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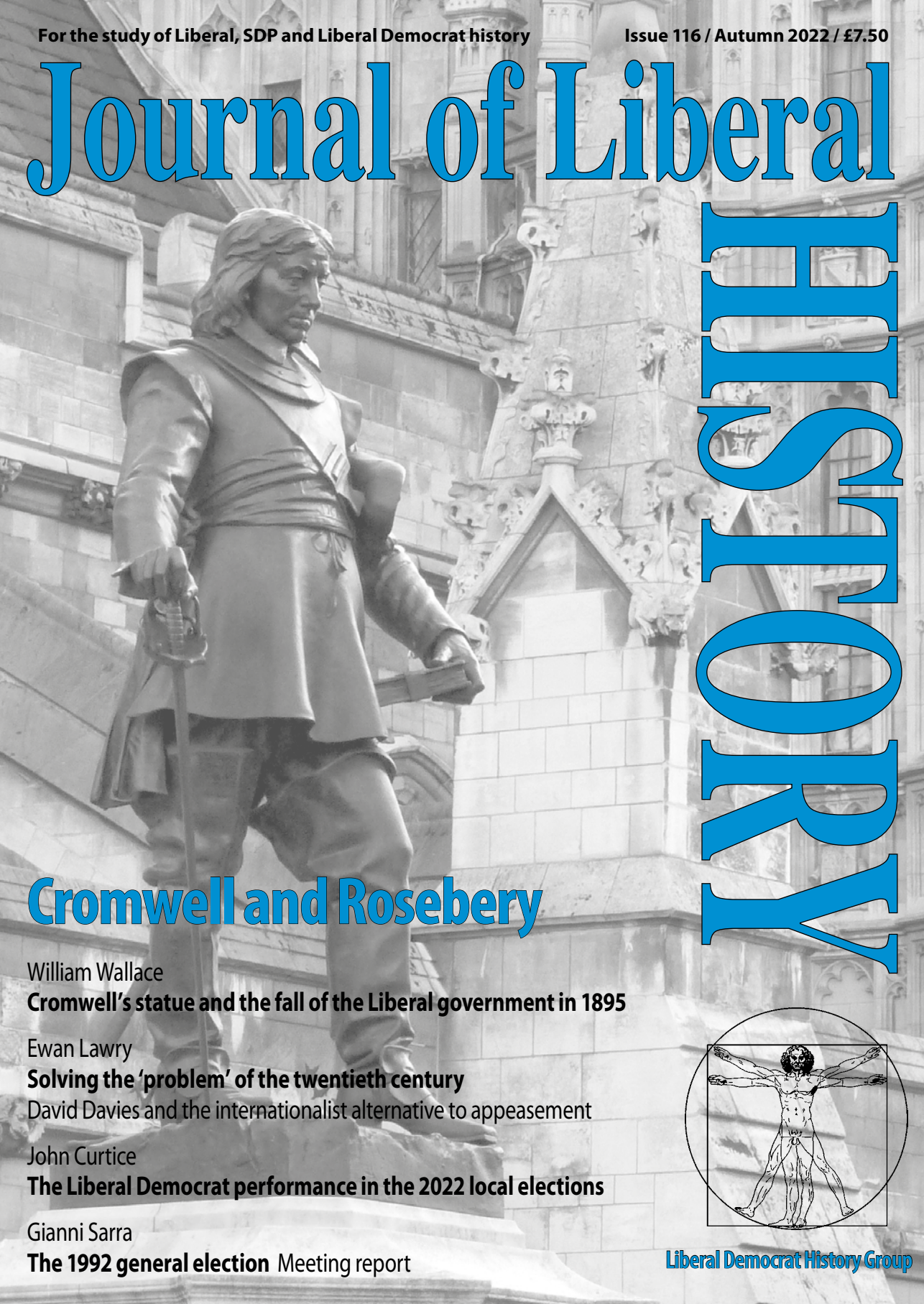
Issue 116 / Autumn 2022 / £7.50

Journal of Liberal History



Cromwell and Rosebery

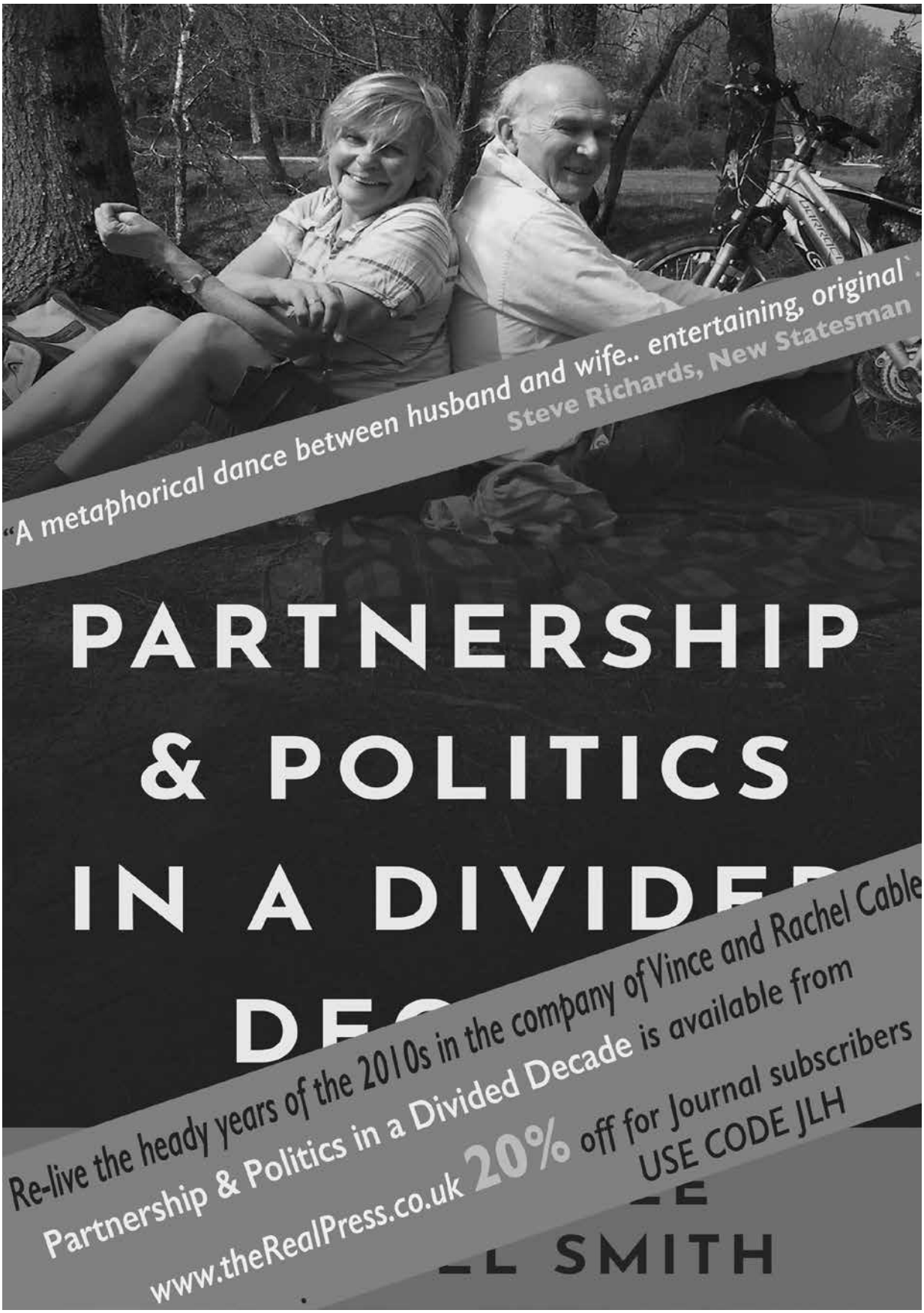
William Wallace
Cromwell's statue and the fall of the Liberal government in 1895

Ewan Lawry
Solving the 'problem' of the twentieth century
David Davies and the internationalist alternative to appeasement

John Curtice
The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2022 local elections

Gianni Sarra
The 1992 general election Meeting report

Liberal Democrat History Group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Journal of Liberal History

Published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

ISSN 1479-9642

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Articles, book reviews and letters are invited. All articles submitted will be peer-reviewed. Contributions should be sent to **Duncan Brack** (Editor) at **journal@liberalhistory.org.uk**.

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Published by the
Liberal Democrat History Group,
54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN

Printed by **Kall-Kwik**,
Unit 1, 37 Colville Road, London W3 8BL

September 2022

Issue 116: Autumn 2022

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.

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Liberal History News
Autumn 2022

Obituary: David Chidgey

David Chidgey came into parliament via the time-honoured Liberal route of local government and a fortuitous by-election; but, although he was a conscientious councillor on his local town council and, later on, the Winchester City Council, his sights were quite early set on a parliamentary career. His first big contest was a European Parliament by-election for the Hampshire Central seat in autumn 1988, but thereafter he concentrated on the Eastleigh constituency, winning it at the second attempt in February 1994 at a by-election caused by the death of the Conservative MP in highly unusual circumstances. He held the seat twice thereafter before retiring at the 2005 general election. He was made a life peer in May 2005.

David was unusual in being a highly regarded civil engineer, a rare breed in the House of Commons, and, prior to his election, he had managed many major overseas engineering projects mainly in Africa but also in Bangladesh, Brazil and the Middle East. As a natural parliamentary follow up to his practical work, he became a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. It was also appropriate that he became the party's spokesperson on transport, which also helped him in his Eastleigh constituency with its history as a railway town.

He was a conscientious constituency MP and preferred to achieve results by applying expertise and by working constructively with other MPs rather than by banging the party drum too loudly. There were also opportunities for David to apply his engineering expertise to local issues as was evidenced by his speeches on the protection of the chalk streams which flowed through the local rivers in his constituency. He was also pleased to have played a significant role in the successful campaign to block plans by major high street banks to increase charges significantly at cash dispensing machines which would have disproportionately affected poorer people. His regular and unassuming habit of walking down from his constituency office to buy a lunchtime sandwich provided an informal opportunity to be approached by constituents, and he was amused by their regular mispronouncing of his name as 'Mr Chidley'.

