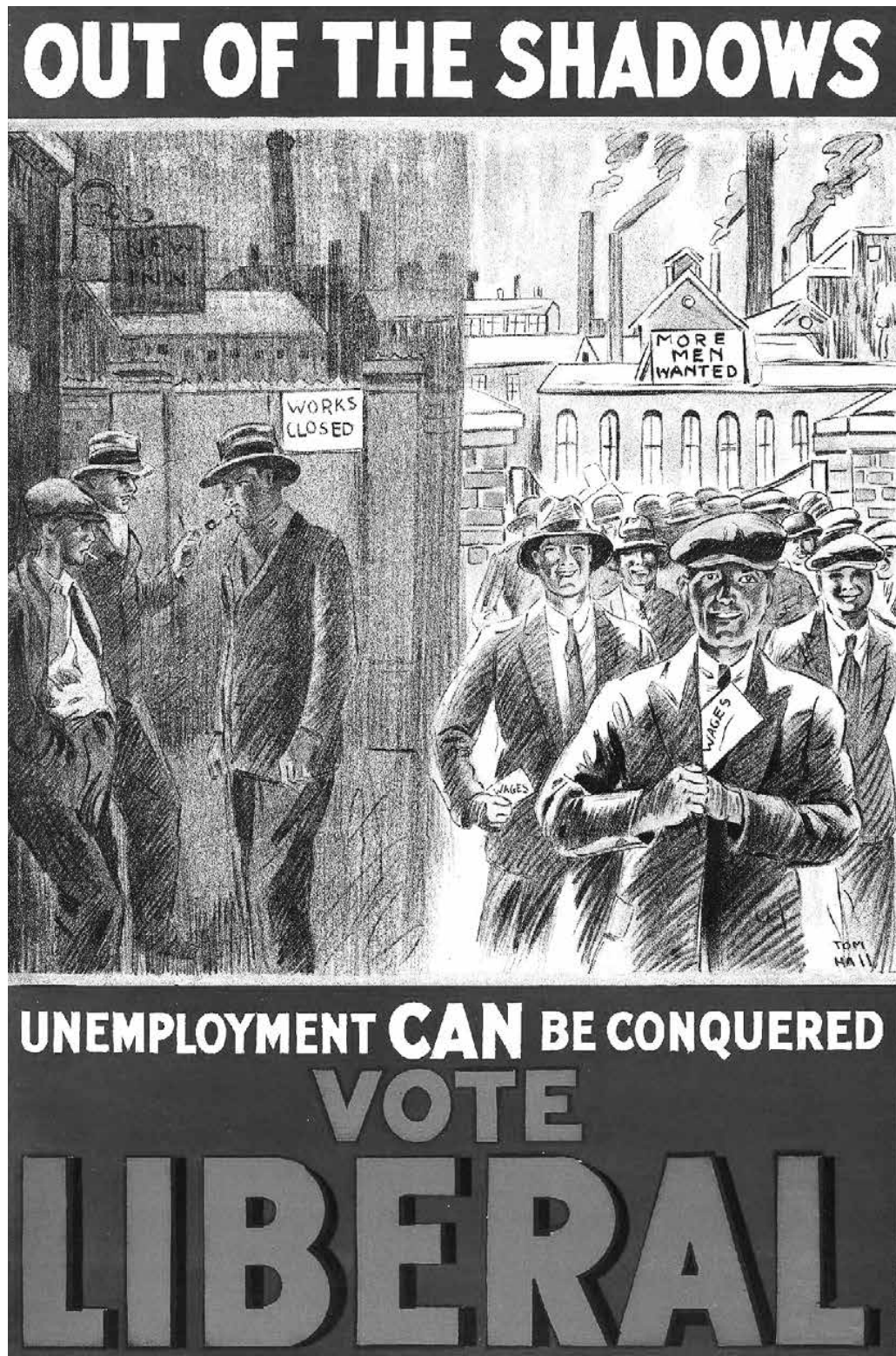


Liberal thought

Aaron Jacob examines the role the Liberal Summer Schools played in the electoral record of the Liberal Party in the 1920s.

Lloyd George, the Liberal Summer Scho



Liberal Party election poster, 1920s

Tools and electoral politics in the 1920s

THE HISTORY of the Liberal Party in the twentieth century is often characterised as being marked by decline and renewal.¹ The New Liberal victory in 1906 marked the high noon of twentieth-century Liberalism. Decline then followed in the inter-war period, reaching its nadir in the 1950s, before the tide turned towards the end of the century. Broadly speaking, this is the trajectory that historical scholarship tends to take as its backdrop. In particular, explanations for the decline – and precisely how, why and when it happened – often predominate, so much so that debate about the decline has ‘tended to overshadow other issues relating to the history of British Liberalism in the Twentieth Century’.² This article does not seek to add to that corpus of literature: far too much analytical ink has been spilled on Liberal Party decline or downfall.

The Liberal Summer Schools (LSS) remain an underexamined area of Liberal Party scholarship. If the Liberals failed electorally between the wars, the same cannot be said of their intellectual impact. This erudite movement, brought under Lloyd George’s aegis in 1925, sought to navigate a middle way between an unrestrained free market and a doctrinaire socialism. This movement has, however, been interpreted as an interlude in the inevitable Liberal decline: the party written off, notwithstanding its precocious understanding of 1920s industrial conflict. One of our key protagonists, Ernest Simon, set the tone for much of the debate that followed. He was clearly exasperated with the state of Liberal Party politics in the 1920s: ‘What a party!’ he declared, after only ten months of sitting in parliament. ‘No leaders, no organisation, no policy! Only a summer school!’³ Yet this interpretation imposes an unnecessary analytical straitjacket on the LSS which overlooks the part it played in shaping political and electoral outcomes in the late 1920s. As such, the author makes three key arguments in this article. Firstly, that this period in British political history provides an excellent vantage point from which to view the changing currents in Liberal thinking on

economic affairs, as the First World War devastated both the cohesion of the Edwardian Liberal Party and the Gladstonian economic order which underpinned it. Secondly, that by examining the Liberal by-election revival between 1927 and 1929, the reader can see which strands of Liberal economic thinking were dominant when the Liberal Party was electorally successful. An examination that weaves between the national and local pictures will afford the reader an insight into how, why and when differing economic ideas held explanatory purchase in Liberal ranks during a period characterised by political flux. Thirdly, given the protagonists’ belief that electoral alignment was fluid in an apparent three-party system, the author provides an analysis of the relationship between Liberal policy ideas, party politics and electoral politics.

