

Report: Asquith vs Lloyd George

How would Asquith and Lloyd George have fared in modern politics and who would be the modern equivalents of Asquith and Lloyd George in British politics? Collins replied that Lloyd George's personal life and financial affairs would be more scrutinised today and he would not have got away with today what he did over a century ago.

When Laws thinks of more recent Liberal Democrat leaders, it is Charles Kennedy and Paddy Ashdown who have a lot in common with Asquith and Lloyd George. There is much in the energy, assets, and liabilities of Lloyd George that Laws recognises in Paddy. There are also many of the extraordinary skills and abilities, but also some of the weaknesses, of Asquith that Laws recognises in Charles's time as leader.

Replying to a question about how factionalism might have affected the Asquith–Lloyd George split, Laws stated that it was the operation of war-time government, the nuts and bolts

of getting shells to the frontline that Asquith and Lloyd George fell out over, rather than a difference in political philosophy.

A final question for Chamberlain was about any remaining memories of Asquith in Fife. Chamberlain stated that she has seen a plaque commemorating Asquith outside the Masonic Hall in Ladybank because Asquith frequently made speeches there. Asquith would undoubtedly be happy to have a Liberal again representing North East Fife, but Asquith and Chamberlain would disagree about universal suffrage. In 2018, while standing for election as the first female MP for North East Fife, Chamberlain discovered that suffragettes had chased Asquith off golf courses many times in the constituency, which is the home of golf.

Katheryn Gallant, a graduate of California State University, Los Angeles, is writing an alternative history novel that explores what might have happened had Asquith's letters to Venetia Stanley been published in 1915.

came from the grassroots, with university Liberal clubs in particular often playing an active part in by-election campaigns. Similarly, and although it was patchy and tended to encourage mavericks who could damage the party's reputation, local council activity increased in the 1950s, especially in places such as Liverpool and Rugby.

Secondly, these revivals encountered great challenges with, for example, the party winning a by-election, but finding itself unable to repeat this in a subsequent election. Nevertheless, during each revival new members joined the party, often remaining actively involved for many years.

A third feature of these revivals was the importance of the party's leadership. In particular, Egan argued that the leadership provided by Jo Grimond, with his ability to inspire members, was crucial.

A fourth, and final, feature was the importance of ideas. In the 1940s, the Liberal Party was largely marked by a commitment to free trade and by not being the Labour Party. Subsequently, however, a commitment to other causes, such as support for membership of the Common Market and opposition to Britain's possessing an independent nuclear deterrent, became more important.

However, despite the positive aspects of some of these features, Egan went on to note a number of missed opportunities for the Liberal Party during these revivals. Firstly, the task of turning success at the local and municipal level into success at Westminster proved elusive. Secondly, the party found itself dependant on 'big moments', such as by-elections. Thirdly, general elections were often seen as a binary choice between Labour and Conservatives and, as evidenced by the 1959 and 1964 general elections, the Liberal Party suffered as a consequence. A strategy to prevent this 'squeezing' eluded the party. Fourthly, there were huge fluctuations in the memberships of Liberal Associations and the number of votes the party received during this period.

Overall, although there was much positive sentiment towards the Liberal Party, transforming this into

Back from the dead: the Liberal Party in the 1950s

Conference fringe meeting (online), 19 March 2021, with Dr Mark Egan and Lord William Wallace; chair: Baroness Liz Barker.

Report by Daniel Duggan

ALTHOUGH ACKNOWLEDGING THAT the same number of Liberal Members of Parliament were elected in 1964 as in 1945, Dr Mark Egan, Greffier of the States of Jersey and author of *Coming into Focus: The Transformation of the Liberal Party, 1945–64*, began the meeting by challenging the idea that there was one Liberal Party revival between 1945 and 1964, arguing that there were, in fact, three revivals during this period. The first, he suggested, was in the late 1940s and centred on the efforts of the Liberal Party's headquarters to establish Liberal Associations in the country. These efforts were particularly successful in universities and there was a large increase in the number of

Liberal Party candidates standing in the 1950 general election as compared with the 1945 general election. A second revival occurred in the mid-1950s and was marked by an impressive performance at the Inverness by-election in 1954 and a win at the Torrington by-election in 1958. Such success was reflected in the opinion polls and, Egan suggested, gave hope to the Liberal Party. A third revival occurred from 1959 onwards when Jo Grimond became leader and produced victory at the Orpington by-election in 1962.

