical and it is interesting to see how quickly the democratic Radicals are willing to move on from the ballot rather than seeing it as an end point. Gurney had wanted 'to know on what grounds they would refuse the suffrage to a woman who paid the rent and taxes of her home' in 1866.⁶⁸ The neutralisation of local democracy was not a new idea from the *Mercury* or from official Liberalism. The *Mercury* had said much the same in 1869, when it described the work of the council as 'wholly unpolitical'.⁶⁹

To conclude, the Radical tradition in Northampton needed no impetus from Bradlaugh. Its traditions were deep rooted and the democratic Radical tradition evolving out of Chartism provided the dynamism. This democratic tradition has been shown above to be distinct from the more moderate or middle-class Radicalism enveloped within the United Liberal Association and the politics of Northampton's Radical MPs, first Raikes then Gilpin. The middle-class tradition recognised the need for change but was more fearful of the forces this might unleash. Cautious and gradualist, it nevertheless saw a need to incorporate democratic Radicals such as Gurney. This middle-class, officially sponsored Radicalism would define itself as both practical and popular – and ironically this form of Radicalism did have greater popular electoral appeal – while noting the continuing limitations of the franchise. Looking to politicians like Bright and then Gladstone, the Radical voters were often conservative in outlook to the extent that they were primarily deferential in their voting habits. Holding to Radical policies and slogans they voted for the official Liberal Party candidates rather than Chartist or independent Radical candidates when presented with a choice both at parliamentary and borough elections; but the democratic Radical remained embedded within the political culture.

Gladstone was crucial in maintaining the illusion of a Radical cohesion and moderation around broad policy aims, an illusion that could not be maintained by middle-class Radicals like Bright who were increasingly overtaken by events. This illusion made an ideological struggle appear, even to historians, to be a struggle over power rather than principles at municipal level.⁷⁰ Taken up by Radical MPs like Gilpin, Gladstone created a mask allowing them to maintain their Radical credibility. But it should

not be forgotten that to begin with Gladstone was also taken up by Whigs, like Lord Henley, as an acceptable compromise with Radicalism. The 'Whigs' Gladstone' was as authentic and significant a vector for Liberalism in the 1860s as the 'people's William', a role he was given to play even before gaining this accolade from the *Telegraph*. There may be a 'merger of popular Radicalism and Gladstonian Liberalism', but the democratic, Chartist tradition remained ideologically distinct and relevant.⁷¹

Popular Radicalism is sometimes used to encompass the non-parliamentary Radical, but this is to miss the nature and diversity of this Radicalism. In Northampton, the Radical societies were the instruments of a democratic ideology which was more than the expression of a municipal identity because it represented an ideological struggle within the municipality. A Chartist democratic tradition continued and offered evidence of continuity within the broader Radical discourse. It assimilated itself into the official Liberal dynamic without losing its identity and as such can also be seen as representing an antagonism within Liberalism. The question as to whether that antagonism was eventually resolved depends on whether the Chartist tradition should be seen as inherently Liberal in the case of Northampton or whether it evolved into the ILP in the 1880s and should be seen as involving a period of interaction with, rather than transition into, Liberalism.⁷²

Bradlaugh courted Northampton as a seat to satisfy his parliamentary ambitions. There is no real evidence that he took the lead in local politics during the 1870s and the ascendancy of Radicalism in Northampton. He was no Cowen or Chamberlain who defined and dominated the Radicalism of Newcastle and Birmingham. He achieved a national profile, but what characterised Northampton Radicalism was the absence of a local charismatic figure. Gurney and Bates are the two champions of this account. Both represented the legacy of the Chartist tradition, a democratic Radicalism, which sought to create a more inclusive and transparent politics. Gurney constructed the bridge for this transition from Chartism towards Liberalism, Bates the reminder that it remained essentially separate. Together they represent the dilemma of the Radical. Either to seek a voice and influence from within (the choice taken by Gurney) or to hold to principles and independence (the position taken with pride by Bates). On the day that Gurney's death was announced to the Northampton Radical Association, J. M. Robertson delivered a lecture entitled 'Radicalism and Socialism', in which

