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Issue 108 / Autumn 2020 / £7.50

Journal of Liberal HISTORY

Swinson as leader

Liberal Democrat History Group

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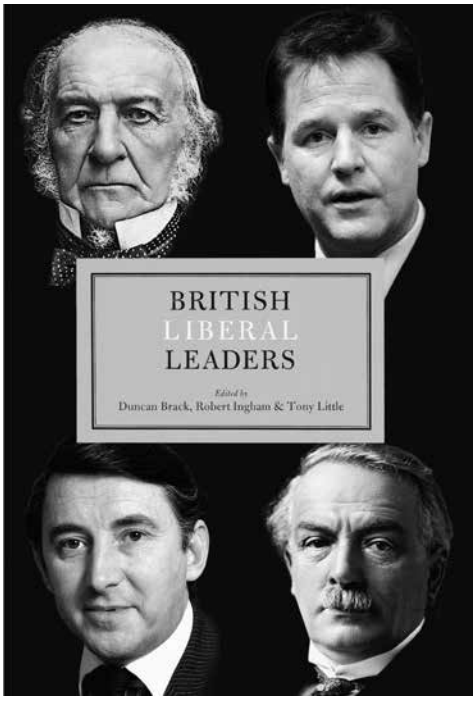
British Liberal Leaders



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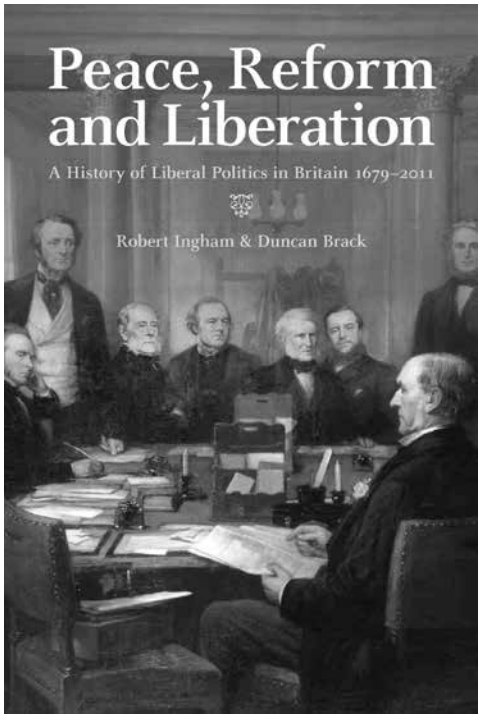

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September 2020

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Front cover photo: Jo Swinson at Liberal Democrat London Business Day, 12 September 2019 (photo: Liberal Democrats)

Liberal Democrat History Group

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

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

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Liberal History News
Autumn 2020

Editorial

Welcome to the autumn 2020 issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*. We're now back on our normal printing schedule after the disruption caused by the coronavirus epidemic.

Our first main article this issue is an interview with Jo Swinson on her period as leader – the latest in the series of interviews we have conducted with every former party leader other Charles Kennedy. We hope these interviews will prove of value to future students of Liberal Democrat history and of political leadership more broadly. We have also updated our comparative table of leadership performance to take account of the interim leadership of Ed Davey and party presidents Sal Brinton and Mark Pack.

Liberal Democrats are used to thinking of Dadabhai Naoroji as the first Liberal black or ethnic minority MP (in the 1892–95 parliament), but as Amanda Goodrich demonstrates in her fascinating article, he was not –he was preceded by Henry Galgacus Redhead Yorke, who was Whig / Liberal MP for York from 1841 to 1848. The article focuses on him and his father, Henry Redhead Yorke, who was well known to historians of British radicalism as an English revolutionary radical from Derby in the 1790s – but in in fact, he was a West Indian creole of African/British descent whose mother, Sarah Bullock, was a slave from Barbuda. Neither were identified at the time as of BME origin.

Our third main article considers the career of the second woman ever to be mayor of an industrial town – Meriel Cowell-Stepney, Lady Howard, who served as mayor of Llanelli in 1916. This acts as a supplement to its author Jaime Reynolds' article in issue 89 on the first Liberal women mayors; his work in bringing to light this hitherto largely unknown aspect of Liberal history is the kind of topic this *Journal* was established to encourage.

I hope you enjoy the articles, the meeting report and out book reviews – and stay healthy and safe.

Duncan Brack (Editor)

Liberal history podcasts

Mark Pack's 'Never Mind the Bar Charts' podcast series now has two episodes on Liberal leaders, based on discussions with *Journal* Editor Duncan Brack: on Jo Grimond (10 July 2020) and David Steel (19 August 2020). For the full list of episodes, see https://www.nevermindthebarcharts.com.

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**.

September

29 September 1956: Clement Davies steps down as Liberal leader, stating 'It is time that the tiller was placed in the hands of a younger man. Fortunately, I can step down knowing that there is a worthy successor waiting – one who has fully earned his master's certificate.' He is succeeded in November by Jo Grimond.

October

8 October 1924: A Liberal motion calling for a select committee of inquiry into the 'Campbell case' is passed in the Commons by 364 votes to 198, forcing Ramsay MacDonald's resignation as he chose to interpret the division as a vote of confidence. The following general election sees the Liberals lose three-quarters of their seats.

November

5 November 1909: The Liberal Party takes the extraordinary step of drafting a second Budget ('Finance (Number Two) Bill') on the assumption that the radical 1909 People's Budget, introduced principally to raise taxes for the Liberal governments social welfare programmes, is rejected. However, it decides a few days later not to present the alternative Budget, should the original one be rejected, as this would concede the right to decide on government finances to the House of Lords and the party is becoming increasingly focused on the constitutional question of the peers versus the people.

Liberal Democrat leadership performance

In the summer 2014 edition of the *Journal of Liberal History* (issue 83), a special issue on the first twenty-five years of the Liberal Democrats, we included an article on 'Liberal Democrat leadership' by Duncan Brack. The article included a table comparing the performance of the four Liberal Democrat leaders until 2014 in terms of their personal ratings and party ratings in the opinion polls, performance in general, European and local elections and numbers of party members, at the beginning and end of their leaderships.

Although these statistics of course ignore the political context of the leader's period in office, and can mask large swings within the period – and other, non-quantitative, measures of a leader's performance may be just as, if not more, important – these figures do have value in judging the effectiveness of any given leader.

We have had, of course, to update this table several times over the last five years, and therefore present here the comparative statistics for the eight leaders of the Liberal Democrats up to the election of Ed Davey in August 2020l; for these purposes, we are counting the interim leadership of Ed Davey and the two party presidents who held office during this period, Sal Brinton and Mark Pack, as a discrete 'leadership'.

Here's hoping we don't need to update the table again for several more years!

Notes and sources

a Ipsos-MORI series on 'satisfaction with party leaders'. Ratings are given for the nearest available date to the leader's election and resignation. Ipsos-MORI did not poll this question for Ed Davey's interim leadership

b After Jo Swinson's defeat in the 2019 general election – and therefore automatic resignation as leader – the interim leadership was held jointly by the deputy leader of the parliamentary party in the Commons (Ed Davey) and the party president (Baroness Brinton until 31 December 2019, Mark Pack from 1 January 2020).

c Ipsos-MORI series on 'voting intention trends'. Where resignation immediately followed an election, the election result is given.

d Willie Rennie was elected in the Dunfermline & West Fife by-election during the 2006 leadership election.

e In December 2018 Stephen Lloyd, one of the 12 Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2017, resigned the whip to sit as an independent. In June 2019 Chuka Umunna MP joined the party.

f Until 2019: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, Elections Centre, Plymouth University. From 2019: Open Council Data UK (http://opencouncildata.co.uk); because of errors in the source data, entry date differences, etc., figures should be accurate to ±10. For voting figures, years in which local elections coincided with general elections are excluded.

g The total number of councillors has been falling since the mid 1990s, as unitary authorities have replaced district councils in some areas; from 1994 to 2013, for example, the total number of councillors fell by about 15 per cent.

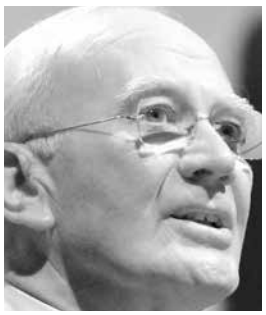
h The postponement of local elections and by-elections due to the coronavirus pandemic means that the bulk of the fall from the previous figure is probably due to resignations and deaths leaving unfilled vacancies.

h Before 2015: Mark Pack. 'Liberal Democrat membership figures', https://www.markpack.org.uk/143767/liberal-democrat-membership-figures/; 2015 on: Liberal Democrat HQ.

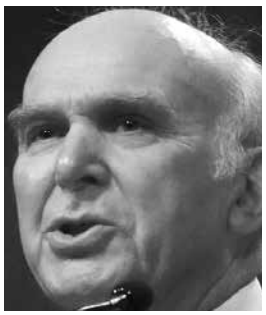
i Ashdown, Farron and Cable announced their intention to resign in advance, and stood down on the election of their successor; the membership figures for the end of their period in office and the start of their successor's are therefore identical. Kennedy, Campbell and Clegg all resigned with immediate effect; the exact membership figures are not available at the point of Kennedy's and Campbell's resignations, so figures given here are approximate. While we know that membership increased sharply after Clegg's resignation, in the run-up to the 2015 leadership election, it is not known whether this happened after Kennedy's resignation in 2006 or Campbell's in 2007.

Liberal Democrat leadership performance





Leadership performance						
	Ashdown (1988–99)		*Kennedy (1999–2006)*		*Campbell (2006–07)*	
Personal ratings (net score satisfied minus dissatisfied (per cent) and date)[a]						
When elected	–4	Aug 1988	+11	Aug 1999	+5	Mar 2006
Highest during leadership	+58	May 1997	+42	June 2001	+6	May 2006
Lowest during leadership	–24	July 1989	+8	June 2004	–13	May 2007
When stood down	+39	July 1999	+20	Aug 2005	–11	Sept 2007
Range (highest – lowest)		82		34		19
Party poll ratings (per cent and date)[c]						
When elected	8	July 1988	17	Aug 1999	19	Mar 2006
Highest during leadership	28	July 1993	26	Dec 2004, May 2005	25	Apr 2006
Lowest during leadership	4	June – Aug, Nov 1989	11	Oct 99, July 00, Jan, May 01	11	Oct 2007
When stood down	17	Aug 1999	15	Jan 2006	11	Oct 2007
Westminster election performance: Liberal Democrat MPs and vote (%)						
MPs when elected		19		46		63[d]
MPs when stood down		46		62		63
Highest election vote (%, date)	17.8	1992	22.0	2005		n/a
Lowest election vote (%, date)	16.8	1997	18.3	2001		n/a
European election performance: Liberal Democrat MEPs and vote (%)						
MEPs when elected		0		10		12
MEPs when stood down		10		12		12
Highest election vote (%, date)	16.7	1994	14.9	2004		n/a
Lowest election vote (%, date)	6.4	1989		n/a		n/a
Local election performance: councillors and vote[f, g]						
Councillors when elected		3,640		4,485		4,743
Councillors when stood down		4,485		4,743		4,420
Highest election vote (%, date)	27	1994	27	2003, 2004	25	2006
Lowest election vote (%, date)	17	1990	25	2002	24	2007
Party membership[i, j]						
Membership when elected		80,104		82,827		72,064
Membership when stood down		82,827		~72,000		~64,000
Change (per cent)		+3		–13		–11





	Clegg (2007–15)		*Farron (2015–17)*		*Cable (2017–19)*		*Swinson (2019)*		*Davey / Brinton / Pack (2019–20)*[b]	
–3	Jan 2008	–7	Sept 2015	–1	Sept 2017	0	July 2019	n/a	
+53	Apr 2010	–1	Dec 2016	–1	Sept 2017	0	July 2019	n/a	
–45	Oct 2012, Sept 2014	–19	May 2017	–19	Oct 2018	–22	Dec 2019	n/a	
–21	April 2015	–19	May 2017	–7	June 2019	–22	Dec 2019	n/a	
98		18		18		22		n/a	
14	Dec 2007	10	Sept 2015	9	July 2017	20	July 2019	12	Dec 2019
32	Apr 2010	14	Dec 2016	22	June 2019	23	Sept 2019	12	Dec 2019
6	Feb 2015	6	Feb, Apr, Sept 2016	6	Mar 2018	12	Dec 2019	6	Aug 2020
8	May 2015	7	June 2017	20	July 2019	12	Dec 2019	6	Aug 2020
63		8		12		12		11	
8		12		12[e]		11		11	
23.0	2010	7.4	2017	n/a		11.5	2019	n/a	
7.9	2015	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	
12		1		1		16		16	
1		1		16		16		n/a	
13.7	2009	n/a		19.6	2019	n/a		n/a	
6.6	2014	n/a		n/a		n/a		n/a	
4,420		1,810		1,803		2,513		2,520	
1,810		1,803		2,513		2,520		2,495[h]	
25	2009	18	2017	17	2019	n/a		n/a	
11	2014	15	2016	14	2018	n/a		n/a	
64,728		60,215		104,925		110,960		127,577	
44,568		104,925		110,960		127,577		116,575	
–31		+74		+6		+15		–9	

Leadership

Interview with Jo Swinson on her period as Leader of the Liberal Democrats

Jo Swinson

Jo Swinson was first elected MP for East Dunbartonshire in 2005. During the coalition government she served as a Parliamentary Private Secretary from 2010 to 2012, first to Business Secretary Vince Cable and then to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, and as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills from 2012 to 2015. She lost her seat in the 2015 election but was re-elected in 2017, and served as Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party under Tim Farron and then Vince Cable. On 22 July 2019 she was elected Leader of the Liberal Democrats, being the first woman and the youngest person to hold the position. She lost her seat in the 2019 election, by just 149 votes, and therefore ceased to be leader. In August, the *Journal of Liberal History* interviewed her about her political career and, especially, her period as leader.

JLH Let's start with your political beliefs. How and when did you decide you were a Liberal Democrat?
JS My realisation that I was a Lib Dem happened in my teenage years when I was debating at school. As I looked up all the different parties' policies, it became clear to me that the Lib Dems were where my home was. The two things that particularly stuck out for me at that point were education and PR. This was in the mid 1990s, when the penny on income tax for education was the party's flagship policy. It seemed to me that education is the foundation of everything else that you want to achieve in society, whether impacts on health or crime or employment; it's such a good investment.

In terms of PR, I grew up in a constituency that seemed as if it would always vote Labour no matter what candidates were put up. I really railed against the unfairness of that because it didn't really matter how people voted; if you voted against Labour, your vote didn't count. Ironically, I then went on to represent that area! – albeit with boundary changes. And then the SNP were the party to take the seat from me on both occasions, so those bastions of one-party states were not quite the fortresses that they once looked like. Nevertheless, the commitment to electoral reform was a key driver.

I didn't join the party at that point, I became a supporter from the sidelines cheering on the Lib Dems in the 1997 election, which I was very frustrated that I couldn't vote in. When I went to university that autumn, I joined at the Freshers' Fair, and through my membership I saw the strands of environmentalism and internationalism running through Liberal values; they struck a chord with me as issues I had already campaigned on through Amnesty International and Friends of the Earth. So the party's values were very much in line with my values.

JLH Moving on to the coalition: you were a PPS and a minister for almost all the coalition government. What was your experience like?
JS It was a huge learning curve for all of us. We didn't have experience of being in government at Westminster – with, I think, the exception of Tom McNally, who had served as a PPS in the 1970s! So although we drew from our Holyrood colleagues – Jim Wallace and others who had served as ministers in the Scottish government – we were all on a big learning curve. I think that's part of the reason why some of the things that we did early on we wouldn't have done in year three; by that time we had worked out how things operated, how you could make the system work and what you had to do to get your priorities through.

Swinson at Liberal Democrat conference, September 2019 (Photo: Liberal Democrats)

n as leader

Of course, no one joins the Liberal Democrats because they're on a power trip or because they want to get their hands on the levers of government at all costs; we had not expected to find ourselves able to put into practice the things that we had campaigned on and really cared about. My portfolio as a minister covered employment rights, consumer affairs, corporate governance. I was able to drive through policies like corporate reporting on human rights and greenhouse gas emissions, gender pay gap reporting, shared parental leave, the Consumer Rights Act, the Groceries Code adjudicator – these were opportunities to make changes to improve people's lives, and because you go into politics to change things, this was incredibly rewarding. And as a minister, even just the things that you say have an impact: you can make a speech, and people within the industries or sectors you're talking about will take that as guidance, as the direction of travel. So you really can drive change, not just through regulation, but by encouraging behavioural change in others.

I think we did do a huge amount of good. It was particularly good to work with Vince in the business department. We were the only department that had two Lib Dem ministers, and I think that gave us quite a lot of heft. I was double-hatted with my equalities portfolio, and I found that I much more free rein in in the business brief, because Vince wasn't going to block stuff, but where I dealt with a Conservative Secretary of State it was much more difficult, whether it was on the gender pay gap, international accords on LGBT+ rights, media objectification or progress on caste discrimination – it was those things that were getting blocked by the Tories. And of course, many of those day-to-day battles never saw the light of day in terms of the media outside, but they were the constant grind of trying within government to make things fairer.

The other thing that I learned from coalition, and just being in government generally, was the huge complexity of most problems. It's easy to make up a soundbite policy, but turning that policy into reality, even with something like shared parental leave where there was no doubt over the government's commitment, was difficult. People's lives are complicated; how do you design shared parental leave so that it works in practice for everyone?

So, having been a minister, I found being an MP again after 2017, when I was re-elected, quite different. I couldn't just reach for that easy soundbite and pretend that I thought it was that simple – which in some ways was a shame because a straightforward soundbite is often the more attention-grabbing thing to say! But it can often be too simplistic, and I found it very hard to go back to that mindset when you understand the wider context in which decisions are made. I think I was ultimately a better politician, and I think that my words carried more weight in the House of Commons and beyond, because of that experience.

What we should have done was to argue that we needed to reopen the comprehensive spending review and say that we needed another three billion because we couldn't possibly raise tuition fees. I think we hadn't realised, frankly, how the Treasury has these 'sofas' that it finds a few billion pounds down the back of. That's happening on a massive scale now, of course, but even then, I think, money could somehow have been found.

JLH Was there anything the party could or should have done differently in coalition that would have avoided the catastrophe of the 2015 election?
JS There were certainly things we should have done differently. As I mentioned before, we learned so much about how to do government. I got gender pay gap reporting through at the very tail end of the government, and I think I was only able to do that because by that point I'd been a minister for nearly three years. I could see the opportunity and who I needed to speak to, which included making sure the Labour Party were also making the right noises about it as well. Just before the general election, the political circumstances were such that it wouldn't be blocked, because the cost of doing that then were much higher for the Conservatives. I wouldn't have understood how to do all that at the beginning.

Tuition fees are another example. At the time we were working within the bounds of the Department of Business's budget, and we knew that we shouldn't, for example, raid the further education budget because of the impacts on social mobility. What we should have done was to argue that we needed to reopen the comprehensive spending review and say that we needed another three billion because we couldn't possibly raise tuition fees. I think we hadn't realised, frankly, how the Treasury has these 'sofas' that it finds a few billion pounds down the back of. That's happening on a massive scale now, of course, but even then, I think, money could somehow have been found. But we didn't realise that that was something that we could do. That was a good example of something we got wrong because we were answering the wrong question.

Some people say that we should never have gone into coalition. I totally reject that. It was the right thing for the country. It was the right thing for our party too. Our own irrelevance would have been absolutely sealed if we had walked away from the offer that was made to put so many of our policies into practice at that point of national crisis. It was the right thing to do.

JLH You talked about making sure that Labour was making the right noises on gender pay gap reporting. Did you deal with the Labour Party much when you were a minister?
JS Yes. On that particular issue, I was encouraging the campaign; Labour MPs were also involved, and I had good relationships with them. It was helpful that Labour pushed it in the Lords, because that gave us the chance to say that there was no way we could keep our peers on board – we're going to lose and therefore we have to do it.

I had good relationships with my opposite numbers – Chuka Umunna was the Labour business spokesperson. I generally took the approach that it didn't matter what party they came from, if an MP was asking me a question at oral question time in good faith, they deserved a good answer. For example, I remember that Andy Sawford, the MP for Corby, was worried about people being exploited in agency work conditions in his town. I met him, I worked with the department, who mounted a big investigation and they found that there were genuine problems, and there was action taken. And when I was PPS to Vince and then Nick, I wrote to all MPs, I gave them my mobile number in case there were issues they wanted to raise; I organised surgeries so that they could come and talk to us. That's a part of politics that doesn't really get shown outside, but I just felt that that was part of the job and that was the right way to do it.

I also think it's a smart way to work, because it gives you a little bit of the benefit of the doubt when things are difficult, when you have to explain something which is tricky, or when you get sent out with a crap line – sometimes that happens in government! – you experience a little more understanding from people on the other side if you'd also been genuinely engaging and trying to take their concerns seriously.

JLH You lost your seat at the end of the coalition, but you were re-elected in 2017, and then you became deputy leader almost straight away, for the last months of Tim Farron's leadership and then for the whole of Vince Cable's leadership. Was that a useful preparation for your leadership?
JS I'm glad I did it, but the job of deputy leader is very different from being leader – and the issues that I faced as leader, and the level of scrutiny and the sheer variety and number of things needing attention, were very very different. Bear in mind that I was leader at a particularly turbulent time in politics, with unprecedented goings-on with prorogation and the Supreme Court ruling and all the Brexit and cross-party negotiations, and then the run-up to the general election. It's fair to say that it was a particularly high-intensity time to be doing the job, and being deputy leader didn't quite prepare me for any of that! But I'm very glad I did it. And it was great to work with Tim and also with Vince, having served under Vince in the business department.

I generally took the approach that it didn't matter what party they came from, if an MP was asking me a question at oral question time in good faith, they deserved a good answer.

JLH Did you think about standing for the leadership in 2017 when Tim Farron stood down?
JS I was inundated with people asking me to do so. But let's just remember the context. Tim stood down six days after the 2017 general election. I don't think I'd even managed to read and reply to all the messages of congratulation, and suddenly I was getting all these people saying: run for leader. I had been an MP before, but I had no staff, I had no office; it was like being a new MP all over again.

Obviously I thought about it, but in the end I was very confident that the decision not to run was the right one. I didn't feel at that point that I definitely would run to be leader at some point – I thought it was quite likely, but I wanted to be sure that I knew what I wanted to do with it. Rather than being something, it's about doing something.

JLH So when did you decide that you did want to stand?
JS It was in early September 2018 that Vince made a speech that announced that he would be stepping down; he'd rung me a couple of weeks before to let me know. My initial reaction was that it was much too soon – partly because I had a six-week-old baby, so I wasn't even sleeping more than about three hours a night, and everything was a bit of a haze! But later in the autumn, I did start to think about it seriously. It wasn't entirely clear when he would be stepping down; he would have fought a general election if it had taken place in the spring, and I was quite happy to remain his deputy leader through an election. Towards the end of 2018, I increasingly felt that when the time came, I would run for leader, and by the beginning of 2019 I was clear that I would. So I started putting together a campaign team and mapping out what I wanted to do.