When he moved to the House of Lords, he became the party's specialist front bench spokesman on African development and on human rights issues. With his internationalism and his attention to

environmental issues, David was a natural Liberal. His easy conviviality was evident in his active involvement in the National Liberal Club, in which he used his experience and his contacts to assist with meetings on overseas affairs.

David William George Chidgey, engineer and politician, born 9 July 1942, died 15 February 2022.

Michael Meadowcroft

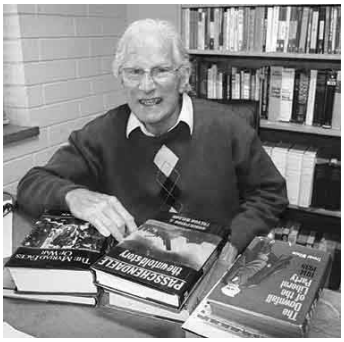
Obituary: Trevor Wilson

Professor Trevor Wilson died, at the age of 93, on 11 June 2022. Born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1928, he completed a PhD at the University of Oxford in 1959. He took up the position of Lecturer in History at the University of Adelaide in 1960 and spent most of his career there. His main contribution to historical studies lay in the field

of World War I military history, but he is best known to students of Liberal history as the author of *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (1966).

His conclusion on the reasons for the party's decline during that period is encapsulated in a memorable allegory:

'The Liberal Party can be compared to an individual who, after a period of robust health and great exertion, experienced symptoms of illness (Ireland, Labour unrest, the suffragettes). Before a thorough diagnosis could be made, he was involved in an encounter with a rampant omnibus (the First World War), which mounted the pavement and ran him over. After lingering painfully, he expired. A controversy has persisted ever since as to what killed him. One medical school argues that even without the bus he would soon have died; the intimations of illness were symptoms of a grave disease which would shortly have ended his life. Another school goes further, and says that the encounter with the bus would not have proved fatal had not the victim's health been seriously impaired. Neither of these views are accepted here. The evidence for them is insufficient, because the ailments had not reached a stage where their ultimate effect could be known. How long, apart from the accident, the victim would have survived, what future (if any) he possessed, cannot be said. All that is known is that at one moment he was up and walking and at the next he



was flat on his back, never to rise again; and in the interval he had been run over by a bus. If it is guess-work to say that the bus was mainly responsible for his demise, it is the most warrantable guess that can be made.'

(Michael Steed reviewed the case for this argument in 'Did the Great War Really Kill the Liberal Party?, *Journal of Liberal History* 87 (Summer 2015).)

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Letters to the Editor

The Two Davids: Owen versus Steel

I was not, alas, able to participate in the fringe meeting at last year's autumn conference. I hope, therefore, that you will allow me, as someone on the front line throughout the whole seven Owen–Steel years, to comment on the report of the meeting by James Moore, to whom I am very grateful for his useful text.

There are two overriding considerations that are the crucial context for the separate issues discussed at the meeting, and which influenced each individual question. The first is whether there was a sufficient common ideological base to enable an alliance of the two parties to work together and the second is the different political perceptions and competences of the two leaders.

For the first, my view was that as long as the two parties were aware that each came from a different philosophical base there was enough common ground on current issues to risk an alliance, up to and including the forthcoming general election. To that end I wrote a booklet – *Social Democracy: Barrier or Bridge*[1] – pointing out that social democracy is part of the socialist family of parties whereas the Liberal Party belongs to the libertarian family of parties. The booklet also sought to set out the relative strengths of the two parties towards assessing the number of seats each party should contest.

In retrospect, the booklet was probably a waste of time as few in the Liberal Party were interested in the intellectual rigour it required and were more interested in embracing the apparent silver bullet of an alliance that would sweep them into the House of Commons. Also, the handful of SDP leaders who read it were outraged at its emphasis on the strength and campaigning resources of the Liberal Party in comparison to those of the untested SDP. My efforts to promote the primacy of Liberalism within the Alliance and to protect it from being sold off by its leader were weakened throughout by the lack of awareness by the party membership of the important ideological difference between the parties. As a consequence, too much influence was conceded to the SDP with the inevitable political fudges required to rescue it in the merger of the parties after the 1987 general election.

The second issue that underlay the Alliance and relationship between the two Davids was the 'unpoliticalness' of David Steel. David Owen could not understand how a leader of a political party, and a politician seeking to exercise power, had so little interest in policy or in political strategy. Certainly he could make good speeches, not least when they were written by such Liberal stalwarts as Richard Holme, Stuart Mole and Tony Richards, but he had little awareness of the importance of the backing of party membership as political strength. In fact, he didn't even like his party, and did not understand the political importance of loyalty and solidarity, even attacking it publicly on one famous occasion at the 1986 assembly.[2] This caused colleagues regular embarrassment when, having caucused beforehand and agreed the 'line', he would blithely abandon it in a joint meeting with the SDP and decide to support the very different Owen view. He also had the unacceptable way, from time to time, of dealing with difficult or unpleasant decisions by announcing them to the media at 4pm in advance of the parliamentary party's regular Wednesday 6pm meeting where they should legitimately be debated. Colleagues had to swallow hard and accept the fait accompli.

David Owen was completely different, in style as well as politics. He was difficult and I had a number of battles with him, not least in my role as the Liberal Deputy Whip, but he respected those who he

regarded as professional politicians and those who argued with him on sound political grounds. The key difference was that, when one came to an agreement with Owen on a policy or a strategy, he kept to it. This meant that, paradoxically, I had a better political relationship with him than with Steel. It meant that I could get Owen to appear at a Radical Liberal meeting and even get him and Debbie to sing 'Love me Liberals, love me do' as a parody of Elvis' 'Love me tender' at an Assembly glee club.

As for particular points from the report of the fringe meeting, the Liberal Democrats were never 'represented by an asterisk in the opinion polls'. This was a bit of Paddy Ashdown hyperbole. The lowest it ever got was 5 per cent in October 1989.[3] I am surprised that Roger Carroll 'could not recall Owen attacking Steel in private' given how incandescent Owen was at Steel's leak of the Alliance Joint Commission on Defence and Disarmament's proceedings in 1986.

James Moore refers to the 'notorious' defence debate at the 1986 Liberal Assembly. I wrote on this debate at length a year later,[4] and suffice to say here that the reality was nothing like the way it was represented then and now. For instance, James Moore writes that it was 'perceived by the media' as a split on defence whereas in fact, immediately after the vote I and Bill Rodgers – by far the best practical politician of the Gang of Four – set about minimising any 'split' and briefing the media together. The next morning, switching on the television, there was the Liberal Chief Whip, David Alton, waving a copy of *The Sun* with its huge anti-Alliance headline and adding fuel to the flames. The whole issue was grossly exaggerated and misrepresented. Contrary to the meeting report, it was Simon Hughes who moved the key amendment and who was 'most criticised', not Paddy Ashdown. I summed up the debate and somehow escaped most of the criticism. As for Paddy's 'rebellious leanings on defence', that depended on which year one listened to him!

Finally, the 'dead parrot': more than any other document, this summed up the essential differences between the parties. It was intended to be a joint policy statement but it was entirely drafted by two SDP researchers under the direction of Bob Maclennan. They consulted thoroughly with members of the merger negotiating team but this appeared to have had little effect on the content. James Moore reports that 'Steel was blamed, perhaps unfairly, for chaotic aspects of the negotiations' on it and this is correct insofar as it was a consequence of Steel's inherent lack of interest in policy and particularly in policy detail. He should have realised the importance of the document and taken much more interest in the text. Remarkably, even after it had been roundly criticised and withdrawn, Steel commented that he still thought it was a good document![5]

An Alliance maintaining the identity of each party, with a number of agreed key policies, including, for instance, pro-European unity, and promoted as a temporary means of overcoming the iniquities of the first-past-the-post electoral system, could have been an honest means of maximising the third-party vote and motivating a swathe of otherwise non- voters. Alas, it was oversold, ending with the ideological confusion of the merger, and with the eventual consequence of killing off the SDP and diminishing the identity of the Liberal Party.

Michael Meadowcroft

1. *Social Demoracy – Barrier or Bridge*, Liberator Publications 1981
2. See, for instance, David Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's Story* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), p. 135, and Des Wilson, *Memoirs of a Minor Public Figure* (Quartet, 2011), pp. 233–35.
3. Roger Mortimore and Andrew Blick (eds.), *Butler's British Political Facts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 435.
4. 'Eastbourne Revisited', *Radical Quarterly*, Autumn 1987.
5. Wilson, *Memoirs of a Minor Public Figure*, p. 250.

Statues and politics

Controversies over statues are not a new feature of political debate. **William Wallace** describes the role the statue of Oliver Cromwell played in the end of Lord Rosebery's Liberal government.

Cromwell's Statue and the Fall of the Liberal Government in 1895

Those who assert in the contemporary political debate that statues should be respected as symbolising the accepted version of British history have forgotten the controversy over the erection of the statue of Oliver Cromwell outside Westminster Hall. On 14 June 1895, the House of Commons in committee voted on a motion to reduce the sum allocated in the Estimates by Lord Rosebery's Liberal government for the erection of such a statue by £500 (then a considerable amount of money). After a sharp debate, the critical motion fell short by only fifteen votes. On 17 June, at report stage, renewed opposition led to the government's Commons leadership withdrawing its support; when Irish MPs nevertheless pressed to a division, the motion to fund the statue was defeated by 200 votes to 83. Three days later, the government lost another vote, on a minor issue of army estimates and the availability of cordite, and resigned.