he stated that the ‘Liberal party ... was the party of present possibilities.’⁷³

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- 1 This is different to that found elsewhere by Matthew Roberts who cites work done by Robert Hall. See ‘Out of Chartism, into Liberalism?’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 67 (Summer 2010), p. 11.
- 2 For a pro-continuity argument see E. F. Biagini and A. Reid, ‘Currents of Radicalism, 1850–1914’, in E. F. Biagini and A. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Organised Labour and Party Politics, 1850–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1–19. For a discontinuity historian see Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class: Labour in British Society 1850–1920* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 94.
- 3 Anthony Taylor, ‘The Glamour of Independence: By-elections and Radicalism during the Liberal Meridian, 1869–83’, in T. G. Otte and Paul Readman (eds.), *By-elections in British Politics 1832–1914* (The Boydell Press, 2013), p. 103.
- 4 Fergus D’Arcy, ‘Charles Bradlaugh and the World of Popular Radicalism 1833–1891’, doctoral thesis (Hull, 1978), p. 387. Argument put most succinctly on p. 9.
- 5 R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement 1837–1854* (2nd edn. 1894; Merlin Press, 1969).
- 6 John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 305 n. 95.
- 7 Gurney in letter to the *Northampton Mercury*, 10 June 1871, p. 3.
- 8 *Northampton Mercury*, 15 Dec. 1893, p. 7.
- 9 *Northampton Mercury*, 30 Oct. 1841, p. 4 gives a copy of the poll.
- 10 *Northampton Mercury*, 24 Mar. 1888, p. 6.
- 11 Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement*, p. 194.
- 12 *Northampton Mercury*, 11 Aug. 1849, p. 2.
- 13 *Northampton Mercury*, 25 Aug. 1883, p. 6.
- 14 *Northampton Mercury*, 8 Sep. 1883, p. 6.
- 15 *Northampton Mercury*, 27 Oct. 1855, p. 4.
- 16 *Northampton Mercury*, 19 May 1855, p. 3.
- 17 *Northampton Mercury*, 27 Oct. 1855, p. 4.
- 18 References from political leaflets, Box 5, Political Ephemera 1850–64, NCL
- 19 See Derek Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England* (Leicester University Press, 1976), Chapter 4 on the Improvement Commissions.
- 20 D’Arcy, ‘Charles Bradlaugh’, p. 313.
- 21 Biagini and Reid, ‘Currents of Radicalism’, p. 6.
- 22 *Northampton Mercury*, 16 Oct. 1858, p. 2.
- 23 Letter from ONE OF ‘THE BUNDLE’, *Northampton Mercury*, 4 June 1859, p. 3.
- 24 *Northampton Mercury*, 18 Dec. 1858, p. 2.
- 25 *Northampton Mercury*, 15 Dec. 1860, p. 5.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 171–3.
- 30 *Northampton Mercury*, 15 Dec 1860, p. 5.
- 31 *Northampton Mercury*, 27 Oct. 1866, p. 6.
- 32 *Northampton Mercury*, 6 Aug. 1864, p. 7.
- 33 Biagini and Reid, ‘Currents of Radicalism’, p. 6.
- 34 *Northampton Mercury*, 6 Aug. 1864, p. 7.
- 35 *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Oct. 1864, p. 5.
- 36 Borough Franchise Bill, Second Reading; Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 175, col. 324 (11 May 1864).
- 37 Palmerston to Gladstone, 11 May 1864; in Philip Guedalla (ed.), *Gladstone and Palmerston* (Victor Gollancz, 1928), p. 279.
- 38 Gladstone to Palmerston, 13 May 1864; *ibid.*, p. 282.
- 39 *Northampton Mercury*, 14 May 1864, p. 5.
- 40 *Northampton Mercury*, 14 May 1864, p. 3.
- 41 Borough Franchise Bill, Second Reading.
- 42 *Northampton Mercury*, 4 June 1864, p. 2.
- 43 H. G. C. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 138.
- 44 *Northampton Mercury*, 28 May 1864, p. 5.
- 45 *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Oct. 1864, p. 5.
- 46 It is implied that Bradlaugh is in Northampton on Monday, 31 January. *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Jan. 1859, p. 3.
- 47 *Northampton Mercury*, 26 Mar. 1859, p. 3.
- 48 Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans* (Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 54.
- 49 *Northampton Mercury*, 8 Aug. 1868, p. 7.
- 50 Speeches delivered on 12 Aug. at St James End and the balcony of the Victoria Hotel, on the Market Square. *Northampton Mercury*, 15 Aug. 1868, pp. 5 and 6.
- 51 Speech delivered on 19 Aug.; *Northampton Mercury*, 22 Aug. 1868, p. 8.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 To the three speeches already referenced, I have included a fourth delivered on 25 Aug. reported in *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Aug. 1868, p. 6.
- 54 Benjamin Wilson, *The Struggles of an Old Chartist* (Halifax 1887); from David Vincent (ed.), *Testaments of Radicalism* (Europa, 1977), pp. 229–30.
- 55 Letter published in the *Northampton Mercury*, 19 Sep. 1868, p. 5.
- 56 *Northampton Mercury*, 3 Oct. 1868, p. 6.
- 57 ‘Men and Women of Northampton’, leaflet, Box 6, Political Ephemera 1868, NCL.
- 58 ‘Who has divided the Liberal Party Mr Bradlaugh or Lord Henley?’ Box 6, Political Ephemera 1868, NCL.
- 59 ‘To the Electors of the Borough of Northampton’, Frederick Richard Lees, 28 Sep. 1868, Box 6, Political Ephemera 1868, NCL.
- 60 E. Royle, ‘Charles Bradlaugh, Free-thought and Northampton’; *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, Vol. 6 No.3 (1980), p. 147. Cites the *National Reformer* and a letter from C. Gilpin to C. Bradlaugh, 4 Aug. 1874. Bradlaugh Collection no. 389.
- 61 Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh*, vol. 1 (T. Fisher Unwin, 1902), p. 396 n.
- 62 Obituary, *Northampton Mercury*, 5 Sep. 1890.
- 63 Fergus D’Arcy, ‘Charles Bradlaugh and the World of Popular Radicalism 1833–1891’, doctoral thesis (Hull 1978).
- 64 ‘To the Electors & Non-electors of the Borough of Northampton’, Box 6, Political Ephemera 1868, NCL.
- 65 Lecture on 25 Aug. reported in *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Aug. 1868, p. 6.
- 66 *Northampton Mercury*, 6 May 1871, p. 5.
- 67 *Northampton Mercury*, 4 Nov. 1871, p. 8.
- 68 *Northampton Mercury*, 14 July 1866, p. 6.
- 69 *Northampton Mercury*, 30 Oct. 1869, p. 5.
- 70 D’Arcy, ‘Charles Bradlaugh’, p. 333.
- 71 Neville Kirk, *Change, continuity and class: Labour in British Society 1850–1920* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 94.
- 72 See Matthew Kidd, ‘Popular Continuity in Urban England, 1867–1918: the case studies of Bristol and Northampton’, PhD thesis (Nottingham, November 2015). http://www.academia.edu/34663279/Popular_Political_Continuity_in_Urban_England_1867-1918_The_Case_Studies_of_Bristol_and_Northampton (last accessed January 2019).
- 73 *Northampton Mercury*, 15 Dec. 1893, p. 6.

Report

The 1979 general election

Evening meeting, 3 February 2020 with David (Lord) Steel and

Professor Sir John Curtice. Chair: Lord Wallace

Report by **Neil Stockley**

THE 1979 GENERAL election was one of the most significant of the twentieth century. It inaugurated the premiership of Margaret Thatcher and an eighteen-year period of Conservative government, which ended the post-Second World War political consensus based on full employment, a mixed economy, strong trade unions, a welfare state, and a broad social balance.

More than forty years on, the 1979 election appears, at first glance, to have been rather less important for the Liberal Party. As Sir John Curtice pointed out, it came between two contests that were rather more exciting. In the two 1974 general elections, the party won nearly a fifth of the votes cast; but in 1979, its share of the vote dropped by 4.5 per cent. Four years later, the Liberals and their allies in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) gained 26 per cent of the vote, almost overtaking the Labour Party, as they made a serious attempt to 'break the mould' of British politics.

In 1979, however, the Liberal Party took to the hustings with no such ambitions. Lord Steel recalled that the party was in 'in a terrible state' when he took over as leader three years earlier, following Jeremy Thorpe's scandal and resignation. 'The Thorpe effect had stopped people canvassing because they were getting insulted on the doorsteps. Our opinion polls were at rock bottom. I was unknown, and it was a really a very difficult period, from '76 onwards.'

In March 1977, Steel and the prime minister, Jim Callaghan, negotiated the Lib-Lab Pact, under which the Liberal Party agreed to support the minority Labour government in any motion of no confidence; in return, the Labour Party agreed to accept a limited number of Liberal policy

proposals. He suggested that the arrangement 'slightly saved us because it projected the party forward, as a serious organisation'. This was a contestable claim, given that during the pact, the party's opinion poll ratings fell into single figures, and it suffered disastrous results in local council elections and by-elections.