JLH And what was that? What did you want to do with the party leadership?
JS When Theresa May called the election in 2017, I knew in a heartbeat that I wanted to run for parliament. I hadn't spent the previous two years thinking that I must get re-elected, but the Brexit vote really affected me. It wasn't just

Swinson with Chuka Umunna and Sarah Wollaston, August 2019 – both MPs who left the Independent Group for Change to join the Liberal Democrats (Photo: Andre Camara / Liberal Democrats)

On the campaign trail, with Layla Moran, Cambridge, November 2019 (Photo: Andre Camara / Liberal Democrats)

On the campaign trail, Esher, December 2019 (Photo: Liberal Democrats)

I hadn't spent the previous two years thinking that I must get re-elected, but the Brexit vote really affected me. It wasn't just about leaving the EU institutions, it was about who we are as a country, it was about the values of internationalism, liberal values: it felt to me that they were under attack. It was similar in some ways to the Scottish independence referendum, where I felt a deep emotional pull. The nationalism and populism which lies behind both those movements really felt like a big threat.

about leaving the EU institutions, it was about who we are as a country, it was about the values of internationalism, liberal values: it felt to me that they were under attack. It was similar in some ways to the Scottish independence referendum, where I felt a deep emotional pull. The nationalism and populism which lies behind both those movements really felt like a big threat.

I knew that the forces ranged against that nationalism and populism were and are fragmented. People who are small l-liberals were and are in different parties. We had a Labour leadership that was not liberal and probably didn't mind if Brexit went ahead, but there were plenty of people in the Labour Party – MPs and members and voters – who did share those values with us. And equally, you could see some people in the Conservative Party – fewer of them, perhaps, but there were 'soft' Conservatives who were also not being well served. But all these people were fragmented, and it seemed to me that there might be a way of bringing these people together – and that's where I felt I could genuinely offer something, because I had good links with the different parties, and I would be able to play that role as leader of the Liberal Democrats.

It wasn't clear to me then what that would look like; I was very open-minded about it. Then the Independent Group for Change was formed in February 2019, which I felt was a great positive move, because the status quo needed to be disrupted – but they found in the European elections that they couldn't deliver even in a proportional system. They hadn't fully taken into account the fact that centrism isn't a political value, and that setting up a new party is incredibly difficult to do. But I think it was helpful that they tried. It became increasingly clear that the Liberal Democrats were a potential vehicle to make that happen, but that wasn't obvious at the start of 2019.

So my aim was to bring those forces together so that we could collectively help our values to win through, and part of that would be stopping Brexit – though I've always felt that Brexit was a symptom of wider problems; it wasn't the be-all and end-all. There's no doubt that we're facing an uphill struggle, but I still believe that we need to find ways to work with others who share our values even if they find themselves wearing different coloured rosettes at election time.

JLH Did you want to take the party in any different direction politically?

JS One of the things I had been looking forward to doing after the general election was policy development. For obvious reasons, we fought the election on a manifesto that had been drawn up for a potential spring election, with a few changes, but that meant that we didn't start with my vision as leader and then work that through and create a coherent manifesto out of it. One of the things that I said often in interviews – and I meant every word – was that we need to reshape the economy so that it works for people and the planet. I know that we had some policies in our manifesto that would have helped with that, but did we have the whole prescription? No, I don't believe we did; and actually I don't believe that anybody has it entirely figured out yet.

We've ended up with this populist nationalist movement, which isn't going to solve the problems that people face, but is offering up comforting soundbites. It's not just a UK problem; you see the same thing in America and in other countries, but the response hasn't been developed properly. I think we're a decade too late – the liberal, progressive, centre-left of politics, the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party, we should have had an alternative plan ready to go when the financial crisis hit. But instead there were big vested interests pressing for a return to business as usual, and the Eurosceptics were claiming that it was all the fault of immigrants, and the solution is to leave the EU – which of course doesn't actually help the problem. I feel the work of developing a coherent alternative economic system still needs to be done.

JLH Did you have any organisational agenda? Do you want to do anything to the structures of the party, the way it operated?

JS I was very aware that that was the kind of thing that would eat up time! Recruiting Mike Dixon as chief executive was something I was proud of doing because his experience of managing organisations at scale is going to be helpful.

I was pretty determined to move on diversity, and I took the opportunities I could in the time that I had – but our decision-making is so white and still very male, and when I was leader it was still too much of both those things. That is a challenge within the party, because we stand for equality and liberty, and so we can easily think of ourselves as the good guys, as if we don't think sexist or racist thoughts, as if everyone is judged on their merits. But it's just not true; if we're pretending that our party is immune to the structural inequalities in our society, then that really makes us part of the problem. There are lots of people in the party

I think that what I found when I was a minister, and it was the same when I became leader, that it was about finding what was my own way of doing it, and using the strengths that I had, rather than modelling myself on somebody else.

who are doing great stuff on this, but there are still too many people who don't think we need to change that much.

JLH Leaders always tend to have different styles. Was there any previous leader, or any other individual, that you modelled yourself on?
JS I don't think I saw clear role models in our past leaders, because it's hard to see role models in people that don't look like you. But Charles [Kennedy] was a great influence on me. He was leader when I first became an MP and he was a much-loved colleague and had a real straightforwardness and warmth. I saw Nick [Clegg]'s leadership at close quarters when I was his PPS. And there were people like Shirley [Williams] who had always been an inspiration to me in the party. But I think that what I found when I was a minister, and it was the same when I became leader, that it was about finding what was my own way of doing it, and using the strengths that I had, rather than modelling myself on somebody else. I was only leader for a few months, I was still on a learning curve, but I think I brought a clarity and a focus and an energy to the role that many people responded well to.

JLH Most leaders, at one time or another, have had problems with the parliamentary party. Was that a feature of your leadership at any point?
JS I wouldn't say so. There were definitely challenges borne out of the fact that we were absorbing lots of defectors – but those were nice problems to have! When somebody joined us, we had to go through a process of working with the local party where there was already a candidate in place – that was obviously a very sensitive discussion – and we had to make sure that their staff were OK; it was a big change for them, and not even their decision. So for each person that joined us there was a lot that needed to be done. This didn't really cause problems with the parliamentary party, but I was very aware that as the party grew, people needed support and help. And it was very important, obviously, that the people who joined us had a good experience – because if they had a bad experience, who else was going to do it? I was really proud of our party, of our candidates, for being so good at putting the bigger picture ahead of their own personal ambition and ensuring that their local parties welcomed the defectors.

I remember reading in the *Evening Standard* a piece by Ayesha Hazarika about Luciana [Berger]; she'd drawn the contrast between the previous Labour conference where Luciana had had to go with a bodyguard, and then she came to the Lib Dem conference and everywhere people just wanted to give her a hug and she was welcomed and found friendship. I've always thought our party is a lovely party! I know that some of it was difficult for people, but the party really stepped up to show that we were open and inclusive and weren't going to be tribal, to recognise the scale of the challenge that we were facing and the need to bring people together to be able to fight it.

JLH Let's move on to the 2019 election. In retrospect, do you think it was a mistake not only to have pressed for the election, but actually to have introduced a bill to bring it in?
JS No. If you're asking me, was that my ideal timing for the election, then no, it wasn't, but we had to cope with the circumstances we faced at the time. Just to remind you, just a few days before, Boris Johnson had secured a second reading for his Withdrawal Bill with the help of nineteen Labour MPs. At that point, the twentyish Tory rebels who had been pretty reliably voting with us to get the Benn Act through, to support the Letwin amendment – all trying to make sure that we could avoid a no-deal Brexit – they had gone back to vote loyally with the government, and they'd been very open about the fact that that was what they were going to do if Johnson got a deal, with the exception of those that had actually left the party, like Dominic Grieve and Justine Greening. So at that point, the prospect of assembling a majority for a people's vote fell away, because the only way those Tories were going to vote for a people's vote was if it was the only way to avoid no deal, and they now had a deal. So we didn't have the chance of getting a people's vote through, we had Boris getting a majority for his deal, but we were still a few days away from crashing out without a deal because we hadn't had an extension [to the Article 50 negotiations] granted. I'd had conversations with [French President] Macron's special adviser on Europe, and he'd been very clear to me that Macron was not minded to grant an extension – and it was the French that were blocking it within the EU – if there wasn't clarity about how the situation would be resolved.

So we couldn't get a people's vote and Boris had a route to get his deal through. The only thing the House of Commons had been reliably voting for was to stop a no-deal Brexit. Ultimately, those nineteen Labour MPs were going to get that bill through and then Brexit would have been an absolute certainty. So what were our options at that point? There didn't seem

to be a lot of choices, but going for an election with a chance to stop it felt like it was worth trying. And let's remember, tens of thousands of people had joined our party, six million people had signed the petition to revoke Article 50, nearly a million people had marched in the streets of London because they didn't want Brexit, we'd had an election [the European election] where lots of people had voted for us for the first time and for the first time we had beaten both Labour and the Conservatives. So I think for us at that point, if we'd just said, well, we'll have some late-night committee sessions to try to amend the Withdrawal Bill, but we won't try to stop it – I don't think that would have been true to ourselves. And the window of time to have an election was very short. There wasn't enough time for an election between Christmas and the 31st January extension date (if granted), and if you wanted to have an election before Christmas, then you had to call it at the end of October or the beginning of November. It was not the scenario we wanted. We wanted a people's vote, but Johnson getting the deal with Europe and then getting it through the House of Commons changed everything.

JLH You didn't think there was any realistic prospect of a referendum being attached to the bill during its progress through committee?
JS I don't see how the numbers added up. On the Conservative side, you weren't getting Tory rebels any more, apart from Justine and Dominic, and then Phillip [Lee] and Sam [Gyimah] had joined us. But you couldn't rely on Labour either. Let's remember that at this time Labour were not voting for a people's vote. We had laid an amendment to the Queen's Speech arguing for a people's vote, and we were told that it was the wrong time. We were about ten days away from crashing out without a deal and we were told it was the wrong time! There were many supporters of a people's vote in the Labour Party who worked incredibly hard to try to get their colleagues on board, and were very frustrated with them, but Corbyn didn't want a people's vote. Corbyn would have been quite happy with Brexit getting through and trying to blame it on the Tories and not having to talk about it. And those nineteen Labour MPs supported the Brexit bill.

The idea that you were going to get all of the Labour Party voting for a people's vote was just not credible. I know that there are people who like to believe that it would have happened, but when we were that close to no deal and they still weren't prepared to, then I don't think they were ever going to.

JLH Do you think the SNP would have voted for an early election anyway, regardless of what the Liberal Democrats did – which would have given the government a majority?
JS Yes, I do. There were two sets of meetings going on during the autumn. There were the functional cross-party meetings to agree amendments and so on, where people might have had different objectives but they were upfront about it and worked constructively to get things done. And then there were the opposition leaders' meetings, which were very frustrating and were really for show; Corbyn didn't want anything to happen, he just wanted to look like he was doing something. In early September, we had to hold back Corbyn and the SNP from going for an election by pointing out that if they went for the election then, then Boris would have the chance to choose the date, and he could have chosen a date that meant the UK would crash out of the EU during the campaign. They took a lot of holding back.

But after the deal was agreed, we had this impasse. Either we went ahead and debated the bill in committee – which Labour might have been quite happy for, but went against what we wanted to be the outcome – or you had an election. The only way to bring some resolution was either a people's vote or a general election, and Boris getting the deal basically decided which one it was going to be.

JLH There were rumours that the defectors were keener on the election than the more long-standing Lib Dem MPs, because they were more gung-ho, less realistic, about the party's prospects. Is that a fair comment?
JS I don't think so. Obviously we had quite a long discussion within the parliamentary party about the merits of going for the election, and I can remember a couple of voices being raised against it, but one of them was a defector and the other was a long-standing colleague. Most people, I think, understood that if the election didn't happen, the alternative was the bill passing and Brexit happening. People were adamant about wanting to do everything we possibly could to stop Brexit; they could see the logic that this was the last chance that we had.

JLH Let's turn to the election campaign. The party's General Election Review identified a series of problems: an unwarranted degree of optimism about the party's prospects after the local and European election results; the revoke policy; the 'your candidate for prime minister' message and falling ratings for you personally. On top of that, there were organisational problems within the party which predated your leadership,

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but they also identified a tendency to centralise decision-making in a small group around you. Do you think that's a fair summary? What do you think were the main problems?

JS I think the main problems for us that had the biggest impact on the election were: Boris Johnson securing a Brexit deal; Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage coming to an electoral pact to avoid their vote being split; and Jeremy Corbyn being so toxic and unpalatable as a prospect for prime minister. Understandably, the review focused on the things which were within our control, but I think we should not forget that many of the biggest forces in politics that have the most impact on election outcomes are not within our control. I'm not going to sit here and say that everything was done perfectly. Of course, it wasn't, not least because we weren't ready for an election! But the idea that if we'd done X or Y differently it would have led to a markedly different result? I haven't seen any evidence that suggests that.

On the revoke policy, remember that six million people had signed a petition saying that they wanted this to happen; it wasn't as if it was a fringe position, and it's not as if we had been quiet about saying that we wanted to stop Brexit. We hadn't had time to work out how that position would be attacked and we hadn't worked out our rebuttals; I'm sure we could have done that given more time. But, ultimately, we wanted to stop Brexit, so however we put it – whether we said we wanted to have a people's vote or whether we said we would revoke – we were going to be attacked, and that was already happening. And it did give us clarity. So, you can debate this, but I think the idea that everybody who was upset by the revoke policy would have been totally fine if it had been a people's vote doesn't stack up.

Were we too optimistic? We were taking a calculated risk, based on the circumstances of the time, to try to stop something that was about to happen that we felt fundamentally was an affront to our values. Since Corbyn was so unpalatable, the only route to stop Brexit was us having a very good election and getting momentum – and you don't do that by saying that our aim was to double our seats, and we're going to focus everything on getting those twenty or so MPs. We could have done that, but we made a clear choice not to do it, and I don't regret that because we would have been saying that we're OK for Brexit to go ahead as long as we win 22 or 24 MPs. We would have been saying from the off that we weren't really serious about stopping Brexit, we were only trying to get a few more votes.

The 'your candidate for PM' message? Again, I think we didn't have enough time to do proper testing. This was people in the Campaigns Department; I didn't write the leaflets – but it's something that we have said before. Nick said it very explicitly in 2010, when we'd been in a similar place in the polls – in fact, this time round, we were closer to the other parties – and he didn't get anything like this kind of pushback. I think we didn't properly anticipate quite how it would be perceived when it was coming from a young woman. It's well documented how ambition in women is still something which is punished.

If we had had longer, we would have been able to do more testing about what the framing, the communication, should have been. There's stuff in the general election review report which is definitely useful, and I'm not going to sit here and say that we did everything perfectly – but on the big calls, given the circumstances at the time, I'd largely make those again. Someone said to me – and I think there's a lot of truth in it – that a calculated risk is not the same as a mistake. We knew that we were pursuing something that was risky, but pursuing a real safety-first approach didn't feel like it would have met the circumstances of the time, when there was so much at stake, where we had momentum, where we had a record number of members, where people were looking for hope between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. Now, we didn't manage to convert that into enough momentum to create a vastly different outcome. But the thought that we shouldn't have tried doesn't sit well with what we set out to do in politics.

The report was right to focus on what we did rather than the external context, but I remember something which Nick said to me when I became leader: don't underestimate how little of what we do actually has any impact. So much is determined by the forces around us. At the end of the day, that voter that people were trying to convince to vote for us, who was terrified of Jeremy Corbyn becoming prime minister – it didn't matter what we did. We could promise – as we did, multiple times – that we would never put him in Downing Street, but if they felt that the safest thing they could do to guard against Corbyn getting into Number 10 was to vote Tory, there wasn't much we could do about it. And the polarisation worked the other way as well.

JLH Let's look at a couple of those issues in a little more detail. On the vote to revoke Article 50 at the autumn conference, it was rumoured at the time, and

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A lot of the people who are pointing the finger at [the revoke] policy now weren't exactly speaking up at the time, saying, oh, no, this will be a problem! Also I think that we can overstate the idea that we wouldn't have come under attack for the basic wanting-to-stop-Brexit approach through a slightly different policy.

the review actually says this, that you decided to support it to head off what you thought was going to be a clash at conference, that the motion was going to be submitted anyway, so you thought you needed to support it to avoid a fight at your first conference after becoming leader. Is that true?
JS I don't think it was about not wanting a clash. This was a motion that had been submitted to previous conferences, and since then, we had had a national petition that six million people had signed in support of it. And Labour's policy was rumoured to be moving towards a people's vote. So you have to remember the context. And let's remember what the policy actually was, which was that if we elected a Liberal Democrat majority government, we would revoke Article 50. I think everybody accepts that if we elected a Liberal Democrat majority government, it would be a seismic event and it would have given us that level of mandate. So it didn't feel like an extreme position. And, by the way, we also went up in the polls significantly, by 8 per cent amongst remainers, after it was announced, because it gave us clarity; there were still some people who didn't know what our policy was on Brexit.

As I said, greater and more in-depth work on rebuttals and so on could have been done if we had had more time – but it did feel as if it was the right time, and it also felt like Lib Dem conference would vote for it, so it wasn't anything to do with being scared of conference. And a lot of the people who are pointing the finger at this policy now weren't exactly speaking up at the time, saying, oh, no, this will be a problem! Also I think that we can overstate the idea that we wouldn't have come under attack for the basic wanting-to-stop-Brexit approach through a slightly different policy.

JLH With the benefit of hindsight, the policy certainly made sense when it looked as if the Brexit process was going to end up with no deal, but when Johnson managed to negotiate a deal, that changed the context, and the revoke policy perhaps stopped being such an obvious answer. Was there any consideration of that at the time?
JS That's why I mentioned the three things that I think were absolutely pivotal in the election: Johnson getting the deal was one of them. There was still the risk of no deal, but it was very hard to get that message across to people; everyone just thought, there's a deal. And Tory MPs didn't care what was in the deal, they just wanted to know that there was a deal.

At that point, did we think about changing our policy? Conference had just voted for it three weeks before! If we had turned around and said, now we're not supporting revoke, that would have suddenly sowed a lot of uncertainty. The headlines would have been: are the Lib Dems for stopping Brexit or are they not for stopping Brexit? We had a clear position and increasing numbers of people knew what our position was. It was a polarising position because this was the issue of the day, it was an incredibly polarising issue. But we did want to stop Brexit! We couldn't adopt a nice sitting-on-the-fence position; there's only so much that you can sugar-coat things like that. That was our position and some people weren't going to like it and we were going to get attacked for it.

JLH Fair enough. So on the 'Jo Swinson for prime minister' message – OK, Nick had used a similar one in 2010, but the context was rather different then. The party had 60 MPs at the time, it had consistently scored well in the polls throughout most of the previous parliament. After 2017 the Lib Dems had twelve MPs and apart from a brief period in the spring and summer of 2019, had been scoring very poorly. Surely the message didn't look credible right from the beginning?
JS Well, look, I wasn't the first person to talk about it during the leadership campaign. The first person to say it then was Ed [Davey]!

I think it was born out of the choice on offer: both Corbyn and Johnson being so unacceptable to big chunks of the population. And just to say, well, that's tough, that's your choice, didn't seem appealing, and it would have got us immediately into that cul-de-sac of questions about who we were going to support if we held the balance of power. It obviously didn't manage to get us out of that hole, but if we had managed to continue on our 20 per cent-ish ratings, then there was a chance that, while getting to be prime minister was not particularly likely, the positioning of it gave us an opportunity to get many more MPs and to be in a situation where neither Johnson nor Corbyn could be prime minister, even though it would probably have been somebody else from one of those parties. It was a positioning that was trying to create the potential for a different outcome. We've seen in previous campaigns that opinion can suddenly shift, but you can't suddenly shift your ambition up if you start off saying that we just want to get twenty MPs.

Then Boris Johnson refused to debate me, and we didn't have a place in those leadership debates. We were taking ITV to court on this, and then ITV announced that if the case was found against them, the debate wouldn't go ahead at all. There was no way they thought that no one would want to watch a three-way debate; they decided it purely because the

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participants weren't going to rock up. There's a good reason why Johnson didn't want to debate me: he saw it would be a risk. I don't know how it would have gone, but it would have been a huge opportunity to boost our credibility. We were trying to create these opportunities, trying to get into those debates, and saying that we're standing all these candidates, therefore our leader is a candidate for prime minister, is part of how we made the argument to be in the debate in the first place.

The decisions about how we communicated that on leaflets were not ones that I made; I didn't say that I wanted this to be our strapline! We had some polling that was positive and suggested that people wanted something different, and so those decisions were made by campaigners who make those kind of decisions at every election.

JLH What about the criticism the review made, that decision-making was too centralised round you and a small group around you, who were not open enough to alternative views – and also, because everything was centralised, decision-making was too slow. Is that a fair criticism?
JS I would challenge you to find me a previous election review that doesn't make the same criticism of any leader in the past! The team that did the strategic thinking included about a dozen people, MPs, members of the House of Lords, people from different parts of the country – there were quite a lot of different views being fed in. But part of the problem was time. When the election started, I was still recruiting people to the leader's team. As soon as I became leader I put adverts out for key roles and did interviews, in some cases within a few days – but people have notice periods to work out. My press secretary didn't start until conference, and my chief of staff didn't start until two weeks before that (though I had an excellent interim chief of staff). We were at the very early stages of being a functioning team. I would have loved to have had more time to have developed my team and got everything working well.

JLH What are you most proud of in your leadership?
JS Inheriting a party that had a black hole in the finances and raising more money than we ever had before in a general election – including the single largest individual donation in British political history – raising more than £14 million; reaching record high membership figures; attracting more MPs to defect to the party in the space of three months than in our thirty-year history as a party; improving our strategic position for next time by securing 91 second places at the election, up from 38; increasing the vote share at the general election by the greatest amount ever by the Liberal Democrats. I think for less than five months' work, that's not too bad!

JLH And what did you find most challenging, apart from the general election, in your period as leader?
JS The most challenging thing was not enough time: both on a day-to-day basis and on a longer time horizon, whether it was developing a full policy platform to underpin my vision, which would have taken months, or getting my team fully recruited and working together. Everything was so frenetic, with parliament being shut down, racing towards a no deal and then a general election – none of it was normal times! From the very beginning, it felt like a huge amount of pressure; I felt like I was running from day one. In the end, we had until December for the election to take place, but at one point it looked like it could have happened in October.

JS What characteristics do you think leaders need to possess to be able to lead the Liberal Democrats well?
JS In reflecting on my time, I'm struck by how much it's about relationships, whether that's with the parliamentary party, with people at HQ, with those in our party's committees, and people from other political persuasions who you need to work with – relationships on so many levels. Those relationships of trust are transformational, if you can get them right, as to what you can achieve. For example, in the Unite to Remain alliance [with the Green Party and Plaid Cymru], it was far easier to conduct negotiations where there were strong relationships.

That's the first thing. Then, obviously, there is being able to communicate well in the media, being able to manage the party structures and be respectful of the party's democratic processes, there's having a vision, coupled with determination and drive, which I think are important. A bit like a candidate in a constituency drives the local campaign, it's about driving the party forward together so that people feel part of something good and are motivated and feel as if they know where they're going. I think those are qualities which are important, although I will also say that everybody's different and people lead in different ways. I don't think we should be afraid of that; I don't think we should try and fit our leaders into some kind of identikit mould and say this is the only way to do it.

JLH Do you think having a plan and a vision is an important part of leadership? You said that you thought Charles Kennedy was a good leader – lots of

people do – but he never really had any kind of overall vision or plan; he was good at reacting to circumstances, so he managed to be a good leader without these things.