Why so much passion on both sides about Cromwell, 240 years after his death? And why did this contribute to the collapse of the Liberal government? And how, in spite of this defeat, was the statue erected in time for the tercentenary of Cromwell's birth in 1899? The explanation lies partly in changing attitudes to Cromwell in the late nineteenth century, partly in the weak and divided character of the post-Gladstone administration of 1894–5, and partly in the character of Lord Rosebery himself.

Cromwell

Cromwell's reputation had remained 'overwhelmingly critical and negative' for the first 150 years after his death – except on the part of English Nonconformists, who remembered him as the first protector and tolerator of religious dissent.[1] Whigs thought more kindly of him than Tories, who dismissed him as a regicide – though radical Whigs condemned him as the man who suspended parliament and replaced it with authoritarian rule.[2] Parliament and the seventeenth-century struggle against prerogative power, together with the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1689, played a central role in the Whig interpretation of history.

When the Palace of Westminster was rebuilt after it had burned down in 1834, the Royal Fine Arts Commission, chaired by the young Prince

Albert, drew up a list of figures from the Civil War to be erected inside the palace. These originally included Cromwell, alongside Falkland, Hampden, Clarendon, Strafford, Montrose and Monck; but Cromwell's statue was not commissioned.[3] When, in 1868, the Fine Arts Commission approved a line of English and British rulers for the Royal Gallery, *The Times* protested that Cromwell had again been omitted; but the Tory First Commissioner of Works, Lord John Manners, dismissed the complaint out of hand in a Commons exchange.[4]

In the agitation for political reform that led up to the 1832 Reform Act, the image of Cromwell as a leader who dismissed a corrupt parliament had become more popular. But it was a Tory, Thomas Carlyle, whose publication of Cromwell's *Letters and Speeches* in 1845 reshaped his legacy among the literary and political establishment. Carlyle believed strongly in the importance of 'great men' in history; and for him Oliver Cromwell had undoubtedly been a great man. Imperialists, both Liberal and Conservative, began to look back to Cromwell as the first ruler of the 'three kingdoms' to have established a strong navy and to make England play a powerful role in the international politics of Europe. Austen Chamberlain made this point in the debate on 17 June 1895, which ended in government abstention and defeat; so did John Morley (then chief secretary for Ireland).[5] W. T. Stead, the editor of the *Northern Echo*, had linked Gladstone's campaign on behalf of the Bulgarians persecuted by Turks to Cromwell's efforts to defend the Protestant Waldensians, exploiting Milton's well-known sonnet ('Avenge, oh God, thy slaughter'd saints…') in support.[6] Radicals had come to see Cromwell as 'the embodiment of successful resistance to arbitrary power' – as the prominent radical Henry Labouchere put it in the same debate.[7] An East Anglian Liberal MP, representing a strongly Nonconformist constituency, had declared in the short debate three days earlier that 'Cromwell fought against the tyranny of kings … The statue would simply be an historical tribute to a great man, one of the strongest whom England ever knew.'[8]

Irish MPs, on whom the Liberal government depended for its majority, saw Cromwell very differently. The MP for Roscommon, who moved the motion to reduce the Estimates on 14 June, declared that 'in Ireland Cromwell was thought of with a bitterness and hatred that could scarcely be exceeded.' He quoted from Gardiner's just-published *History of the Commonwealth* on the Drogheda massacre that Cromwell 'had one measure for Protestants and another for Papists, especially for Irish Papists.'[9] Willie Redmond, a prominent Irish Nationalist MP, added that Cromwell was 'regarded by the nine-tenths of the Irish people not only as a murderer, but as a canting hypocritical murderer as well.'[10]

Britain's Jewish community had also reappraised the importance of Oliver Cromwell. Carlyle had stated that Cromwell's contribution to the position of Jews in England had been limited. But, in 1894, Lucien Wolf had suggested in a paper to the Jewish Historical Society that his interventions had enabled Jews in London to gain freedom of worship and protection from discrimination in trade.[11] London's Jewish community in the 1890s was small but influential. Rosebery knew its leading members well. He had become a friend of Baron Mayer de Rothschild through their shared love of horse racing and had married his only daughter Hannah.

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Religion was an important factor in political and social life in the 1890s. The Commons spent

a good deal longer on 17 June 1895 debating Welsh disestablishment and religious tithes than it devoted to the proposal to pay for a statue of Cromwell out of public funds. Across the Channel, the Dreyfus affair had just erupted, with Catholics on one side and secular Republicans on the other, and with strong elements of anti-Semitism. Views on Cromwell differed from oratory to church to chapel to synagogue.

The Liberal Party was a coalition of Nonconformists and socially minded Anglicans, with support from many within the Jewish community, but was dependent on the continuing support of Catholic Irish MPs. Gladstone's Protestant religiosity and his commitment to disestablishment had sustained the loyalty of Nonconformist leaders and their churches; his departure weakened that link. Cromwell's willingness to allow debates within the New Model Army and the Commonwealth on diverse structures for worship had earned him heroic status among Nonconformists – though for Irish Catholics he was a symbol of oppression. It was not easy to hold this diverse coalition together, and Cromwell was a symbol for division.

A fractious and demoralised Liberal government

When the 84-year-old Gladstone finally retired as prime minister in 1894, he left his party without an agreed successor or political strategy. Gladstone favoured Earl Spencer as his successor, despite his position in the Tory-dominated Lords. Queen Victoria, suspicious of almost all Liberals and still exercising a considerable degree of choice in the appointment of a prime minister, preferred Rosebery. Chancellor of the Exchequer William Harcourt had acted as Gladstone's deputy for much of his premiership and hoped to succeed him. Rosebery was twenty years younger than Harcourt and had served as his junior minister; his first ministerial position had been as under-secretary of state to Harcourt as home secretary in 1881. Harcourt and John Morley, chief secretary for Ireland, had taken much of the burden of managing Commons business in Gladstone's final administration, while Rosebery as foreign secretary remained at some distance from the details of legislation and party management. Many of Gladstone's other senior ministers, however, favoured Rosebery over Harcourt.

Personal relations among leading ministers were poor at the outset and worsened as the months went by. Harcourt was abrupt and short-tempered with his colleagues. He resented Rosebery's promotion over him and attempted to impose tight conditions in return for accepting office under him.[12] After the success of Harcourt's 1894 budget, which introduced death duties, dislike deepened into hatred. He told Morley that Rosebery was 'a rogue and a liar and he knows that I know him to be such'.[13] Lewis Harcourt, his son and private secretary, openly jeered Rosebery as the prime minister arrived to present the prizes at Eton College in June 1895.

In 1890 John Morley had agreed that he would support Harcourt against Rosebery as Gladstone's successor; but the two had later fallen out. In 1894 Morley hoped that Rosebery on becoming prime minister would offer him the Foreign Office, after his years of service on Irish home rule; but Rosebery, a Liberal imperialist, disliked his 'little Englander' tendencies, and preferred Lord Kimberley. The radicals in the parliamentary party, committed to abolishing the Lords, objected to a peer as prime minister. Labouchere's bitter attacks on Rosebery were sharpened by the latter's resistance to the determined efforts two years earlier of both Labouchere and his wife to persuade Rosebery as foreign secretary to appoint him minister in Washington.[14]

The morale of the Liberal Party and government would have been higher if there had been less confusion about policies and priorities now that Gladstone's dominating presence had withdrawn. Rosebery caused widespread dismay by admitting, under pressure as he wound up his government's first Queen's Speech debate in an overwhelmingly hostile House of Lords, that Irish home rule was not attainable until public opinion in England was willing to accept it.

He then compounded that confusion by making abolition or reform of the Lords the main plank of a succession of campaigning speeches, while failing to define whether he wanted to replace the hereditary second chamber or move to a single-chamber legislature. Rosebery's Bradford speech in October 1894, in which he referred to the Liberals struggling against the Lords 'in the manner of Cromwell's Ironsides', alarmed some of his colleagues as well as the Queen and the Tory press.[15] Harcourt meanwhile moved on from introducing death duties to campaigning for temperance reform (restrictions on alcohol), a popular issue with Nonconformist voters. Neither Rosebery nor other senior ministers focused on social reform or workers' rights, which would have been welcomed by many recently enfranchised voters and would have provided a rationale for a confrontation with the Lords on issues far more popular than Ireland.[16]

The question of a memorial to Cromwell would have been a minor issue for a strong government. It was first announced to the Commons by Herbert Gladstone, the commissioner of works, in August 1894, looking ahead to the tercentenary of Cromwell's birth. Rosebery wrote him a stern note to complain that he had known nothing about it until he read about it in *The Times*. The cabinet agreed to the proposal in December. The following April, however, Harcourt attempted to insist that the statue should be placed between those of Charles I and II inside Westminster Hall rather than in Rosebery's chosen site, which he described as in 'the ditch' outside.[17] It seems remarkable that the cabinet had not anticipated the reaction of Irish MPs. When these erupted in the Commons, Harcourt and Morley's response was understandable in terms of parliamentary management but infuriating to a prime minister already deeply suspicious of their intentions and their refusal to consult him on policy and procedure. Angry notes were exchanged, relations within the cabinet deteriorated further, and defeat on the issue of supplies of cordite for the army a few days later led to the government's disintegration.

Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Rosebery

The eccentricity of Lord Rosebery was a major factor in both this disintegration and the outcome of the dispute over Cromwell. In 1894–5, Rosebery was one of the richest men in Britain. He had inherited the Dalmeny estate, west of Edinburgh, when a student at Oxford, on the death of his grandfather; his father had died when he was seven. His marriage to Hannah Rothschild had brought him ownership of Mentmore and its Buckinghamshire estate, and considerable additional wealth. She encouraged him to purchase a house in Berkeley Square as their London base, while Rosebery also bought a mansion (the Durdans) close to the racecourse in Epsom to support his involvement with horse racing.