After outlining the above revivals, Egan highlighted a number of their features. Firstly, they were very much grassroots-led. The idea, for example, of campaigning in by-elections

electoral success proved difficult. Egan concluded by asking why we still discuss the revival of the early 1960s and stressed the important role Grimond played by combining charismas with ideas. Indeed, for Egan, when charismatic leadership and ideas are merged the party is able to make progress, yet in their absence the party cannot succeed.

The second speaker, Lord William Wallace of Saltaire, has not only served the Liberal Party, and subsequently the Liberal Democrats, in various roles, but completed his doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party's revival of 1955 to 1966.

Wallace began by observing that each revival attracted new recruits, serving to re-energise the party, but questioned Egan's suggested second revival, arguing that the mid-1950s were a time when the Liberal Party was close to dying, possessing a mere 250 councillors. Nevertheless, after 1955 a revival did occur and, like Egan, Wallace stressed the importance of Grimond's leadership. Not only was Grimond inspiring, but he also successfully sought out capable people, such as Frank Byers and Mark Bonham Carter, victor of the Torrington by-election. By the time of the Orpington by-election, the Liberal Party's organisation, especially in the suburbs, had become highly effective, so much so that this established the conditions for the next revival in the early 1970s – a revival which occurred despite, and not because, of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership.

Similar to Egan's point regarding general elections often reduced to a binary choice during this period, and with the Liberal Party suffering as a consequence, Wallace argued that all of the party's revivals show how dependent the third party's fortunes have been on the standing of the Conservative and Labour parties. In particular, in the wake of the Suez crisis in 1956, a sense that the Conservatives were more reactionary than the 'one-nation' Conservatives that Churchill had sought to present since 1951, combined with, after 1958–9, a feeling that the Labour Party could not form a government, provided the Liberal Party with credibility and, indeed, council seats were

won in the early 1960s. However, the Labour Party's renewed cohesion and electoral support, culminating in victory at the 1964 general election, demonstrated that the Liberal Party could not present itself as the radical alternative to the Conservatives.

In summing up, and while acknowledging that the Grimond-inspired revival led to a new generation of activists joining the party, Wallace noted that the barriers for the third party in a first-past-the-post electoral system are enormous and, with greater reliance on professional organisation and money for effective campaigning today, are now more so.

After hearing from the speakers, various questions were raised, beginning with why Grimond was such an effective and special leader. Egan noted that prior to Grimond, Clement Davies was not a powerful leader, suffering from ill health, and coming from a previous era. In contrast, Grimond was in his forties when he became leader and was a good speaker and television performer. In particular, Grimond's interest in new ideas was stressed by both speakers. When Grimond became leader, the party lacked news ideas, with co-ownership of industry being the last major and distinctive idea that the party had articulated in the late 1940s. Grimond, however, acted as his own think tank, publishing three books between 1957 and 1961 addressing both international and domestic issues, and engaged with a wide range of policy experts and academics who examined contemporary problems, such as local and regional government, and found an intellectual home in the Unserville State Group and the New Orbits Group. Developing new ideas was an important part of the party's revival during this period and, in this respect, was notably different from the revivals of the 1940s and early 1970s.

A second question focused on the extent to which the Liberal Party's fortunes were impacted by Labour being in power, and in particular Labour's ability to attract the support of the youthful and idealistic. Egan noted that during the 1950s and 1960s it was felt that the party tended to struggle electorally when Labour was in power

and benefit when a Conservative government existed; indeed, this was understood to be the best guarantor of revival. Nevertheless, Egan added that Labour being in power did not prevent the Liberal Party attracting new activists during the 1960s and the Liberal Democrats' performance during the Blair years has undermined the theory that the party struggles to benefit electorally under a Labour government.

Regarding the place of young supporters, Wallace noted that after 1966 the party possessed a very lively and imaginative Young Liberal movement. However, under Thrope's leadership the Young Liberals were poorly handled and, Wallace suggested, had Thrope and his circle engaged better with the Young Liberals the revival of early 1970s could have been much stronger.