Manchester and Cambridge: the Liberal Summer Schools

The First World War and its immediate aftermath fractured the Liberal Party so that it entered the 1920s disorganised and divided. The Lloyd George–Asquith split did not recede in peacetime, as Lloyd George continued to lead a Tory-backed coalition. After Lloyd George’s fall from power as a result of the Carlton Club revolt in October 1922, the Liberal Party remained divided along these lines for the remainder of the 1920s. The brief let up in the schism within the party leadership, to defend free trade at the 1923 general election, simply masked the dearth of Liberal Party policy in the early 1920s.

Outside the contours of the Liberal Party, however, a new agitation sought a radical rethink of economic affairs. If the ‘New Liberalism’ was characterised above all as a form of ‘welfare politics’, in that it was microeconomic in nature, the First World War had illustrated that the state could successfully involve itself in economic life.⁴ Keen to heed the collectivist lessons of wartime, Ernest Simon – businessman, Manchester councillor and director of the New Statesman – was the catalyst around

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which provincial industrialists and academics coalesced as they sought a sweeping change in intellectual direction. The Manchester Liberal Federation was used as the conduit through which they could lobby the Liberal Party hierarchy. It was met with immediate intransigence, however, by the National Liberal Federation (NLF), which had fallen prey to the caprice of the Liberal leadership since Gladstone's day.⁵ The General Committee of the Manchester Liberal Federation initially sought a number of amendments to the central body, as they heeded the collectivist lessons of wartime: commitments were made to nationalisation of the coal mines, canals and the railways.⁶ Yet the NLF, populated by those who clung onto Gladstonian platitudes, was unsure about this change of intellectual direction and instead settled for a nebulous resolution calling for increased public control over those three sectors 'if experience proves desirable'.⁷ This pull-and-push of party politics did not deter the Mancunians, however, and Ramsey Muir, professor of Modern History at the University of Manchester, published his seminal *Liberalism and Industry*. This proposed a series of institutional reforms within industry: the encouragement of profit-sharing, the legal limitation on profits, industrial councils to fix minimum wages in all industries, and the experimental transfer of the coal mines and railways into state ownership. Muir conceived of the role of government as mediator between capital and labour. A special conference of the NLF in 1921 ultimately accepted the majority of Muir's proposals and it increasingly seemed that the parameters of Liberal economic ideas were being redrawn for the needs of the interwar world.

This redefinition of Liberal industrial policy led to the formation of the Liberal Summer School movement. Under the auspices of the Manchester radicals, this movement met at Grasmere in October 1921, but then settled for the more cerebral enclaves of Oxford and Cambridge thereafter. Michael Freeden has contended that the individuals who coalesced around the LSS 'had regressed in terms of intellectual ability and sophistication' in juxtaposition to New Liberal thinkers.⁸ However, early in its formation, the decision was explicitly taken not to devise a formulaic, theoretical approach to the economy but instead to act as a vehicle for promulgating policy that addressed contemporary socio-economic issues. Freeden's supposition is based on a false premise.

Alongside the Mancunian businessmen, three Cambridge economists were central to the LSS: J. M. Keynes, Hubert Henderson and Dennis

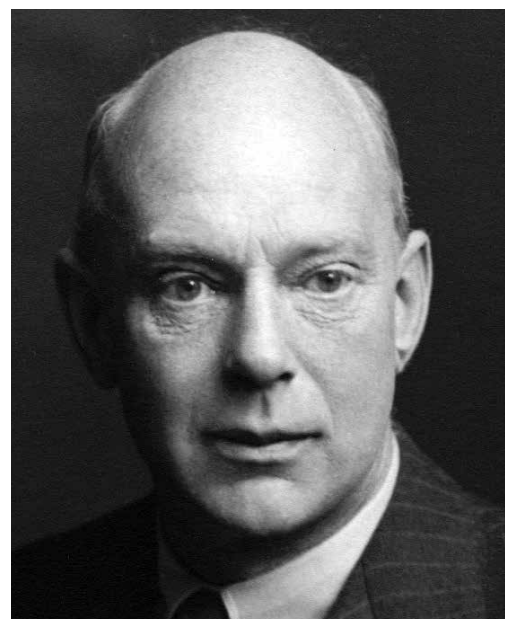
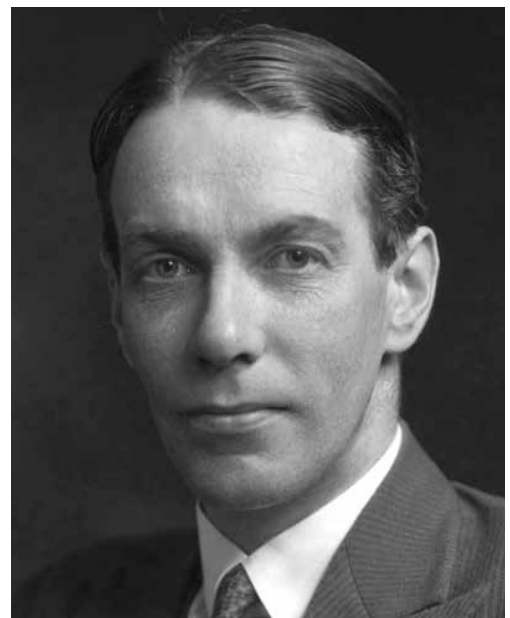
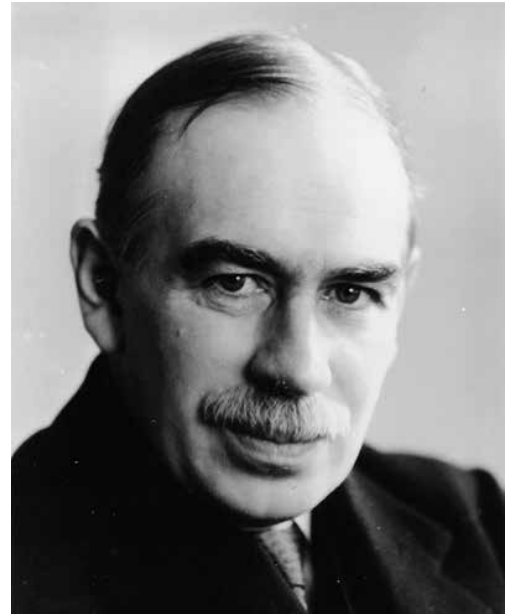
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Robertson. The interchange of ideas between these three, in particular, afforded this change of direction a theoretical underpinning. It is the shifting patterns in Keynes' thought that provide a useful vantage point for examining particular facets of the Cambridge contribution to liberal economic thought in this period. The Cambridge contribution pursued macroeconomic stabilisation with two particular discretionary tools: monetary policy and fiscal policy. An active monetary policy assumed greater importance initially. Whilst writing his *Tract on Monetary Reform* in 1923, Keynes came to believe that modern capitalism simply could not withstand a volatile standard of value and thought that only an actively managed currency could stabilise prices. The Treasury, the Bank of England and the banking sector could even out the trade cycle between them, he believed. On the fiscal side, an active, large-scale, counter-cyclical public works programme also grew in salience in these years. Keynes spoke of the 'rut' that the economy was in, as unemployment remained around 10 per cent of the insured workforce. This, he said, required 'an impulse, a jolt, an acceleration' that would 'provide the stimulus which shall initiate a cumulative prosperity'.⁹ In this way, the Victorian and Edwardian economic settlement of the Gold Standard and balanced budgets was not so much incrementally undermined as torn asunder, with a more domestically oriented approach to economic management creeping onto the political agenda. In certain quarters of the Liberal movement, the intellectual currents were shifting towards direct state involvement in the economy as the problem of the 'refractory million' of unemployed appeared insoluble within the intellectual parameters of classical economic theory.