Early inheritance of his title deprived him of the 'apprenticeship' many young aristocrats served, as MPs for family-sponsored seats. He never cultivated close ties with Liberal MPs; his reputation was based upon his fluency as a speaker at mass meetings. He first came to prominence as the manager of Gladstone's Midlothian campaign – directed from Dalmeny, using

Photo: Statue of Oliver Cromwell in front of the Houses of Parliament (Dion Hinchcliffe, Creative Commons BY-SA 2.0)

techniques of street processions and mass gatherings that he had observed on visits to the USA. Throughout his career he was ambivalent about public office. He turned down Gladstone's first offer of a ministerial post, in 1880. He resigned after two years in office in 1883 to embark on a lengthy tour of North America and Australia. He became foreign secretary in Gladstone's brief 1886 government, but agreed to resume that post in 1892 only after repeated pleas, during which Morley travelled up to Dalmeny to bring him back to London and a succession of others then visited Berkeley Square.[18] A similar sequence of hesitations, imploring letters and journeys to follow him from one of his four residences to another preceded his acceptance of nomination as prime minister in 1894.

Rosebery was an intensely private man, marked by his privileged but lonely upbringing. His mother had remarried (becoming the Duchess of Cleveland). His marriage to Hannah Rothschild had provided personal and political support, and encouragement for his career in public life; but she had died (of complications following typhoid) in 1890, leaving him with four young children. Rosebery's politics were a mixture of social reform and liberal imperialism – shaped by his visits to North America and Australia. He was a powerful speaker, attracting enormous crowds in cities around the country. After the Liberal defeat in the 1886 election, he accepted nomination from the City of London to the new London County Council, which he chaired for six years – switching in 1892 to election for East Finsbury, where his representation is commemorated in Rosebery Avenue. In 1893, while foreign secretary, he successfully mediated between the striking Miners' Federation and their employers, at Gladstone's request. Queen Victoria described one of his speeches, in Birmingham in 1892, as 'radical to such a degree as to be almost communistic,' adding that 'poor Lady Rosebery is no longer there to hold him back.'[19]

He had failed to complete his studies at Oxford, withdrawing when his college told him to sell the racehorse he had just bought or leave. Two of his horses won the Derby, in 1894 and 1895 – a popular achievement for a struggling prime minister among many voters, though much less welcome to Liberal Nonconformists. Yet he was intensely intellectual. He restored part of the ruined castle in the grounds

of Dalmeny as a library and study for which he assembled an extensive collection on Scots and British history. He published four biographies, the earliest in 1891 of Pitt the younger. His espousal of the Cromwell proposal, once it had been launched, fitted in with his acceptance that great men shaped history, that the Whig historical narrative was key to Britain's rise, and that the Cromwellian Commonwealth had witnessed (in the wars with the Dutch) the beginnings of imperial assertion.

Rosebery was far more popular in the country than among his colleagues when Gladstone resigned. Those who had worked with him found him secretive, restless, moody, sarcastic, self-centred and hard to fathom.[20] He lacked the temperament to create a team out of government or party. His habitual insomnia had worsened after Hannah's death, and worsened again under the stresses of holding his divided government together. His popularity plummeted as he failed to provide any clear direction for his government. In the early months of 1895, after Rosebery had privately threatened to resign unless his cabinet treated him with more respect, his ability to sleep collapsed, and his doctor injected him repeatedly with morphine.[21] His partial recovery returned him to the head of a demoralised and directionless government and a faction-riven party. Cromwell and cordite were enough to bring it down.

Nevertheless, the statue was erected

Morley and Harcourt had withdrawn the government's support for public funding of the statue. But many of the statues that filled Britain's cities and towns in the late nineteenth century were funded by 'public subscription' – by contributions from supportive individuals and groups. His initial irritation at Herbert Gladstone's failure to inform him of the initial proposal long since forgotten, Rosebery wrote to him on 19 June (two days after the lost vote) that 'we must not lose Cromwell's statue. And I am authorised by a gentleman, whose solvency and good faith I can guarantee, to say that he will gladly take the place of the government in the matter and pay for the statue.'[22] Rosebery had already taken an active personal interest in the choice of sculptor and site; it came to be universally assumed that he was himself the anonymous donor. The contract for the statue was signed before the Liberals left office. Lord Salisbury's government honoured the contract and the choice of site.[23] Rosebery visited the sculptor's studio on several occasions to discuss the details of the statue's stance and dress. Everything was ready in time for the tercentenary of Cromwell's birth in 1899.[24]

The unveiling was anticlimactic: by workmen, at 7.30 a.m., to avoid giving an opportunity for protestors to gather. That evening, however, Lord Rosebery delivered a lengthy speech on 'Cromwell's immortal memory' to the 'Cromwell Tercentenary Celebration' at the Queen's Hall. The audience included a large body of Nonconformists and, as Rosebery noted, the leaders of the Jewish community. Rosebery praised Cromwell as 'the raiser and maintainer of the power and Empire of England', claiming the Lord Protector as a precursor of his own version of Liberal imperialism; as the first proponent of religious toleration, citing his willingness to listen to the Quaker George Fox; and as a statesman inspired by a firm religious faith:

> I will go so far as to say that, great and powerful as we are; we could find employment for a few Cromwells now. … The Cromwell of the nineteenth or of the twentieth century … would not compromise with principles. His faith would be in God and in freedom, and in the influence of Great Britain as promoting, as asserting, both.[25]

The statue is still there, standing on what is now labelled 'Cromwell Green'. There have been occasional protests against its position, from MPs with Irish links. After an attempted IRA attack on Westminster Hall in 1974 the statue was removed to a 'safe location'. Anthony

Crosland, announcing to the Commons as secretary of state for the environment that it would be returned in early 1977, declared that 'Cromwell was a stern defender of our constitutional liberties.'[26] And current controversies over statues in Westminster have passed Cromwell by.

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19 Ibid., p. 217.
20 Ibid., ch.1.
21 Brooks, *Destruction*, pp. 224–35 provides Sir Edward Hamilton's descriptions of Rosebery's illness. See also McKinstry, *Rosebery*, pp. 339–44.
22 Cited in Ward-Jackson, 'Thornycroft's Statue', p. 187.
23 Worden, *Roundhead Reputations*, p. 312, states that Rosebery 'made a bargain with the incoming Tory government', which Salisbury and Balfour honoured despite continuing criticism from their backbenches.
24 A statue of Cromwell had already been erected in Deansgate, Manchester before the tercentenary of his birth, paid for by the widow of a prominent Liberal Nonconformist. Displaced by bomb damage in 1940, it is now in Wythenshawe Park. In 1899 a Liberal councillor in Warrington presented John Bell's statue of Cromwell exhibited at the 1862 London Exhibition to his town, from which Cromwell had commanded his armies in 1648; there was a vigorous debate in the council before it was erected. Thomas Carlyle had recommended a statue in his birthplace of St Ives, in a letter to I. K. Holland in 1849. Nextdoor Huntingdon debated commissioning one for the tercentenary; when that plan was abandoned St Ives commissioned its own, erected in 1901.
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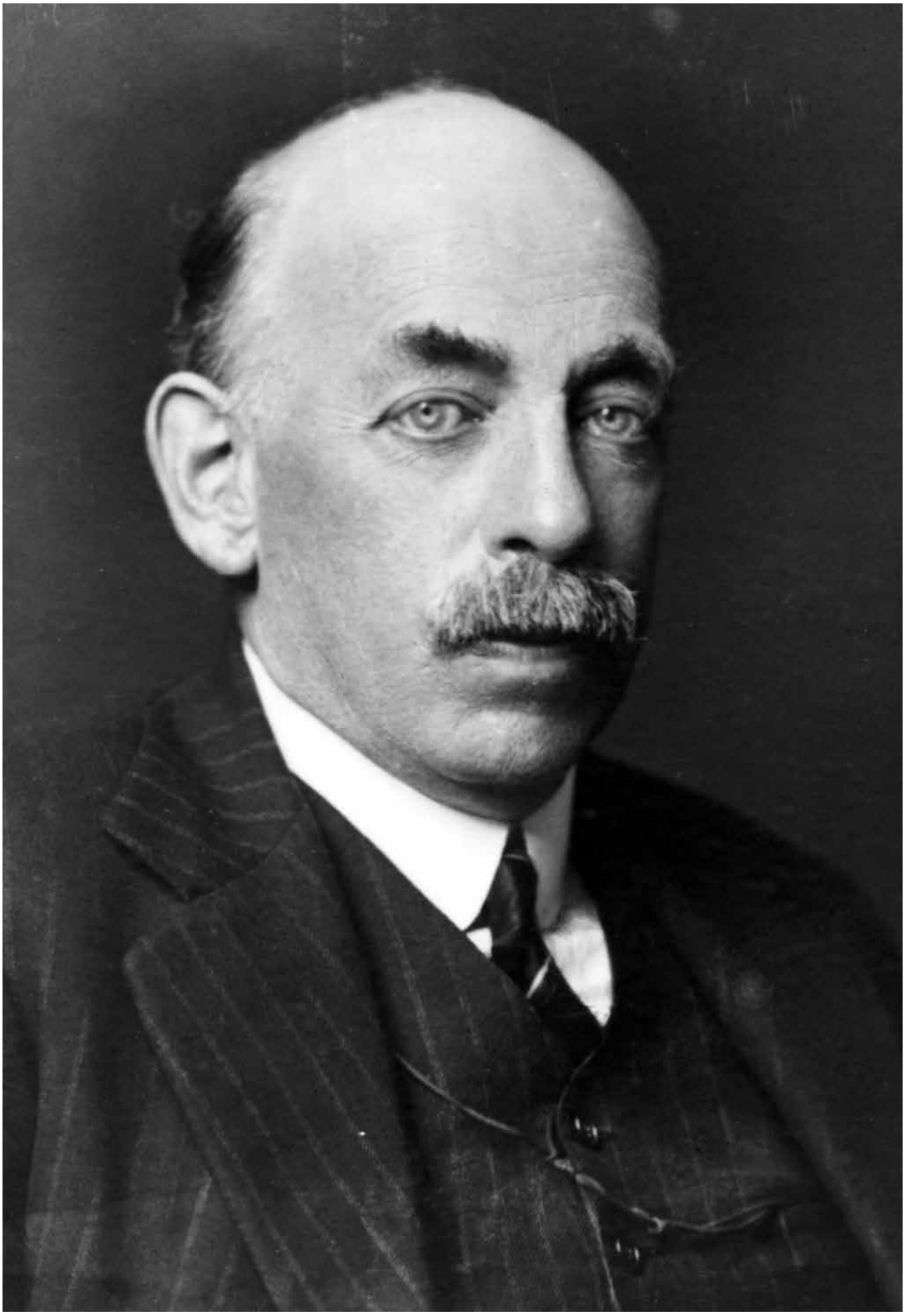


Liberal internationalism

David Davies, First Baron Davies, briefly served as a Liberal MP but was far more important in putting forward an internationalist alternative to appeasement in the 1930s. By **Ewan Lawry**.