Lord Steel discussed in more detail how he had expected that the pact could provide a fresh argument for voting Liberal. When it came to an end, in May 1978, he explained, 'I thought [that] having done the pact reasonably well, we could argue for greater [Liberal] participation in government [and] head for the balance of power in a realistic way.'

He argued that this potential campaign theme was, however, 'destroyed' when Callaghan confounded most expectations and decided not to call a general election in the autumn of 1978. In September, the prime minister famously spoke to the TUC conference and left them 'waiting at the church'. Steel recalled the day of Callaghan's speech, when he sat at his home in Ettrick Bridge with the media camped outside, awaiting his reaction to the announcement of an early general election. That afternoon, Steel was left 'absolutely distraught' when Michael Foot, the de facto deputy prime minister, phoned him to advise that Callaghan would be making no such statement. The prime minister planned to soldier on, alone, for one final parliamentary session.

Then came the 'winter of discontent', with 'rubbish piled up in the streets,' and the Labour government became very unpopular. Without Liberal support, Callaghan was defeated in a no-confidence motion in the Commons on 28 March 1979 and had to call

a general election. 'I was crestfallen,' Steel said, 'because the whole argument that we were sustaining in the autumn of '78 rather fell apart because of the way the Labour government had behaved.' The *Daily Express* predicted that just two of the fourteen Liberal MPs would be returned. Ian Mikardo, the Labour MP who was the Commons' resident bookie, offered very long odds on there being more than ten Liberals in the new House of Commons. Steel put down £10.

Lord Steel recounted how the party's fortunes immediately improved. The day after the no-confidence vote, David Alton won the by-election in Liverpool Edge Hill, a safe Labour seat, with a swing to the Liberals of 30 per cent. The stunning result, he said, 'restored a little bit of credibility that we had otherwise lost, at the start of the general election campaign'.

The party went on to run a good campaign. The main innovation was Lord Steel's use of a battle bus to tour key constituencies all over England. 'It was quite exciting, although there were no mobile phones and all our target constituencies seemed to be in areas of difficult [radio] reception,' he remembered. The bus also lacked plentiful supplies of electricity. As a result, on one occasion Steel's secretaries had to offer the assembled hacks a choice between a preview copy of his next speech, or a cup of coffee. They voted for coffee.

The campaign posters, designed by Adrian Slade, featuring the slogan 'The real fight is for Britain', and showing Steel against photographs of Callaghan and Thatcher, portrayed back to back and holding pistols, proved 'very effective'. The manifesto was well received: *The Guardian* gave it 42 points for new ideas, against 11 for Labour and 9 for the Conservatives. Steel's final Party Election Broadcast, in which he spoke slowly and directly to camera from what appeared to be his own living room, but was actually a BBC set, won good reviews. One omission from this account was the overall message that he articulated so successfully, calling for a larger 'wedge' of Liberal MPs in the next parliament as the best means of ending the

politics of two-party confrontation. Indeed, Lord Steel probably understated his own importance in the successful Liberal campaign.

In the end, the Liberal Party won eleven seats. Three of the party's MPs were defeated: Treasury spokesperson, John Pardoe, in North Cornwall (which Steel described as a 'real blow'); Emlyn Hooson in Montgomeryshire; and, inevitably, Jeremy Thorpe in North Devon. The party had, Steel reflected, 'snatched survival out of disaster', but he insisted that 'we would have done very much better' had Callaghan called an election for the previous October.

Sir John Curtice agreed with Lord Steel that the campaign did much to turn the Liberals' fortunes around and pointed to the 5 to 6 per cent improvement in the party's average poll ratings during the official campaign period. (Both speakers entered the caveat that several Liberal MPs were returned in large part due to high personal votes in their constituencies; the party owed them rather more than they owed the party.) But he went further than Lord Steel in assessing the election's significance for the Liberal Party. 'The 1979 election did bequeath a party that was at least strong enough – particularly because, after the election, its position in the polls strengthened yet further – that it was at least a viable partial platform for any attempt to reshape British politics,' he said. In 1981, the newly formed SDP concluded quickly that the Liberal Party had to be at least part of that platform and so they did not try to displace it, he added. Thus was born the Liberal–SDP Alliance, the forerunner to the Liberal Democrats.

Even so, it was clear that, decades later, Lord Steel had still not forgiven Callaghan for failing to call an early election. During the question and answer session, he recalled a revealing conversation, after the former prime minister had retired, during which Steel challenged him over the decision. Callaghan said that he was told he couldn't have been sure of winning a majority in autumn 1978. Steel then asked him 'what was wrong with that, we were doing quite well, shoring you

up?' Callaghan had supposed that 'we would have to have a coalition, and we'd have to have you in the cabinet.' 'Let's forget about that, the fact is you didn't do it, and we lost the argument,' Steel remembered replying. He was sure that in any early election, the Liberals would have won more MPs than in 1979, to hold the balance of power, and 'we could have done a coalition'. He added that 'the mainstream' of the Labour Party were quite happy to work with the Liberals.

Sir John discussed the long-term lessons from the Liberals' experiences in the 1974–79 parliament. The first concerned the electoral benefits from the Lib–Lab Pact. He contended that Lord Steel and his colleagues believed that the arrangement would make them a more credible to the electorate as a party of government: 'not just a bunch of woolly-jumper, sandal-wearing liberals [but] actually capable of helping to run the country'.

The party did not finally suffer an electoral fate nearly as grim as the one that the 2010–15 coalition wreaked on the Liberal Democrats. Still, Sir John argued, the experience of 1974 to 1979 'might give you pause' as to whether being in government was 'necessarily a recipe for advancing the party's electoral cause'. By the spring of 1977, he pointed out, the party was already in a weak position, with opinion poll ratings of around 10 per cent, barely half the level of support they had achieved at the October 1974 election. The Liberals lost some more ground during the pact, and afterwards, between the autumn of 1978 and the spring of 1979, their poll ratings did not decline further, but nor did they improve.

The second long-term lesson concerned the deep difficulties for the party in securing electoral reform. Sir John recalled that the party had hoped to use its leverage in a hung parliament to deliver a fairer electoral system, one of the party's crucial political priorities. When it entered the Lib–Lab Pact, the party understood that the Labour government would use its best endeavours to introduce a form of proportional representation (PR) for the European elections due in 1978 (but were finally held in June 1979). They

also expected that a majority of Labour MPs would vote for the necessary legislation.