This macroeconomic stabilisation was symptomatic of Keynes' view of the requirements of a mature, industrial economy such as Britain. In a 1924 lecture, 'The end of laissez-faire', and in the paper 'Am I a Liberal?', delivered at the 1925 LSS, Keynes asserted that the political and economic context had fundamentally changed since the nineteenth century. Considering the work of American economist John Commons, Keynes posited that Britain was moving into an era of stabilisation. Due to the growth of large firms and trade unions, the classical model of the economy was becoming an anachronism.¹⁰ Keynes shared the traditional Liberal concern that these corporations might collude against the public interest but argued that such collusion could be avoided so long as they were brought into line by government.¹¹ He then outlined how any potential collusion

could be avoided. Firstly, government should incorporate corporate entities into the fabric of the state, with the state becoming just one, *primus inter pares*, in the hierarchy of corporations. Echoing the zeitgeist of the period, Keynes argued that the conventional public–private divide was no longer applicable because of the growth of intermediate institutions. These ‘semi-autonomous bodies within the state’, such as the ‘universities, the Bank of England, the Port of London Authority’ and joint-stock companies, were evidence of a new corporatism as these institutions were ‘socialising themselves’.¹² Secondly, government should exercise a ‘coordinated act of intelligence’ over the economy, which concerned the coordination of savings and investment, to be achieved via currency and credit control.¹³ As Peter Sloman has shown, these dual harmonising roles of government ‘correspond loosely to the two strands of constructive Liberalism which existed during the 1920s, associated respectively with Manchester and Cambridge’.¹⁴ Keynes provided the appropriate economic and historical context which underpinned these two circles of thought. He thereby illustrated why economic theory had to change, paving the way for detailed policy ideas to emerge.

Questions of price instability and the trade cycle, and those issues of industrial strife and unemployment which flowed from them, were at the heart of the LSS in the mid-late 1920s. Social justice issues were not entirely neglected, however. One of our key protagonists, Ernest Simon, had a long pedigree of seeking social justice and took a particular interest in inheritance rights, proposing a ‘bold extension of taxes on inherited wealth’.¹⁵ His interest in inheritance reform dovetailed with his vision of a wider diffusion of ownership, as he affirmed his support for that Liberal maxim which kept cropping up in the 1920s: the Liberal ideal, he said, was to have ‘every worker a capitalist and every capitalist a worker’.¹⁶ To realise these ambitions, he maintained his support for free markets but envisaged a more pervasive role for government in order to achieve increased wealth redistribution: ‘it may’, he said, ‘be necessary for the State to provide the conditions under which private enterprise can function freely’.¹⁷ Simon’s view of a more proactive role for government meant that he was prepared to countenance its involvement in other areas too. In light of the failure of Lloyd George in coalition to build ‘homes fit for heroes’, as the combination of a slump, City interests and a vociferous Tory press put paid to Lloyd George’s ambitions for a welfare capitalism, a



Liberal economists:

John Maynard Keynes, Baron Keynes (1883–1946)

Sir Hubert Douglas Henderson (1890–1952), by Lafayette, 1932 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Sir Dennis Holme Robertson (1890–1963), by Walter Stoneman, 1939 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

housing policy was also urged.¹⁸ The idea of a more active, muscular state was indicative of his view of an alternative, preferred socio-economic framework for Britain: 'we are perfectly willing that houses should be built municipally rather than they should not be built at all but our preference is always in favour of private enterprise and initiative, properly regulated by the State'.¹⁹ A mediated position, a synthesis of public and private, a 'middle way': this view neatly captures the LSS balancing act. A comprehensive look at inheritance, wages and housing saw these issues as inextricably linked and Simon in particular proposed both practical policies and a different socio-economic framework to achieve more wealth redistribution.

It is axiomatic that the Liberal Summer Schools in the 1920s tackled a plurality of issues, as the conversation moved from high macroeconomic theory to the minutiae of social policy. The leitmotif which manifested itself time and again was the emphasis on the need for a framework for socio-economic stability under which individual dynamism could flourish. The absolutist vision of the state associated with Labour was rejected as was the inequality and instability associated with interwar capitalism and the Conservative Party. As they sought to address the underlying symptoms of a wider socio-economic malaise, the LSS used adjacent concepts of certainty, individual dynamism and social reform to surround its liberal core. This required an enquiring, experimental and elastic liberalism. Importantly, against a backdrop of Bolshevism abroad and socialism at home, these debates signified a serious attempt to provide alternative answers to the problems of the 1920s British economy and society. The Liberals were finding their way towards a managed capitalism as the vicissitudes of the 1920s disrupted those economic norms in Britain that Liberals had known and understood since the days of the 'Grand Old Man' at the Treasury. The Victorian conception of society was receding quickly as a more 'communitarian' conception sought to use the state almost as powerfully as it had been deployed during wartime.

The return of Lloyd George

The Liberal Party under the auspices of Lloyd George began to rebuild. With his cash, charisma and chutzpah, the Liberal Party set to work on a series of policies that sought to radically alter British political economy. His own perception of the difficulties of 1920s Britain was that socialism, or its more radical sibling, Bolshevism, was a grave threat to the 'whole

order of society'.²⁰ This was the macro-theme of the 1920s, as the Russian revolution abroad and industrial strife at home seemed a harbinger of revolution on British soil. Ross McKibbin has, moreover, shown that class became the 'dominant variable' in political affiliation in the interwar period, to which Edwardian political cleavages were subordinate: 'What primarily determined political allegiance was ideological-sociological identification: a sense among voters that their party stood for the world as they understood it and wished it to be'.²¹ The Liberals knew that they had to radically reshape their electoral offering in light of the enfranchisement of the working classes, lest they be tempted by socialism or communism. Despite the attempts of the Asquithian elite, it was to this end that Lloyd George sought to re-orient the Liberal appeal away from the traditional middle-class base that had been their core constituency in the Edwardian period.²²

The Liberal economic tradition was one of adaptation to the environment and circumstances that the party found itself in. Andrew Gamble has correctly highlighted the leitmotif in Liberal policymaking as 'the constant relating of economic issues to the party's political and electoral strategy'.²³ The electoral power of positive policy proposals had, of course, been central to Liberal Party ethos since Newcastle in 1891, and the 1920s were no different. Lloyd George confirmed at the 1927 Summer School that acquisition of office was futile unless it was 'to carry out a definite programme of work which the party has devoted its years of leisure to thinking out and planning'.²⁴ It was to this very task that Lloyd George set himself; as Charles Masterman, who worked closely with Lloyd George on pre-war social reform, confessed, 'I've fought him as hard as anyone ... but when Lloyd George came back to the party, ideas came back to the party'.²⁵ It was in this milieu, as Lloyd George made one final push for power, that the LSS became his think tank as he chased the chimera of a managed capitalism that had eluded him in office.