Solving the 'Problem' of the Twentieth Century

Lord Davies of Llandinam's internationalist alternative to appeasement

David Davies, a biographer wrote, was 'the public-spirited Welshman of his age'.[1] Having inherited a business empire, which he duly expanded, along with £2 million and 100,000 acres of land, Davies and his sisters, Gwendoline and Margaret, cast their philanthropic net wide. Their charitable endeavours included endowing tuberculosis sanatoriums, funding medical research, and building housing for their workers.[2] Like his grandfather and namesake, this 'wealthy, intelligent and attractive young Welsh squire' built a modest political career by being elected, unopposed, as a Liberal in his native Montgomeryshire at the 1906 general election.[3] Kenneth O. Morgan summarised his platform, borrowing elements from both the Liberal and Conservative manifestos, as 'far from radical' by opposing Irish home rule, but supporting tariffs and welfare reform.[4] Going further, J. Graham Jones described Davies the parliamentarian as 'like some eighteenth-century landowner', rarely participating in Commons debates, partly due to a discomfiture at public speaking, and largely neglecting his local party association.[5] From this, one could easily conclude that politics was, at best, a poor third behind an admirable devotion to charity and business or, at worst, a rich man's pastime. But it was a political issue, crossing party lines and rooted in the philanthropic impulse, that dominated the last fifteen years of Davies' life and set him apart from many others in the febrile foreign policy debates of the 1930s.

Determined to build a new order from the embers of the First World War, he devoted himself to a crusade of far greater proportions than any that had animated him before. By devising a plan to radically overhaul international relations, organising the New Commonwealth

David Davies in 1942
(© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Society to campaign for it, and pressing his ideas to the forefront of debate, Davies opened another front against the appeasement of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Japanese Empire in the 1930s. It is possible to draw out the importance of this little-known figure to the anti-appeasement cause by close analysis of his books, articles, papers, and the scant secondary literature on this largely obscure topic. Despite being one of several anti-appeasers, it was in applying his views of international relations and bringing together leading figures of the day that Davies helped to challenge appeasement. By drawing out his ideas and activities in this period, it is possible to understand the road to the Second World War in its proper political context and give due credit to those who believed that they could preserve peace.

Finding a cause

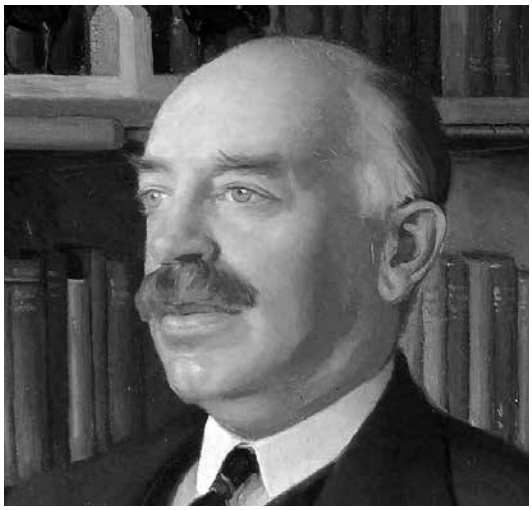
The First World War saw Davies, as a lieutenant-colonel in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, applying his 'fertile imagination' to a rigorous training scheme for his troops and providing, out of his own funds, supplies including field telephones and bicycles.[6] It was an early sign of Davies's organisational flair, creative use of his considerable resources, and a sense of *noblesse oblige*. In peacetime, he applied himself to fighting TB, in wartime he found himself equally moved by the bloodshed and squalid conditions to prevent it from happening again. In June 1916, he was recalled to become parliamentary private secretary to War Secretary David Lloyd George, which placed him at the heart of the plot to make his new political master prime minister. When that was achieved, he was given a position in Lloyd George's cabinet secretariat. However, their relationship soon fractured when Davies, who had initially amused Lloyd George with stories about Wales and impressions of preachers, used a stream of notes to lecture his political master on the war effort and their colleagues. As Owen noted, 'David Davies was a good man himself, and he wanted everyone else to be one.'[7] The result was that he was dismissed in July 1917 on the grounds that there were rumours that Davies was protected from returning to the front by his wealth and Lloyd George felt he should not stay on in these circumstances.[8] In light of his earlier service, it was an entirely unfair charge.

This rift with Lloyd George coincided with Davies' involvement with the early movements that eventually became the League of Nations Union (LNU). It was perfect for a man deeply affected by the suffering of war. Where his charity work saw him using his privilege to help poorer people in Wales, his League work could help save lives around the world. In helping to establish this organisation, a lobbying group to promote the new League of Nations, he joined those hoping to replace a world order dictated by force with one based on sedate dispute resolution. Davies was in a strong position to make the most of this new group. His local status meant that he became chairman of the LNU's Welsh National Council and worked with the leading lights of the internationalist movement, including Conservative peer Lord Cecil of Chelwood, Labour MP Philip Noel Baker, and fellow Liberal Professor Gilbert Murray. They aimed to rally the LNU's rapidly growing mass membership and their Whitehall connections to influence British policy in favour of the League. Davies, 'an imperious, impatient idealist' who often assumed 'that his wealth alone could decide outcomes and that colleagues and opponents could be steamrolled into submission', quickly emerged as one of its leading members.[9] The charitable spirit that inspired him to invest in sanitoria and housing also motivated his desire to prevent a recurrence of a war that had caused huge social, political, and economic upheaval. Compared to Westminster, where he was never fully reconciled to the compromises necessary to reach the front ranks, the League offered an honourable cause in which he could channel his considerable energies.

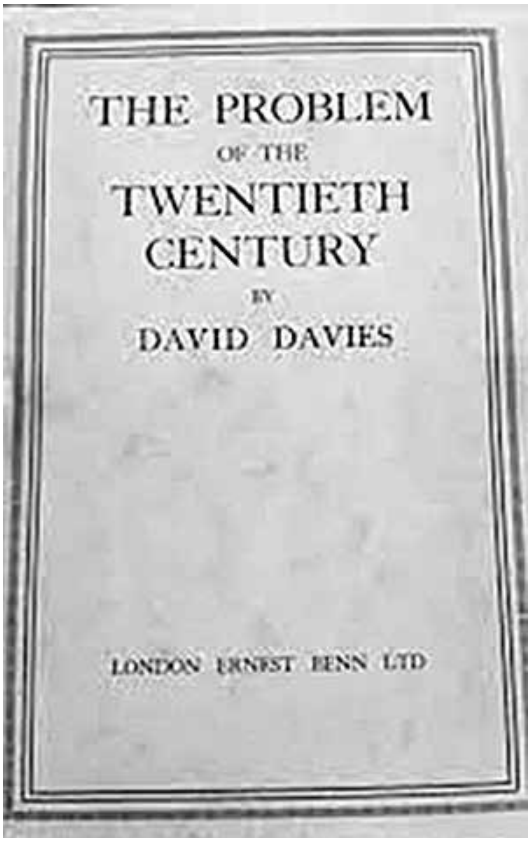
Through the 1920s, his newfound devotion to this body became increasingly clear and he achieved a number of personal successes. Most notably, he hosted the 1926 annual general meeting of the Federation of League of Nations Societies in Aberystwyth, an event which helped to

get Germany a seat on the League Council.[10] Though Davies continued to attend Westminster, albeit irregularly, his time there only served to emphasise the stark differences between party politics and extra-parliamentary campaigning for the League. When he attended the House in the years immediately after the First World War, he could often be found voting against the coalition government and criticising its record.[11] When the Liberals were out of office after 1922, though working to reconcile the Asquithian and Lloyd George factions, he continued to attack any policies he disagreed with. This attitude added to the bad feeling left when Lloyd George dismissed him. When added to discomfort at his old master's dubious political fund and his 'Green Book' proposals for all but nationalising rural land, Davies increasingly questioned whether it was worth holding a role he had never really fitted into whilst his real interests, the League and philanthropy, were demanding more time.

It seemed almost inevitable then that Davies would surrender his parliamentary career. For years, he neglected the Montgomeryshire Liberal Association with the same attitude as he held towards his Commons career. Undoubtedly this was, partly, borne of the fact that Montgomeryshire was uncontested until the mid-1920s and so he could afford to indulge his outside interests. And yet, now ready to focus almost entirely on the League, he expected the Montgomeryshire Liberals to select a successor of his choice. Instead, they nominated local solicitor Clement Davies, an ally of Lloyd George, and so, in a fit of pique, David withdrew his considerable financial support.[12] Now just one more constituent, albeit a rich and respected one, it would have been out of character for Davies to meekly retire



Lt-Col. David Davies, 14th Royal Welch Fusiliers, 1915
David Davies in 1921 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)
David Davies in 1935 (portrait by Sam Morse-Brown, photo: Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales)



from public life. Rather, he threw himself into advancing his thinking on international relations, working with the LNU to gain access to the corridors of power, and exerting influence on the political scene.