JS That is interesting because, of course, under Charles's leadership, the real pivotal change in our fortunes came after the Iraq war – and obviously that wasn't planned. It's a truism, but you can never predict what the big issue of the next election will be. In 2001, you would never have predicted that the Iraq war was going to be a big issue in 2005; and in 2005, you wouldn't have predicted that the next election was going to be about the economy. In 2010, you wouldn't have predicted that 2015 would have been about whether or not Labour was going to be in the SNP's pocket. In 2015 you might have predicted that 2017 was going to be about Brexit, but actually it ended up being as much about social care. It's hard to look ahead! So I think rather than a plan which has to change, a vision and a broad strategy are important. And I think you need agility as well, because even if you're the governing party, you can't predict when things like pandemics are going to hit. You do need a kind of a guiding force behind what you're trying to achieve, but if you don't allow yourself agility and the ability to adapt to circumstances, then you're not seeing the full picture. It's a mix of those things.

JLH What are you going to do now and are you going to stay involved in politics?

JS If by politics you mean trying to change the world for the better, you'll not be surprised that I'm still as determined as ever to create positive change in the world! I have an exciting new job starting in September: I'm going to be director of Partners for a New Economy, which is a group of four philanthropic foundations that come together to make grants to try to change the economic system – everything from trying to look at how our banking and monetary systems work, to how companies can change their behaviour and how we can sow a new thread of academic thinking and foundation for what a different economic system looks like. In lots of different ways the economic system doesn't work: climate change is an obvious example, inequality is another.

I'm also now a visiting professor at Cranfield University in the 'Changing the World of Work' department. I'll be doing various things in that academic role, which is another new world for me.

JLH No more involvement in party politics?

JS I'm focused on making change in different ways. I'm part of the Liberal Democrat family and will obviously always continue to provide guidance and support, particularly to people who are setting out in politics and especially those who are from backgrounds that are under-represented in politics; I'll always be an encouraging voice, trying to help. But I think it's appropriate that whoever our new leader is, they have some space to get on with their job as I get stuck into my exciting new role.

JLH Thanks very much.

Think history

Can you spare some time to help the History Group?

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BME politicians in Britain

Amanda Goodrich examines the histories of two – hitherto unsuspected – BME politicians in early radical and Liberal politics

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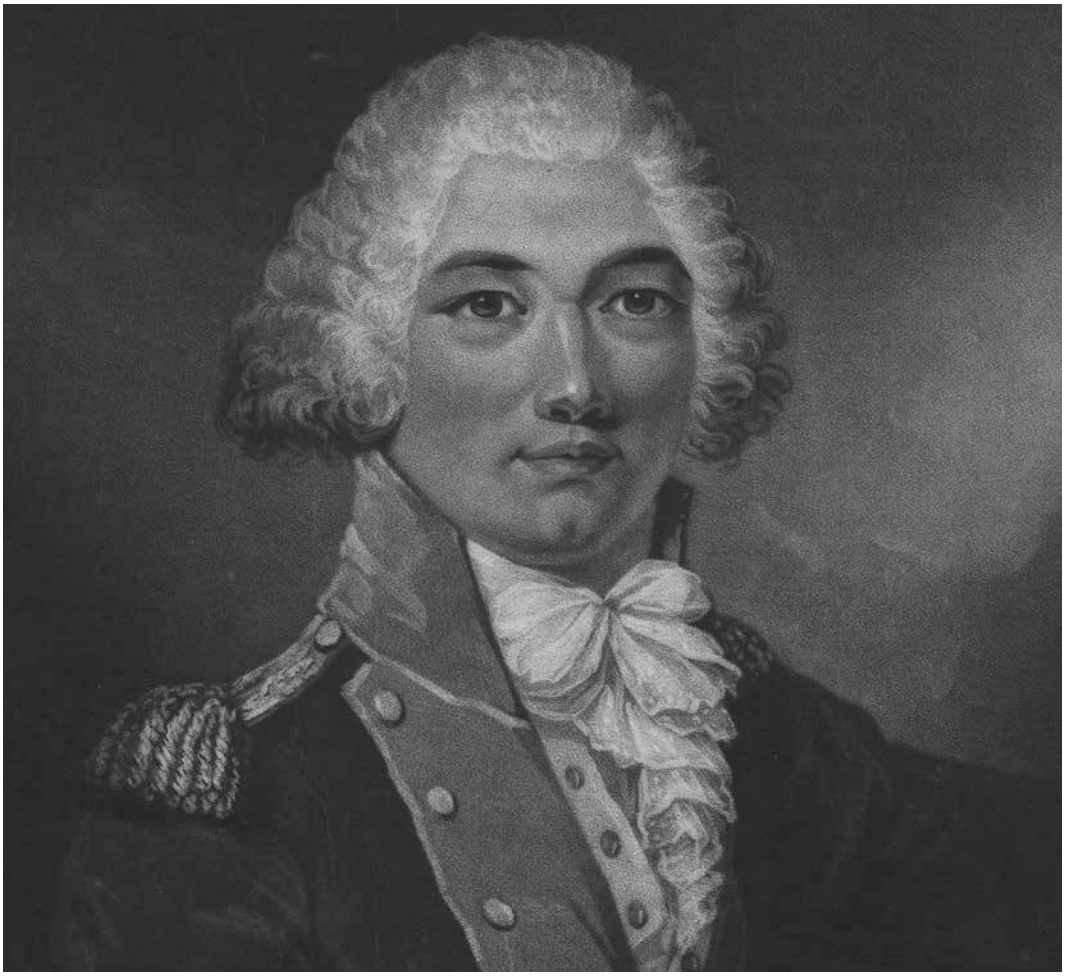

Henry Redhead Yorke by James Ward, published by and after William Hay mezzotint, published 21 July 1796 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

The significance of black and mixed ethnicity (BME) people in British history has long been underestimated.1 Recent research has attempted to restore such forgotten people to their rightful place in history.2 We know that black people have been present in Britain as far back as the Roman invasion. There were many black Georgians who lived and worked alongside their white counterparts in occupations such as seamen, soldiers, servants, performers and shopkeepers.3 It was fashionable for the elite to employ black men and boys as liveried servants and pages to adorn the halls and parlours of their mansions. Francis Barber, born a slave in Jamaica, became manservant to Dr Samuel Johnson.4 Also well-known is the story of Dido Elizabeth Belle, dual-heritage great-niece of Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, who lived with him in London partially as a family member; Mansfield was famous for his role as judge on the status of slaves in England in the Somerset Case of 1772.

Yorkes, Radical to Liberal: itish politics 1790–1850

A few became wealthy, such as Ignatius Sancho, who gained sufficient wealth and property to be the first black Briton known to have voted in the Westminster elections in 1774 and 1780. He also moved in elite literary circles in London.

The main focus of BME history in the Georgian period (1714–1830) has been slavery and abolition, and the lives of Africans who migrated to Britain after escaping slavery, such as Sancho, Oloudah Equiano, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano and Mary Prince. Yet little has been discovered about BME individuals engaged with politics in Britain. This is partly because they or their ethnicity are often absent from the archives and from other biographical material. Further, those from marginal groups or on the fringes of English society were less likely than English gentlemen to leave personal documents on their death, so their life histories are harder to trace. Thus, biographies written today of such BME individuals are often incomplete, with many absences and silences.

My recently published biography of Henry Redhead Yorke (1772–1813) illustrates that it is possible to discover BME individuals engaged in politics in Britain by searching an extensive variety of sources.[5] This article focuses on Yorke, who engaged with English radical and later Whig/Liberal and Tory extra-parliamentary politics, and his son, Henry Galgacus Redhead Yorke (1802–1848), who became a Liberal MP for York in 1841. It will explore how, in part due to their different identities in terms of class and ethnicity, as perceived by themselves and others, they ultimately achieved different positions within English society and politics.

Yorke belonged to a significant but small BME cohort in Georgian Britain: the offspring of liaisons between the plantation owners of British descent who had worked and/or lived in the West Indies and local enslaved or free BME women.[6] West Indian plantation owners were often very wealthy, on a par with the wealthiest elite in England. Their illegitimate children could, if their father so wished, benefit from the family fortune. It was common for planters to retire 'home' to England even if in fact they were born in the West Indies. When they immigrated to England, they often bought a country seat, which was then occupied by an entourage of extended family, including BME servants, mistresses and illegitimate children.

The presence of such families in rural Britain was often viewed as a flagrant flaunting of sexual impropriety between planters and slaves. The miscegenation so reviled in the West Indies was now on the doorstep in Britain. It represented the failure to regulate families and assert ideals of English masculinity in the colonies. Yet the planters' wealth gave them implicit privileges that were sometimes granted to their BME children – privileges not generally shared by other BME people in Britain at the time. For example, they could educate their BME sons as gentlemen in public schools and elite universities, enabling them to enter the law, city institutions and, theoretically, politics. Whilst the English elite often derided such incomers as nouveau riche, they were still keen to marry their younger sons and daughters off to the children of wealthy West Indian planters to boost the family coffers. This suggests a fairly open elite in Britain, but the class system was not entirely porous and when family trees merged through such marriages the black ancestry was generally suppressed.[7]

There was no legal bar against BME men from the British colonies entering parliament.[8] The concept of national identity, as we interpret it today, was not yet established in Georgian England but only emerging, and passports were not required for travel. The qualification

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for political rights within Britain, such as the right to vote or to become a member of parliament, was based on property ownership. Those from the colonies but living in Britain were not legally excluded from the political rights enjoyed by Englishmen.

However, in the eighteenth century both houses of parliament were dominated by the nobility, who did not generally welcome interlopers from the colonies. West Indian plantation owners and their descendants infrequently made their way into the British parliament by taking advantage of the corrupt system: buying rotten boroughs and votes at high prices to thwart the nobility. But evidence that any such West Indians were of black or mixed ethnicity is often absent from the archives. Indeed, no BME members of parliament have been identified in the Georgian period by the History of Parliament Trust, and only two have as yet been identified in the period 1832–68: John Stewart, MP for Lymington, 1832–47, the illegitimate son of a West Indian plantation owner; and David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre, MP for Sudbury, 1841–42, who was of European and Indian ethnicity.[9] One problem in tracing any such members of parliament is that the original volumes of the *History of Parliament* in the Georgian period did not record BME ethnicities.

Historians have identified a few Georgian BME individuals who did not enter parliament but took on roles in local government or extra-parliamentary politics. For example, Nathaniel Wells became deputy lieutenant of Monmouthshire; Equiano and Cugoano both engaged with reform politics as well as slave abolition; and the BME radicals Robert Wedderburn and William Davidson were prominent in early nineteenth-century extra-parliamentary politics.

Both Yorke and his son were engaged with British politics, but neither was identified by historians as of BME heritage until now. Yorke was well known to historians of British radicalism in the 1790s as an English revolutionary radical from Derby. I discovered that, in fact, he was a West Indian creole of African/British descent whose mother, Sarah Bullock, was a slave from Barbuda and whose father, Samuel Redhead, was an Antiguan plantation owner and agent for the Codrington family's plantations in Antigua and manager of Barbuda.[10]

Redhead, a somewhat disreputable character, had worked his way up from humble beginnings – his father was a carpenter. But Redhead married into one of the elite Antiguan families and, by 1764, he managed to buy the Frye plantation in Antigua for the hefty sum of £20,000.[11] The indenture stated that Frye consisted of 420 acres and all the 'negro and mulatto slaves' that lived on it: '55 men, 12 boys, 71 women, 11 girls and 28 children boys and girls … and also 2 bulls, 35 oxen, 30 cows, 12 cow calves, 18 bull calves, 3 steers, a fatling, and 4 horses'. A letter from Redhead to Sir William Codrington in 1771 asked for the manumission of Sarah Bullock and offered to pay her value as a slave of £90.[12] Codrington agreed to this arrangement. Obtaining freedom was difficult for slaves and having the child of a man who could afford to buy their freedom was one possible route to manumission. It was a risky one, however, for it was more likely that the father would deny his paternity or disown the slave and her child. Moreover, manumission did not necessarily bestow automatic and immediate freedom in the West Indies. According to the contemporary writer Bryan Edwards, manumission did not mean a complete or immediate status change to a free citizen with all the rights that might endow. For, 'The courts of law interpreted the act of manumission by the owner, as nothing more than an abandonment or release of his own proper authority over the person of the slave, which did not, and could not, convey to the object of his bounty the civil and political rights of a natural-born subject; and the same principle was applied to the issue of freed mothers, until after the third generation from the Negro ancestor'.[13] According to this interpretation, neither Bullock nor her children would, strictly speaking, have been deemed 'free' in the West Indies.

Historians had also previously assumed that Yorke was white, but the evidence indicates that he was a person of colour.[14] Georgians described him in common contemporary terms as, for example, a 'mulatto' a 'half-caste', having 'negro blood' and 'In complexion … not more than two shades from an African'. One acquaintance, James Montgomery, a printer from Sheffield, described Yorke's hair as 'defying' the fashion of the day 'by its luxuriant curl – a tendency derived from the sunnier side of his ancestral tree'.[15] In this period in Britain, scientific interpretations of race were developing but were not yet fully framed. Some thinkers and writers expressed racial prejudice against colonial identities, but attitudes on the ground to BME individuals were rather less well formulated. Conflicting ideas about racial difference coexisted, with many still believing that skin colour was due to climate. Overall, attitudes to black and mixed ethnicity were complex, inconsistent and circumstantial.[16] That does not mean, however, that racial prejudice was not experienced by BME people in everyday life.

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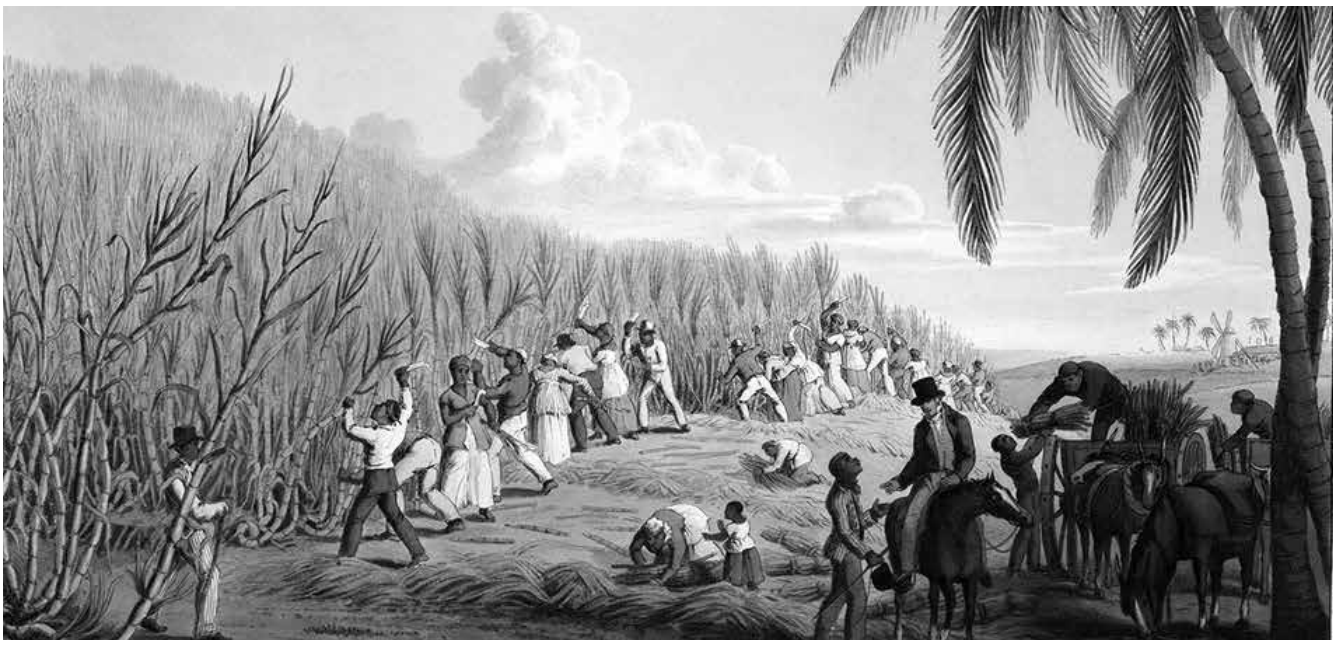

Slaves cutting the sugar cane, Antigua (from William Clark, *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua*, 1823) (British Library / Creative Commons)

Yorke was born on Barbuda, a small island about thirty miles north of Antigua. It was leased by the Crown to the Codrington family for 'one fat sheep if demanded' and Redhead was the manager of the island at the time of Yorke's birth. The Codringtons were mostly absentee plantation owners, preferring to live on their estate in Gloucestershire, rather than in the West Indies, and to leave their plantations to the management of local agents such as Redhead. Barbuda was not suitable for sugar cane, and the main agriculture involved rearing livestock and growing crops. This was not easy, however, as frequent droughts and hurricanes interfered with agriculture and often left both slaves and livestock hungry and without shelter. The governor of the Leeward Isles described Barbuda in 1777 as 'almost in a state of nature', there being so little cultivation. Dennis Reynolds, a manager in the 1780s, described it as 'a miserable poor place'.[17] A major source of income was wreck salvaging. Many ships were purportedly wrecked on the reefs around Barbuda. It was populated by slaves and the only white inhabitants were Redhead, on a part-time basis, and, when one could be found, a full-time manager. Unusually, the slaves lived in families, which were long-standing on the island, and thus had a sense of community and kinship. Redhead built a house on Barbuda in 1771 where Bullock lived and raised their illegitimate children, including Yorke, his brother Joseph and sister Sarah Ann. Redhead visited Barbuda regularly but retained his own plantation, and continued to act as agent for the Codringtons, in Antigua. He also kept another illegitimate family with an enslaved woman at the Betty's Hope plantation in Antigua. There is no evidence that Yorke visited Antigua as a small child. There was no school or chapel on Barbuda (until the nineteenth century), so it is unlikely that Yorke was baptised or received any formal education. Thus, it appears that Yorke was initially raised primarily by his mother in a slave society. There is no record that his parents ever married.

Yorke was taken to England in 1778 as a small boy to be educated as a gentleman. Presumably Redhead and Bullock had decided that with education, their son could 'pass' as an English gentleman. They were not alone in such an assumption, as the writer Edward Long confirmed:

> the many Mulatto, Quateron and other illegitimate children sent over to England for education … are often sent to the most expensive public schools, where the history of their birth and parentage is entirely unknown; they pass under the general name of West-Indians; and the bronze of their complexion is ignorantly ascribed to the fervour of the sun in the torrid zone.[18]

Illegitimacy was, however, often assumed from the skin colour of such West Indian children. Illegitimate children in England had no legal status. Under English common law, a child born outside marriage was 'nobody's child' and had no legal next of kin or hereditary position within the family. Power and property adhered to the male head of the family and power was contingent upon legitimate association with that family, thus illegitimacy led to powerlessness.[19] Such children were entirely reliant on their father's good will to provide them with any status or wealth.

For Yorke, the move to England at such a young age represented a reinvention, a new identity. School life would have come as something of a shock to him; he probably spoke little English and had a strong accent. One of the aims of an English education was to lose all trace of what was termed the 'Negro dialect'.[20] Education in England was known to be a considerable expense for planter families. Redhead must have been willing, or persuaded by Bullock, to expend large sums on educating his illegitimate sons. Notably, he already had five legitimate children with his wife, who had died some years earlier, but he had educated none of them in England. One reason for this was that Redhead did not gain his own plantation and become personally wealthy until the 1760s, when his first family had grown up. He moved to England with Bullock and their illegitimate children in about 1779 and lived in London until his death in 1785, by which time the family patrimony had started to decline. Redhead subverted the law on illegitimacy by leaving his illegitimate children bequests in his will. He left Yorke a financial legacy and some property in St John's, Antigua, thus giving him a private income from the legacies of slave ownership.

Yorke followed the orthodox educational route for a gentleman and a role in formal politics or the law, studying at Cambridge University and then training for the Bar at Inner Temple. He joined the Whig Club in 1790. As a young man he lived in London and Derby and associated with wealthy Derby industrialist reform Whigs. The movement for the abolition of slavery instigated in 1787 was well under way and Yorke wrote a pro-slavery pamphlet, published in early 1792, encouraged by a local gentry Tory. Thus, Yorke had been well educated out of his early West Indian slave identity; but it seems he could never quite discard it. He had developed a hybrid identity which, I argue, influenced his life and politics. Notably, Yorke promoted many identities and personas in his life and writings, but rarely the original West Indian one. In 1792 he attempted to change his name from Redhead to Yorke but never explained why. Thereafter, uncertainty as to his name added to an unstable identity: he was referred to as Redhead, Redhead Yorke or just Yorke. Nor did he follow a political career that reflected consistent allegiance to English conventions or political parties. He frequently changed his political position, which suggests a constant search for political 'belonging'. Politics was always at the centre of his life, however, and an important aspect of his adult identity.

In Paris, Yorke readily adopted a new identity as a 'citizen of the world', becoming one of the revolutionary cosmopolitans who flocked to the city at the time. Their intellectual focus and aims were international, embracing all humanity and promoting universal rights and freedom.

During the 1790s the French Revolution significantly influenced British politics, with many reformers and radicals emerging on to the political scene. Societies were formed to promote parliamentary reform, such as the London Corresponding Society, the Society for Constitutional Information and local societies around the country in, for example, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Birmingham, Sheffield, Norwich and Nottingham. Initially, such societies expressed their support for the revolution by sending addresses to the French National Convention in 1792. Extra-parliamentary divisions emerged between reformers (together with the more extreme radicals) and those who expressed loyalty to the political status quo, 'Church and king'. In 1792 Yorke began to promote radical politics in the Derby reform society and he drafted the Derby address to the French National Convention: an uncompromising document enhanced by fiery revolutionary rhetoric. Late in the same year he visited Paris, where he completed this political volte-face and changed his politics from Whig to revolutionary radical and from a pro-slavery to an anti-slavery position. He claimed that it was in Paris that he fell 'madly in love' with 'ideal liberty'. This dramatic shift could be put down to youthful enthusiasm and desire for the excitement of revolution, but in the case of Yorke his political shift was more complex. Certainly, one could argue that he was fully radicalised in Paris. He engaged with the exciting atmosphere of the revolution, attending the Convention and the trial of Louis XVI. He associated with French revolutionaries and other foreign radicals such as Thomas Paine and Joel Barlow at the 'British Club' (a group of British radicals who met at White's Hotel in Paris). Yorke wrote his first radical pamphlet in Paris – *Reason urged against Precedent; A Letter to the People of Derby* – which was published on his return to England in 1793. This was a strongly radical and revolutionary pamphlet in which he promoted French humanitarian and universal ideology and reversed his previous position on slavery.