There were early synergies between Lloyd George and the LSS. Lloyd George's *Coal and Power*, also known as the *Brown Book*, drew upon ideas captured at the 1923 LSS which suggested that the state ought to nationalise coal royalties and grant leases on the premise of effective rationalisation and involvement of the miners. However, it was the subsequent publication which really cemented the partnership between Lloyd George and the LSS. Rural radicalism remained part of Lloyd George's armoury: 'Whatever happens we must

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strengthen our grasp on the rural districts'.²⁶ From his time as chancellor with the People's Budget to his lamenting to C. P. Scott, upon falling from power, that 'the real ground of attack is the Land', Lloyd George consistently emphasised the relationship between a positive land policy and electoral success, placing him firmly in the radical Liberal tradition of Henry George.²⁷ Running to almost 600 pages, the *Green Book*, published two years later, was comprehensive and its proposals complex.²⁸ It envisaged the nationalisation of land that would give the tenant farmer security of tenure subject to 'good cultivation', to be adjudicated upon by the county agricultural authorities. Similar to the proposals for the coal industry, it was believed that the state could provide much needed certainty and stability in turbulent market conditions yet would be detached from the production process. A bifurcation began to emerge in Liberal ranks, though, as the likes of Hilton Young and industrialist Alfred Mond defected to the Tories over what they saw as socialist policies. The ideas associated with the LSS were manifest in this document, as Lloyd George continued to manoeuvre his way back onto the centre of the political stage.

Soon after the general strike of May 1926, the LSS was brought firmly into Lloyd George's orbit. It was the industrial problem to which his attention now turned. Lord Lothian had been urging him to address the issue for some time: 'There is not the slightest hope that the perpetual battle between capital and labour ever coming to an end under the present system'. He was clearly frustrated with his old boss: 'Why on earth do you never come near the problem? The whole country is waiting for a lead'.²⁹ It was to this end that Lloyd George set up the Liberal Industrial Inquiry and furnished it with £10,000. The consequent *Yellow Book* was a synthesis of the ideas of both Cambridge and Manchester, enhanced by the expansionist instincts of Lloyd George.³⁰ Freedon is right to contend that 'the result of the Yellow Book was to incorporate state interventionism decisively within liberal ideology as no document has ever done before'.³¹ The micro proposals considered industrial democracy a panacea for industrial conflict: works councils, trade boards, Whitley councils and encouragement of profit-sharing. The macro proposals also envisaged some institutional solutions: a Board of National Investment to issue bonds and coordinate investment at home, greater public control over the Bank of England and the use of an active credit policy by manipulating interest rates. A programme of national development offered this programme

the immediacy and relevance it craved: unemployment could be tackled by an unprecedented programme of public works comprising slum clearance, house building, electrification and road construction. This document encapsulated the main strands in liberal economic thinking over the previous decade, combining institutional reform with a nascent resolution to the unemployment problem and the economic cycle.

These dense and complex policy programmes were hardly ideal electioneering weaponry. An election campaign required panache, vim and a dose of Lloyd Georgian demagoguery. After rejecting two versions of a manifesto forwarded to him by Lord Lothian, Lloyd George was adamant that 'it must somehow or other create the impression that Liberalism alone has got the message that will lead the land out of its present difficulties'.³² Something a bit snappier was required and the 'pledge' was the answer. Two months before the 1929 general election, Lloyd George asserted that, if returned to power, the Liberals had schemes of work to put in place 'immediately', which would reduce unemployment to 'normal proportions' in one year without adding a single penny to local or national taxation.³³ The *Orange Book* explained that this would be done with a £250,000,000 programme of loan-financed public works, which received the imprimatur of Keynes and Henderson in their pamphlet, *Can Lloyd George Do It?*³⁴ That the 1929 general election failed to produce the anticipated Liberal electoral dividends is well known. What remains to be explored, however, is the relationship between Liberal policymaking, party politics and electoral politics in the Liberal by-election revival from 1927 to 1929.

Party reactions

It has been doubted how original these ideas were. The debate centres around precisely who was the progenitor of the 'Middle Way' movement in the interwar period. Booth and Pack, for example, argue that the Liberals in the 1920s were 'still firmly rooted in the orthodox view of the economy to which was added an array of practical and utopian reformist ideas' and they are juxtaposed with Harold Macmillan and the Conservative Planners.³⁵ Stewart Faulkes, however, disagrees and views the LSS as the true instigators of the 'Middle Way', as they built a viable pathway between an untrammelled free market and a doctrinaire socialism.³⁶ Ultimately, though, such post hoc judgments about which political grouping was the most innovative in the interwar years do little to aid

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our historical understanding of these policy proposals. This debate pays scant attention to, and does not take account of, the political consequences of these policy departures. Yet contemporary impressions and responses, as demonstrated by the policy reactions of other parties, the press reaction and electoral results, were central to the path-dependent nature of policymaking in interwar Britain. Indeed, others such as Philip Williamson even argue, rather cynically, that the primary reason for Liberal policy construction in these years 'was perfectly straightforward – to regain the balance of power in the House of Commons'.³⁷ Whilst this latter point may be a mischaracterisation, the above debate, in this way, disregards the contingent nature of economic policymaking and artificially elevates the economic debate above the political process. Particularly for the Liberal Party, the political outcome of policymaking was invariably more important than the policies themselves and it is that outcome which concerns us here.

Lloyd George increasingly set the political agenda. After he launched his land proposals at Killerton in September 1925, both of the other parties responded rapidly.³⁸ Both Labour and the Tories held their annual party conference between Lloyd George's Killerton speech and the publication of the *Liberal Green Book*. A meeting at the Labour conference concluded a particular resolution on agriculture but, prior to debate, MacDonald personally intervened and persuaded conference to avoid announcing any new policy until Labour's experts had settled on a rural programme. When these proposals appeared in 1926, they bore a strikingly similarity to the *Green Book*. They proposed land nationalisation by vesting the freehold in the state with county agricultural committees providing for long-term land improvements and special boards fixing farm workers' wages. The Tory conference, equally, accepted a resolution 'calling on the government to make ... a definite statement on agricultural policy, to carry such policy into effect forthwith, and with a view to the fullest use of the land for production of food and employment of labour'. The significance of this was that, as Roy Douglas points out, not only were Conservative conferences loath to criticise their own governments but this resolution was moved by a delegate from the prime minister's constituency.³⁹ Government action quickly followed as it brought forward the Small Holdings and Allotments Bill. It appeared that the legislative landscape was being shaped by Lloyd George's rural radicalism.