A third question asked whether the party's enduring problem is that many people have defined the Liberal Party, and Liberal Democrats, by what we are not, i.e. Labour or Conservatives. Egan returned to the claim that during the 1950s and 1960s the binary nature of politics was very problematic for the Liberal Party. Although Grimond did position the party on the left – as a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives – and this chimed with many Liberal activists who saw themselves of the left, but not part of the Labour movement, this clever positioning only took the party so far and opened the Liberal Party to attack from the Conservatives. The party, Egan argued, has always faced the problem of how to relate to other parties, and although party leaders have attempted to define the party in other terms, for example, on the basis of policy, the media's focus on which party the Liberal, and subsequently Liberal Democrats, would support in the event of a hung parliament has hindered this strategy.

Wallace argued that, in the 1950s and 1960s, politics was very much class-based, with voters tending to vote for the same party in election after election. Today, however, the electorate is largely alienated, often voting for the party that they dislike least. In such circumstances, the task of offering a positive alternative to voters is, Wallace contended, all the more challenging.

Report: Back from the dead – the Liberal Party in the 1950s

The fourth, and final, question was asked by the chair, Baroness Barker, and focused on the Liberal Party's approach in the 1950s and 1960s towards international and local issues and what Liberal Democrats today can learn from this. Addressing the party's engagement with international issues, Egan suggested that such matters provided party leaders with principled and distinctive stands, such as Grimond's support for the Common Market and Thorpe's views on Rhodesia. Although such issues tend to appeal to only a relatively small part of the electorate, they can generate media attention for the party and, as Wallace commented, attract members to the party.

As to the party's concern with the local dimension of politics, Egan argued that in the 1950s the Liberal

Party knew very little about its local organisations and their development was very much grassroots-led, with local activists learning from one another via such publications as *Liberal News*. Similarly, Wallace stressed the accidental pattern of Liberal Party activity during the 1950s and 1960s, sometimes dependant on the presence of a local notable Liberal family. Today the party's significant reliance on volunteers, in contrast to, say the Conservatives, who are able to rely on much greater financial resources, helps explain why the Liberal Democrats are much stronger in some parts of the country than others.

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It is quite possible to believe that all sex outside religious marriage is sinful, that you 'love the sinner if not the sin', and that you don't consider that people who indulge in it should be considered evil. But simply saying that 'we are all sinners' does not provide any reassurance that the view held is not discriminatory and did not fit with any form of election message. Whilst referencing gay sex twelve times in the book, Tim does not suggest any way in which what he said could help a party seeking to build on its long-standing commitment to the principle of equality on issues of sexual orientation.

As party leader, he was of course targeted ruthlessly by the Tories in his Westmorland and Lonsdale constituency. He had previously been a very popular constituency MP. As chief executive of the Lib Dems at the time of the 2005 general election, I admired how his great campaigning energy had helped him to win the marginal seat by 267 and to become one of a parliamentary party of sixty-two. He then built his constituency into an apparently safe seat with a majority of 8,949 in 2010. But as leader of the party in 2017, he came within 777 votes of losing it. His book says that internal polls showed him losing. He blames this near defeat on being leader. But he does not explain why the constituencies of previous leaders since 1974 had benefitted hugely from having the leader as their candidate.

Reviews

Religion and politics

Tim Farron, *A Better Ambition: Confessions of a Faithful Liberal* (SPCK Publishing, 2019)

Review by Chris Rennard

SOME EYEBROWS WERE raised amongst Lib Dems when it became known that Tim Farron's memoirs were to be published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). The author admits in the book to his own fears prior to leading the party in the 2017 general election that more details of his 'whacky religious views' (his phrase) would appear.

The book does not explain satisfactorily why the view he expressed about gay sex was not properly 'stress tested', either within the party or amongst potential voters, in the twenty months that he was leader. Almost everyone who canvassed for the Lib Dems in the 2017 general election campaign met people expressing concern, and often

astonishment, over his belief that gay sex was sinful. I did over twenty canvassing sessions across seven different constituencies during the campaign and in only one of them was this issue not raised with me.

The initial strategy described in the book was to refuse to say whether gay sex was sinful. But this could not last long because it simply confirmed that this must be his view. When Tim briefly went on to deny that this was the case, he came across as unconvincing. His post-election admission that he had not been telling the truth when he had said that it was not sinful did him no good and none of this sat well with the party's attempt to present itself at the time as being 'open, tolerant and united'.