In Paris, Yorke readily adopted a new identity as a 'citizen of the world', becoming one of the revolutionary cosmopolitans who flocked to the city at the time. Their intellectual focus and aims were international, embracing all humanity and promoting universal rights and freedom. In this respect cosmopolitanism was in direct conflict with the nationalistic politics growing in the monarchies of Europe, including Britain, at the time.[21] But then that was the point, in part at least, for men such as Yorke. By adopting a 'citizen of the world' persona they

could avoid or evade the emerging national identity in their home country.[22] They could find a role on the political stage but speak from no place or social position, imagining a 'global citizenship'.[23] Yorke's radicalisation, change of name and adoption of a citizen-of-the-world persona were all a way of evading both his West Indian identity and an English national identity, and of re-situating himself, both politically and geographically. Moreover, the revolution offered the possibility of a new democratic world for all. In 1792 the National Convention was dubbed 'a congress of the whole world', and on 26 August the Legislative Assembly awarded French citizenship to eighteen foreign citizens of the world, with full political rights, as a gesture of the revolution's cosmopolitan goals.[24] Yorke was welcomed in Paris along with other foreigners; he could 'belong' in the revolutionary mix, something that was more difficult in English politics. Yorke even planned to move his mother and siblings to live in Paris at this time. Unfortunately, this did not happen, as he was forced to flee France in 1793. A warrant for his arrest was issued by the Jacobins, in power since May, who had become suspicious of English radicals; war between Britain and France had been declared in February 1793.

Once back in England in 1793 Yorke became a radical activist preaching revolutionary ideas in dangerously inflammatory rhetoric on the outdoor platform to ordinary people around Britain. He frequently travelled between London, Derby, Sheffield and Manchester and stated that he generally journeyed on foot. He also published several lengthy radical pamphlets which placed him in the public political sphere. In his speeches and writings, Yorke continued to promote French revolutionary ideology and a citizen-of-the-world persona. He promoted universal rights for all mankind, including 'the African and the Asian', and a world of revolutions. Consequently, he ran against the grain of current English radicalism, which had largely turned away from the French Revolution and was increasingly promoting reform in terms of an Anglo-focused constitutionalism and parliamentary reform that functioned within the law and within national boundaries. The major aims publicly expressed by reform societies were to remove corruption, reform parliamentary representation and introduce universal male suffrage. Petitioning parliament or the king remained the main method they utilised for seeking reform. While Yorke did sometimes advocate constitutional reform for Britain he promoted, most strongly, a new post-revolutionary world of liberty and equal rights, without empires, 'kings, priests or nobles', or any of the social and political hierarchies of ancien-regime Britain. Ultimately, he wanted a world made anew, where men such as him could attain positions of power in the state. This vision incorporated a desire for agency, for self-determination without identity issues of race, class and illegitimacy getting in the way.[25] He functioned in this individualistic way largely because he was an 'outsider', because he did not fit within the national and customary political restraints generally observed even by English reformers. His focus was international, crossing and ignoring boundaries geographical and political. He imagined himself as ubiquitous – a true transatlantic 'citizen of the world', but like many fellow radicals he failed to turn his ideology into a framework for a new form of government.

Nevertheless, through his radical activities, writings and speeches to a popular audience around the country, Yorke was a dominant presence in 1790s English radicalism – another factor underestimated by historians. One reason for his dominance was the unconventional approach he took to radicalism in England. As a writer and activist, he was instrumental in pushing the English radical societies, particularly in Sheffield, in a more revolutionary direction, ignoring their established rules and methods. He promoted the arming of Sheffield radicals and the sale of arms made by Sheffield cutlers to other societies; he also advocated the creation of a convention (reflecting the French Assembly) to replace parliament. Yorke thrust himself into the forefront of radical action. As an orator, he zealously preached dangerous radical ideas from the outdoor platform. In his popularity and oratorical skills (although not generally in his revolutionary extremism), Yorke could be compared to significant public speakers such as John Thelwall, John Wilkes, Henry Hunt and Feargus O'Connor. He gained a large plebeian following, particularly in Sheffield, and became something of a radical gentleman hero.

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Between 1793 and 1794 Yorke also travelled to Europe and engaged with clandestine revolutionary activity in the Low Countries and France. He did this alone: English radicals were not at this time generally involved in European radicalism. It appears that he fought in the French revolutionary army for a short time in late 1793. He put himself in danger probably more than any other English radical activist of the time. After leading a radical outdoor meeting in Sheffield in April 1794 – allegedly attended by at least 12,000 people – Yorke was

arrested and charged with high treason. I argue that the combination of Yorke's writings and actions suggest that he was the most revolutionary radical in Britain during 1793–94. It is true that Paine's *Rights of Man* (1790–91) was much the most influential radical text of its day, and that others such as John Thelwall, leader of the London Corresponding Society, wrote similarly coherent works on governmental and economic reforms. Yet, unlike Paine, who left England in 1792 never to return, Yorke remained an active radical in England until his arrest in 1794. He was also more internationalist in his writings and activities than most English radicals, including Thelwall. Certainly, Yorke was identified by the government as a treacherous revolutionary and leader of the treasonable conspiracy to overthrow the government it identified prior to the Treason Trials of radicals in 1794.[26] Yorke was held in prison from his arrest until his trial in July 1795. His was convicted of seditious conspiracy and imprisoned in Dorchester Gaol for two years.

During the French Revolution the British government had formed a significant secret service led by master spy William Wickham. Spies infiltrated the reform societies and reported on radical activity. Yorke was hounded mercilessly by the government from 1792 to his arrest, and he remained under surveillance until his death in 1813. While this was mainly due to his connections with revolutionary Europe, it is also likely that his West Indian background played a part in this singular government interest. At that time, unrest was common in West Indian colonies and the French colony of Saint-Domingue had erupted in rebellion (a rebellion which became a revolution, resulting in the formation of the Republic of Haiti in 1804). There was much interplay between radicals and revolutionaries across the Atlantic.[27] The British government was fearful of West Indian revolutionary ideology spreading to Britain and vice versa, and that the Saint-Domingue uprising might trigger uprisings in its own West Indian colonies. The government was afraid that BME men originally from the West Indies but living in Britain would become radicalised and incite revolution in Britain.[28] To the government, Yorke was the personification of that fear.

On his release from prison in 1798, Yorke expeditiously changed his politics again, becoming a loyalist patriot and conservative journalist and writer. He published a great deal, including political pamphlets, journalism, historical and economic works, a progressive text on education, and a fascinating travelogue of a visit to France in 1802. Yorke's reversion to loyalism was not an abrupt change of allegiance, as historians have suggested.[29] Rather, it represents a shifting of his position over time after his release from prison from something of the moderate Whig liberal reformer in his political writings of 1797–99 to staunch Tory in his later journalism. Yorke was inconsistent in his political position and it is hard to judge during this period where his political allegiances lay.

Recanting here, by Yorke and by others who turned away from radicalism, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, should perhaps be reconsidered as a process rather than a volte-face. Yorke's writings reveal a moderate reform ideology that might be associated with emerging liberalism. He still focused partially on Europe but had now abandoned his desire for a 'world of revolutions'. War with France and the threat of an invasion led by Bonaparte certainly made a citizen-of-the-world persona coupled with a universalist ideology both dangerous and unworkable in Britain. Yorke's writings reflected something of the 'liberal spirit of thinking' and patriotic rhetoric to be found in publications such as Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*.[30] They also presented ideas similar to those of anti-war liberals in support of defensive war against France on the basis of 'love of country' and 'moral patriotism'. Yorke also promoted ideas similar to anti-war liberals in the form of an essentially anti-aristocratic focus that fostered a progressive society in which authority was based on representation and a theory that the general good would prevail.[31]

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Yorke was now putting himself at the forefront of debates about the new post-revolutionary age, ploughing his own furrow. Yet his journalism was, for the most part, rather different; strongly patriotic, anti-Bonapartist and anti-French, scattered with vitriolic, xenophobic rhetoric reminiscent of his earlier extreme radical zeal. While it was much admired by some, he was frequently vilified for the viciousness of his journalism and accused of being a Treasury hireling and a government spy. It appears that he may well have been paid by the Treasury for some of his journalism, in which case he would have been influenced in terms of the content.

In 1807, on Francis Fane's retirement an election was called in Dorchester and there was talk of Yorke standing, but nothing came of this and Yorke never became an MP. He was again involved in extra-parliamentary politics, attending meetings of the Middlesex Freeholders and engaging with the elections of 1806 and 1807 from the sidelines. He clashed with members of the political elite, narrowly

avoiding a duel with Sir Francis Burdett in 1806 and engaging in a bitter political dispute with William Cobbett. The latter published a vicious racial slur against Yorke, claiming that he 'boasts that "*royal* blood runs in his veins", he being as he is said to assert, a descendant on the female side, in a direct line from the Prince Lee Boo, one of the most ancient and venerable of the sable sovereigns of Africa'.[32] This was a complete invention. Cobbett criticised Yorke, both in terms of class and race, as a dual-heritage upstart, for his effrontery in challenging a minor nobleman such as Burdett to a duel.

Socially Yorke did well, despite his spell in prison, although he never became rich. He gained a reputation as an eloquent and scholarly writer and retained his gentlemanly status despite his turbulent political life. He married the daughter of the wealthy keeper of Dorchester Gaol, Jane Williams Andrews. She had inherited a considerable legacy from her grandmother and her father also left her well provided for on his death. The Yorkes had four children, but both the daughters died in childhood. Yorke died in 1813 and 'left his family as little fortune as usually befalls the man of letters', but his sons were educated as gentlemen, at public schools and at Cambridge University.[33]

It is notable that Yorke has been known to historians as a radical revolutionary and for changing his political positions. Such frequent recanting has been taken as a sign of incoherence and insincerity, with some attributing his political change after being released from prison to his infatuation with Miss Andrews.[34] The evidence does not support such a conclusion. The shifting nature of Yorke's politics could be put down in part to a lack of commitment to established political communities and ideas within England or of allegiance to its history and its ancient constitution, commonly revered at the time. This did not mean that Yorke lacked intellectual commitment, more that he did not fully identify with a conventional 'Englishness' in politics. His 'outsider' status enabled fluidity and flexibility in his politics that was further facilitated by the diverse and sometimes shared discourses within the French revolutionary context. Yorke developed his interpretations of political ideas and appropriate action within the polemical debates of the moment circulating around Europe and the Atlantic world.

Another step to understanding Yorke's changeable political allegiances requires a return to the issue of identity. Yorke sought a place in politics, but he never quite found a comfortable one, partly due to his multi-layered and inherently unstable identity. His political career represents a constant search for 'belonging' in the English, and French, political worlds. It is not surprising that he was swiftly radicalised in Paris – attracted to the revolutionary alternatives that might make a new world in which a citizen of the world such as himself could hold a position of political power. His peripatetic lifestyle and frequent travel across borders in the Atlantic world also enabled multiple identities and allegiances rather than adherence to one national identity.

It is also likely that, as a man of colour, Yorke encountered a certain amount of racial prejudice that prevented him from fully engaging in formal politics. The fact that there is little direct evidence of this, apart from the debacle with Cobbett, does not mean that it did not exist. One thing is certain: Yorke retained his focus on politics throughout his life – for him politics and identity were inextricably linked. He was remembered as a 'well-known political writer'. I suggest that Yorke's case study presents new frameworks within which to explore political engagement in Britain, focused on ethnicities and identities within a global perspective.

It is probably no coincidence that his eldest son, Henry Galgacus Redhead Yorke (hereafter HGR Yorke) went into politics. HGR Yorke also completed the appropriate education, attending Eton College and Charterhouse, and then Christ's College, Cambridge (1825–28). Unlike his father, HGR Yorke was English and presumably white in skin colour.[35] He took a post as tutor to the ward of Sir Robert Heron, of Stubton Hall in Lincolnshire, a role which won him Heron's 'esteem and gratitude'. Yorke retained this social connection, and links with Lincolnshire, and it was Heron who assisted him in finding a candidacy when Yorke expressed a desire to enter politics. Heron introduced Yorke to the Earl of Zetland who was seeking recommendations for a replacement for his brother, John Dundas, who was retiring as MP for York.[36] HGR Yorke stood as a liberal reform candidate and was elected as Whig MP for the city of York in 1841 and re-elected in 1847. Thus, he found his way into parliament through the conventional route of connections, something his father would have struggled to accomplish.

HGR Yorke also married well, in 1837, to the wealthy Hon. Cecilia Elizabeth Crosbie, the only surviving child of William Crosbie, 4th Baron Brandon (an Irish title), and Elizabeth, daughter of Colonel David Latouche and Cecilia Leeson, who was daughter of the first Earl of Milltown. Lady Elizabeth Brandon,

Another step to understanding Yorke's changeable political allegiances requires a return to the issue of identity. Yorke sought a place in politics, but he never quite found a comfortable one, partly due to his multi-layered and inherently unstable identity. His political career represents a constant search for 'belonging' in the English, and French, political worlds.

renowned as a great beauty, had had a scandalous affair with William Lamb (later Prime Minister Lord Melbourne) which ended in court after Lord Brandon found their love letters.

The Yorkes had three children: two boys and a girl. One of the boys died at one year of age but the other children, Louisa and Henry Francis, lived into adulthood. The family lived in Eaton Square and at Fulbeck Hall near Grantham, in Lincolnshire. HGR Yorke was a member of gentlemen's clubs in London, including the Reform Club, Brooks's and the Oxford and Cambridge Club, and lived the life of a gentleman MP, attending the sort of social and sporting events, in York and London as required. He was reportedly – an 'influential member for the city' – a 'distinguished patron' of a York Grand Regatta on the Ouse.[37] He was on the management committee for a Grand National Archery meeting held in York in 1844.[38] He and his wife could be found at a Grand Full Dress Ball at the York Assembly Rooms 'in commemoration of the glorious success of her Majesty's arms in the East' attended by 'more than three hundred persons of rank' and at a concert hosted by the Lady Mayoress of York, 'one of the most fashionable events of season'.[39] The 'Hon. Mrs. and Mr. Redhead Yorke' were also reported as attending the Yorkshire Ball in London in June 1846 – a ball 'which from the distinguished support that it receives' is now 'established as one of the many attractions of the London season.'[40] HGR Yorke, then, attained a position among the English political and social elite without question as to his ethnicity or background.

His political career appears to have got off to a good start. On his election in 1841, the *York Herald* reported that he was received 'with the most enthusiastic cheers' before giving his first speech in the constituency, which was 'eloquent' and won approval for his commitment to reform and to the poor. He promoted free trade and declared that he was 'an implacable friend of the people' and that the government should 'consult the necessities of the poor and the honourable industrious, rather than coquet to the superfluities of the rich.' He stated that they 'were almost the first ministry that had plainly avowed the principles of reform and made war against the heartlessness, the recklessness, the ruthlessness and the extravagance of the old Tory system.' HGR Yorke's proposer promoted him as 'a man of unblemished honour, of independent fortune … with all his faculties about him.'[41]

HGR Yorke expressed himself a reformer in the Commons and promoted parliamentary reform in terms of shorter parliaments, an increased franchise and vote by ballot, plus measures to control bribery and corruption. On his election he echoed his father in asserting his political independence, as 'an independent man' and 'not a hanger on to … any ministry', although in Yorke's case this was with reference to his position within extra-parliamentary politics.[42] Later, HGR Yorke was reported as declaring, 'I am a moderate Reformer, when moderation is sufficient, a decided Reformer when decision is better; a radical Reformer, where radicalism is best; but, above all things, an uncompromising friend of the people.'[43] At the 1847 election, the *York Herald* declared that 'Henry Redhead Yorke, Esq., our present liberal and worthy member and J. G. Smyth Esq., of Heath Hall, will be the candidates for the City of York; and it is more than probable that they will be elected without any opposition'.[44] He was also reported on his election in York to have 'expressed himself determined to continue his adherence to the liberal policy of the Whig Ministry'.[45]

HGR Yorke was an active and diligent MP in the House of Commons, presenting petitions, joining select committees, active in the committee rooms and engaging in a diverse range of issues.[46] *Hansard* reports his engagement in many debates. Not forgetting his constituency, in July 1845 he requested the liberation of a constituent, a Joseph Mason, who had been wrongly convicted for a burglary in York and transported to Norfolk Island.[47] He made a lengthy speech on the Poor Law Commission in September 1841, in which he argued against the separation of man and wife when entering the workhouse. He argued that the country was in 'a state of great distress' and many were going hungry, and the deserving poor should not suffer such a disgraceful penalty. Indeed, under the Slave Emancipation Act, the 'social ties of the negro' were better protected than those of the deserving poor in Britain. Under the act, 'under no circumstances, should a negro in our colonies ever be removed from one plantation to another, if such removal subjected him to separation from his wife or children, or even his reputed wife'. Thus, as the law stood, an Englishman 'was put to the degradation of seeing his own wife in a worse condition than the reputed wife of the black'.[48]

He was not, however, always given an easy ride in the press. On his election in June 1841, *The Times* reported, somewhat disparagingly, that 'Mr. H. R. Yorke, stands as a Whig-radical and thick and thin supporter of the government … He is a son of Mr. Redhead Yorke, a

It is probably no coincidence that his eldest son, Henry Galgacus Redhead Yorke went into politics … Unlike his father, HGR Yorke was English and presumably white in skin colour.

political writer of some note 30 years ago, who at about that period was committed on a charge of high treason to York Castle, and on a subsequent charge of sedition was sentenced to and underwent 18 months' imprisonment in that gaol.' It noted that, although formerly a tutor, since marrying a lady of considerable wealth', HGR Yorke 'now seeks to serve parliamentary honours by a lavish expenditure of some of that wealth among the poorer classes of the electors of the ancient city'. [49] In 1845 a satirical publication also suggested dubious social climbing, stating 'Redhead Yorke, the M.P. for York, was, we believe, some fifteen years since an usher at a suburban school … [h]e married a woman with some forty thousand pounds, and so Redhead went ahead for the incorruptible borough of York.'[50]

The criticisms of HGR Yorke imply that he was not quite the gentleman he presented himself to be. He had a criminally convicted father, had no personal wealth, and had launched his political career on the back of his wife's social position and fortune. Such criticisms were, however, based on class rather than race, and it appears that his true ethnicity was unknown to his contemporaries.

He was also attacked in the high-Tory periodical *John Bull* as a 'do-nothing' who 'at the fag-end of a session, when on the eve of meeting their *dear* constituents … set about, at least the *appearance* of doing something, just to remind the world … that they are in existence – and their constituents that they are really very useful, by getting their name advertised as having "made a motion" in the House'. 'Mr. HENRY GALGACUS REDHEAD YORKE' provided a 'brilliant example of this' when to gratify his vanity and at such an 'advanced period of the session' he needed to '*be doing* something, as a small beginning' and so raised notice of a question about Joe Mason in the House when the matter could have been settled by anyone sending a 'penny letter … to the convict department of the Home Office.' The article continued to imply impropriety between HGR Yorke and Mrs. Joe Mason.[51] Another piece in the same journal ridiculed a motion in the Commons requesting laborious details as to the divisions in the 1845 session of the Commons. It declared, 'To have made these returns complete, the Hon. Member should have included … "an estimate of the number of times Mr. HENRY GALGACUS REDHEAD YORKE, during any one evening, enters, leaves, and re-enters the House, scours along one gallery, descends and ascends the opposite, brushes across the lobby, and traverses the corridors, armed with a huge horse-whip and a bundle of well-fumbled papers".'[52] Some rather crude, satirical reports suggested an addiction to Morison's Pills, a notorious quack stomach medicine of the day. One snippet in *The Age*, in 1840, noted that, when HGR Yorke was canvassing for York, 'we were personally introduced … to an eccentric of that name … at a dinner party' where he was 'swallowing Morison's Pills by handsfull' Another in the same journal as a 'Rumour of the Day' from the Reform Club implied that Yorke was conversationally dull and not very bright. [53] Of course such harsh satirical representations of MPs by the opposition press are not uncommon, but the criticisms of HGR Yorke imply that he was not quite the gentleman he presented himself to be. He had a criminally convicted father, had no personal wealth, and had launched his political career on the back of his wife's social position and fortune. Such criticisms were, however, based on class rather than race, and it appears that his true ethnicity was unknown to his contemporaries.

His parliamentary career ended in tragedy when he committed suicide on Friday, 12 May 1848, very publicly in Regent's Park by taking prussic acid. His body was taken to the St Pancras Workhouse and an inquest was held. The coroner, who knew HGR Yorke personally, declared at the inquest that, on the day of the suicide, 'the whole of the unfortunate gentleman's manners led to a strong belief that he was not in his right mind.' The jury returned a verdict of insanity. The case was widely reported in the press. *The Times* noted that, as he lay in St Pancras Workhouse, 'His countenance is scarcely at all changed, retaining the firm and somewhat peculiar expression which it exhibited in life.' And Yorke had 'attended the House of Commons on Thursday night, and conversed very freely with his friend and neighbour, Mr. Bernal, chairman of committees. He was also at the Reform Club the same evening and in other circles at the West-end … without anything particular being observed in his manner.' But it continued, 'the deceased, who has always been considered of a somewhat eccentric turn of mind, was about 50 years of age', while his wife was 'very much younger than himself' and was 'at present staying in Lancashire'.[54] The *York Herald* , however, remembered him as 'ever true to his political principles' with 'an independence of mind which would never bend to expediency or even to courtly favour.'[55]

The reason for the suicide is not clear; apart from a regularly recorded eccentricity there is no indication from his active engagement in the House of Commons that he was suffering from mental illness. It is likely at the time that this was something he would have kept hidden. Future research may reveal mental health issues, personal, or financial reasons for him taking his own life.

Cecilia Redhead Yorke lived to the age of 85 and on her death in 1903 left £5,694 10s 1d. (worth about £700,000 today) to their son

Sir Henry Francis Redhead Yorke (1842–1914) KCB (1902) COB (1897). In July 1882, he carried on the family habit of marrying well – to Lady Lilian Harriet, daughter of the 10th Earl of Wemyss and widow of Sir Henry Carstairs Pelly, 3rd Bt, who had died in 1877.

Ultimately, Yorke (the elder) had secured an extensive family in Britain and the names were carried down the ensuing generations, particularly Redhead, which suggests an enduring sense of ancestry and a link to the West Indies, albeit not one the Yorkes tended to highlight. The extended family members continued to gain access to the elite institutions that had enabled the upward mobility that Yorke had experienced in his youth. From Yorke himself, down the family line, they consistently married well, increasingly into the English elite, and reflected the 'biological whitening' commonly desired by BME West Indians.[56] Yorke provides an example of the gentrification accessible to BME children of wealthy West Indian planters in the Georgian period. Such gradual gentrification was enabled, in part, by slave-owning wealth that carried through from Yorke's inheritance from his father to his descendants. Indeed the profits of slave ownership sustained in part generations of the Redhead family from the 1760s onwards, in Europe as well as Antigua. Samuel Redhead had been of low birth but had built his fortunes based on slavery into considerable wealth at its peak, when he owned a plantation and approximately 260 slaves. Despite the declining value of the original plantation, the Legacies of British Slave Ownership project has emphasised that a family with 100 to 200 slaves could sustain generations in Britain on the profits from the plantation.[57]

Yet despite his life-long dedication to politics, Yorke did not reach the political heights he desired in Britain and although he was widely accepted as a gentleman, that did not automatically confer an English identity. By his death, Yorke had established himself as a respected writer in English society but with a somewhat mixed political life, including a spell in prison. How far his dual heritage and skin colour affected his chances of elevation in society and politics is hard to determine, but Yorke's multi-layered identity together with his radicalisation and shifting political allegiance suggest an insecure sense of self and an 'outsider' status.