The 'problem'

The first step, and bedrock of all that was to come, was the publication of Davies's first book, *The Problem of the Twentieth Century*, in 1930.[13] Its central claim was that the League's existing structure was inadequate for fulfilling its primary role: preserving world peace. Though he thought it a good start, Davies identified several key flaws, including the requirement for unanimity for any major decision, the fact that important states were not members (then the United States and Soviet Union), and the lack of adequate machinery to assess and adjudicate territorial claims. These weaknesses, he believed, risked the 'welfare and progress of the whole human race and the continued existence of civilisation'.[14] By restructuring the League, he hoped to realise the dream of preserving peace through impartial and equitable judicial resolution. It would require a complete overhaul of the fundamental nature of international affairs, but he thought it both possible and, after the advent of industrialised warfare, a necessity.

In a world still coming to terms with the costs of the First World War and a popular fear of aerial bombing, Davies was not alone in reaching this conclusion. The 1920s saw a succession of international attempts to reinforce peace by rehabilitating the defeated powers and outlawing war as an instrument of national policy. The early 1930s, meanwhile, saw the Labour Party electing an unashamedly pacifist leader, George Lansbury, and the National Government, with its huge parliamentary majority, only beginning to rearm in 1935. Concurrently, the LNU went from strength to strength, becoming the largest pressure group in Britain, and embracing politicians from across the spectrum.[15] It was not, therefore, that Davies was isolated since there was clearly a large domestic and global audience for internationalist solutions to preventing war, and here was an idea that could be presented as the natural evolution of the system established in 1918.

That evolution involved three central components: an 'equity' tribunal, a police force, and an executive. The tribunal, composed of leading statesmen, lawyers, and technocrats, would hear the cases of states wishing to revise their borders and, reaching rulings impartially and judicially, could expect to be obeyed. It was unworldly, relying on all states surrendering control over their foreign policies and accepting judgement without reservation. However, Davies' argument went that the tribunal would grant moral authority to those upholding its decisions and, if any country chose to resort to war, the whole world would rally behind the 'victim' to uphold this new order.[16] Any justice system, though, requires a body capable of enforcing its decisions, so this tribunal would be complemented by a

police force, to prevent its collapse into impotency, and an executive, to direct the police and agree to international law. In a largely undemocratic world, Davies saw agreements as meaningless without a threat of force behind them. As he wrote, the tribunal brought 'justice', which 'in turn is dependent upon disarmament; disarmament cannot be obtained without security; and security cannot be purchased without the establishment of sanctions.'[17] As such, it was not, as pacifists wished, a complete rejection of the use of force, but utilising it to enforce peace. Rather, the protection of an international police force ready to deploy overwhelming military might would naturally lead to a voluntary renunciation of the use of force by individual states. In this, though Davies was undoubtedly idealistic, his solution was based on a basic principle: if a justice system worked within states, it could work between them. Viewed that way, and in light of most of the world freely joining the League already, his proposals were an evolution of the existing system and, basically, very simple. Disobedient countries would be treated like disobedient citizens by a legal system based on the rule of law. Law-abiding states would voluntarily give up their arms, rely on the even-handed courts and overwhelming power of the police force, and so a lasting peace could not only be achieved, but constantly enforced against potential threats.

Davies devised three schemes in order to establish this international police force (IPF). One involved a quota system, by which member states would mobilise their militaries in a crisis and join something akin to modern United Nations peacekeeping forces.[18] The second was for a dedicated army, navy, and air force to be permanently mobilised.[19] But, recognising flaws in both schemes, Davies proposed a third that combined both, with a permanent, rapid-reaction force to be reinforced by national levies when needed.[20] In peacetime, these national units would be utilised by member states to maintain order within their own borders, the implication being that member states would retain autonomy over domestic issues. National contingents would, however, not be strong enough to overwhelm the IPF or to attack another state. As a composite, the permanent force would negate the possibility of member states breaking commitments, whilst leaving them with a degree of sovereignty, but unable to attack one another. The IPF would be commanded by a 'high constable', a post initially rotated amongst the Great Powers and then appointed on merit, who would command other 'constables' for the navy, air force, artillery, and chemical weapons.[21] Their headquarters would be in Palestine, as a meeting place of religions and buttressed by defensible deserts and oceans, with bases in strategic locations, such as Gibraltar and Panama.[22] The high constable then, would be answerable to the third component of Davies' new League, the executive. He envisioned a committee of the Great Powers, with permanent seats, and smaller countries, joining on a rotational basis. In this respect, his executive presaged the United Nations Security Council, with the task of instructing member states to mobilise their quotas, issuing orders to the high constable, and giving member states a stake in decision-making. The final result would be a world state, with individual countries maintaining sovereignty over internal affairs, but part of a greater whole, in which defence and foreign policy were permanently internationalised.

Whilst there was a clear logic to Davies' thinking and, being such a simple proposition, it could theoretically work, the problems were legion. For instance, the Palestine headquarters would also house the IPF's arsenal. It is difficult to see how stockpiling weaponry in a region, even then riven by political violence, could have been anything but disastrous. The scheme would also require the abdication of a large degree of sovereignty, the surrendering of territory for bases, and trust in the IPF and other nations to act swiftly against aggressors. Achieving such compliance required a great deal of goodwill and favourable circumstances, neither of which could be taken for granted as the Great Depression was tearing through the global economy. In the end, the 1930s would both vindicate his analysis and challenge his solution. At the time of writing, most of the Great Powers were League

members, so it was not unreasonable to design the system in anticipation of the eventual accession of the United States and the Soviet Union. However, within three years of publication, Japan and Germany had withdrawn, with Italy following in 1935, thereby terminally undermining the League's claim to moral authority. Italy had already proven, in the 1923 Corfu Incident, that it could bombard a fellow League state, whilst Geneva acquiesced to its demands, and no other country would act to stop it. And yet, there is no denying the simplicity of the proposition in *The Problem* and the obvious fact that Davies had clearly thought about the technical details in some depth. He was seeking to address the flaws in the League that would prove to be its downfall and, though it has been described as demonstrating 'a somewhat tenuous appreciation of the balance of forces in the world', it was, at least, an attempt to adapt the existing system before its collapse.[23]

By comparison, his fellow internationalists, including Lord Cecil and Gilbert Murray, whilst offering token support, tended to simply repeat the mantra of rallying behind the League, but not how to make it work. Admittedly, Cecil and other LNU leaders had to be more circumscribed in order to hold that broad-based organisation together, but it was Davies who attempted to bridge the gap between what proved to be an inadequate League and a secure peace. Undoubtedly, it sounded as radical then as it does in our more cynical age. It is true that it was a time of unorthodox ideas, with Lloyd George adopting the new Keynesian thinking to tackle unemployment, the rise of the British Union of Fascists, and birth of the Social Credit Party. All of which proposed to institute similarly large-scale, radical reform to solve society's ills. But it was also an era in which governments were regularly elected on the basis of their staid, cautious, and, ultimately, orthodox approach to current affairs. The three major post-Lloyd George prime ministers crudely demonstrated this. Ramsay MacDonald, though leading the first Labour governments, embraced aristocratic high society and governed longest at the head of Tory-dominated coalition. Stanley Baldwin, meanwhile, consciously sought to amplify a provincial, middle-class Englishness. And Neville Chamberlain was as famous for his Edwardian dress as his energetic prosecution of foreign policy.

Unlike those other movements though, the Christian roots of *The Problem* are clear to see. It was Methodism, long synonymous with Welsh Liberalism, that shaped Davies' means of interpreting and communicating his new world order. In one of the many speeches he gave on the subject, he declaimed that 'we have all sinned and fallen short of those beneficent intentions embodied in the Covenant'.[24] He was not referring to the covenant between God and the Israelites, but to the League of Nations Covenant of 1919. Instead of 'breaking' the Covenant by making the League effective whilst they had the chance, they had 'sinned'. Davies, the lifelong believer, was substituting God for the League, before which all states would be equally supplicant and upon which they would rely for justice. The League Covenant stood in for the Ten Commandments and the hope encapsulated in the Gospel of Christ was to be fulfilled by this new Gospel of Eternal Peace. Any international dispute could be solved by the disinterested tribunal and punishment for breaking the law would be imposed by the omnipotent IPF. Here then, was the basic idea that would dominate Davies' approach to foreign affairs for the rest of his life. Indisputably, it was reliant on a great deal of ambitious

He was seeking to address the flaws in the League that would prove to be its downfall and, though it has been described as demonstrating 'a somewhat tenuous appreciation of the balance of forces in the world', it was, at least, an attempt to adapt the existing system before its collapse.

thinking and goodwill. Indeed, it appears to be hopelessly naïve and unrealistic. However, it would also prove to be the basis of a unique challenge to the appeasement of the dictators in the late 1930s and was an attempt to address the flaws in the system as it then existed.

Return to Westminster

In order to understand how it was that Davies, a marginal political figure, brought this plan to the heart of a great political debate, it is necessary to first recount how he returned to Westminster. As a former MP, out of favour with his party leader, his support base was limited to his native Montgomeryshire. He could use his wealth to gain influence, but he was now detached from the centre of power, having given up a safe Liberal seat, where his reputation was strongest, and then been defied by local members over the selection Clement Davies. It was not a propitious position from which to promote a plan that, as he understood, had to be enacted before the League inevitably broke down.

This impotency prompted Davies to write to a fellow former Liberal MP, Sir John Herbert Lewis, in early 1932 to lament his inability to get a hearing for his views. Indeed, so strong was this feeling that he wrote that he was prepared to defect to the Labour Party and re-enter the House of Commons if necessary.[25] This was significant for two reasons. Firstly, that he was willing to return to a role he disliked, just three years after surrendering a safe seat, and abandon his old party is an indication of the importance of a reformed League to him. It was also notable that he was prepared to join Labour, a party that had recently been smashed in the 1931 general election. One result of that was for the elderly pacifist, George Lansbury, to become chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party. It is not a huge leap to suggest that Davies saw a broken party, but which had now clearly supplanted his own Liberal Party in electoral terms, as an opportunity to secure their endorsement of his proposals and, when Labour was back in power, to have them implemented. This seems even more obvious in light of the fact that the interim Labour leader was former Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson. Though he had lost his seat, he was the most high-profile figure in the party and had been appointed as president of the Disarmament Conference, a world summit on multilateral arms reduction. In early 1932, though, it was entirely possible that a figure such as Henderson could readily take up the gauntlet and lead his party to join Davies' crusade.