As Sir John explained, the Labour Party was simply not interested in electoral reform. In December 1977, in a key vote in the Commons on using a regional list system for electing MEPs, only a minority of Labour MPs voted in favour, and the proposal was lost. During the 1974–79 parliament, there were five Commons votes in total on various aspects of PR, and each one failed to attract sufficient Labour support. It was this disappointment, he argued, that gave Lord Steel his 'greatest internal grief'. In January 1978, shortly after the Commons voted to reject a regional list voting system, an emergency party conference supported the continuation of the pact but was also clear – and Steel agreed – that it should not run beyond the summer of that year.

Lord Steel agreed that the vote on the regional list for the European Parliament had 'killed off the pact'. He had negotiated, 'with great difficulty' that Labour MPs would have a 'free vote' on a PR system for the European elections. 'I made a terrible mistake with my calculations ... something like 200 Tory MPs had voted for PR for [devolved government in] Scotland. I thought that we might get half the Labour Party [and] around 100 Tories. We didn't. They said, 'We're not voting for that because it's to do with the Lib–Lab Pact.'"

As a result, Sir John explained, the Liberal Party came away from the pact with very little. Direct elections were held for the European Parliament, but without PR, and it would be another fifteen years before the first Liberal Democrat MEPs to be elected. He reminded the meeting that the Liberal Democrats' experience in coalition with the Conservatives was hardly any happier. In 2011, national referendum resoundingly rejected changing to a non-proportional system for electing MPs.

Sir John then drew some interesting comparisons between the result achieved by the Liberal Party in 1979 and that achieved by the Liberal Democrats four decades later. Both times,

Report: The 1979 general election

the party emerged with just eleven seats but won just one constituency, 'the Liberal perennial' of Orkney and Shetland, on both occasions. In 1979, the Liberals were almost entirely a party of the Celtic fringe – Devon, Cornwall, parts of Scotland and parts of Wales. In 2019, however, the seats won by the Liberal Democrats were mostly in south-west London and in university towns in England and Scotland. 'There is very little left of the Celtic fringe, but this is now a party that can win seats in the capital [and is] over-represented in the university towns and in parts of southern England,' he said.

The point was underlined when Sir John explained how much the geography of the party's support has changed. Whereas the Liberal Party under-performed in London in 1979, the opposite was the case forty years later, and the Liberal Democrats also did relatively well in southern England. In Devon and Cornwall, and even more so in the Midlands and the north of England, the party's support is now weaker than in 1979. 'This has become much more a party of London and its environs, in a way that is quite remarkable,' he concluded.

In 1979, the Liberals claimed to be the only 'classless party'. Even if the reality was not quite that simple, their successors now receive twice as much support from middle-class voters as from working-class voters. Similarly, in 1979, the Liberal Party performed better amongst university graduates than among non-graduates, but that gap has now widened considerably.

Sir John also noted some marked, probably related shifts in the political beliefs of the party's supporters. In 1979, the Liberals had gained the support of 14 per cent of those who had voted 'Yes' in the 1975 referendum on European Common Market membership and 12 per cent of those who had voted 'No'. In 2019, 21 per cent of Remain voters backed the Liberal Democrats, compared to just 3 per cent of Leave supporters, indicating that the party's supporters are now much more pro-European Union.

In 1979, Lord Steel could reasonably claim to lead a centre party, as

measured by its supporters' attitudes on such issues as nationalisation of industry. 'Now, the Liberal Democrats are distinguished [by] above all [being] strong amongst social liberals, people who value cultural diversity [and] think what people should do in terms of morality and social mores is up to them ... the party's support is much more clearly rooted in that perspective than it was back in 1979,' said Sir John Curtice.

To some Liberal Democrats, all this might sound like the basis of the stable and philosophically coherent 'core vote' that has eluded the party since Lord Steel's time. But whether the party is better placed than in 1979 for renewed growth and development remains to be seen.

Neil Stockley is a former Policy Director for the Liberal Democrats and a long-standing member of the History Group.

Reviews

The twisting path

Tudor Jones, *The Uneven Path of British Liberalism: from Jo Grimond to Brexit* (Manchester University Press, 2nd edn., 2019)

Review by **William Wallace**

THE REVISED EDITION OF Tudor Jones's study of the ideas and policies behind the revival of British Liberalism is, understandably, less optimistic in its conclusions than its predecessor of 2011. Over half of the Liberal Democrats' present party members have joined since that date, however. A book that focuses on the shifting interpretations of the Liberal tradition since Grimond led the Liberal Revival should therefore be valued by many involved in current debates and searches for messages that will appeal to voters.

It is well-researched. The author is a member of the editorial board of *The Journal of Liberal Democrat History*. Several other members of the editorial board, notably including our editor Duncan Brack, appear in this intellectual history of the party. Newbies will discover the important contribution of the two Greaveses, Tony and Bernard, as well as of Gordon Lishman and Michael Meadowcroft. The links between the modern party and its predecessors are traced through the

writing of Elliott Dodds, sadly largely forgotten today, and Donald Wade. But the overwhelming impression from the early chapters is of how great an intellectual debt we still owe to Jo Grimond.

It would now be impossible for a party leader to behave as Grimond did in his early years as leader. He sought out leading experts in various fields, held seminars, wrote books and pamphlets, and captivated student audiences (myself amongst them) with his questioning of the conventional wisdom. The development of twenty-four-hour news, and the demand for instant responses to each new event, has made it far more difficult for his successors to step back and reflect, and to ask uncomfortable questions. Grimond, in 1957–8, was already challenging the slow pace of decolonisation, questioning the case for an independent nuclear deterrent, calling for British entry into what was then the European Economic Community, and supporting stronger civic participation, decentralised government,

The uneven path of British Liberalism

FROM JO GRIMOND TO BREXIT

TUDOR JONES

co-ownership, and market regulation instead of nationalisation or the free market.

Jones starts with Grimond, and therefore underplays the extent to which he rescued the party from the followers of Friedrich von Hayek, who doubted the concept of a public interest and viewed the state as a constant threat to individual freedom. As late as the 1958 party assembly, this wing of the party, better funded than its 'Radical Reform Group' opponents, was strong enough to block social liberal proposals. When Grimond, with the support of the tiny parliamentary party, took the party in a different direction, they departed – some to form the Institute of Economic Affairs and influence the Conservative Party, others to profit from pirate radio.

Subsequent chapters take us through the repeated cycles of party reflection on how Liberal principles matched current challenges, with working groups after each decisive general election. He takes us up to the incoherent and disastrous 2015 election campaign and the 2017 referendum. Recent recruits to the party may puzzle at the extent to which Liberals attempted to return to first principles as they set out to reshape policy priorities after general elections. The 1979 party conference devoted an entire session to speeches on party philosophy – though the development of Margaret

Thatcher's deregulatory economic policies, followed by the emergence of the Social Democrats, sharply impinged on subsequent Liberal thinking.