By exploring one BME Georgian, it has also been possible to shed new light on the somewhat different life of another, his son, who became a Victorian MP. HGR Yorke, as first-generation English, became well integrated into elite social circles in London and York and, unlike his father, could enter the House of Commons as an MP. It has been assumed that HGR Yorke was English and 'white'; certainly his mixed heritage has not been recorded until now. But he is an important addition to the small number of BME MPs so far discovered from the first half of the nineteenth century. Both Yorkes were well hidden due to lack of archival evidence and assumptions about their ethnicity. These are only two case studies, but they illustrate how such micro-history can challenge or enhance the macro picture.[58] They reflect a notable diaspora from British colonies to Britain in the Georgian period that is rarely highlighted. The question arises: how many more MPs and political activists from the past, not previously identified as such, were of black, Asian or mixed ethnicity? It is important that historians explore this question to ensure that we represent British history accurately, incorporating all those who have played a part in our politics with equal attention. As the Royal Historical Society has recently argued, changing our approach to BME histories 'is imperative to enhance public understandings of the past in Britain' and 'to reflect the full diversity of human histories'.[59]

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1 See Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660–1807* (Manchester University Press, 2009); Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune* (Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2018); also Eve Tavor Bannett, *Transatlantic Stories and the History of Reading, 1720–1810: Migrant Fictions* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

2 BME as used here includes all people of colour or white of mixed ethnicity. It is recognised that such terms are problematic as they set up a racialised 'black' against a normative 'white', but here they are used entirely for identity purposes without an intentional racial construct. Further, I use the term 'race' or 'mixed race' fully aware that they are social constructs with no validity biologically.

3 Chater, *Untold Histories*.

4 See Michael Bundock, *The Fortunes of Francis Barber* (Yale University Press, 2015).

5 Amanda Goodrich, *Henry Redhead Yorke, Colonial Radical: Politics and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1772–1813* (Routledge, 2019).

6 Livesay estimates that there were probably thousands of such mixed race West Indians who travelled Britain in the Georgian period. Livesay, *Children*, p. 4.

7 Livesay, *Children,* p.401.

8 Under the Act of Settlement 1701, those born within 'the dominions' of the 'kingdoms of England, Scotland, or Ireland' had the same political rights as those born within such kingdoms. Antigua as a British colony was such a dominion.

9 See Michael H. Fisher, *The Inordinately Strange Life of Dyce Sombre: Victorian Anglo-Indian MP and 'Chancery Lunatic'* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

10 The Codrington family was a long-standing plantation owning family in the West Indies and one of the wealthiest by the eighteenth century.

11 £20,000 at today's value would be approximately £3,675,000.

12 Samuel Redhead to Codrington, 30 July 1771, *Codrington Correspondence 1743–1851* (microform) 1960, Film 24995 Reel 1, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries.

13 Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West*

Indies, 3 vols. (London, 1801), quoted in Moira Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals and Radicals* (University of Nebraska Press, 1993) p. 3.

14 In his seminal text on English radicalism in the 1790s, Albert Goodwin referred to Yorke as a 'mulatto demagogue'. But he did not expand on Yorke's ethnicity, nor did he provide a reference. Ethnicity was not a category of analysis in Goodwin's study or in others of the time, which retained a primarily national focus. Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (Hutchinson & Co., 1979) p. 253.

15 J. Holland and J. Everett (eds.), *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery*, 7 vols. (London, 1854), vol. 1, pp. 165–6, 171.

16 See for example Chater, *Untold Histories*; Isaac Land, 'Bread and Arsenic: Citizenship from the Bottom Up in Georgian England', *Journal of Social History* (Fall, 2005), pp. 89–110.

17 Margaret Tweedy, 'A History of Barbuda under the Codringtons, 1738–1833', PhD diss. (University of Birmingham, 1981) pp. 131, 77–8.

18 Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 2 (London, 1774), p. 274, quoted in Deirdre *Coleman*, '*Janet Schaw* and the Complexions of Empire', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36 (2003), p. 171.

19 V. Spike Peterson, 'The Politics of Identification in the Context of Globalisation', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19:1 (1996).

20 Daniel Livesay, *Children*, p. 213.

21 Michael Scrivener, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in the Age of Revolution and Reaction, 1776–1832* (Pickering & Chatto, 2007), p. 3.

22 Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT, 2004).

23 Sophia Rosenfield, 'Citizens of Nowhere in Particular: Cosmopolitanism, Writing, and Political Engagement in Eighteenth-Century Europe', *National Identities* 4:1 (2002), pp. 27, 39. See also Scrivener, *Cosmopolitan Ideal*, p. 24.

24 Goodrich, *Henry Redhead Yorke*, p. 89.

25 Simon Gikandi, 'Race and Cosmopolitanism', *American Literary History*, 14 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 593–615, at p. 596.

26 For the Treason Trials see for example, John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael Lobban, 'Treason, Sedition and the Radical Movement in the Age of the French Revolution', *Liverpool Law Review*, 22 (2000), pp. 205–234; Alan Wharam, *The Treason Trials, 1794* (Leicester University Press, 1992).

27 See, for example, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Beacon Press, 2000).

28 Livesay, *Children*, pp. 238–40.

29 See, for example, James J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative: Reaction and Orthodoxy in Britain, c. 1760–1832* (Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 67; Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (Yale University Press, 2004) pp. 10, 29; Edward Fearn, 'Henry Redhead Yorke: Radical Traitor', *Yorkshire Archeological Journal*, 42 (1967), pp. 187–92.

30 Harling, P., 'Leigh Hunt's Examiner and the Language of Patriotism', *English Historical Review*, 111:444 (Nov. 1996), pp. 1159–1181.

31 J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England 1793–1815* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 27–8, 163–185.

32 *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 27 Dec. 1806, vol. 10, 717 no. 26, pp. 997–9.

33 'H.G.R. Yorke, Esq. M.P.' [obituary], *Gentleman's Magazine*: *and historical review,* 12 May 1848.

34 Mark Philp, 'Disconcerting Ideas: Explaining popular radicalism and popular loyalism in the 1790s' in Mark Philp (ed.), *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) pp.71–101, at p. 76; See also Fearn, 'Redhead Yorke', p. 190.

35 I have uncovered no contemporary references to his skin colour or his BME origins.

36 R. Heron, *Notes by Sir Robert Heron, Baronet* (2nd edn., London, 1851), p. 258, quoted in K. Rix, 'Henry Galacus Redhead Yorke', in P. Salmon and K. Rix (eds.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1832–68* (forthcoming): http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1832-1868/member/bagnall-charles-1827-1884.

37 'York Local News', *York Herald*, 24 Aug. 1844, British Library Newspapers online.

38 'Archery', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 20 Oct. 1844, Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals online.

39 *York Herald*, 21 Jan. 1843 and 12 Jun. 1847, British Library Newspapers online.

40 *Bradford Observer*, 4 Jun. 1846, Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals online.

41 *York Herald*, 27 Jun. 1841, partially quoted in Rix, 'Yorke'.

42 *York Herald*, 3 Jul. 1841, quoted in Rix, 'Yorke'.

43 'H.G.R. Yorke', *Gentleman's Magazine*.

44 *York Herald*, 24 Jul 1847, p. 5, British Library Newspapers online.

45 *John Bull*, vol. 27, no. 1,390, 31 Jul. 1847, p. 489, Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals online.

46 Rix, 'Yorke'.

47 Hansard, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/people/mr-henry-yorke/index.html.

48 Hansard, H.C. Deb. (series 3) vol. 59, cols. 881–912 (27 September 1841): https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/people/mr-henry-yorke/index.html.

49 *The Times*, 25 Jun. 1841, Times Digital Archive.

50 *The Satirist; or Censor of the Times*, no. 710, 23 Nov. 1845, p. 372, Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals online.

51 *John Bull*, vol. 25, no. 1,284, 19 Jul. 1845, p. 454, Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals online.

52 *John Bull*, vol. 25, no. 1,287, 11 Aug. 1845, p. 501, Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals online.

53 *The Age*, 19 Jul. 1840, p. 232 and 7 Nov. 1841, p. 355, Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals online.

54 *The Times*, 13 May 1848, p. 8, Times Digital Archive.

55 *York Herald*, 20 May 1848, quoted in Rix, 'Yorke'.

56 Livesay, *Children*, p. 104.

57 Legacies of British Slave Ownership Project, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/.

58 A recent view of global history argues that, rather than dismissing micro-history, it is incorporated within a broad multi-layered view of global history. See Marek Tamm, 'A Framework for Debating New Approaches to History', in Marek Tamm and Peter Burke (eds.), *Debating New Approaches to History* (Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 2.

59 Royal Historical Society, Race, *Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change* (London, 2018).

Liberal women mayors

Jaime Reynolds recounts the story of Lady Meriel Howard, the second woman ever to be mayor of an industrial town.

Another Ma

Lady Howard of Llanelli and the st

In 'Madam Mayor: The First Wave of Liberal Women in Local Government Leadership 1918–39', published in the *Journal* a few years ago,[1] I described the Liberal pioneers amongst the six women who served as mayor of boroughs before 1918,[2] and the 147 more who served between 1918 and 1939, or at least those that I succeeded in identifying. Unfortunately, I missed one of the very early and interesting ones, Lady Howard,[3] who succeeded her late husband as mayor of Llanelli[4] in 1916.

The story of Lady Howard – or, to give her full name, Catherine Meriel Cowell-Stepney, known as a child as Alcyone or 'Alcy' and later as Meriel – is of interest for several reasons. She was a significant figure in Llanelli, Carmarthenshire and Welsh public life from before the First World War until shortly before her death in 1952. She was born and married into the Liberal aristocracy in its heyday, with close ties to the Gladstone family and wide influence in South Wales and later in Cumberland and Gloucestershire. She was also the only daughter of parents whose long and strange marriage ended in a divorce case which was a cause célèbre in early Edwardian England, an experience which must have deeply affected her emotionally, and may well have shaped her strongest political beliefs.

Meriel's parents were Sir Emile Algernon Arthur Keppel Cowell-Stepney (known as Sir Arthur), who was born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1834, and Margaret Leicester Warren. Both were from wealthy, well-connected, politically active, aristocratic families. Meriel's paternal grandmother came from the Stepneys,[5] who had built up extensive landholdings in Carmarthenshire which passed to her in 1857 when her two elder brothers died without heir. Meriel's grandfather John Cowell-Stepney (1791–1877) developed the estate commercially around the family seat, Llanelly House, laying out the streets of the rapidly growing town. He was a personal friend of William Gladstone and served as Liberal MP for Carmarthen Boroughs (1868–74). Sir Arthur came into this inheritance rather unexpectedly in 1872 after his two elder brothers died. Before that he had pursued a career as a clerk in the Foreign Office for many years.

Meriel's mother, Margaret, was the youngest of four daughters of the second Baron de Tabley (1811–87) and Catherina Barbara de Salis, who came from an Anglo-Swiss (from Grisons) noble family with land in Ireland. Margaret was born in Heidelberg. Baron Tabley was a Liberal politician who served under Lords Aberdeen, Palmerston and Russell as a government whip in the House of Lords in the 1850s and 60s. From 1868 to 1872, he was treasurer of the household in Gladstone's first government. He was close to Gladstone personally and

dam Mayor:

range case of the Cowell-Stepneys

Margaret also entered into the Gladstone circle, becoming a best friend[6] of Gladstone's favourite daughter Mary (for a time his de facto political secretary). Her friendship with the Gladstones lasted all her life.[7]

Meriel's parents married in August 1875, at first apparently happily, although on his part 'there were some instances of eccentricity during the first few months, to which Lady Stepney did not pay much attention. Sir Arthur absented himself without telling her, and dismissed her maid without reason … he made certain vague insinuations against her'.[8] Meriel was born on 12 September 1876. Arthur 'showed the very greatest delight at the birth of his daughter' but on 6 October he abruptly left home and never again cohabited with his wife. 'Certain suggestions were made by Sir Arthur at the time concerning his wife, which were investigated by his friends and by his then solicitor, who found them to be absolutely baseless.'[9] Years later the divorce court was told that 'they were result of a mental delusion which was subsequently treated under medical advice … this resulted in Sir Arthur being sent abroad with a doctor.'[10]

For the rest of his life Sir Arthur led a nomadic existence with long periods spent abroad, until he finally settled in the United States. This was despite the fact that he continued to manage his Welsh estates (mostly as an absentee landlord), sat as Liberal MP for Carmarthen Boroughs,[11] his father's old seat, and in 1884 served as High Sheriff of Carmarthenshire. He supported his wife and daughter with an ample annual income of £2,000 a year and they carried on living at the family homes in Ascot and London.

At the age of four, 'Miss Alcyone Stepney' was painted by the celebrated Victorian artist, John Millais, who wrote this account:

> The child Alcyone was a difficult little bird to catch. She could only be taken on the wing, for when perched on the dais she was so frightened that there was nothing for it but to take her down again, give her some flowers to play with, and let her run about the studio at her own free will. Whatever details were wanted had to be got by catching her up now and then and holding her for a few minutes at a time; and in this way a likeness was secured.[12]

Lady Cowell-Stepney regularly sent messages to Sir Arthur via his friends entreating him to return and, in 1882, a friendly meeting between the two took place and he made several other visits – of a few hours – in the 1880s. But nothing changed: Sir Arthur's 'delusions' continued despite Lady Margaret's 'settled policy… to show to Sir Arthur the greatest possible kindness and the most cordial welcome. No

Maggie and Alcy Cowell-Stepney, c. 1886

Meriel Cowell-Stepney in 1909

Meriel Cowell-Stepney (undated)

questions were asked of him, and no explanations were sought, no scenes were ever made.'[13]

Throughout, Sir Arthur showed the utmost pride in and affection for his daughter Meriel. In 1889, he invited the tenants of his Welsh estates to an agricultural show at Windsor and Meriel, then 13 years of age, was introduced to them as his heiress, and her health was drunk at the luncheon. Lady Margaret assented to this but wrote to her husband 'that in taking their daughter to the luncheon she did not doubt that he meant to do what was right and kind, but asked him to think how it must have struck his friends and the girl's friends when they saw him bring his child but not his wife.'[14]

In February 1891, Sir Arthur – 'under the strange delusion that certain photographs of an improper kind were being made of his daughter'[15] – went to Norwood, where Margaret and Meriel were staying with a friend, and demanded custody of the child. This was the only occasion on which Lady Stepney showed anger. It was decided that Meriel would stay in the custody of a mutual friend while the case was referred to the Court of Chancery. Affidavits by Gladstone[16] and others – selected because they were old and tried friends of her husband – were produced after which Sir Arthur abandoned the case and custody was granted to Lady Stepney.

For the next ten years there were occasional visits between the father and daughter. She later stated that 'her father was always most courteous and considerate to her, except of course, in saying painful things about her mother'[17]. On 1 January 1901, he wrote to Meriel: 'My dear child, I cannot begin the year and the century without wishing you happiness,' and adding that he had taken a long farewell to England and was about to become a citizen of the United States.[18] The letter gave Meriel elaborate and very detailed directions for the management of the estates, which he appeared to be abdicating.

In mid-1901 this Trollopian tale moved to its denouement. Letters arrived for Lady Stepney from America in which Sir Arthur declared 'let bygones be bygones' and asked: 'How would the thing act, and how would it suit you to join me in this country and to live here with me? If after our long – more than twenty years separation you could make up your mind to join me, a letter would find me.'[19] She replied: 'Surely your being a citizen of the United States need not prevent you from coming back to the old homes? And you are such a good traveller! Distance is nothing to you. It would be too sad to think of your never being in England or in Wales, and though I can't go to you, I must just say how glad I shall always be to see you again.'[20]

Sir Arthur's surprising proposal was an attempt to pin the blame for their separation on his wife in order to obtain a divorce. He wrote back: 'My Dear Margaret, … I claim the right to choose the spot we make our home and permanent dwelling place. That home I have asked you to share with me as my wife … If you can be happy anywhere with me, you know on what quarter of the globe to find me. If you will not make my home yours, and live with me in America, then I am constrained to feel that I am bound to effect something very like a full and legal separation.'[21]

At a meeting with Meriel in August 1901, her father admitted – after some fencing – that he planned to divorce her mother and was

Sir Arthur Cowell-Stepney during the divorce case in 1903

Margaret Cowell-Stepney during the divorce case in 1903

Meriel, Lady Howard, in Druidic dress, 1922

particularly concerned to ensure irrevocably Meriel's inheritance as there might be another claimant. Indeed, Sir Arthur had gone to the USA to obtain a divorce and he did so in March 1903 – on the grounds of his wife's desertion – after claiming domicile in Boise, Idaho. He also resumed the management of his estates despite previously handing it over to Meriel.

The US divorce of March 1903 denied Sir Arthur's desertion of his wife and, if unchallenged, Meriel's claim to her entailed estates could easily be imperilled. Lady Margaret, therefore, reluctantly, sued him for judicial separation on the grounds of desertion in the English courts and in May 1903 the High Court granted her petition.

In mid-1909 an elderly passenger was found dead at a station in Yuma, Arizona, and was identified as Sir Arthur, now known simply as Mr A. C. Stepney, American citizen. It seems that he had gone to Arizona in search of beetles for his collection.

Meriel lived with her mother throughout these years and shared Margaret's view that Sir Arthur behaviour stemmed from mental illness. This seems highly likely. He was treated by Dr Henry Maudsley, a pioneer psychiatrist, or 'alienist'. Apart from the 1903 High Court case, many press reports over the years refer to his prolonged bouts of ill health and incessant travelling – his absences often attributed to the need to recover from illness. It is not known exactly what form the illness took, but there seems to be a pattern of wishing to flee from the identity and obligations that fell upon him when he became heir to the baronetcy unexpectedly at the age of 38. This was apparent in his sudden and incomprehensible abandonment of his wife in 1876, of his political career (in 1878 and again in 1891), of Gladstone, home rule and the Liberal Party in 1891, of his Welsh estate in 1901 and of his country in 1908 when he announced from California that he would never again set foot in Britain. Two or three years before his death he had also renounced his title: 'I am just plain A C Stepney, American citizen, and I want to forget that I ever was Sir Emile Arthur Cowell-Stepney.'[22]

Even Sir Arthur's affection for his daughter and desire to ensure her inheritance of his Welsh estates seems to have been negated by his efforts to divorce her mother in 1903. Nevertheless, by the mid-1900s she became increasingly involved with the estate and was fully so after her father's death. From 1909 she mostly resided with her mother in Wales, having moved from Woodend near Ascot where she had spent her childhood. In the 1911 Census she proudly recorded her occupation as 'Landlord in Wales'.

The Cowell-Stepney estate, almost entirely in Carmarthenshire around Llanelli, amounted to 9,847 acres in 1872, valued at £180,000 and generating an income of £7,200 per annum.[23] For today's equivalents you can multiply these amounts by at least 100. The value of the estate increased in the late nineteenth century as it became an important coal-mining area and then as the tinplate industry concentrated around Llanelli – which came to be known as 'Tinopolis'. The industry expanded greatly between 1870 and 1890 as the demand for tinplate for such uses as canning and roofing exploded. The industry continued to flourish until 1914, despite setbacks such as the 1890 McKinley tariff, which drastically curtailed US demand.[24] New markets such as the

manufacture of 'Stepney wheels' for the car industry opened up. By the 1900s, it seems that Sir Arthur's annual income had grown to some £30,000 a year.

The population of Llanelli more than doubled between 1851 and 1881 to almost 28,000 and it was to increase to a peak of more than 38,000 in 1931 (with a dip in the 1890s, presumably due to unfavourable economic conditions following the loss of the US markets).

The Liberals were dominant locally, holding the parliamentary seat until 1922, but thereafter it became an absolutely safe Labour seat; even in the 1931 election debacle, Labour had a majority of 16,000 there. However, at the local level, the council was controlled by a Liberal–Conservative alliance ('Independents') throughout the interwar period. Labour held five out of twenty-four seats in 1913 and were not able to expand much beyond this in the 1920s and '30s. The first Labour mayor was not elected until 1929: Morgan Morgan, a steelworks supervisor and trades unionist and secretary of a local Baptist church. Politics in Llanelli were mostly tamer than in the Glamorgan mining valleys, with the notable exception of the August 1911 riots after troops had killed two people when they fired on pickets who had halted a train carrying strike-breakers during the national railway strike. Four other people were killed as the result of an explosion when a man dynamited a freight wagon carrying munitions.[25]

Just three weeks after the riots Meriel married Sir Stafford Howard in the Church of St Elli, Llanelli. She was 35 and he was 60 and a widower.[26] It was described as the 'event of the season' with a guard of honour formed by boy scouts and territorials. Remarkably a film of the wedding has survived and can be watched on the internet.[27]

Sir Stafford was born into one of the lesser branches of the Howard dynasty and was related to the Duke of Norfolk. The family had lands at Greystoke Castle in Cumberland and Thornbury Castle in Gloucestershire. He was another Gladstonian Liberal, sitting as MP for Cumberland East between 1876 and 1885 and Thornbury from 1885 to 1886, when he was defeated after briefly serving as under–secretary for India. From 1893 to 1912 he was responsible for managing the Crown lands.

Meriel had taken an increasing part in public life in Llanelli and Carmarthen and became a celebrated and popular local figure. Continuing her father's philanthropy, she came to be known as Llanelli's 'Lady Bountiful'.

Sir Stafford threw himself wholeheartedly into the public life of Llanelli alongside his wife, playing a major part in obtaining the incorporation of the borough in 1913 and serving as its first mayor until his death in 1916. He was also very active on the Harbour Board and sat on Carmarthenshire County Council. In 1912, the Howards bought Bryncaerau Castle and its twenty-four-acre park for £7,750 and gave it to Llanelli to form 'Parc Howard'. They also gave £4,000 to build premises including a rifle-range for the boy scouts. In the First World War, the Howards were heavily engaged in helping families whose menfolk were in the services, especially through the Llanelly & District Relief Fund. Sir Stafford was also chairman of the County Recruiting Committee and largely responsible for forming the Carmarthenshire Battalion of the Welsh Regiment.

The couple also had two children during these years: Margaret Catherine, born in January 1913 and Stafford Vaughan[28] born in September 1915.

Sir Stafford died suddenly in April 1916, and Meriel accepted an invitation to serve out his mayoralty, thus becoming only the second woman mayor of an industrial town, the first being Sarah Lees in Oldham. At the end of her term in November, she was co-opted as an alderman so that she could remain a member of the council. She was also co-opted as a Carmarthenshire county councillor in February 1917 and re-elected unopposed for Llanelli No. 1 division in 1919. She resigned her Llanelli Borough seat in November 1919 and thereafter concentrated her work on the county council, and although she lost her seat in 1922, she soon regained a seat as a county councillor and later sat as a county alderman until 1946. She was also an active member of Llanelli Board of Guardians from before 1914 until 1930 and chaired the board in the early 1920s. She received the Freedom of the Borough of Llanelli in 1934.

Meriel was a committed Liberal by inheritance, marriage and conviction. She was a popular figurehead of the local Liberal cause before the First World War. Addressing the cheering crowd after the declaration of the Liberal win in Carmarthen Boroughs at the January 1910 general election,

> she said that it had been one of the most glorious days of her life; they had gained a magnificent victory. It was very good of them to think her worthy to take that little part in the triumph … and not to think she looked something like the grasping landowner they saw on the posters (laughter).

Meriel was a committed Liberal by inheritance, marriage and conviction. She was a popular figurehead of the local Liberal cause before the First World War.

One of the underpinnings of her Liberal belief was her identification with Wales and Welsh language and culture. Llanelli and even more the surrounding districts of Carmarthenshire were Welsh-speaking strongholds.