The Tories in particular were concerned about a rejuvenated Lloyd George more generally in the 1920s. After dispensing with his services in October 1922, the Conservatives viewed this debauched opportunist as a constant thorn in their side, who, with his cash and chicanery, threatened to derail their chances of absorbing the anti-socialist vote. This was, of course, the all-important Conservative strategy in the 1920s.⁴⁰ Stanley Baldwin's House of Commons room became a venue for designing a potential response to Lloyd George: 'Sir Samuel Hoare suggested that it was desirable to get up-to-date on the subject of land taxation, in view of the probability that the matter would be taken up in the autumn by Lloyd George'.⁴¹ They were simply unsure as to how to combat the man:

Conference discussed what steps should be taken with reference to the campaign which would probably be undertaken by the Liberals on the subject of taxation of land values and kindred matters; the question being whether the Unionist party should have an active policy ... or should restrict themselves to opposition of Liberal proposals.⁴²

The Conservatives often conflated personality and policy, in what was a recurring theme throughout the 1920s: they were as uneasy about the policies of the 'Welsh Wizard' as much as the unpredictability of the man. As Lord Morgan has correctly highlighted, whether by action or reaction, the 1920s were the 'age of Lloyd George'.⁴³

Whilst sending shockwaves throughout the political system, Lloyd George's series of policies received considerable support from Liberals across Britain. Ross McKibbin has argued that the *Yellow Book* and the unemployment pledge were merely personal initiatives of Lloyd George to which the Liberal Party as a whole was only weakly committed. McKibbin argues that disgruntlement with Lloyd George's leadership reflected the fact that the Liberals contested the 1929 general election 'on a programme neither the majority of its voters nor its MPs believed in', and the 'fundamentally anti-socialist' view of most MPs and activists meant that 'the representative Liberal leader' was actually Sir John Simon.⁴⁴ However, this view is at odds with the evidence. The Welsh National Liberal Federation 'rejoiced at the fine Liberal spirit which animates the [industrial] report and in its enthusiasm for social betterment, holding out hope for a recognition of the rights of all ... in industry'.⁴⁵ The Home Counties Liberal Federation was equally enthused

by the changed emphasis in Liberal economic policy. Throughout the 1920s, the federation passed resolutions calling for profit-sharing and co-ownership, the abolition of the slums via the 'active co-operation' of local authorities and private enterprise in the 'speedy' production of homes and approval of both the rural and urban land reports.⁴⁶ In Norwich, too, middle-class Liberals welcomed Lloyd George's return to the party and his platform at the 1929 general election in particular.⁴⁷ Mr Rewcastle, Liberal candidate in Kettering, speculated on the electoral consequences of a rejuvenated Liberalism, 'the Liberal unemployment policy will sweep this country'.⁴⁸ Manchester, perhaps unsurprisingly, was also a stronghold where the 'pledge' was advocated vociferously. Each election address in 1929 contained the proposals to tackle unemployment: Philip Oliver, contesting Blackley, gave a succinct summary of the multiplier, a principal tenet of the policy: 'the works will bring employment not only to those directly engaged upon them, but to countless others in subsidiary industries. The purchasing power of the people will be increased.'⁴⁹ Further north, Fred Martin, Liberal candidate in Central Aberdeenshire, spoke of the 'immense advantage' of a national development policy and the virtue of works councils in inducing confidence in industry.⁵⁰ Additionally, the Women's National Liberal Federation showed consistent support for the full gamut of Lloyd George's ideas. Its Executive Committee in 1928 celebrated the *Yellow Book* as 'an achievement of which all Liberals are justly proud' and they 'acknowledge that a real contribution has been made to economic thought'.⁵¹ This is significant because, as Pat Thane has shown, the Women's National Liberal Federation claimed 100,000 members in 1928 and its membership was spread across Britain.⁵² Furthermore, an analysis by E. A. Rowe has shown that all Liberal candidates mentioned unemployment at the 1929 general election, 79 per cent of them gave it special emphasis and 52 per cent of Liberals mentioned Lloyd George's pledge directly, whilst 37 per cent emphasised that the Liberal plans were 'detailed' and 'expert'.⁵³ Indeed, as Sloman correctly argues, 'a clear majority of Liberal activists and MPs rallied behind Lloyd George in the period 1926–1929'.⁵⁴ The evidence presented here lays out a kaleidoscopic picture of a Liberalism converging on Lloyd George's radicalism across much of Britain in the late 1920s.

The following analysis will focus on the campaign issues and subsequent interpretation of results in the Liberal by-election victories between 1927 and 1929, when the Liberals

succeeded against the other parties. This is for two reasons. Firstly, success at the expense of the other parties gives the reader the opportunity to see which strands of Liberal economic thinking were dominant when the Liberal Party was electorally successful. An analysis which weaves between the national and local pictures will afford the reader the benefit of observing how, why and when differing economic ideas held explanatory purchase in Liberal ranks in a period characterised by political flux. Secondly, when it seemed to the protagonists that electoral alignment was fluid in an apparent three-party system, what follows is a microcosm into the relationship between Liberal policy ideas, party politics and electoral politics. Michael Hart has argued that, by 1924, the Liberals were 'eliminated as a potential Government' and that the by-elections in this period masked the actual strength of the Liberal Party.⁵⁵ Hart suggests that the constituencies in which these by-elections occurred overstated the strength of the Liberals vis-à-vis the Labour Party. In the thirty-seven by-elections between 1927 and the general election, only three seats displayed an increase in the Liberal vote of more than 10 per cent whilst three saw a decline on 1924. Importantly, Hart argues that Labour 'continued to show that, although its support in rural England was slight, it was sufficient to preclude a Liberal revival' because in three by-elections (St Ives, Cheltenham and Tavistock), Labour intervened to contest seats that they had not contested in 1924 and the Liberals won only one, at St Ives. Yet this post hoc judgment does not appreciate or acknowledge the shifting dynamics involved in electoral politics nor does it vitiate the expectations that arose from the Liberal electoral success in these by-elections. By May 1928, Lloyd George hoped for 100 or 120 MPs and by April 1929, he hoped for 80 to 100.⁵⁶ Even Sir John Simon, an Asquithian traditionalist, expected the party to win around 5 million votes at the next general election.⁵⁷ The Liberal press tended to agree, as Garvin argued that the Liberals could capture the parliamentary balance of power by winning 'well over a hundred seats'.⁵⁸ The key point for our purposes here is that our protagonists *believed* that they were operating in a contestable market and they did not appreciate the harsh realities of the first-past-the-post electoral system as Labour steadily cemented itself as the opposition to the Conservative Party in the duopoly of British politics.