Jones is less persuasive in analysing the convergence and divergence of ideas within the SDP–Liberal Alliance than elsewhere in his volume. David Steel was in many ways a social democrat, while Shirley Williams was a passionate liberal. David Owen was a natural authoritarian, setting out his concept of a 'social market' as much to separate the Social Democrats from their Liberal partners as to promote a coherent economic strategy.

After Grimond, the party owes most to Paddy Ashdown in terms of its intellectual legacy. He picked up a party with minimal popular support after the botched merger of 1987–8, sparked off domestic and international policy initiatives, travelled around Britain picking up ideas, and pulled people in for informal seminars. I remember meetings in his office on the Bosnian war which included people who had just returned from Sarajevo as well as academics and UN advisers. I also remember how he drove the 1997 manifesto, meeting after meeting, posing questions, checking with outside experts. No leader since then has shown such an interest in strategic policies.

The picture that emerges from successive chapters is of a party that has taken policy very seriously, but which has ground policy development through the slow procedures of the Federal Policy Committee and the policy groups it has set up. Between 2001 and 2010 a series of volumes from outside the party's formal structures – *The Orange Book* in 2004, *Beyond Liberty* in 2007, and *Reinventing the State* in 2009 – sparked some lively debate about the balance between what David Laws called 'the four strands of liberalism': personal, political, economic and social. Jones summarises their main arguments, concluding that the *Orange Book* has acquired in retrospect an over-critical reputation.

There's little here on Liberal think tanks, because few rich sympathisers were willing to fund them. Richard Wainwright (given too little credit in

this volume) provided the money to set up the Centre for Reform, but not enough to enable it to compete with wealthy Conservative-leaning bodies or union-funded Labour ones. Paul Marshall then transformed it into CentreForum, more generously funded but with a bias towards economic liberalism that alienated many within the party. Jones does not add that the poverty of groups outside the party's formal policy-making structures has been one of the many factors that has held the Liberal Democrats back. Policy Exchange, the Taxpayers Alliance, the Henry Jackson Society and others supply their staffers for radio and TV discussion programmes and give newspapers regular copy with their published reports; LibDems lack comparable research reports or staff to gain visibility in the public debate.

Reading this history in 2020, what should lessons should today's Liberals learn? Perhaps the most important is the stubborn opposition of both established parties to cooperation, and the difficulties that has created for Liberal leaders dedicated to multi-party politics and to reasoned compromise. Grimond, Steel and Ashdown all pursued the social liberal strategy of centre-left cooperation. Harold Wilson first played with and then ridiculed Grimond in 1964–5, before winning a clear majority in the 1966 election. David Steel negotiated a Lib–Lab pact; but most of the Labour cabinet refused to give anything in return, ending in the chaos of 1978–9 and the election of Mrs Thatcher. Paddy Ashdown's 'project' was better prepared than either of these. It succeeded in persuading Labour to introduce devolution for Scotland and Wales, thanks in large part to the support of Robin Cook. But many of Cook's colleagues were opposed to cooperation; with Labour holding a majority of seats, if not of votes, the LibDems were no longer useful and could be disregarded.

We have now half-forgotten the weaknesses of the Labour governments of 2001 and 2005, which led Nick Clegg – the first party leader not to have been shaped by the bitter experiences of the Labour 1970s

Reviews

and Thatcherite 1980s – to look more kindly on David Cameron’s ‘modernising’ project. Jones touches on the disputes over the tuition fees pledge in the Federal Policy Committee in 2008–9, where Evan Harris led successive revolts against leadership attempts to modify the proposal. He notes Clegg’s acceptance that the coalition’s deficit reduction should come overwhelmingly from spending cuts rather than increases in taxation – to my mind one of our crucial errors in 2010. But he underplays the systemic dilemma that faces any third party in our two-party system: that the only way to national power is through coalition, but that the junior partner in any coalition gets the blame and not the credit.

One lesson is that a party of ideas needs to rethink its approach in the light of changing circumstances every decade. Jones could have discussed more directly the impact of economic, technological and social change on Liberal politics and policy. He gives the party too little credit for its influence

over British social regulation, from abortion reform through to sexual equality and LGBT rights – with a voice and parliamentary influence, outside government, that has helped to make Britain a more open and liberal society. But globalisation, the replacement of British enterprise by multinational investment, the continuing technological revolution and its impact on the unskilled, all pose challenges to liberalism that the party has struggled to address. For these we need to develop new policies. But many of the old policies that Grimond espoused remain directly relevant, and some are underplayed by the party today: active citizenship, the importance of the third sector between the state and private enterprise, profit-sharing and co-ownership, decentralisation of government and strong local democracy, spreading power and wealth as widely as possible.

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and the good of the time, including Viscounts Samuel and Simon (former Liberal and Liberal National leaders respectively), the Liberal classicist Gilbert Murray, and Jan Christian Smuts, then prime minister of South Africa, had contributed fulsome tributes. Waugh then goes on to contrast these comments on the character and achievements of Campbell-Bannerman with his relegation to someone whom, even in 1973, Wilson called an almost forgotten figure.

Whilst it is perhaps not surprising that the general public have almost no knowledge of Campbell-Bannerman – indeed I remember a ‘University Challenge’ contestant thinking he was a Tory in answer to one of Jeremy Paxman’s questions – his obscurity among Liberal Democrats is more surprising. In part, perhaps, this relates to a more general ignorance about Liberal history among a party most of whose members have joined since the 2015 general election. It also, of course, relates to the gap in the ‘big picture’ story of the Liberals between Gladstone (the ‘Grand Old Man’) and Irish home rule, and the rivalry of Asquith and Lloyd George, the ripples from which were felt through the party even as late as the 1970s. Even Campbell-Bannerman’s role as the Liberal leader who achieved the party’s greatest electoral victory in the 1906 general election does not in itself restore him to the prominence he deserves in its history. What Waugh

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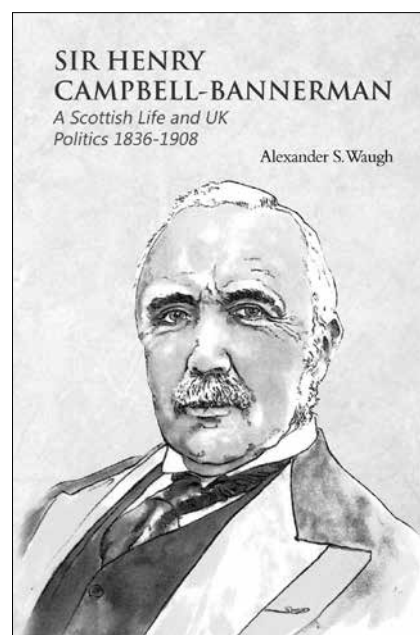
Alexander S. Waugh, *Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman: A Scottish Life and UK Politics 1836–1908* (Austin Macauley Publishers (2019)

Review by **Malcolm Baines**

I STILL VIVIDLY REMEMBER finding the last major biography of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, by John Wilson, in a library surplus sale in Shrewsbury on my way to help in the Brecon and Radnor by-election. Alexander Waugh has spent much of his life putting together another biography: one which is in many ways a potpourri of Campbell-Bannerman’s life, combined with digressions into Scottish life, politics and history, looking back at one point even as far as the year 641. This range is in many ways the great charm of the book and it helps when reading it to have a wide range of historical and indeed cultural interests, otherwise the reader could rapidly find the constant digressions both distracting and irritating.