> She hoped not to be like him, but to do her duty in the way of payment of the taxes. She would have very great pleasure in paying any taxes that Mr Llewellyn Williams (the elected MP) and his party chose to impose upon her (loud cheers).[29]

In 1912, at the time of the Carmarthenshire East by-election, there was talk of running Stafford Howard as the Liberal candidate either there or in Carmarthen Boroughs (in place of the incumbent, W. Llewellyn Williams). It was reported that 'Lady Howard is so popular at Llanelly that it is thought that she could carry her husband in …'[30]

She continued as a leading light of the local Liberal Association after her husband's death and was a strong supporter of Lloyd George and especially of Dame Margaret Lloyd George, who came to Llanelli and lunched with Meriel during her national tour in the 1918 general election. In April 1919, Meriel resigned as president of Llanelly Women's Liberal Association and withdrew from the regional federation in protest at its critical attitude to Lloyd George and decision to drop Lady Lloyd George from the federation executive. She seems to have received wide support from Llanelli Liberals for her stand.[31]

Meriel was in the running to be National (pro-Lloyd George) Liberal candidate for Llanelli in the 1922 general election, succeeding to the seat vacated by the retiring Lloyd Georgeite MP. However, she was unexpectedly passed over by the Association, which selected George Clarke Williams. She supported his campaign and spoke on his behalf, but the seat was lost to Labour.[32]

She continued to play a prominent part in Llanelli and South Wales Liberal activity in the 1920s and '30s, for instance appearing on the platform with Lloyd George at the Welsh Liberal Assembly in Swansea in 1925.[33] In 1936, she was again invited to run for selection as candidate (Liberal National) for a parliamentary by-election in Llanelli, but declined. Whether this was for personal or political reasons is unknown.[34]

One of the underpinnings of her Liberal belief was her identification with Wales and Welsh language and culture. Llanelli and even more the surrounding districts of Carmarthenshire were Welsh-speaking strongholds. Meriel's wedding in 1911 and the funeral service of her mother in 1921 were conducted in Welsh. Her daughter Margaret, born in 1913, was called "Marged Fach" by her parents,[35] and subsequently more usually known as Marged. Meriel was very active in the Union of Welsh Societies (dedicated to promoting bilingualism), the Welsh Bibliographical Society and the Carmarthenshire Society in London. She was said to be a 'great student of Welsh history'. It was reported that Sir Stafford Howard learned to speak fluent Welsh after his marriage – quite a feat for a man in his sixties. Meriel learnt Welsh in order to communicate with her tenants. It was reported that, during an extended visit to the estate in the 1900s, 'after speaking very gracefully in English, the young heiress turned with "effortless ease" to the vernacular showing a familiarity with the "language of Eden" that would have satisfied the most exigeant of Welsh scholars'.[36] However she played down her capabilities. In 1923 it was proposed that future meetings of the Board of Guardians should be conducted in Welsh. Lady Howard, who was in the chair, 'asked if the members would be allowed time to put in some study. She promised she would be proficient in Welsh in a year's time'. Rev Trevor Jones the proposer of the change replied, 'I think your Ladyship understands the language well enough'. It seems, nevertheless, that she stood down as chair because of this language issue.[37]

There may well have also been a religious gulf between fierce Nonconformist zealots like the Baptist Reverend Jones[38] and Meriel who, like the Gladstones, was tolerant and rather High Church Anglican in her outlook. Her mother was an 'ardent Churchwoman' and her husband became an Ecclesiastical Commissioner of the Church of England. Her religious tolerance and feeling for Welsh identity was well captured in a message she sent to a bazaar held in London in 1912 to raise money for the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Churches:

> We Welsh people somehow mix up our patriotism and our religion. When we have lost them we have lost more than words can say and I can well imagine the enormous help and delight it must be in those of our fellow-countrymen who are working here, and who otherwise never hear a word of their mother-tongue, to find that just once a week they can, so to speak, go home a Welshman among the Welsh, and find the church of their childhood in their … faith, just as it always had been to them ever since they can first remember.[39]

In 1928 Meriel converted to Roman Catholicism and remained a Catholic for the rest of her life.

Meriel held very strong views on drink and was a passionate supporter of the temperance movement.[40] Possibly this stemmed from the part that alcohol may have played in her father's eccentric behaviour. Dr Maudsley, who treated him, adhered to the degeneration theory that mental illness was often triggered by drunkenness and alcoholism and that the effects were inherited. There is at least a suggestion that Sir Arthur had a drinking problem. His death was initially attributed to alcoholism though this was later amended to heat-stroke and a weak heart.[41]

Apart from any family history, it was quite natural that Meriel should be drawn to the temperance cause like many other wealthy, Christian, Liberal, philanthropic women of the period. As Margaret Barrow's *Temperate Feminists* has shown, there was a close connection between Liberalism, temperance and the wider women's suffrage movement. One of key motivations of women who campaigned for the vote and became involved in local government through the poor law guardians and later borough and county councils (as Meriel did) was to further temperance measures.[42]

She married into the heart of the temperance movement. 'Temperance reform was one of the passions of (Sir Stafford Howard's) life', it was said,[43] and he became president of the South Wales and Monmouthshire Temperance Association. There was a distant family connection with Rosalind Howard, Countess of Carlisle ('the Red Countess'), who was president and dominant figure of the National British Women's Temperance Association from 1903 to 1921. Sir Stafford's sister-in-law, another Lady Howard, was a temperance activist in Cumberland and a county alderman for many years.[44]

Both Meriel and Sir Stafford tended towards the prohibitionist position. At their insistence, no alcohol was served at their wedding or the accompanying festivities and, when they gifted Parc Howard to Llanelli, one of the conditions was that no intoxicating liquors should be sold in any part of the estate. Leases of pubs on the Stepney estate were not renewed.[45] In November 1916, Meriel signed a public appeal to the cabinet, organised by the 'Strength of Britain Movement' and signed by '1000 Representatives of the Brainpower of the country', calling for the suppression of the liquor trade for the duration of the war. Meriel taught her daughter that alcohol was poison. Her children were taught that drink was a curse and a great sin: 'they had never seen and would never see intoxicants at home'.[46]

Sadly, her daughter Marged developed a drink and drug problem. She is remembered as a patron of the poet Dylan Thomas in the early 1950s. Marged died in January 1953, only six months after her mother, aged 40, after an overdose of sleeping pills.[47]

Meriel's temperance and Liberal activism and her early engagement in local government[48] suggest that she would be sympathetic to women's suffrage, though no direct evidence has been found of her participating actively in the movement before 1918.[49] In later years, she was firm in her advocacy of women's rights, for example declaring in 1922 that she was 'heartily in agreement with all questions' posed by National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship to candidates in the county council election.[50] In 1938, as a member of the magistrates bench at a trial for indecent assault of a girl, she demanded to know why there was no woman on the jury, insisting 'that there should be women on the jury in a case where a young woman is involved'. When her comment was overruled, she 'entered a very strong protest'.[51]

Lady Howard-Stepney died at her Carmarthenshire home, Cilymaenllwyd, on 8 June 1952.

At the height of the 'Peers versus the People' political crisis of 1910, she declared her deep personal connection with her political faith and her Welsh home that remained with her all her life: 'Fellow Liberals … I came here today because I wanted you to feel how Liberal I am … There is hardly anywhere else where one feels so much that we are in a Liberal centre as in Llanelly … it is delightful to feel that we are on the right side …'[52]

Dr Jaime Reynolds was a UK civil servant and EU official working on international environmental policy until his retirement in 2016. He is currently writing a book on the first women mayors in inter-war Britain.

1 *Journal of Liberal History* 89 (Winter 2015–16).

2 Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was the first, in tiny Aldeburgh in 1908, followed in 1910 by Sarah Lees in the large county borough of Oldham, and Miss Gwenllian Morgan in Brecon. Lavinia Malcolm served as provost of the small burgh of Dollar in Clackmannanshire from 1913 to 1919. Mary Alice Partington served as mayor of Glossop in Derbyshire from May 1916 to 1920; and Elizabeth Hannah Kenyon for Dukinfield in Cheshire between May and November 1917, both succeeding their deceased husbands. All were Liberals.

3 She changed her name by deed-poll to Howard-Stepney in 1922, but I have referred to her as Lady Howard throughout the article.

4 The modern spelling of the borough, Llanelli, was adopted in 1966 in place of the Anglicised spelling, Llanelly, and is used throughout this article except for a few quotations and names of organisations.

5 The Stepney family originated in Stepney, east London and began building their fortunes in South Wales from the early sixteenth century. The baronetcy was created in 1621. The seventh baronet, Sir Thomas Stepney (1725–72), accumulated substantial business and shipping interests centred on Llanelly, where the family resided in Llanelly House. The last baronet died childless in 1825, and his sister, the mother of John Cowell-Stepney, became claimant to the inheritance.

6 For instance, she was a sponsor at the christening of Mary's daughter, Dorothy, at Hawarden in 1890 with Gladstone and Rosebery present. Dorothy was a bridesmaid at Meriel's wedding in 1911.

7 *Western Mail*, 15 Aug. 1921. Mary Gladstone (Drew) was prominent at Lady Margaret's funeral in 1921: *Western Mail*, 18 Aug. 1921. Lady Margaret features often in the diaries and correspondence of Mary Drew (the Drew Manuscripts in the British Library); see Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics 1860–1914* (Oxford, 1986).

8 *Western Mail*, 29 May 1903. This and subsequent citations relating to the divorce hearing are taken from this source. The same material from the case was published widely in the national and provincial press and abroad. The material reflects the submissions by Lady Cowell-Stepney, supported by Meriel, which were not contested by Sir Arthur's legal representatives.
9 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
10 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
11 He was returned as a Liberal unopposed on 14 Aug. 1876, having been defeated in 1874, and resigned in 1878. He again represented the seat from 1886 to 1892. In September 1891, he wrote to the Liberal Association that he would resign immediately on account of his health – soon correcting this to say that he would resign at the next election. In November, he wrote again from Naples, en route to Western Australia, where, despite being 'slightly better in health', he intended to recuperate until spring 1892. His letter announced that he could no longer support Gladstone's home rule policy and would support the Unionists for the remainder of the parliament. His letter indicated that, since Parnell's disruption of Commons' proceedings in 1890, he had been considering such a move 'but long and troublesome illness' had delayed his decision; see *Cardiff Times*, 12 Dec. 1891. He had not been an active MP; in the 1886–7 session: he voted in 56 of the 485 divisions, the sixth lowest number of the thirty-four Welsh MPs; *South Wales Daily News*, 17 Sep. 1887. He voted in only 16 of the 276 divisions from Feb. to Aug. 1888, the lowest number of Welsh MPs; *South Wales Daily News*, 20 Aug. 1888.
12 John Guille Millais, *Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* (Methuen, 1899), ch. 15.
13 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
14 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
15 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
16 Gladstone wrote to Lady Cowell-Stepney: 'Dollis Hill NW Feb 24th 1891, My dear Lady Stepney – No words can tell you how I am grieved at the deplorable intelligence you send me. May God in His mercy minister support to you and Alcy, and to him who does you wrong the light he sadly needs. Of course I shall be ever ready to do all that I find to be legitimately in my power, and I think my first duty is to be on the spot. I propose, therefore, to be at No 18 Park-lane (where we are to live next year), to-morrow at twelve to meet your solicitor, if you will kindly appoint him there at the time, and pray do you come or not as you think best. I will come to you if I find a note or message to that effect. My wife is not here. You know what her feelings and those of our children will be. Ever yours, affectionately W E GLADSTONE'. *Weekly Mail*, 6 Jun. 1903.
17 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
18 He applied for naturalisation in Los Angeles on 24 Dec. 1900 but did not receive citizenship until 1908. Ancestry website, and *Evening Express* and *Evening Mail*, 25 Feb. 1900.
19 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
20 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
21 *Western Mail* 29 May 1903
22 *Belfast Newsletter* 5 July1909
23 K. Cahill, *Who Owns Britain? The hidden facts behind landownership in the UK and Ireland* (Canongate Books Ltd., 2001), pp. 309, 370. Sir Arthur also owned land in Canada, Australia and Ireland, which he left to Meriel.
24 From L. W. Evans, 'The Tinplate, Steel, and Coal Industries', in Sir John E. Lloyd (ed.), *A History of Carmarthenshire*, 2 vols. (London Carmarthenshire Society, 1935, 1939): https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/CMN/Lloyd5.
25 Robert Griffiths, *Killing no murder: South Wales and the Great Railway Strike of 1911* (Manifesto Press, 2009); local politics became more polarised in the 1930s when two Communists were elected to the council.
26 His first wife was Lady Rachel Campbell, daughter of the 2nd Earl Cawdor. They married in 1876 and had one son and two daughters. She died in 1906.
27 https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-stepney-wedding-1911-online; see also *Windsor & Eton Express*, 23 Sep. 1911
28 Stafford Vaughan Stepney Howard (1915–91); market-gardener and forester; Liberal candidate for Gloucestershire South 1950, Penrith & Border 1951; member Cumberland County Council.
29 *Llanelly Mercury and South Wales Advertiser*, 27 Jan. 1910.
30 *Western Mail*, 31 Jul. 1912.
31 *Cambria Daily Leader*, 24 Apr. 1919; *Gloucester Chronicle*, 13 Sep. 1919.
32 *Western Mail* 30 Oct. 1922, 3 Nov. 1922.
33 Ibid., 30 May 1925.
34 Ibid., 19 and 21 Feb. 1936.
35 In English: "Little Margaret", she was known by this nickname in Llanelli, see Western Mail 29 Aug 1927
36 *Llanelly Mercury and South Wales Advertiser*, 15 Jul. 1909.
37 *Western Mail*, 8 Jun. 1923, *Yorkshire Post*, 23 Nov. 1923.
38 In 1914, the Rev. Jones described cinemas 'as the latest delusion of the devil' and called for their wholesale condemnation; *Gloucestershire Echo*, 10 Jun. 1914.
39 *Western Mail*, 21 Jun. 1912.
40 She was president of the British Women's Temperance Association in Llanelly.
41 *Oakland Tribune*, 3 Jul. 1909.
42 Margaret Barrow, 'Temperate Feminists: The British Women's Temperance Association 1870–1914', PhD thesis (University of Manchester, 1999).
43 *Western Mail*, 10 Apr. 1916.
44 Lady Mabel Harriet Howard (née McDonnell) of Greystoke Castle (1858–1942), wife of Stafford's elder brother Henry Howard. She was described as 'progressive, influential and fearless'; *Penrith Observer*, 5 Jan. 1943.
45 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 12 Apr. 1916.
46 *Llanelly Star*, 12 May 1917.
47 See Hannah Ellis (ed.), *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014).
48 She was first nominated for election to Llanelly Board of Guardians in March 1910 but withdrew before the poll. *Llanelly Mercury and South Wales Advertiser*, 24 Mar. 1910.
49 Christabel Pankhurst visited Llanelly in 1906, and Muriel Matters, propagandist for the Women's Freedom League, spoke in Llanelly and at a stormy meeting in Carmarthen in 1909. A non-militant Women's Association was active in Llanelly in 1913. There are no reports of Meriel being involved.
50 *Common Cause*, 3 Mar. 1922.
51 *Western Mail*, 2 Jul. 1938.
52 *Llanelly Mercury and South Wales Advertiser*, 13 Jan. 1910.

Report

General Election 2019: Disappointment for the Liberal Democrats

Online meeting 8 July 2020, with Professor Sir John Curtice and James Gurling; chair Wendy Chamberlain MP
Report by **Neil Stockley**

The results of the 2019 general election were a huge disappointment for the Liberal Democrats. There has been considerable debate within the party about what went wrong, and a comprehensive, critical review of the party's campaign, led by Baroness Thornhill, was published in May. At the Liberal Democrat History Group's first online meeting, the eminent psephologist Professor Sir John Curtice analysed the conclusions of the Thornhill Review in detail; or, as he put it, Sir John 'reviewed the review'. James Gurling, who chaired the Liberal Democrat campaign, had the unenviable task of providing an 'insider' perspective without falling into the trap of sounding too defensive. I drew five main conclusions from their thoughtful and candid discussion.

First, the party committed a fundamental strategic error in allowing the general election to happen at all. The Thornhill Review concluded that, by acquiescing with the SNP in passing the Johnson government's bill to, in effect, bypass the Fixed Term Parliaments Act and force an early general election, Liberal Democrat MPs had taken an unreasonable risk. As we now know, the gamble failed. The Conservatives won an overall Commons majority of eighty. The Liberal Democrats won just eleven seats, one fewer than in 2017.

The two speakers tried to explain why the party rolled the dice in late October 2019. Sir John said that the Liberal Democrats were determined to stop the UK from leaving the European Union without a deal, but that the window of opportunity was closing rapidly. Speaker Bercow had announced that he would resign at the end of October. Few expected that Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the expected successor, would be as liberal in his interpretation of standing orders. The manoeuvres that had allowed the Benn Bill to proceed and force the extension of the Brexit date from October 2019 to the end of January 2020 were, therefore, unlikely to succeed again. In helping to bring on an early election, the Liberal Democrats sought to deny the Conservatives a Commons majority, and to install a new government that, however fragile, would stop a 'no deal' Brexit from happening at the end of January 2020. Sir John also recalled that the Liberal Democrats' opinion poll ratings had been stable at around 18 per cent for four months; just as importantly, Labour's support still showed no signs of recovering.

James Gurling agreed that their strong desire to prevent a 'no deal' Brexit was the key driver of the Liberal Democrats' decision to support an early general election. In continuing to oppose Brexit after the referendum, the party had, by 2019, found an issue that defined them clearly to voters, possibly for the first time since the Iraq War, he said. In other words, the party saw Brexit as a political opportunity.

As James said, this reasoning seemed to be vindicated by the Liberal Democrats' impressive performance at the English local elections in May, followed by their second place at the European elections later that month. Their local campaigning had also enabled the party to see off a challenge from the newly formed Change UK, which many commentators had perceived as a major threat. Then, in August, the Liberal Democrats won the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election. Over the summer and autumn, eight former Labour and Conservative MPs defected to the party, albeit through some circuitous routes. At their September conference, the Liberal Democrats enjoyed a new confidence and had recently chosen a dynamic, young leader, Jo Swinson. It was against this optimistic backdrop, James said, that the party decided to go along with forcing an early election. Interestingly, he described it as 'a Westminster bubble decision … a response to parliamentary tactics'; the importance of the change of Speaker, for example, was 'not well understood' by the public.

The party's problem was, however, that the electoral landscape had shifted significantly between July and October. Sir John showed that once Boris Johnson became prime minister, in July 2019, the Conservatives' poll ratings, which had sunk to around 25 per cent early in the summer, began to improve. In October, once Johnson had reached his agreement with the Irish taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, on the 'pathway' to a Brexit deal, the Conservatives further strengthened their position, mostly at the expense of the Brexit Party. The Conservatives were then on course to win 345 seats, enough for a comfortable Commons majority. Sir John concluded that, by the time they went ahead, voting for an early election was an 'extremely risky strategy' for the Liberal Democrats.

He added that, even if the party had maintained their support at 18 per cent, they would have picked up few new seats, so long as the Conservatives were recovering. The Liberal Democrats were, therefore, betting on their ability to damage the Labour Party, which was, he said, 'very bold'. With the Leave vote consolidating behind the Conservatives and the Remain vote still split between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, it was going to be extremely difficult for the opposition parties to deny Johnson a majority, unless the Conservative vote fell back again.

Second, the Liberal Democrats did not make a fatal error by promising to revoke the UK's notice, under Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, to leave the European Union, if they formed

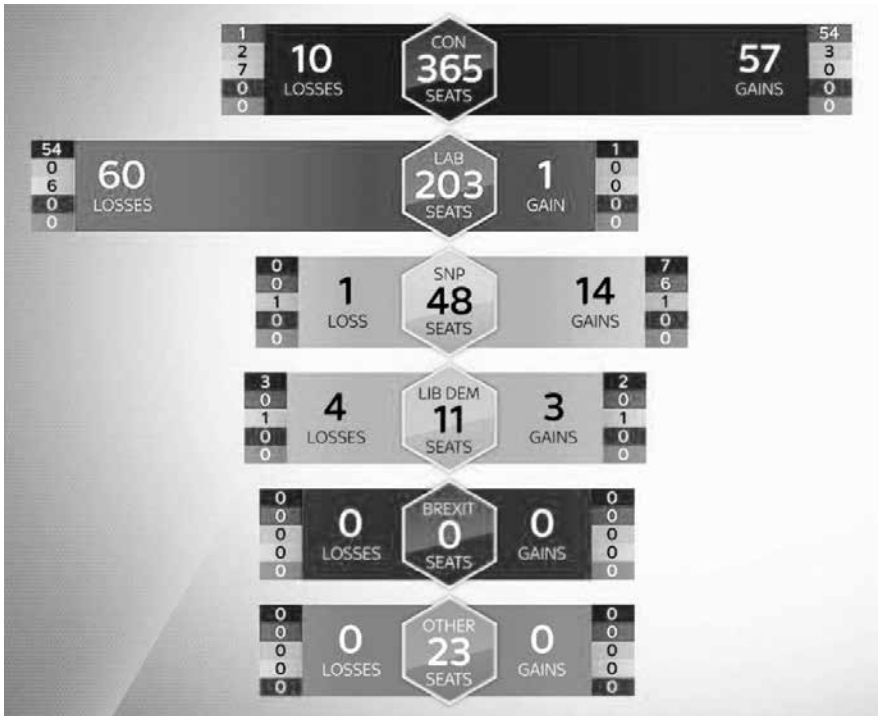
a majority government after the election. Just as importantly, however, the 'revoke' pledge did not prove to be a vote-winner for the party.

The Thornhill Review argued that 'revoke' had too little public support, and alienated both Leave voters, as well as a significant body of Remain voters who considered it undemocratic. (Another point of context: in September, the Labour Party promised to hold a referendum on a new Brexit deal, to be negotiated by an incoming Corbyn government – a potentially attractive position for Remain voters.)

James explained that rather than it being a 'strategic decision' by the party, the shift from advocating a second referendum to a promise of 'revoke' was made 'in full public vision' by the autumn 2019 party conference. He suggested that the party might in future want to test in advance how such a major shift might be communicated to voters. Still, James described 'revoke' as a 'sustainable' and 'sensible' position for the party's core audience. Brexit was also the only issue where the Liberal Democrats had any 'cut through' and with Labour's 'utterly unclear' Brexit policy gradually shifting, the Liberal Democrats sought to polarise the debate, he explained.

Sir John was not convinced by the Thornhill Review's conclusion. He cited BMG research from the summer and autumn of 2019 indicating that the British public was polarised over Brexit, with little electoral space for any compromise position that might appeal to both sides. The same research showed the Liberal Democrats' pledge to revoke the Article 50 notice was slightly more popular with Remain voters than the promise of a new referendum. During the election campaign, YouGov found that Remain voters preferred 'revoke' to Labour's offer of a new referendum. In late October, Survation polling suggested that the 'revoke' promise made Remain voters more likely to vote Liberal Democrat.

According to data from the British Election Study, support for the party's 'revoke' policy fell gradually as the campaign went on. Even so, Sir John argued, it is difficult to prove that Remain voters who preferred a



'second referendum' were more likely to defect from the Liberal Democrats than those who supported 'revoke'. His own research found that during the campaign, the Liberal Democrats were the most popular party with those who wanted another referendum and, more significantly, that party's support amongst Remain voters declined by about the same amount amongst 'revoke' and 'new referendum' supporters. Sir John concluded that the party's real problem was that the promise to cancel Brexit was 'rather ineffective': although the Liberal Democrats had support from both 'hard' and 'soft' Remainers, once the party started to lose votes, this occurred across all anti-Brexit voters. Here, Sir John argued, the Thornhill Review had 'missed its target'.