The by-election revival

Southwark North was wrested from Labour in March 1927. Local circumstances predominated

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here, as the Labour MP resigned because of Labour's stance towards China. Haden-Guest believed that Labour's policy 'would have exposed our nationals in Shanghai to very grave peril', which would have been akin to 'intervention in the Chinese Civil War'. This would have contravened Labour Party policy, agreed at conference the year before.⁵⁹ Elements of the Tory press, notably *The Scotsman*, believed this to be Labour's loss and not a Liberal gain.⁶⁰ Even the Liberal press were inclined to interpret the campaign in this way.⁶¹ Lloyd George tried to introduce his new economic thinking: 'We are fighting for the right of the community to make the best use of the resources of the land'.⁶² This tried to build on the unsuccessful campaign at Leith just weeks beforehand where the Liberal candidate there extolled the virtues of the land policy. This was difficult in Southwark, though, as the Liberal candidate, Edward Strauss, was a keen free trader and stood on a Gladstonian platform.⁶³ The Liberals were picking up political momentum though, as *The Economist* suggested: 'Leith and Southwark are noteworthy. If they do not justify paeans of rejoicing in the Liberal camp, they do at least provide a tonic to the new party organisation'.⁶⁴ Electoral victory shifted the political focus onto the Liberal Party.

Bosworth came next. This constituency seemed fertile terrain for a thorough exposition of the new interventionism. Its electorate was mixed: partly agricultural, partly industrial. The Tories tried to make the Trade Dispute Bill the focal point of the campaign and the Liberals found themselves dancing to the Tory tune. On Lloyd George's visit to the constituency, he made it clear that he and the Liberal candidate, Sir William Edge, would strive to restore the seven-hour day for miners and defeat the Trade Disputes Bill.⁶⁵ Importantly, the Liberal candidate did support both the *Green and Brown Books* and Liberal luminaries such as Sir William Acland and Sir Archibald Sinclair held a score of meetings on the *Green Book's* proposals.⁶⁶ The division in Liberal economic thought was clear, though, in how Liberals interpreted their own victory: it was at once a call for retrenchment and for further state intervention. Sir James Pratt, former Liberal MP, for example, was unsurprised by the Liberal victory given that there had previously been 'no attempt at national economy'.⁶⁷ *The Biggleswade Chronicle* saw Liberalism in the same terms:

These triumphs ... demonstrate beyond doubt that Liberalism is still deep-rooted in the hearts of people who populate the

English countryside ... Liberal leaders would do well to concentrate on the old-time slogan: 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform'. Nothing is more needed in England today than peace and retrenchment.⁶⁸

Gladstonian policy had an enduring appeal in Liberal ranks across parts of the country at this time, as Lloyd Georgian prescriptions for state intervention had not percolated through to all places and to all Liberals.

A second Liberal victory in quick succession seemed a harbinger of things to come. Herbert Samuel's revamp of party machinery coincided with these by-election victories. He detected general election victory, as he told Edwin Samuel: 'There is now a feeling of buoyant optimism ... there is a growing feeling in the country that we shall dominate the next Parliament'.⁶⁹ The *Northampton Mercury* unknowingly proclaimed that 'ministers are profoundly disturbed by the Bosworth result'.⁷⁰ As the political momentum now appeared to be with the Liberals, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin responded with alacrity as he sought to equip the Conservatives with constructive proposals for the remainder of the parliament and the next election. It fell to Sir Laming Worthington-Evans to design a programme.⁷¹ Arthur Steel-Maitland clearly viewed the agricultural issue as fertile ground on which to conduct a policy battle with Lloyd George: to capture the rural vote, he said, 'what is particularly needed is something to make the farmers in this disastrous year feel that they are not forgotten. A good year may make a huge difference'.⁷² Increasingly anxious, they were determined not to be outflanked amongst rural voters, whom they considered to be their natural constituency, an 'important part of the party's ethos and identity'.⁷³ It is clear that in the aftermath of electoral victory at Bosworth, a narrative developed that Liberal policymaking led to Liberal electoral success, irrespective of the centrality of the policy in the campaign itself.

After failing in the Northampton and Faversham by-elections in early 1928, Lancaster provided an opportunity for redress. The Liberals that coalesced around Lloyd George believed that the failure at Northampton and Faversham was due to the failure to present Lloyd George-style interventionism. The Liberal candidate, however, had other ideas: he actively recoiled from the new policies and called for retrenchment and peace abroad.⁷⁴ This by-election ultimately triumphed on personality, as Lloyd George successfully defended the allegations

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against him by Lord Ashton, a former Liberal grandee. Again, both factions of the party claimed victory as their own: Vivian Phillipps, on the Asquithian wing, asserted that victory was affirmation of a Liberalism which stood for 'peace abroad, industrial peace at home, reduced taxation and freedom of trade'⁷⁵ whilst the *Burnley News* attributed the result to the *Yellow Book*.⁷⁶ More significantly, however, Labour clearly believed that Lloyd George was making the political weather and, shortly after the result, launched concrete agricultural proposals such as national purchasing boards to keep imported wheat prices stable. Policy generation dovetailed with personality to create a narrative and impression which by-elections seemingly confirmed.

Notwithstanding the kaleidoscopic picture painted above of a Liberalism converging around Lloyd George's radicalism in these years, the South West remained a bastion of the old Gladstonian Liberalism. The Liberalism of Devon and Cornwall was particularly prone to the rallying cry of 'Peace, Retrenchment, Reform'.⁷⁷ The St Ives by-election in March 1928 thus seemed particularly inauspicious for the coterie of Lloyd Georgians and so it proved to be. In Hilda Runciman, the Asquith-supporting Liberal Council had an ideal candidate to promote a Liberalism that was the antithesis to LSS-inspired state interventionism. Mrs Runciman did not mention the *Yellow Book* despite its recent publication and her husband actively disavowed the *Green Book*. Retrenchment was the issue put forward most forcefully by the Liberals; as the *Manchester Guardian* explained, 'Vivian Phillipps, like everybody else here, is making economy the cornerstone of the Liberal case'.⁷⁸ St Ives was, furthermore, steeped in Nonconformity in the 1920s and it was in the South West in particular that religion remained a dominant socio-political cleavage. The *Church Times* was correct when it said that 'she won the seat for the old Liberalism which Lloyd George dislikes but which clearly appeals to a Cornish constituency where Wesleyan Methodism is still a political factor'.⁷⁹ Despite this division, they were still winning, the 'pulses and arteries of Liberalism coursing with a new vigour'.⁸⁰ It appeared to outsiders as if Liberalism still mattered.