The other great strength of the book is the amount of information that it contains. Lists of Liberal cabinet members and the posts they held pepper the pages; whilst if you want to know who the other parliamentarians were who attended Glasgow High School (Campbell-Bannerman’s alma mater) then Table 29 in Appendix 6 is the place to look.

It is especially interesting, in the case of such a personal book, to understand Waugh’s motivation in writing it. He has helpfully appended a personal prologue and traces his interest back to an article he saw as a pupil in the Glasgow High School magazine in June 1948, 100 years after Campbell-Bannerman was the head boy of the third form. A number of the great



does, however, is – despite all the family and local history and political manoeuvring he includes in the book – to make the case for Campbell-Bannerman as a great politician, a superb prime minister and, unusually, a good man.

The biography is therefore chronological in its structure and takes the reader through Campbell-Bannerman's family background, upbringing, personal life, and political career from his election as MP for Stirling Burghs in a by-election in April 1868 followed in the November by the general election that brought Gladstone to power. Within three years he was a junior minister at the War Office before becoming Chief Secretary for Ireland in Gladstone's second ministry in October 1884 and then joining the cabinet as Secretary for War in February 1886. His ministerial career was, however, inevitably overshadowed by the Irish Question which so dominated Gladstone's third and fourth governments. Waugh not only charts Campbell-Bannerman's progress during these years but also looks at his marriage and his family life – including Campbell-Bannerman and his wife's annual visits to the Bohemian spa of Marienbad – and his relationship with his brother, James, Conservative MP for the Universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen, and subsequently Solicitor-General for Scotland in the Tory governments of the 1880s. They sat on opposite sides of the Commons for twenty-five years and, in a typical Waugh digression, there follows a list of all the other brothers who have sat in different parties in the Commons at the same time. Such is the charm of this book.

Whilst Campbell-Bannerman is not regarded as a major Liberal figure, despite his triumph in the 1906 general election, there are two political events in his life that are better known: his 'methods of barbarism' speech to the National Reform Union, in which he condemned the concentration camps that characterised the final phase of the Boer War; and his triumph over the Liberal Imperialists, Asquith, Haldane and Grey and their so-called Relugas compact, which meant he rather than Asquith led the party into the 1906 election. Both of these are testimonies to those characteristics of

Campbell-Bannerman which Waugh in this book successfully argues have been overlooked: his decent humanity and his often overlooked – by his contemporaries as much as by posterity – political acumen. Indeed, Waugh devotes his final chapter to an appraisal of Campbell-Bannerman as a man, as a constituency MP, as a minister, as prime minister and as a Scot, collating quotations from various Liberal worthies, Tories and constituents all of whom spoke very favourably about him, his character and his ability.

This biography is therefore a very enjoyable read and a reminder (particularly in the current environment) of what could be achieved by an exceptionally competent but unshowy Liberal leader. It does, as I have written above, appeal to those with eclectic interests and those who like to see connections between

people and events: Waugh does this very well and includes a real wealth of these linkages which are always interesting. This is therefore a good addition to the bookshelf of those fascinated by Liberal history and indeed parliamentary history in general, and a welcome contrast to the now rather dated Wilson biography of Campbell-Bannerman. What it is not, however, is a fully rounded biography; it is hard to find a criticism of Campbell-Bannerman in its pages. He does come across as something of a political saint, and at the end that is perhaps the only criticism from this reviewer.

Malcolm Baines completed a D.Phil at Oxford University on the survival of the British Liberal Party between 1932 and 1959. He is now head of tax for the UK and Irish construction arm of a major French multinational.

Liberalism and the Gladstone salon

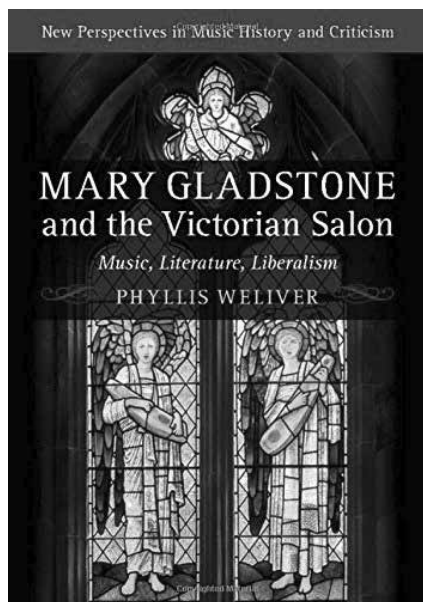
Phyllis Weliver, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Review by **Roger Swift**

IN THIS INNOVATIVE and illuminating study, Phyllis Weliver, who is an Associate Professor of English at Saint Louis University, explores the specific role played by Mary Gladstone, the favourite daughter of the great Liberal prime minister William Ewart Gladstone, in late-Victorian salon culture. As Weliver herself acknowledges, this is not a biography of Mary Gladstone, although it tells us much about her life and works; rather, it is an intellectual and cultural study of the ways in which Liberal political ideas were informed by, revealed, and disseminated through Mary's family life and values, friendships, and more especially, through an appreciation of the arts and musical performances which she promoted at the Gladstone salon during the years immediately preceding and following the formation of Gladstone's second ministry of 1880–85.

Born in 1847, Mary was the fifth of William and Catherine Gladstone's eight children and developed a passion for music at an early age, becoming an outstanding pianist who performed before Franz Liszt in 1867 and Arthur Sullivan in 1870. She was also an accomplished violinist and accompanied the virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim in 1876. When Mary increasingly took over the responsibility of organising the Gladstone salon from her mother in the mid-1870s, she not only developed a reputation within political circles as a notable *salonnière*, displaying a social brightness and a gift for networking in the process, but also ensured that musical performance, as a liberating and elevating experience, became a regular feature of the proceedings.