During the question and answer session, the speakers highlighted some of the tensions and strategic ambiguities around the Liberal Democrats' Brexit policy. Sir John contended that the party did not sell it very effectively and 'got all defensive' by, for instance, trying to highlight the promise to hold a referendum if they did not win the election outright. Having adopted the revoke policy, he suggested, they may have been better advised to campaign as 'the one vote [in England and Wales] to not leave the European Union' and draw a sharp contrast with the Conservatives' simple pledge to 'get Brexit done'.

James shared many members' frustration at 'the over-complicated message' on Brexit. He recounted how the campaign had played up the 'referendum message' after facing 'friendly fire internally', and that it continued to come under heavy pressure from supporters who wanted to stop Brexit as the first priority.

Third, the emphasis on stopping Brexit turned the Liberal Democrats into, in Sir John's words, 'a one-trick pony' and meant that the party did not communicate its broader policy messages to voters. He cited Lord Ashcroft's research, showing that, on average, barely one voter in four recognised any of the party's policy positions, compared to 43 per cent for the Conservatives and 51 per cent for Labour.

Sir John rejected the Thornhill Review's suggestion that the party's potential appeal to Leave voters was limited by the revoke policy and that promoting popular policies in other areas might have helped the party to attract their support. He was clear that the party was 'always fishing in the waters of Remain voters'.

The real problem with the campaign's lack of 'a broader vision' beyond Brexit was, he stressed, that it hindered the Liberal Democrats in their battle with Labour for

Remainers' support. Many Labour supporters had supported the Liberal Democrats in the European elections, and the party needed to keep them onside, but they started moving back to Labour after that party had promised a new referendum. The Liberal Democrat campaign had, however, failed to provide other reasons to vote for them, Sir John argued.

James Gurling believed that in the end, Labour Remainers 'slunk back [to Labour] to stop Boris rather than [voting] to stop Brexit'. He regretted the party's failure to squeeze the Labour vote, despite that party's huge problems with Jeremy Corbyn, Brexit and anti-Semitism. He also suggested that the Liberal Democrats had failed to develop an appeal to the full diversity of Britain's communities, especially in the inner cities.

Fourth, the Liberal Democrat campaign committed major tactical blunders. Sir John endorsed the Thornhill Review's conclusion that promoting Jo Swinson as a serious candidate for prime minister 'lacked credibility'. He reminded the meeting that her personal poll ratings had trended downwards throughout the campaign. Jo Swinson was 'not an asset', he said, which mattered for a party that always depends heavily on the leader to provide much of the impetus for its campaigns.

James explained that the campaign put so much effort into promoting Jo Swinson for the very reason that she was hardly known to the public. Both speakers reflected that, given more time to establish herself with the electorate, Swinson may have been more successful. James was also surprised and disappointed by the vehement and personal nature of some peoples' comments, including harsh criticisms of her appearance and clothes. He added, however, that in presenting her as a candidate for prime minister, the party reinforced the message that it was aiming to form a majority government, 'which took [us] straight over the top of the established promise to hold a [second Brexit] referendum and straight into revoke.'

The Thornhill Review also criticised the campaign for pursuing a poor targeting strategy and hinted that too many resources had been directed to constituencies fought by MPs who had defected recently from Labour and the Conservatives.

Here, the Liberal Democrats seemed to be in a no-win situation. In explaining how the party had identified around eighty target seats, James appeared to allow that some choices may have been too optimistic given the party's past election results and organisational capacity in many constituencies. He added, quite reasonably, that many in the party would have been disappointed even if twenty more Liberal Democrat MPs had been returned. James argued that it was important to 'find homes for the defectors' and secure their re-election, because the new recruits had made the parliamentary party more diverse and increased the Liberal Democrats' potential appeal to, for example, BAME audiences.

Sir John showed that, whilst the party's vote increased by an average of 15 per cent in the seats fought by the seven defectors, they still finished an average of 15 per cent behind the winners. These were, after all, nearly all constituencies with no Liberal Democrat tradition.

Sir John also observed that, just as importantly, the party performed poorly in areas of historic strength. The ten seats where the party saw the sharpest drop in its vote between 2017 and 2019 were all held by the Liberal Democrats until very recently. He said that the party needs to recognise how much Brexit has changed the geography of its support and warned that it will 'need to think about sensible targeting in future'. Liberal Democrat support is now concentrated much more in 'Remain Britain' and, although no one knows how much longer that will last, the party cannot expect to simply go back to where it was in 2010, he said. Traditional Liberal Democrat territory such as Devon and Cornwall now tends also to be Leave territory and will be more challenging for the party than London, part of southern England and university towns.

Later, Sir John stressed how much the demography of the party's support has also shifted, towards middle-class voters who have a university education. More than the other parties, he said, the Liberal Democrat vote is now defined by occupational class. And the party continues to face challenges appealing to BAME voters, which is especially important in London.

Fifth, the Liberal Democrats faced a major challenge that was outside their control. Many voters were still angry about the party's role in the 2010–15 coalition government with the Conservatives.

Both speakers agreed that attacks from Labour and some of the media on the party's – and Jo Swinson's – participation in the coalition caused major problems. Sir John described the stark dilemma that faced the party. By ruling out any arrangement to help the Conservatives stay in office, they were opening the door to a Corbyn-led Labour government; in their key target seats, however, the Liberal Democrats had to 'bind in' Conservative Remainers. James added that supporting a putative Corbyn government would have been anathema to many liberals, largely because of the anti-Semitism issue.

Both speakers also agreed that the electoral dynamics would be different in 2024, when the next general election is due. Sir John suggested that most voters would have forgotten about the coalition by then. James noted that Sir Keir Starmer would not present the Liberal Democrats with the same problems as Jeremy Corbyn.

Valuable as these observations were, I would have also liked to have heard more analysis of another, arguably more substantial barrier: the prospect of a Corbyn-led government deterred many people, especially in Conservative-held seats, from voting Liberal Democrat.

When the meeting touched on the Corbyn factor, the speakers shared some important, if uncomfortable insights. During the question and answer session, James lamented the party's failure to appeal to voters 'in the middle', who were unhappy with the 'polarised' choice between a 'right-wing' Johnson government and Corbyn's 'hard left' Labour Party. Sir John disputed the description of Boris Johnson as 'right wing', given that the Conservative manifesto was so

interventionist on economic issues. He also reminded the meeting that 'left-wing' voters were as likely as those on the right to back Brexit. Voters may, then, have seen the choice through a rather different prism to the one that is familiar to many Liberal Democrats.

By cutting across the traditional left–right divide, Brexit was a difficult issue for the major parties, Sir John said. 'Brexit played to your strengths,' he added. 'Opposing Brexit was a social liberal issue, a home-made issue for you.' But the party must face the harsh reality that a huge opportunity was squandered. Perhaps that is the greatest disappointment for the Liberal Democrats.

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

Reviews

The shock of coalition

Edward Fieldhouse, Jane Green, Geoffrey Evans, Jonathan Mellon, Christopher Prosser, Hermann Schmitt, and Cees van der Eijk, *Electoral Shocks: The volatile voter in a turbulent world* (OUP, 2020)

Review by **Duncan Brack**

Understanding what happened during the 2010–15 coalition government, what the Liberal Democrats did and what they could have done differently, and how the electorate reacted, is essential to the party's future. Assuming it has any future prospect of a coalition, the party needs to manage the next one differently, whether through the negotiations leading up to it or the management of it or both.

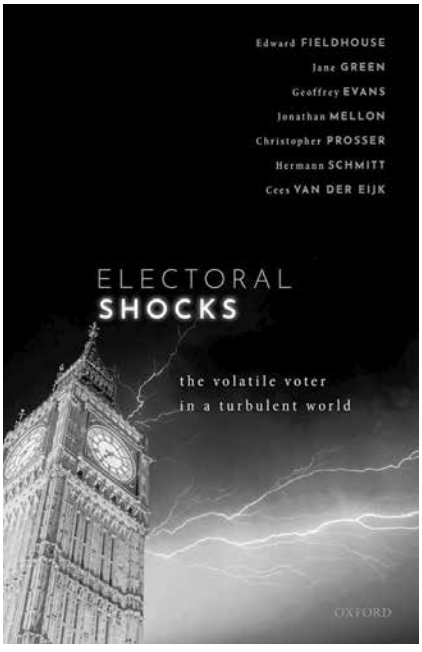
This book, *Electoral Shocks*, provides an essential part of the background. Based primarily on British Election Study (BES) data, it offers a new perspective on British elections, focusing on the role of 'electoral shocks'. It defines these as major political decisions, important events or political outcomes with three defining characteristics: they represent an abrupt and unanticipated change, usually coming at least partly from outside the political system; they are highly salient, so they are noticeable even to people not interested in politics and cannot be easily ignored; and they are relevant to party politics, so have the potential to change how parties are perceived.

Electoral shocks affect electoral politics in three main ways: they change how important or salient different issues are to voters; they change the extent to which different parties are seen to be competent at handling different aspects of government, such as the economy, or immigration; and they change the social or political image of the parties by altering who and what the different parties are seen to represent.

The five electoral shocks the book analyses are the rise in immigration after 2004, particularly from Eastern Europe; the global financial crisis of 2007–08 and its aftermath; the coalition government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015; the Scottish independence referendum in 2014; and the Brexit referendum in 2016.

The book's definition of an electoral shock is not totally convincing. I would have thought that Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour leader would qualify, but it does not because 'the circumstances that enabled his victory originated from within the Labour Party' and should therefore be considered 'part and parcel of normal party politics' (p. 34). But arguably, the relevant parties' decisions to enter coalition in 2010 and to hold the two referendums of 2014 and 2016 also all originated within political parties – granted, they were clearly affected by external circumstances (Labour's defeat in 2010, UKIP's rise before the Brexit referendum), but, then Corbyn's election was affected by Labour's unexpected defeat in 2015 and the coalition's legacy of austerity.

Be that as it may, this is a fascinating book, and an interesting new approach to analysing election outcomes – particularly those of 2015 and 2017, on which it mainly concentrates. It demonstrates how these five shocks all changed the landscape of party competition. For example, although the nationalist side lost the 2014 Scottish referendum, the campaign and its outcome enabled the SNP to consolidate the pro-independence vote, involving detaching a sizeable number of voters from Labour; it demonstrated to these voters that they cared more about independence than they did about class (or whatever they thought the Labour Party stood for). Similarly, the Brexit referendum destroyed the case



for voting UKIP (or, later, the Brexit Party) and enabled the Conservatives to attract leave supporters – again, detaching a sizeable chunk of the Labour vote (Corbyn's incompetence played a major part too) who cared more about Brexit, and what they thought Brexit meant, than about class.

None of this would have been possible – or, at least, not to the same extent – if these shocks had not taken place against a background of increasing voter volatility, i.e. voters' preparedness to change the parties they voted for. The 2015 and 2017 general elections displayed the highest levels of individual-level voter volatility seen in modern times. In 2015, 43 per cent of people voted for a different party than they did in 2010, and there was the highest share of the vote on record for parties other than the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. By contrast, 2017 saw the highest Conservative plus Labour share since 1970; 33 per cent of people changed their vote from 2015; and there was the highest switch of voters from Labour to Conservative and Conservative to Labour ever recorded in BES data. Across the three elections between 2010 and 2017, only 51 per cent of voters remained loyal to their original parties. This is a huge change from British politics as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, and still a substantial one from more recent political history.

The chapter of most interest to *Journal of Liberal History* readers will of course be that on the 2010–15 coalition and its impact on the Liberal Democrat vote in 2015. Although junior partners in coalition governments often come off badly – and this is probably exacerbated in an adversarial system like the UK's – the collapse in Liberal Democrat support in 2015 was particularly dramatic because of the nature of the party's vote. This had two main characteristics.

First, it was only very weakly partisan. In the 2010 election – at 23 per cent, the party's best performance since it was founded – only 30 per cent of Lib Dem voters identified very or fairly strongly with the party, compared to two-thirds of Labour voters and over half of Tory voters, and half of the party's voters didn't identify with the Lib Dems at all. This included a significant number of tactical voters who identified with other parties but were prepared to vote for the Lib Dems because of where they lived. In 2010, the majority of these were Labour identifiers – who, unsurprisingly, were not exactly overjoyed to see their votes put the Tories into government. But this weak level of partisanship was more serious than just the loss of tactical voters; the Liberal Democrats possessed a much smaller base of voters prepared to give their party the credit when things went badly: 'if the Liberal Democrats had started with a stronger partisan base in 2010 it is likely that their role in the coalition would have been seen favourably by a larger number of people and that more of their voters would have weathered the storms of coalition partnership' (p. 119).

Second, even those voters who did identify with the Liberal Democrats were mostly left-wing or centre-left in their political views – an outcome of the position systematically developed by the party's first two leaders, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, after the formal abandonment of 'equidistance' in 1995. This was different from the Liberal Party and the Alliance pre-merger which, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, were seen to be closer to the Conservatives; in 1979, even after the Liberals had kept the Labour Party in power for eighteen months through the Lib–Lab Pact, voters still saw the party as slightly closer to the Tories. It was the most economically left-wing Lib Dem voters who most turned against the party in 2015, and who were most prone to see the coalition's record through the lens of Labour partisanship.

This combination of factors meant that the Lib Dems lost the bulk of their 2010 support within the first six months of the election, even before the tuition fees debacle. It was simply the fact of entering coalition with the Tories that did the damage rather than any individual policy or measure. And the party was then unable to recover from this position because it essentially became invisible; although plenty of Lib Dem policies made it into the coalition agreement, many of them were not on issues voters much cared about, the Lib Dems ceded control of the main planks of economic policy – which voters definitely did care about – to the Conservatives, and they controlled no high-profile spending departments. BES data showed that across six different policy areas three to four times as many respondents attributed responsibility to the Conservatives for policy successes than to the Liberal Democrats. Even Lib Dem partisans attributed more responsibility to the Tories in four of these six areas.

These two factors – the loss of support after the formation of the coalition and the party's invisibility in government – then reinforced each other to destroy the Liberal Democrats' credibility in terms of winning elections. The worse they did in local, Scottish and Welsh elections and in the opinion polls, the less they looked likely to be able to win in future elections, and the fewer tactical voters they attracted, and the more they lost, in 2015. The picture was largely the same in 2017, when the party was able to retain only 50 per cent of those who had voted for it two years before; less than a fifth of the party's supporters in 2017 had voted for them in 2010. The authors conclude that this was largely a problem with credibility (the election came too soon for much of a post-coalition recovery to have taken place), and also with the party's stance on Brexit alienating its more socially conservative tactical supporters, rather than with Tim Farron's weaknesses as leader.

The book does not extend to include the 2019 election, and its partial Liberal Democrat recovery amongst remain voters (see John Curtice's analysis in *Journal of Liberal History* 105, winter 2019–20), but even without that, all is not necessarily doom and gloom for the party. As the authors observe, it seems unlikely that voter volatility will fall, though there is some sign that voters are becoming more polarised – i.e. they may be more prone to change their vote but they are also more likely to see parties (at least, the big two) as more different from each other. In addition, other political identities

– mainly remain / leave – may be becoming more important. The future, therefore, is highly uncertain, and there is still plenty of opportunity for further electoral shocks to disrupt the established political landscape.

With respect to the potential for future coalitions, the authors conclude that the outcome of the 2015 election does not show that, as Disraeli put it, 'England does not love coalitions', but that the voters did not like that specific coalition. That was partly due to the fact that Lib Dem voters didn't like Conservatives, but also because Lib Dem participation in coalition didn't obviously deliver anything much that they cared about. As David Laws' and others' recollections of the 2010–15 government show, the Conservatives rarely missed a chance to bring in measures that directly benefited their own voters and to veto things that would hurt them. In contrast, Liberal Democrat ministers governed with a comprehensive disregard to what their voters were likely to want and think – probably at least partly because Lib Dem politicians are more likely to see politics as a competition of ideas rather than of social groups. As one Liberal Democrat minister put it in 2011, 'The Lib Dem base has been public sector workers, students and intellectuals. We have contrived to fuck them all off.'

Arguably, if the party had stuck to its manifesto commitment to abolish tuition fees – which was clearly identified amongst the public with the Liberal Democrats, and was a popular policy particularly with university graduates, one of the groups most strongly voting Lib Dem – instead of insisting on its manifesto commitment to raise the income tax threshold – which was not strongly identified with the party and in practice benefited only the Conservatives – the 2015 election might not have proved such an electoral shock. Liberal Democrat participants in any future coalition need to pay as much attention to politics as to policies.

Duncan Brack is the editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

Analysing the 2015 and 2017 elections

Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)
Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh *The British General Election of 2017* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)
Review by **Michael Steed**

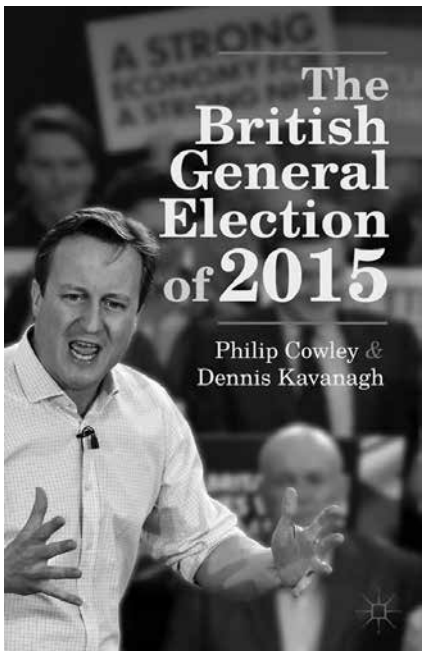
The cluster of UK general elections of 2015, 2017 and 2019 may appear to future historians as essentially one momentous juncture, comparable with that of the 1922, 1923 and 1924 elections. These, starting with the removal of the last Liberal prime minister and ending with the establishment of a new two-party dominance, transformed Britain's political landscape. Superficially, the 2015–19 trio confirmed the existing big-two-plus-others system, after a reshuffle of the smaller parties' cards. Dig deeper and maybe, just as the 1922–24 trio replaced an earlier political alignment with one based on socio-economic class, the three recent elections have dumped class and substituted a new mix of age and cultural values as the denominator of the British party system. If so, that alone would be a profound, once-a-century political realignment.

Or, perhaps, future historians will add in the first Scottish independence referendum of 2014 (surely not the last), along with the second European referendum of 2016, to make a set of five seismic popular votes which shook the United Kingdom: a shaking that will maybe finish off the Union – or perhaps just end the extraordinary dominance that the Conservative Party has exercised since the Disraelian realignment of 1874. Indeed, might a future Trevor Wilson be debating whether the Conservatives' demise following their last-ever victory of December 2019 was accident, old age, or the inevitable outcome of the suicidal insanity that gripped the party in 2010s?

Whatever the perspective, all such historians will need to consult these two comprehensive and meticulous accounts of the 2015 and 2017 British general elections. Their strength is that each looks at one specific election framed by the expectations and actions of those who took either part in that event or were assessing and defining its significance as it was happening. The authors follow a pattern laid down originally in 1945 and developed by many authors since then, most notably David Butler: what were known as the Nuffield election studies when I contributed (1964–2005) now proclaim themselves the Palgrave Macmillan election studies, these two being the nineteenth and twentieth in that series.

They also mark a turning point in authorship. Butler retired with the 2005 election; by then his co-author for nine volumes, Dennis Kavanagh, had taken the brand forward. Philip Cowley has now moved firmly into the saddle. A more earthy style, a decision to quote the exact words of interviewees under the stress of party infighting or unexpected setbacks (no expletives deleted), and quirky speculative asides have spiced up the Butler offering of clinical detachment. Anthony Howard reviewed Butler's 1970 election volume under the headline 'Taking the life out of politics',[1] somewhat unfairly – but it was a widespread view among the commentariat. Cowley may be criticised for using 'industrial language', but not for what Howard termed Butler's 'rigid and austere standards'.

These volumes also now appear later in the electoral cycle than Butler's used to. I well recall the rush to get my material on the 28 February 1974 election into print in time to inform commentators on the expected second election, in October 1974. Butler



thereby made sure that he wrote the first draft of history, fast; others took more time to analyse the evidence and ponder the meaning. That now includes another political science institution – the British Election Studies. The BES interviews a full representative sample of the electorate before, during and after the event; Cowley's volumes now include evidence from the BES, which makes for a fuller, more reflective, second draft of history.

The books have also grown. These two measure 483 and 570 pages respectively; the last pre-Cowley one (2005) was 275. I calculate the modal length in the period I was involved at about 380 pages, the mean was similar, the median 373.5 and the maximum ever (1970) 493 pages, expanded to include a one-off prescient appendix by James Kellas on Scottish Nationalism, despite the failure of the SNP to win any mainland Scottish seat at that election.

This expansion allows the authors, and the other specialists who have contributed (in total seventeen to one or other of these volumes), to handle better not only an increasingly complex party system but also what to a previous generation is a baffling multiplicity of media outlets. A shift in the books' media coverage records the print media having become more partisan in the electoral battle than other channels of communication: one important conclusion is that the 2017 result was a notable rebuff to the vituperative press campaign against Corbyn. Examining constituency campaigning in 2015, the authors assign the Conservatives' victory in the digital war to their having more money, thereby avoiding the effect of the long-term massive decline in the party's membership (i.e. volunteer workforce) on the ground. Yet the huge SNP surge did, it seems, owe much to the efforts of the swelling membership. The Liberal Democrat collapse followed from five years of loss of activists, councillors and Short money funding. Examined in such detail, these elections were a fascinating interplay between old and new types of campaigning.

Each book is a mine of well-informed and thorough research into British politics around the time of each election, rich in revealing nuggets. Political historians, whether with a focus on voting behaviour, on any of the British political parties (major or minor),[2] on any of the changing media or on policy issues, will neglect this evidence at their peril; Northern Ireland is the exception. The growing separation of the province's politics from mainland Britain has meant that, from 1997, the series has given it only perfunctory coverage (an unfortunate gap when the DUP suddenly acquired leverage at Westminster in 2017). Fortunately, the growing separation of Scotland's politics from the rest of Britain has not been treated in the same way; a lag in understanding how much the Scottishness of elections in Scotland now matters may explain why the 2017 campaign (when Scotland behaved slightly less differently) is more fully and better covered than the more dramatic 2015 outcome.

For the Liberal Democrats, the story of 2015 is confirmation that it was indeed the coalition that caused the catastrophe. A few weeks in spring 2015 could not reverse what had happened since 2010. The party was torn between trying to save seats by fighting on local MP's reputations and trying, with no success whatsoever, to string together a national narrative out of pupil premiums and personal tax allowances. Nonetheless, the BES found Nick Clegg's standing actually increased during the campaign more than that of any other leader.

Too late. The Conservatives had won the narrative war during the years in which Lib Dem ministers had been used as window dressing (quoted from a Cameron aid, p. 26). In their analysis of how Labour worked out its post-2010 strategy, the authors stress the Lib Dem role in this narrative construction, as Labour saw it. By using the Tory version of history ('to put right Labour's reckless spending', p. 72) to justify his decision go with Cameron, Clegg had reinforced that version. Here, perhaps, is also a key to later problems encountered by the Lib Dems. Buried in footnote 10 on page 38 lies the authors' sober verdict that 'it may indeed have been better for the Lib Dems to have left the coalition before the five years was up.'