By October 1932, however, Henderson had resigned in order to focus on his work in Geneva. He was succeeded by Lansbury, who was riding the wave of pacifism then sweeping across the Labour Party. As Davies' plan required an implicit acceptance of the use of force, it was incompatible with Lansbury's world view and the direction in which the party lurched. Fortunately for Davies, another opportunity arose in May 1932 when Ramsay MacDonald, the prime minister who had abandoned Labour in favour of a Conservative-dominated coalition, nominated him for a peerage. Davies' acceptance from a man reviled in the Labour Party is an indication of his proposed defection being calculated as the best route to achieve his ends, rather than a renunciation of his Liberalism. There is no evidence that he considered defecting again, though whether he was still officially a Liberal is unclear. His later re-engagement with the Montgomeryshire Liberals in 1938, in an attempt to influence Clement Davies to defect from the Liberal Nationals and re-join the independent Liberal Party, suggests that he had not completely severed his ties.[26] But now, with a guaranteed seat in the House of Lords, he had a platform to launch his wider campaign for a reformed League without the distraction of elections, feigning party loyalty, and working on issues that did not interest him.

The early 1930s was also a time in which talk of an international force persisted in political circles. Davies could point to several examples of his ideas in action, such as, in 1932, when he supported the League commission, chaired by his LNU colleague Lord Lytton, to investigate the Japanese invasion of Manchuria as being what

he envisioned for an equity tribunal.[27] Similarly, in 1934, he welcomed a proposal for an international force from the French delegation to the Disarmament Conference. However, the problem in this case was, as he told the Lords, that as there was not yet an armed League to provide security, he did not think the proposition would achieve anything meaningful.[28] And finally, when debating the forthcoming 1935 Saarland plebiscite, to determine whether it would return to German rule, he saw the multinational force sent to manage it as an example of an IPF in action.[29] In each case, he naturally cited them as evidence that his ideas could work and that the world was already moving in that direction. When demanding a leap of faith for all states, these examples could help to ameliorate their concerns and imply that it was an evolutionary step for the world system. Davies also snatched at the opportunity to present his ideas as having a great deal of public support. The 1934 'Peace Ballot', an unofficial referendum conducted by the LNU, found that, of the 11 million people questioned, 86.6 per cent supported the League's use of economic sanctions against aggressors, and 58.7 per cent backed military measures.[30] Though historians still debate what, if anything, can be discerned from the results, Davies was quick to link it to his campaign. In an LNU Welsh National Council bulletin, he stated that 'two vital principles are involved': the question of 'isolation or collective security' and whether the League was 'to become an International Authority, or merely a Debating Society?'[31] As with the examples of his plan in action, it suited Davies' purposes to interpret the results so as to support his case. In the first place, the rest of the world was automatically moving in the direction he desired and, secondly, the public desired it to be so. Put that way, it was a far more compelling and weightier case than the theory he had dealt with in *The Problem*, which, alone, could not realistically be a precursor to a radical upending of international affairs. With this in place, and there being more real-world examples as time went by, Davies began to follow the LNU route of tapping into public opinion and drawing in the powerful to shape policy. That meant forming a new organisation, as the LNU's Conservative and pacifist elements would not endorse such a proposal, and so rallying support for his specific idea. The answer came in the form of the New Commonwealth Society.

The New Commonwealth Society

In 1932, the newly ennobled Lord Davies gathered several leading politicians and public figures, including former Labour leader George Barnes, the Archbishop of York William Temple, and Lord Cecil. Together they formed the New Commonwealth Society (NCS), with Davies heavily subsidising it, to promote his ideas about a reformed League and collective security. The LNU's size proved that there was a widespread, if vague, support for the League across the political spectrum. As such, the NCS did not emerge in a vacuum. Whilst the LNU, trading on being a mass membership organisation and keen to hold onto its wide array of supporters, was cautious in advocating much more than supporting the League come what may, the NCS was much more strident in staking out its position. In early 1932, the LNU Executive Committee discussed an international air police force, but backed off in order to satisfy its Conservative element, though it only finally resolved that point shortly after the founding of Davies' new group.[32] The NCS, by comparison, only had 2,000 members by 1937 due to the deliberate policy of attracting support amongst the national elite, thus avoiding wasting resources on replicating the LNU.[33] This meant that where the LNU was far more ideologically diverse, the NCS was founded as Davies' brainchild and, at least formally, stood by his ideas.[34]

Davies chaired the preliminary meeting on 26 May 1932 that laid down the NCS's founding doctrines in line with his proposals.[35] Its immediate aims were to consolidate opinion behind these ideas and to educate those with the power to implement them. It was also agreed that British and international sections should be formed in due course, with Barnes as president of the overall organisation and Davies as treasurer and

chairman of the executive committee. Overseas branches followed in France, whose politicians had shown themselves to be amenable to a reformed League to ease their national security anxieties, and Germany, which was still a liberal democracy.

As with the examples of his ideas in practice, the timing of the NCS's founding was auspicious. In July 1933, just over a year after the inaugural meeting, the Labour Party conference issued a foreign policy statement calling for an international force to facilitate disarmament.[36] Understandably, the NCS leapt on this and, at a subsequent meeting, Davies agreed to write an appreciation of the statement in *The New Commonwealth*, the body's official publication, which would be sent to all Labour members and offered to the Labour-supporting *Daily Herald* for reproduction. As with Davies' proposed defection, and regardless of the 1931 election outcome, they would have naturally relished being aligned with one of the two major parties. It was not a huge leap for an internationalist party to endorse a reformed League and there was only so much they could do when the National Government had such an overwhelming majority, but it was an undeniable early victory.

That meant forming a new organisation, as the LNU's Conservative and pacifist elements would not endorse such a proposal, and so rallying support for his specific idea. The answer came in the form of the New Commonwealth Society.

April 1934 saw the British section formed with its own executive committee. Its president was to be Lord Gladstone of Hawarden, a younger son of the Victorian prime minister, with Davies as treasurer, and representatives from each of the three main parties and the British Legion.[37] This group became the centre of the NCS's campaign to influence national policy. Vyvyan Adams and Geoffrey Mander, respectively the Conservative and Liberal representatives, regularly appeared in the columns of Hansard advocating collective security and the League. The Labour representative, John Wilmot, would stand in for Clement Attlee. As Labour's deputy leader, Attlee's proxy membership is indicative of the fact that those earlier approaches had garnered tangible results. When added to the Liberal Party's support for collective security, Davies and his allies could be confident that the Opposition was firmly in favour of the League and amenable to his ideas. The problem remained, though, that neither party had any prospect of forming a government in the immediate future and the attitude of the Conservative leadership was amply demonstrated by their nominating an obscure backbencher to represent them.

Recognising the potential of this support though, Davies held a dinner in the Palace of Westminster for supportive MPs to form a parliamentary group on 6 November 1934.[38] The purpose of this group, which was soon extended to include peers, was to meet with experts on international affairs to inform their arguments in parliamentary debates.[39] Within a year, they had recruited eighty-two members, though this was reduced to sixty-seven by the 1935 general election when new Labour MPs replaced several of its Liberal supporters. It was an outcome that meant that they had firm grounds to hope to rebuild quickly.[40] The size of the group was an indication of there being a sizeable current of support in parliament for Davies' ideas and, though few such groups could expect to get legislation passed, this did not stop Mander from proposing a bill in December 1935 to legislate for the formation of an IPF.[41] Though the motion was withdrawn, this incident must be seen as drawing attention to the issue and forcing the government to respond to it. Parliamentary time was thus devoted to discussing Davies' ideas, its opponents were welcomed to challenge it, and, the NCS could hope, its advocates defeat them by force of argument.

Having laid out his ideas and begun campaigning to implement them, Davies had to contend with a rapidly changing international scene.

A year after the NCS was formed, Hitler rose to power in Germany, began rearming, and soon after withdrew from the League. It was this challenge, combined with the growing threat from Italy and Japan, that forced Davies to adapt his proposals in order to meet it and transformed the NCS into one of the several groups that took a stand against attempts to appease them.

Force

Before going into detail about how Davies' campaigns changed tack in response to the challenge posed by the dictators, it is necessary to look at his second important book in this period. Published in 1934, *Force* was intended to give a philosophical underpinning to Davies' proposals and to adapt them to the changing world situation. It is evident that events were transpiring as Davies had expected them to, unless his ideas were implemented, when he wrote that 'sovereign nations, dominated by imperialistic and nationalistic motives, have succeeded in undermining the moral authority of the League'.[42] By that stage, the League had lost two important members, Germany and Japan, and Hitler was embarking upon a major rearmament programme, but the situation had not yet deteriorated to such an extent that it was impossible for his plans to save it. Clearly, Davies also thought it necessary to lay his thinking out in order to give weight to the technical programme he had devised in 1930. The fundamentals were the same, the world had to have a reformed League in order to save the peace, but it was now framed as even more pressing in light of changes, primarily, in Germany.

Aside from realising Davies' fears and vindicating his predictions, namely that the League would inevitably fail unless it had the power to enforce its will, the rise of Hitler added greater urgency to his efforts. It was obvious, with rearmament proceeding apace, that the Nazi state might be inclined to use force to secure a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. To head that off, Davies wrote that it was still possible for Britain to push reform of the League in order to address Germany's demands for treaty revision and French anxiety about national security.[43] Though the enormity of his scheme made him sound detached from reality, *Force* made clear that there was a simple logic behind it. Of course, it was impracticable and there was little prospect of it being enacted, but there can be no doubting that Davies had put a great deal of thought into how to make his blueprint work in practice. To that end, in light of all that had transpired, Davies argued that it was necessary to immediately rally the remaining League members behind reform.[44] In the end, the case was the same, it was a matter of explaining how the thinking behind it weathered the tests of the international situation and how peace could be preserved.