This study, which builds upon and extends previous publications by Weliver on this subject, comprises two



interconnected sections. The focus of Part 1 lies in intellectual history, and the first four chapters examine, variously, idealist philosophy, culture and the Gladstone family; the passion of Liberalism; the Victorian salon; and music and the Gladstone salon, by reference to the musical elements of Mary's salon hostessing. By contrast, Part 2 explores, through a series of triangulated and critical case-studies: the political elements of music-making and aesthetical criticism with particular reference to Mary Gladstone's life, writing and support for, and association with, the establishment of the Royal College of Music in 1882; Alfred Tennyson's poetical recitations and their impact on William Gladstone's politics, notably in his response to the Eastern Question; and Mary's reading of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, a novel which influenced her life decisions and inspired her contribution to Liberalism.

Within this broader framework, Weliver explores and develops, through Mary Gladstone's various initiatives and activities, the concept of 'lived Liberalism', the idea that Liberalism was not only political but also personal, a moral creed governing a way of life which could be expressed not only through a commitment to human welfare by charitable initiatives and Christian endeavour (as evinced in the contribution made by both Mary and her mother to the work of the Charity Organisation Society and other

philanthropic enterprises) but also through aesthetic qualities, whether in music, poetry or the novel, as the Gladstone salon, and indeed Mary's life and work, epitomised. Here, however, it might have been useful to have considered the extent to which 'lived Liberalism' could be contradistinguished from a concept of 'lived Conservatism', for surely some of the 'Liberal' values which Weliver delineates, and which were essentially Christian and humanist, also permeated Victorian Conservative thought and, indeed, the Tory salon?

As Weliver shows, the Gladstone salon was an invited, at-home conversational gathering of prominent politicians, Anglican clergymen, Oxbridge intellectuals, men of letters, writers, artists, scientists, explorers, publishers, musicians and celebrities – a largely male-dominated social gathering – who discussed a wide range of political, intellectual and cultural issues in the presence of the Grand Old Man himself. The Gladstone salon was held during the parliamentary season either at the Gladstone's London homes at 11 Carlton House Terrace (until 1875) and 4 Carlton Gardens or, during Gladstone's subsequent premierships, at 10 Downing Street; whilst during the parliamentary recess, the Gladstones hosted dinners and soirées at Hawarden Castle. The litany of notable guests who frequently attended these events included John Ruskin, Edward Burne-Jones, Alfred Tennyson, Hubert Parry and Lord Acton. They also included the future Tory prime minister, Arthur Balfour, with whom the Gladstones enjoyed a close friendship and who shared Mary's passion for music. A notable feature of the Gladstone salon was the Thursday Breakfast, held during the London season. As her diaries and letters indicate, Mary Gladstone was primarily responsible for organising the event, issuing invitations to selected guests (who had to be personable, have interesting achievements, and be capable of 'capital talk'), arranging the seating plans (to ensure meaningful and lively conversation), and preparing the post-breakfast entertainment. Normally, between five and fifteen guests, who sometimes included

other members of the Gladstone family and their close relatives, the Lyttletons, would arrive at 10 o'clock in the morning and, while a small group might share one table, a larger group would be split between two. Following a hearty meal accompanied by wine and a convivial conversation lasting for an hour or two, guests would then be treated to a musical performance, a sight-reading of chamber music, or a poetical recitation.

Yet the Thursday Breakfast was more than a social experience and intellectual exercise. In 1876 Gladstone had appointed Mary, who, although not an academic, possessed a shrewd knowledge of Liberal politics and current affairs, as his private secretary (the first female prime ministerial secretary in Britain). She accompanied her father during his famous Midlothian campaign, when he condemned the Bulgarian atrocities and denounced Disraeli's foreign policy. During Gladstone's subsequent premierships, Mary, who shared her father's high church Anglican principles, who possessed strong connections with the Keble College group, and who married the Hawarden curate Harry Drew in 1886, held a particular brief for ecclesiastical affairs and advised and assisted Gladstone in clerical appointments at all levels, championing those candidates who shared her beliefs in aesthetics, idealist philosophy and social theology. These included Edward Benson, appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1882. There was, therefore, a political dimension to Mary's role as a society hostess, for she was regarded by contemporary Liberal politicians as, in Weliver's words, 'a wire puller', someone who 'had Gladstone's ear' and could exert some, albeit 'soft', influence on her father in both private and public spheres prior to his retirement in 1894. This did not, however, extend to the question of women's suffrage, which Gladstone opposed, although Mary lived to see this achieved prior to her death in 1927.

Weliver draws upon an impressive range of primary and secondary sources, including Mary Gladstone's detailed thirteen-volume diary and correspondence, and this fine book,

which is placed firmly in the context of recent historiography, illustrates the ways in which an interdisciplinary study can enhance our understanding of the role and influence of the female hostess in the complex world of elite political culture during the late-Victorian period. As such, it sheds not only new light on the high-Victorian salon, a subject which has received relatively little scholarly attention hitherto, but also on the influence of affluent and privileged women on social change during the late-Victorian period. Moreover, as a welcome addition to the growing body of recent research on members of William Gladstone's family (which includes Ros Aitken's, *The Prime Minister's Son: Stephen Gladstone, Rector of Hawarden*, 2012), Kenneth Brown's *The Unknown Gladstone: The Life of Herbert Gladstone, 1854–1930* (2018) and several of the unpublished papers presented at the Gladstone Conference,

held annually at Gladstone's Library at Hawarden), it also, inter alia, provides additional insights into the personality, politics and private life of William Gladstone himself. In this latter context, Weliver's monograph complements, in many respects, Ruth Clayton Windscheffel's excellent interdisciplinary cultural and intellectual study, *Reading Gladstone* (2008). However, at £78.99 per hardback copy, this important book is probably beyond the purchasing power of both scholars and the general reader, and the publishers should give serious consideration to the production of a paperback edition.

Roger Swift is Emeritus Professor of Victorian Studies at the University of Chester, Honorary Visiting Professor of Humanities at the University of Keele, and a Fellow of Gladstone's Library. He has published widely on aspects of British and Irish history during the Victorian period.