The Liberals were offered many opportunities to cement this appeal in a number of by-elections in March 1929 with a general election right around the corner. In a mostly rural constituency, the Eddisbury by-election provided an unrivalled opportunity to espouse the virtues of the *Green Book*. The Tories

The Liberal by-election revival of 1927 to 1929 was an opportunity to appeal to the electorate with this new, radical economic thinking. Notwithstanding the campaign difficulties and differences due to Liberal Party infighting, the Liberals continually built political momentum in this period and it was in the reaction of the press and the other political parties that the new interventionism had its most profound effect.

successfully castigated the Liberal programme as 'nationalisation in disguise', drawing on the themes of bureaucratisation and surveillance that had consistently been levelled against it.⁸¹ Even Lloyd George opted for a non-partisan approach to agriculture.⁸² As the campaign went on, any proposal of state-engineered recovery for agriculture receded and reliance upon market forces crept back into the Liberal policy platform. The recently launched unemployment policy fared no better. The Liberal candidate was uneasy over a policy designed for urban Britain and local Liberal magnate, Lord Stanley, openly doubted the wisdom of an unemployment policy. Instead, he thought, 'there must be more individual effort on the part of the people themselves. To tell people that you can remedy all difficulties by legislative action is to make promises that you cannot fulfil'.⁸³ It seemed that Cheshire Liberalism, similar to that which obtained in the South West, was shaped by its bucolic character and was at once hostile to and sceptical about a panacea seemingly designed for urban Britain. The Liberal press, however, trumpeted this success as an endorsement of Liberal interventionist ideas, as criticism of the government and praise of constructive programmes were deployed in equal measure. The *Western Morning News* thought that the Liberal unemployment policy 'captured the imagination of the country' whilst the *Burnley News* asserted that this result 'proves' that the 'electorate in town and country are heartily tired of this Government'.⁸⁴ The Liberals were manifestly intoxicated with their own success as the failure in East Toxteth before Eddisbury was held by the *Manchester Guardian* to be a 'reflection of the rise which has taken place in Liberal stock since Lloyd George launched his unemployment plan'.⁸⁵ By-election success was viewed as clear affirmation that Liberal policy was popular, pragmatic and pertinent amidst persistent unemployment.

Holland-with-Boston arrived the next day and Lloyd George's unemployment 'pledge' was all-consuming. The Liberal candidate fully endorsed the 'pledge', but Lloyd George remained the subject of ignominy. The *ad hominem* attacks came thick and fast from both sides. On the Labour side, J. H. Thomas said that it was 'useless for Lloyd George to talk in his slipshod way when he knew perfectly well that he would not be called on to redeem his pledges'.⁸⁶ On the Conservative side, Arthur Steel-Maitland said the 'pledge' was 'not possible, but even if it were, it would be no cure'.⁸⁷ The Asquithian elite continued to press for free trade and retrenchment, most notably by Walter

Lloyd George, the Liberal Summer Schools and electoral politics in the 1920s

Runciman and Vivian Phillipps, the latter explaining that ‘as sure as night follows day so will a lowered national credit from borrowing on the scale suggested’.⁸⁸ Even at this stage, with an election looming, the Asquithian elite continued to long for the vestiges of a lost world.

Internal opposition and external condemnation could not prevent the Liberals from winning. The Liberals secured a majority of almost 4,000 as the ‘pledge was the topic of conversation ... all over the country’.⁸⁹ In the aftermath, the Tory press argued that a constructive policy response was required from Baldwin with the general election fast approaching as Beaverbrook’s *Daily Express* lamented the lack of ‘boldness, of constructive imaginativeness’.⁹⁰ Both MacDonald and Baldwin responded in kind. Rehashing *Labour and the Nation* in more vigorous form, MacDonald’s competing ‘pledge’ was light on detail but similar in its immediacy, ‘the first meeting of the Labour Cabinet will tackle the unemployment problem in all its details’.⁹¹ Far from trying to match him, the Conservative response sought to rise above Lloyd George’s legerdemain and reiterated concrete Conservative measures on housing and electricity. Baldwin’s objections to the Liberal proposals were at once administrative and rooted in classical dogma as he dismissed these ‘palliatives ... which would require a miracle’.⁹² Lloyd George set the tone and shape of the debate as the 1929 general election approached. As Britain headed into the ‘devil’s decade’, he continued to press for a managed capitalism that had so eluded him in office but which had been a consistent feature of his political career.

Conclusion

In conclusion, following the failure of the British economy to return to its Victorian and Edwardian normalcy in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, a group of radicals in Manchester were keen to heed the collectivist lessons of wartime and harness the government’s leverage in industrial and economic affairs. Outside the

parameters of the party organisation, this combination of industrialists and academics persistently attempted to suffuse Liberal Party thinking with solutions to industrial conflict, as strike action and unemployment seemed to characterise the British economy at this time. The Liberal Summer Schools which emanated from this Mancunian agitation in the early 1920s became a platform from which Keynes, Henderson and Robertson questioned the contemporary application of classical theory as private enterprise appeared to yield to a new corporatism. The strands of thought which were the basis of LSS thinking, namely institutional reform and macroeconomic stabilisation, subsequently became associated with Lloyd George as he pursued that chimera of a welfare capitalism which had proved so elusive in government. The phalanx of books produced under his auspices all outlined how the state could and should be used to make private enterprise more productive, efficient and fair with an alternative socio-economic framework. The Liberal by-election revival of 1927 to 1929 was an opportunity to appeal to the electorate with this new, radical economic thinking. Notwithstanding the campaign difficulties and differences due to Liberal Party infighting, the Liberals continually built political momentum in this period and it was in the reaction of the press and the other political parties that the new interventionism had its most profound effect. Labour and the Conservative Party continued to follow Lloyd George’s lead; despite dismissing his ‘pledge’ as a stunt, it illustrated that, when Lloyd George acted, the other parties reacted.

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Decline, Dormancy and Rebirth (Exeter, 2000), p. 2.

