

# 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

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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*

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