Lloyd George and money

Ian Ivatt, *The Financial Affairs of David Lloyd George* (Welsh Academic Press, 2019)

Review by **Vernon Bogdanor**

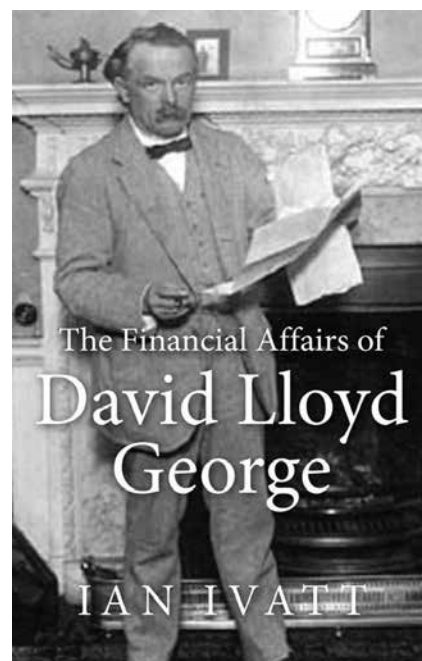
MUCH HAS BEEN written about Lloyd George's love affairs, but hardly anything on his financial affairs, which were far less successful. He started work at the age of 15 as a trainee solicitor's clerk, earning 15 shillings a week – around £40 in today's money. Elected as the youngest MP in the Commons in 1890, twenty-one years before the payment of MPs, and fifteen years before he could enjoy the salary of a cabinet minister, he had to finance himself even to the extent of providing for his travel expenses between London and his Carnarvon Boroughs constituency. Some money was available from the profits of the family legal firm, and his uncle also gave some help. There were, in addition, fees from occasional journalism. Still, he was for many years in some financial difficulty. In 1907, he was offered an allowance from Liberal

Party funds, but, to his credit, turned it down. 'I am not', he said, 'going to accept charity from the Party'. But at his death in 1945, Lloyd George's estate was worth £139,855 – around £6.5 million in today's money. How did he do it? That is the question which Ian Ivatt, a retired tax accountant, seeks to answer in what is the first serious study of Lloyd George's finances.

Lloyd George loved to exaggerate the poverty of his early circumstances. His uncle, Richard Lloyd, who looked after him following the early death of his father, ran a boot repairing business employing three or four paid assistants, and was actually one of the better off in the small Welsh village of Llanystumdwy, near Criccieth. Lloyd George used to tell the story of how he and his siblings had to share an egg every Sunday, but his brother never remembered 'any such dramatic performance

taking part in any meal of ours'. In this, as in other areas of his life, Lloyd George was a fine romancer. Indeed, it is not too harsh to say that no statement of his should ever be accepted unless corroborated from at least one other source.

In his early years, Lloyd George involved himself in various get-rich-quick schemes, most of which collapsed ignominiously. From 1892, he speculated on gold in Argentina, an enterprise veering on the fraudulent. No gold was discovered, and in the words of Lloyd George's brother, the gold mine turned out 'to be a mere illusion of the Patagonian desert'. The story has been told in greater detail in the first volume of John Grigg's biography. More notorious was the Marconi affair of 1913, in which Lloyd George and other ministers acted disreputably by purchasing shares in the American Marconi Company at a time when the government, as he well knew, was awarding the tender for erecting wireless stations across the empire to the British Marconi Company. The two companies were, admittedly, separate entities, but the British company controlled the American and a rise in the shares of the former, a likely consequence of the government contract, would be likely to have a favourable effect on the shares of the American company. In any case, the chancellor of the exchequer had no business to be



General Election 2019: Disappointment for the Liberal Democrats

After crushing defeats in the 2015 and 2017 elections, the Liberal Democrats entered the 2019 general election with high hopes, only for them to be dashed once again. Discuss what went wrong with **Professor Andrew Russell** (Head of Politics, Liverpool University) and **James Gurling** (former chair, Liberal Democrats' Federal Campaigns and Elections Committee).

Postponed from the cancelled Liberal Democrat spring conference in March, this meeting will now be held online.

Time and date to be confirmed; provisionally, a weekday evening in July

Details will be announced on our website (www.liberalhistory.org.uk) and via our email mailing list (to sign up, fill in your details at <http://bit.ly/LDHGemail>)

gambling in shares. The dubiousness of the transaction was, perhaps, somewhat compensated for by the fact that Lloyd George lost money on it – also perhaps by the fact that leading Conservatives, such as Balfour, Chamberlain, Hicks-Beach and Selborne, had been involved in similar transactions unacceptable by modern standards. The story, however, has already been told in great detail in Frances Donaldson's book, *The Marconi Affair*, published as long ago as 1962, in G. R. Searle, *Corruption in British Politics, 1895 to 1930*, published in 1987, and in Grigg's biography. Ian Ivatt does not really have very much to add.

It is not clear that Lloyd George really needed the Marconi money in 1913. For, in 1908, his promotion to the chancellorship had led to an enhanced annual salary and a grace and favour house – 11 Downing Street. This enabled him to afford private schools for his children and the costs of their university education in an era before student grants or maintenance.

As prime minister, Lloyd George established a political fund, eventually worth between £3 and £4 million – worth roughly between £130m and £170m in today's money. The fund was held in the form of a trust, but it

was in practice under Lloyd George's sole control. Much of it was built up through the sale of honours. There was a tariff: knighthoods for £10,000, baronetcies at £30,000, peerages at £50,000 and sometimes more. By the time Lloyd George left office, nearly 100 baronies had been awarded, 294 knighthoods, around 25,000 Order of the British Empire awards and 90 peerages. Lloyd George, indeed, had little respect for the peerage, naming his outside lavatory in North Wales, his 'house of lords', and amusing his guests by saying in the middle of a conversation that he had to go to the house of lords for a moment! Prime ministers had, of course, in effect sold honours before, and were to do so again, though more discreetly and not on so large a scale. The Liberals were, admittedly, in a difficult financial position in the 1920s, since unlike the other two parties, they could not rely on institutional sources of finance from business or trade unions. But the Fund was not a party fund. It was instead earmarked for Lloyd George's personal use and for the provision of expenses of Liberal candidates sympathetic to his policies, which were not always those of the party. Some of the money was used for Lloyd George's policy inquiries in the

1920s, inquiries which led to the bold Keynesian programme put before the voters in the 1929 general election – an intellectually impressive programme though electorally unsuccessful.

After his premiership ended in 1922, Lloyd George had two major sources of finance. The first was fees and royalties from journalism and war memoirs, the second was profits from his various horticultural and farming experiments in the properties he purchased at Churt in Surrey in 1922, and Ty Newydd, a mansion between Criccieth and Llanystumdwy, which he purchased in 1939.

Ian Ivatt has found an interesting subject, but, though worth telling, it is a bit thin to sustain a book, and there is some padding in the form of additional material on Lloyd George's political career, much of which is already known. And it has to be confessed that the story of Lloyd George's finances does not make for exciting reading. Nevertheless, this is a valuable addition to the ever growing library of Lloyd George studies.

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