- 3 Mary Stocks, *Ernest Simon of Manchester* (Manchester, 1963), p. 69.
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- 5 Paul Adelman, *Gladstone, Disraeli and Later Victorian Politics* (Oxford, 1997).
- 6 Stewart Faulkes, ‘The Strange Death of British Liberalism: The Liberal Summer School Movement and the Making of the Yellow Book in the 1920s’ (London Ph.D. thesis, 2000), p. 102.
- 7 ‘NLF Resolutions’, *Liberal Magazine* (October 1918), quoted in Faulkes, ‘Strange Death’, pp. 102–3.
- 8 Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914–1939*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 91.
- 9 *The Nation*, 24 May 1924.
- 10 John Maynard Keynes, ‘Am I a Liberal?’, in *JMK*, ix, 295–306, at 303–4.
- 11 John Maynard Keynes, ‘The end of laissez-faire’, in *JMK*, ix, 272–94, at 288–90.
- 12 Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: The Economist as Saviour, 1920–1937*, ii (London, 1992), p. 228.
- 13 Keynes, ‘The end of laissez-faire’, pp. 291–2.
- 14 Peter Sloman, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964* (Oxford, 2015), p. 40.
- 15 Ernest Simon, *The Inheritance of Riches* (London, 1925), p. 3.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 11
- 17 Ernest Simon, *Houses for All* (London, 1923), p. 7.
- 18 For more on the failure of Lloyd George’s ambitions to deliver 500,000 homes, see Alan Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776–1988* (Essex, 1997), p. 225.
- 19 Simon, *Houses for All*, p. 18.
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- 21 Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People: England, 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 185–93.
- 22 Asquith declared that ‘the Liberal Party is not today, it has never been, and so long as I have any connection with it, it will never be, the party of any class, rich or poor, great or small ... We are a party of no class’, *National Liberal Federation Report*, 1921.
- 23 Andrew Gamble, ‘Liberals and the

- Economy', in Vernon Bogdanor (ed.), *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 193–4.
- 24 *Manchester Guardian*, 2 Aug. 1927, p. 12.
- 25 Lucy Masterman, C. F. G. Masterman (London, 1939), p. 345.
- 26 Alan Taylor (ed.), *My Darling Pussy: The Letters of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, 1913–1941* (London, 1975), p. 97, 20 Aug. 1925.
- 27 Trevor Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911–1928* (London, 1970), p. 434, 6 Dec. 1922. See also Sloman, *Liberal Party and the Economy*, pp. 26–9 for background on Henry George and site value taxation in the 1880s. See also Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom, 1878–1952* (London, 1976) for background on Lloyd George's pre-war Land Campaign.
- 28 The name of the Green Book was *The Land and the Nation*.
- 29 Lloyd George Papers, Parliamentary Archives, LG/G/12/5/2 and LG/G/12/5/3, Philip Kerr to Lloyd George, 4 Feb. 1924 and 1 Mar. 1924
- 30 The name of the Yellow Book was *Britain's Industrial Future* (1928).
- 31 Freedden, *Liberalism Divided*, p. 118.
- 32 Lloyd George Papers, Parliamentary Archives, LG/G/12/5/14, Lloyd George to Philip Kerr, 11 Aug. 1925 .
- 33 *The Times*, 2 Mar. 1929, p. 7.
- 34 Robert Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929–1931* (London, 1967), pp. 51–8. The name of the Orange Book was *We Can Conquer Unemployment* (1929).
- 35 See Lan Booth, and Melvyn Pack, *Employment, Capital and Economic Policy: Great Britain, 1918–1939* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 54–6.
- 36 Faulkes, 'Strange Death', p. 15.
- 37 Philip Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926–1932* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 25.
- 38 *The Times*, 18 Sep. 1925, p. 14. Killerton was the Acland family home.
- 39 Douglas, *Land, People and Politics*, p. 191.
- 40 For further work on this subject, please see David Jarvis, 'British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s', *The English Historical Review*, 111, no. 440 (1996), pp. 59–84.
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- 42 Sir Laming Worthington-Evans papers, Bodleian Library, MSS English History c895–6, Unionist Party Commons Standing Conference, Min 17 (24), Minute 1, 24 Jul. 1924.
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- 46 *Home Counties Liberal Federation, Report of Executive Committee of 32nd Annual General Meeting of the Council*, 7 May 1924; *Report of Executive Committee of 33rd Annual General Meeting of the Council*, 1 May 1925 and *Report of Executive Committee of 34th Annual General Meeting of the Council*, 30 Apr. 1926.
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- 53 E. A. Rowe, 'The British general election of 1929' (unpublished University of Oxford B.Litt. dissertation, 1959), pp. 198, 208.
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- 56 Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 24.
- 57 Simon to Irwin, 18 Sep. 1928, Halifax papers 18/132 quoted in Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 25. The Liberal press tended to agree. See *The Economist*, 2 Apr. 1927, pp. 687–8 and *The Observer*, 6 Jun. 1927, p. 3.
- 58 *The Observer*, 6 Jun. 1927, p. 3. See also *The Economist*, 2 Apr. 1927, pp. 687–8.
- 59 *The Times*, 1 Mar. 1927, p. 9.
- 60 *The Scotsman*, 30 Mar. 1927, p. 10.
- 61 *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Mar. 1927, p. 11.
- 62 *The Times*, 28 Mar. 1927, p. 9.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 14 Mar. 1927, p. 11.
- 64 *The Economist*, 2 Apr. 1927, pp. 687–8.
- 65 *The Times*, 30 May 1927, p. 11.
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- 69 Herbert Samuel to Edwin Samuel, 29 May 1927, quoted in Bernard Wasserstein, *Herbert Samuel: A Political Life* (Oxford, 1992), p. 299.
- 70 *Northampton Mercury*, 3 Jun. 1927, p. 5.
- 71 Sir Laming Worthington-Evans papers, Bodleian Library, MSS English History c895–6, 61, Worthington-Evans to Hoare, Cunliffe-Lister and Neville Chamberlain, 13 Sep. 1927.
- 72 *Ibid.* c895–6, 108, Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland to Worthington-Evans, 28 Sep. 1927.
- 73 Ewen Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002), p. 117.
- 74 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 Jan. 1928, p. 6.
- 75 *The Scotsman*, 14 Feb. 1928, p. 10. Vivian Phillipps was a founding member of the pro-Asquith Liberal Council. As Philip Williamson has shown, the Liberal Council was formed to keep Liberalism 'clean', 'independent' and collect an Asquithian fund to secure the return of Liberal MPs hostile to Lloyd George. See Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 32.
- 76 *Burnley News*, 11 Feb. 1928, p. 9.
- 77 Michael Dawson, 'Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall, 1910–1931: "The Old-Time Religion"', *The Historical Journal*, 38, no. 2 (1995), pp. 428–31.
- 78 *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Feb. 1928, p. 9.
- 79 *The Church Times*, 16 Mar. 1928, p. 303.
- 80 *Daily Express*, 8 Mar. 1928, p. 10.
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- 82 *Ibid.*, 14 Mar. 1929, p. 11.
- 83 *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Mar. 1929, p. 13.
- 84 *Western Morning News*, 22 Mar. 1929, p. 8 and *Burnley News*, 23 Mar. 1929, p. 9.
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- 88 *The Spectator*, 30 Mar. 1929, pp. 493–4.
- 89 *The North Devon Journal*, 27 Mar. 1929, p. 5.
- 90 *Daily Express*, 23 Mar. 1929, p. 10.
- 91 *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 22 Mar. 1929, p. 2.
- 92 *The Scotsman*, 22 Mar. 1929, p. 8.