Their account of Tim Farron's travails in 2017 over the sinfulness of sex adds little to the known story. The party was trapped by an odd combination of Channel Four News, the Daily Mail and a Labour Facebook campaign (what else do these three have in common?). The authors do comment on the oddity that his equivocation blew up in 2017 when it had been unnoticed at the point when he became leader in 2015, but do not explore any conspiracy explanation. Were, perhaps, the sins of his predecessor being visited upon poor Tim via an essentially trivial question?

There is a curious parallel in the Conservative manifesto commitment

to a free vote on fox hunting, which featured in both their 2015 and 2017 manifestos. This issue also cut through unexpectedly in 2017, having not done so at all in 2015, and the authors struggle to answer why (they dismiss the explanation that it was social media). Was it something about the very pointlessness of Mrs May's premature dissolution in 2017 which encouraged such side issues to explode as they did?

Cowley and Kavanagh see the gay sex issue as derailing the 2017 Lib Dem campaign, implying rather than concluding that it was therefore damaging: at the start of the campaign the party's prospects had looked better than things turned out. Another answer lies in a revealing statistic in Dominic Wring and David Deacon's exhaustive analysis of press coverage – the Lib Dem news presence dropped from 10 per cent in 2015 to 6 per cent in 2017.

The vote-share dropped less, from 8.1 per cent to 7.6 per cent, yet Lib Dem seats went up in 2017 (as they often do when there is a national anti-Tory swing but a falling Liberal vote, viz. 1966 or 1992). It is tempting to see the party's similar level of 2015 and 2017 votes as its baseline. Not so, as the statistical appendix by John Curtice et al. shows by examining the varied local performance. Serious politics seems to have played a major role in reshuffling the party's vote.

The overall drop was 0.5 points; but across Labour seats, regardless of EU referendum vote or education, the drop was three and a half times greater (Table A1.5). In Conservative ones, the vote share rose substantially if the area was strongly pro-EU or where more than a third of the population had degrees; elsewhere in (most of) Toryland it nonetheless dropped. The 2017 election is the one when the party found itself taking a clear step away from representing bits of Celtic fringe together with some distinctive local communities to representing a distinctive socio-cultural constituency: more internationally minded, better-educated people living in seats where Labour is not in the running.

Cowley and Kavanagh offer, as their overall encapsulation, that the 2015 election was the 'surprise election'. The date had been fixed by legislation, for the first time, well in advance; all participants – parties, media, commentators – had agreed that no one would win an overall majority of seats. This was not just drawn from their experience of the 2010 outcome; the expectation relied above all on polls, which consistently seemed to reflect a settled division of opinion that made such an outcome inevitable. The authors show how this framed each party's strategy (unlike 2010, when Labour was extraordinarily unprepared for inter-party negotiations) and responses to other parties. Thus, the prospects of a Labour–SNP deal became a campaign issue, skilfully played by the Conservatives. The authors report that the Liberal Democrats had picked up the local impact of this Tory message and felt the need to distance themselves from any chance of Labour coming to power 'on a life support system' from Alex Salmond (p 196). The withdrawal of tactical support for LD MPs by so many former Labour voters was thereby encouraged.

This 'false framing' by the polls frames the authors' interpretation of the 2015 result. The polls were actually only wrong about the gap between Conservative and Labour (they got the two huge changes, the SNP surge and Lib Dem collapse spot-on, but few commentators correctly understood how that would impact on seats won by the two larger parties). The narrow gap was, it later transpired, due to sampling methods which included a few too many Labour and a few too few Tory voters. Correcting for this mis-sampling means, Cowley and Kavanagh point out, the polls had been wrong for some years beforehand. They suggest that, with this correction, Cameron had really led Miliband since July 2013, with a slowly but steadily increasing lead; if that had been known, might Ed Miliband have been replaced in good time?

As for 2017, it comes over as the unprepared election. The sudden, grab-for-a-big-majority dissolution found few candidates in place (result: a more centralised rapid placing of future MPs by central party apparatchiks, a loss of grass-roots democracy fully set out here) and no manifestoes ready. Consequently, the lack of preparation of the bolder pledges in Mrs May's manifesto mattered in a way that no election manifesto has mattered in recent memory (previous volumes have dutifully covered steadily lengthening documents, seeing them as necessary but largely meaningless ritual). Mrs May was badly wrong-footed, and Jeremy Corbyn proved to be far better on the hoof. That, more than any issue (or the 'youthquake' which the authors dismiss), determined a campaign in which the polls charted a dramatic shift of opinion.

So the two election campaigns could not have been more different in how they played out. One was a set-piece battle, whose outcome was settled in advance (though inaccurately forecast) – a campaign with plenty of sound and fury, signifying little. The next was an unscripted drama, possibly, taking the long view, the campaign that changed more voting intentions than any other since 1935.[3] Historians may indeed come to see them as two stages of one seismic event; but each, at the time, went its own way.

Michael Steed was a graduate student at Nuffield College 1963–5, where he was recruited to David Butler's election coverage team. He is now largely retired and is an honorary lecturer in politics at the University of Kent.

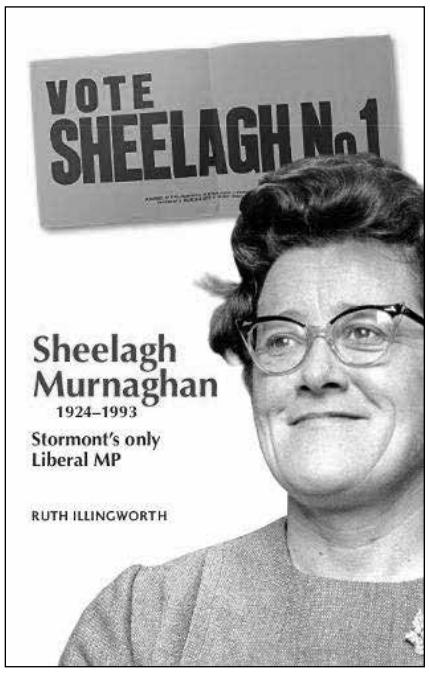
1 *The Observer*, 18 Apr. 1971.

2 Revealing nugget: in January Ofcom officially listed UKIP as a major party but the Green Party as a minor one. So much for UKIP's stance as an outsider unfairly treated by a liberal cultural and media establishment. Footnote asides in this style abound in these volumes.

3 See Tom Stannage, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition: The British General Election of 1935* (London, 1980). That being the last British election with no contemporary opinion polls, there is no measure with which to compare. Stannage argues, however, that all contemporary predictions were exceeded by the actual Conservative majority.

Ulster's Liberal MP

Ruth Illingworth, *Sheelagh Murnaghan – Stormont's only Liberal MP* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 2019)
Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**



In my time at party HQ in the 1960s, I met with our Ulster Liberal Party colleagues at least once a year, just as I did with all the regional parties. I looked forward to these visits, not least because I recognised the much tougher environment in which Liberals had to function there, and I found that our Ulster comrades had perforce to be more soundly based in their Liberalism to enable them to combat the twin extremes of nationalism and unionism. There were other Liberal standard bearers, but it was the triumvirate of Albert McElroy, Sheelagh Murnaghan and the younger Berkeley Farr who stayed loyal under all the pressures and who maintained the Liberal presence against the odds. I always stayed with Albert and we invariably debated the issues until the small hours, with Albert enveloped in a permanent unpleasant halo of cigarette smoke.

Sheelagh had a Catholic background and Albert was a minister in the equivalent of the Unitarian church in Britain – 'protestant' in Ulster parlance – and I recall being at an election meeting in Newtownards with both of them. Sheelagh spoke first and was received in silence; Albert followed and managed to provoke the audience, who began shouting 'Papist'. Albert stopped and commented, 'The Liberal Party is clearly making headway when you shout "Papist" at me and not at Miss Murnaghan!'

The university seats, which gave graduates an additional vote, were abolished in Britain in 1948, but the Queen's University constituency for the Northern Ireland parliament continued for a further decade. There was no argument in principle for this elitist second vote, but it had the immense practical benefit of enabling Sheelagh Murnaghan to serve as Stormont's only Liberal MP for eight years. What impresses me on reading her biography is her intellectual consistency in promoting Liberal principles in Stormont and her doggedness in never taking an adverse vote as a definitive rejection. Four times she attempted to get a Human Rights Act on to the statute book and each time it was defeated. Ironically, the key aspects of such an act were enacted under the pressures of the power sharing years after Sheelagh's seat had been abolished.

Sheelagh once commented that 'in Northern Ireland politics, I don't know which is the greatest obstacle: to be a woman, a Catholic or a Liberal. I am all three.' None of the three daunted her and, although the electoral disadvantages were manifest, the personal respect in which she was held was seen in the number of times she was consulted on constitutional and civil rights issues even after she had left parliament. From 1969 she chaired industrial relations and employment tribunals in Belfast and gave a number of rulings that set good precedents. Another Liberal – and unpopular – cause that she championed throughout her political life was that of the rights of travellers and the need to establish services for them and their children.

Albert McElroy died in March 1975 and Sheelagh penned a tribute to him in the *Irish Times*. With great insight she wrote:

> The only thing he found it really hard to forgive was inhumanity. The gross inhumanity of so many of the acts of the past few years drove him almost to despair. It was not fear that made him recoil from the violence, much though he abhorred it. What almost destroyed him was the sheer evil of it all. That people could stoop to such deeds was beyond his comprehension.

Sadly, I can attest to that. Shortly before Albert's death, Pratap Chitnis and I went to Northern Ireland on a Joseph Rowntree Trust mission to investigate what the trust might do to assist the end to the violence of the Troubles. We stayed with Albert and Jan McElroy at their home in Newtownards and I was distressed in the change in him from my previous meeting. He was a broken man and simply could not comprehend the cynical day-to-day murders and mutilations. I have never been sure that it was right to have imposed on his hospitality at that time.

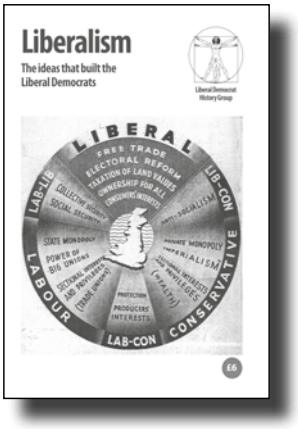
The other development that hurt McElroy was the formation of the Alliance Party and the defection to it of a number of Liberal members. Their disloyalty greatly upset him. Sheelagh stayed loyal to the party and, frankly, one could not imagine such a natural Liberal as Sheelagh being a member of any other party. She was a pioneer on so many grounds. She was the first female barrister to practise in Northern Ireland, the only Liberal Party MP ever in the Northern Ireland parliament and, as a total contrast, she was an international hockey player for Ulster and Ireland. This is a long awaited and warm biography of a very remarkable person.

Michael Meadowcroft has been a 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.

Booklets from the Liberal Democrat History Group

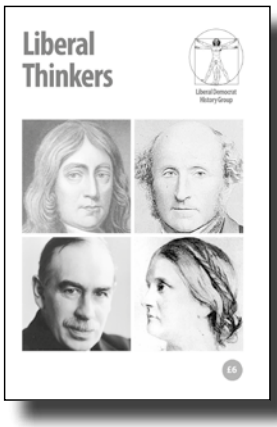
Liberalism

The ideas that built the Liberal Democrats



An accessible guide to the key ideas underlying Liberal Democrat beliefs, including entries on environmentalism, internationalism, the rule of law and community politics, together with contemporary and historic currents of thought, including social and economic liberalism, social democracy, Keynesianism, radicalism and more. Essential reading for every thinking Liberal.

Liberal Thinkers

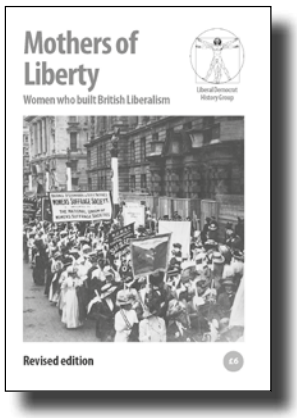


Liberalism has been built on more than three centuries' work of political thinkers and writers and the aspirations of countless human beings who have fought for freedom, democracy, the rule of law and open and tolerant societies.

This booklet is an accessible guide to the key thinkers associated with British Liberalism, including John Locke, Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Richard Cobden, John Stuart Mill, L. T. Hobhouse, John Maynard Keynes, William Beveridge and many more. This second edition updates some of the entries in the first (2014) edition, and adds one new entry.

Mothers of Liberty

Women who built British Liberalism



Even before they gained the right to vote and to stand for election, women played many key roles in the development of British Liberalism – as writers and thinkers, campaigners, political hostesses, organisers and, finally, as parliamentary candidates, MPs and peers.

The new edition of this booklet contains the stories of the women who shaped British Liberalism – including Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, the suffragist leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the first woman Liberal MP Margaret Wintringham, Violet Bonham Carter, Megan Lloyd George, Nancy Seear, Shirley Williams and many more.

How to order

All these three booklets are available at a special discounted rate for *Journal of Liberal History* subscribers: £5 each instead of the normal £6. Order via our online shop (**www.liberalhistory.org.uk/shop/**) or by sending a cheque (to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN (add £1.50 P&P per booklet).

Letters to the Editor

Robert Maclennan (1)

I very much appreciated the three letters from Kenneth O Morgan, William Wallace and Philip Goldenberg critical of my obituary of Robert Maclennan (*Journal of Liberal History* 107 (summer 2020)). They illustrate vividly the problem of giving an accurate and fair picture of his life. Writing an appreciation of Robert Maclennan was certainly the most difficult of the hundred or so that I have written and it caused me much concern, not least that for each of the three who commented that I had been unfair there would be three who would take the opposite view. Suffice to say that I read everything available on him and, for instance, obtained every one of his election addresses that is archived. Furthermore, every opinion I noted did not emanate from any single capricious comment but was on record or known personally to me. Rereading my obituary I do not believe that it gives an unbalanced picture of an extremely likeable man with whom I maintained a friendly contact.

Michael Meadowcroft

Robert Maclennan (2)

Bob Maclennan would have been a little surprised to have been the subject of so much controversy following Michael Meadowcroft's obituary, which I thought was sensitive and considered. I don't know if I qualify as one of Kenneth O. Morgan's 'lower league' or 'lightweight' Liberals but I can confirm that Michael's assessment of Bob's actions during the merger negotiations in 1988/89, as being at times unusual if not eccentric, was held by many of the bemused Liberal team.

With the benefit of over thirty years' hindsight it seems clear to me that one difficulty we all had was that Bob himself had a very clear idea of the kind of constitution that the merged party should have, while the nominal leader of the Liberal side (David Steel) had very little. On the other hand the SDP team as a whole had little to add to Bob's vision other than (in some cases) an inbuilt dislike of Liberals, while the Liberal side had a clear negotiating mandate from the wider party which we pursued with vigour but which was not shared by certain members of our team, including David.

Many years later I lent Bob a copy of the slim volume on the merger negotiations that Rachael Pitchford and I wrote soon after the event (Merger – The Inside Story) and his comment was that 'you understood the issues underlying the negotiations rather better than some of those involved'.

I will ignore most of Philip Goldenberg's rather acidic comments, though to describe the Liberal Party constitution – which, with one major revision in 1969, had served the party well from the creation of the Liberal Party Organisation in the mid-1930s – as 'an anarchic shambles' is ridiculous, and does no more than highlight Philip's own prejudices. It is a fact that through the quite traumatic events leading to the formation of the new party, and afterwards as part of the merged party, the Liberal Party possessed the institutional resilience to largely hold together, while the more centralised and tightly controlled SDP broke into pieces.

As for Bob, he more than once said to me that 'if only you and I could have got together we could have sorted it all out between us and created an even more appropriate structure for our party!' Be that as it may, he was not the only leading member of the SDP to admit to me in the comfortable precincts of the House of Lords to have realised in the later stages of their political life that the creed of Liberalism was what they had really always believed in.

For twenty years after the merger, Bob felt at home in the Liberal Democrats. But he was, as Lord Morgan writes, dismayed by the five years of coalition with the Tories. His loyalty to colleagues prevented him from becoming a public rebel but he was increasingly unhappy. In his last few years, as a new generation of Liberal Democrats moved into the Lords, he felt increasingly detached from the party he had done so much to create. He used to tell me he now felt 'quite deracinated', a typical Maclennan turn of phrase. But his achievements, most of all through the Cook–Maclennan initiative, have stood the test of events and will stand the test of history.

Tony Greaves

Robert Maclennan (3)

May I supplement Ken Morgan's fine tribute to Bob Maclennan with some comments from the other side of the Lords? I exchanged no more than a few words with him at the conferences we both attended when he was the SDP's very effective spokesman on Northern Ireland in the 1980s. So I did not expect the great encouragement he gave me when I arrived in the Lords nearly ten years ago as one of David Cameron's unduly abundant creations. ' I was so interested in what you had to say about Northern Ireland', he would tell me after I had made points that he would have put much better. 'It is very important to ensure that the province is not forgotten at Westminster.' Whenever I saw him in or around the Lords, he would always offer a warm handshake and ask how I was getting on. I wish he was still here so I could talk to him about the contemptuous manner in which Boris Johnson treats our country's constitution.

Lord Lexden

Lloyd George and the partition of Ireland

I wish to comment on Alistair Lexden`s commentary on the partition of Ireland's proposals (Journal of Liberal History 107 (summer 2020)). The cartoon on page 24 clearly shows the exclusion of all nine counties of Ulster

from the then proposed Southern area. In reality the proposed Northern Ireland was in one sense an artificial creation in the sense that it neither included all nine Ulster counties, nor did it cover only the Protestant majority counties, since there has never been a dispute that Fermanagh and Tyrone and the City of Derry all had Nationalist majorities. All election results reflected this up to the time and only changed when the Unionists subsequently replaced the elected bodies with gerrymandered elections.

The job of the Boundary Commission was to redraw the border in accordance with the wishes of the local population. The key phrase being that the border shall 'be determined in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants'. The clause continues: 'so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions'; however, it is hard to see how this clause prevented the transfer of the whole City of Derry or, for example, County Tyrone.

In my view, later claims that the powers of the Commission, as defined in the treaty, were ambiguous, can only be supported by those who do not understand the English language. Two representatives were appointed by the UK government, one appointed by the UK as chairperson and one to represent Northern Ireland (the Ulster government refused to participate). Although Northern Ireland was bound by the international treaty obligations of the UK government, not for the first time the Unionists chose to ignore UK law when it suited them. The chairperson and representative for Northern Ireland were only appointed after the Irish Free State appointed their Commissioner. The chairperson took it upon himself to state that the Commission had to preserve Northern Ireland as the same provincial entity and could therefore not recommend any large change to the border. In other words this individual, with the unsurprising support of the representative appointed to represent Northern Ireland, took it upon himself to redraft the Treaty to now say that the Border of Northern Ireland would be drawn in total disregard of the wishes of the local population. The third delegate, representing the Irish Free State, resigned, no doubt in response to this total breach of trust. To settle the matter an agreement was reached which wiped out the Free State's obligation to pay any part of the UK national debt and the report, with its minor proposed changes, was suppressed for almost half a century.

To an Irish Nationalist, of course, the issue never was 26 to 6 counties, 28 to 4 or even 31 to 1. In addition, the Free State government no doubt calculated that including within Northern Ireland large areas with Nationalist majorities would bring a basic instability to the new area which would bring the house of cards down, which, as far as the Stormont government was concerned, finally happened in 1972. There was, however, an overwhelming feeling of betrayal in the Nationalist community, particularly in Fermanagh and Tyrone and the City of Derry, rendered all the greater by the abolition of the democratically elected county councils, as already mentioned.

With the final introduction of one person one vote in Northern Ireland in 1971 there would have been the hope of fairer results in the 1972 county council elections; however, the Unionist government had taken the precaution of abolishing them in favour of new small authorities with most of the powers being transferred to Stormont, with the clear intention of excluding Nationalist participation in decision-making. In reality the introduction of direct rule in 1972 torpedoed this strategy but the intention was clear and was not anticipated by the Northern Ireland government when this ploy was launched.

Sometimes events do take on an historical significance quite unknown at the time, but historians should take note of them. Should Derry been allocated to the Irish Free State then no doubt a provision for facilities to continue to be allocated to the Royal Navy could have been negotiated, as happened in the case of the three Southern ports, but it seems likely that all of these facilities would have been surrendered by Chamberlain in 1938 with even more, perhaps fatal, consequences during the Battle of the Atlantic. However, this was not known by the commissioners in 1925.

Source: *Report of the Irish Boundary Commission 1925* (Irish University Press, 1969) – this was the first publication of the suppressed report.

Richard Pealling

Five Liberal Women

The comprehensive article on 'Five Liberal Women' (*Journal of Liberal History* 107 (summer 2020)) is quite correct in describing the radical nature of Megan Lloyd George, and her distaste for those who would undermine the progressive nature of Liberal politics. It was a disappointment to many when she left the party, but it was long expected, given her disenchantment with the party's hapless performance and its cosying up to Conservatism. In leaving the party she said: 'I first came to Anglesey as the Radical daughter of a Radical leader; I have latterly been disturbed by the pronounced tendency of the official Liberal Party to drift toward the Right'. (Even though Megan did win Carmarthen in 1957 for Labour, she was never happy within that party, nor was Labour convinced about her.)

In fact, this was only one of a number of occasions when the Liberal Party had abandoned radicalism in order to facilitate Conservatism, and, each time, the result has been rejection by the electorate, and damaging factionalism within the party. I need not remind readers of the most recent of these.

Suffice to say that, as history shows, the Liberal flame shines brightest when it has a radical fuel.

Ian Jenkins

Asquith and home rule

In his review of my book, *Irish Liberty, British Democracy: the third Irish Home Rule Crisis, 1909–14* (*Journal of Liberal History* 107 (summer 2020)), Iain Sharpe takes exception to my criticisms of H.H. Asquith, and he is certainly entitled to his opinion. Readers of Dr Sharpe's review will have been left unaware of my argument that

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

Liberals with a radical programme

The post-war welfare state, Beveridge and the Liberal Party 75 years on

2020 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1945 general election and the beginning of the creation of the post-war welfare state.

While the system of social security introduced after 1945 is often heralded as one of the greatest achievements of the Labour Party, its intellectual origins and design were primarily owed to Liberal thinkers and politicians stretching back over several decades.

Join us to discuss these issues with **Professor Pat Thane** (Birkbeck College) and **Dr Peter Sloman** (University of Cambridge). Chair: **Baroness Tyler**.

1200 – 1250, Saturday 26 September

This fringe meeting will be held online as part of the the Liberal Democrat autumn conference, and will be open only to those who have registered for the conference.

behind all the Unionist political theatre, the true nature of the struggle was between the British parties and the Irish nationalists. The book presents very considerable evidence of dissatisfaction with Asquith's stewardship of Home Rule expressed by Liberal backbenchers, the Liberal press, and the rank and file in 1914. The demand from these quarters was for ministers to support the Liberals' Irish allies and enact Home Rule, and in so doing, to secure democracy by operation of the Parliament Act. Had the extent of Asquith's efforts to accommodate Unionist demands at the expense of the Irish nationalists become publicly known, it is quite possible that many Liberals would have used words like 'less than honourable intentions', 'appeasement', 'pusillanimity', and 'perfidy'.

James Doherty

Liberal History

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