Force is significant for two other reasons. The first is that it was an opportunity for Davies to define himself from the pacifists who dominated the Labour Party and, he argued, had led to the LNU clinging to disarmament as the solution to all ills. In terms of pacifism generally, he wrote of the experiences of the past showing that force could not 'be dispensed with: the problem is not how to abolish it, but how to use it.'[45] Force, used by the police and 'held in the leash of the law', would provide 'the security indispensable to the progress of mankind.'[46] Going further, Davies issued an outright challenge to the pacifist position by pointing out that history showed 'that justice cannot become effective without the assistance of force'.[47] He also took aim at the LNU for playing 'the part of fairy godmother to the governments of the day' by endorsing their lip service support for the League.[48] Where the LNU was taking concerted action was in continuing to chase 'the ever-receding shadow of disarmament', at a point when the Disarmament Conference had broken down after Hitler withdrew Germany from it.[49] This sentiment reflected the fact that the LNU had not directly endorsement an IPF in the May 1932 debate. Though he never explicitly stated it, it is likely that this setback, which was essentially accepted weeks before, had inspired him to form his new group. With an organisation firmly dedicated to promoting a reformed League, *Force* served not

Meeting of the League of Nations Council, 1936

only to buttress Davies' case with a philosophical foundation and very simple logic, but also to mark him out from his fellow internationalists. It would be unfair to present his LNU colleagues like Cecil and Gilbert Murray as blind to the changing situation, but they were much more circumscribed, where Davies had no reason to be. The result was that Davies and the NCS were in place to push for a firmer response to the threat from Germany and, realistically assessing the situation, calling for a faster pace of rearmament to face it.

Fighting appeasement

The 1935 Abyssinian crisis marked the final blow to the League as a serious force in world politics. It prompted Italy to end its membership, leaving only Britain, France, and the Soviet Union inside, and exposed its inability to prevent aggression without the use of armed force. The National Government had recently secured a second term in office by promising to 'support the "appeasement of Europe" within the framework of the League of Nations'.[50] That was, before the foreign secretary was revealed to have secretly offered to partition Abyssinia in favour of Italy, without reference to Geneva. At the same time, the NCS's British section was going through a transformation that would end with it firmly opposed to the appeasing attitude that had led to this scandal. The death of Lord Gladstone in April 1935 left a vacancy for the presidency, a post which was filled, in May 1936, by the most prominent backbench critic of the government: Winston Churchill. Having first approached Liberal grandee Lord Crewe, who preferred a more subordinate position, their selection of Churchill

was a clear sign of the side that the NCS was taking in the developing debate about defence. At this stage, Churchill was firmly estranged from the Conservative leadership over his opposition to their granting dominion status to India and, importantly in this case, the speed of their rearmament programme. The myth of his 'Wilderness Years' has it that he alone recognised the danger of appeasing the dictators. The reality was that he was inconsistent on that score and not always opposed to his party leaders, especially when ministerial office was in contention. More significantly, his NCS role, supported by a cross-section of the political and national elite, is only one example of his never really being a lonely exile on foreign policy. They were, in theory, in agreement about reforming the League and many, including Attlee and Liberal leader Sir Archibald Sinclair, were in the process of becoming part of the wider network of opposition to Britain's foreign and defence policies.

As insightful as this was of the NCS's direction of travel, it also reveals that its new president was more complex than the Tory imperialist caricature would suggest. Churchill, who first achieved ministerial office as a Liberal, used his inaugural presidential address to dispel any doubts about his endorsement of the NCS programme.[51] And it was Churchill who, a fortnight later, was tasked with meeting the foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, to convey to him an NCS resolution to propose League reform.[52] It may have been that he was cynically using this new platform to attack the government, with a skin-deep support for a reformed League as a useful cover, but it required a public alignment with a positive approach to foreign affairs. If he had merely wanted to exploit the League, he could have joined the much less demanding LNU, but he never did. Instead, he became the face of the NCS and aligned it with his other efforts to force a change in foreign and defence policy. The most notable example of this was the NCS joining the 'Defence of Freedom and Peace' Albert Hall rally, which had been partly orchestrated by Churchill, in November 1936.[53] It placed the NCS alongside other leading opponents of government policy and suggests that speeding-up rearmament, which the rally was intended to promote, was an important part of its programme. After all, an IPF would require an initial commitment of weaponry, the bulk of which would have to come from the only major League powers left: Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. Interestingly, the same countries that were the basis of Churchill's much desired 'Grand Alliance' against German expansionism.

The NCS's following Churchill was not a matter of Davies losing control over the group he had done so much to create. Rather, as he wrote, they were 'prepared to work loyally under your [Churchill's] leadership'.[54] He demonstrated this amply when, though keeping his plan at the heart of their campaigning, Davies realistically gave a lesser role to the essentially defunct League. Where a reformed League was a long-term aim, the situation necessitated a focus on short-term measures and issues that were the mainstay of anti-appeaser campaigning. For instance, in March 1938, he wrote an article in the *Western Mail* in response to Anthony Eden's resignation as foreign secretary.[55] In it, he wrote of Eden, 'the first martyr of the League', being sacrificed by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to appease the 'Sawdust Caesar', Mussolini. Weeks later, the Anschluss between Germany and Austria led to another article in which he described Hitler as 'the Bandit Dictator'.[56] Through the following year, he spoke in the Lords in support of an alliance with the Soviet Union, a compromise with reality that contradicted his commitment to the League over the old alliances, and calling for a

Until his death in 1944, Davies continued to develop his ideas. In 1940, he published 'Federated Europe' to make the case for a United States of Europe, a federation of European countries to rival the United States of America.

Ministry of Supply to ramp up the rearmament programme.[57] Each of these were issues on which the wider group of anti-appeasers were vocal. Churchill was a vocal proponent of a Ministry of Supply, possibly hoping to be appointed to run it, whilst Conservative Imperialist backbencher Leo Amery wrote in his diary that the Anschluss had tipped him into full opposition to the National Government's foreign policy.[58] With the League now dead, and unlikely to be revived in the near future, Davies downgraded the centrality of his proposed reforms in favour of more conventional anti-appeasers causes. In doing so, he was aligned with others in opposition to the National Government's foreign and defence policies, but he always maintained that ultimate aim of a reformed League in the hope of one day achieving a permanent peace.

Deluded idealist or neglected prophet?

Until his death in 1944, Davies continued to develop his ideas. In 1940, he published 'Federated Europe' to make the case for a United States of Europe, a federation of European countries to rival the United States of America.[59] Two further books followed, both setting out the principles by which peace could be rebuilt and made permanent when the Second World War came to an end.[60] Ultimately, there was no real prospect of Davies' vision being implemented. Aspects of it were incorporated into the United Nations and, in hindsight, he was remarkably prophetic. And the impulse that drove him, a desire to avoid a repeat of the carnage of the First World War, though not unique, was admirable. However, despite his best efforts, he was not courted by those in power seeking a solution to the international crises of the 1930s. Free of the constraints of the Commons and living on inherited wealth (which he generously distributed), it would be easy to conclude that he was a privileged ideologue unable to make a practical assessment of the international situation and the role his ideas could realistically play. For instance, his books, which stand as an important contribution in the history of internationalist thought, made little direct impact on British political discourse when he needed them to.

However, his analysis was fundamentally sound. The Abyssinian crisis demonstrated that the League was inherently flawed by relying on its members to voluntarily honour their commitments. Each subsequent crisis merely confirmed this until the League itself was defunct. Davies' answer to how this would be overcome in his own system was, essentially, coercion. The IPF would be so overwhelmingly powerful that states would feel compelled to join, if not to bask in the security it offered, then by being unable to challenge it and so permanently at a disadvantage. Unlike pacifists, Davies understood that force could not be abolished, but should be repurposed to police the world and enforce peace. This would be achieved by evolving an existing system that most countries had already joined voluntarily.

In time, this idea developed into an alternative proposition to the appeasing attitude to foreign affairs. Davies, as the driving force behind the NCS, drew in several leading figures in order to exert influence in the corridors of power. Though it failed to alter British policy on this front, the NCS became a platform for Winston Churchill and his fellow anti-appeasers to wage war on Britain's foreign and defence policies. That Churchill and several other prominent figures, including Sir Archibald Sinclair and Clement Attlee, pinned their colours to the NCS mast is indicative of the fact that his ideas, as radical as they may seem in our time, were palatable enough to be deemed acceptable for ambitious politicians to adopt. In so doing, Davies and the NCS stand as proof against the mythology of Churchill's 'Wilderness Years' that continue to pervade the popular memory of the 1930s. By his energetic advocacy of a reformed League, Davies provides a different perspective on the inter-war debates around foreign policy, without which the history of that period cannot be fully understood.

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Local elections

The Liberal Democrats were surprise winners in the 2022 local elections, gaining more seats than any other party. **John Curtice** analyses what happened.

The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2022 local elections

The Liberal Democrat performance was the surprise package of the local elections held in May in England, Scotland and Wales. Much of the commentary before polling day focused on how much of a reverse the Conservatives might suffer in the wake of 'partygate' and how much might Labour benefit as a result. In the event, however, it was the Liberal Democrats, not Labour, who gained most seats. For a party that has spent much of the last decade in the electoral doldrums, such a surprise was especially welcome. But what lessons should the party take away from the result if we examine it more closely?

The need for some careful scrutiny becomes clear once we break down the headline results a little. True, as Table 1 shows, the party made net gains in all corners of Britain. Overall, it registered 224 net gains of seats, well ahead of Labour's more modest tally of 108, most of which were in Wales. But those successes were much greater in England outside London than they were elsewhere. Here the party made just over 160 net gains of seats, whereas its combined tally elsewhere was little more than 60 seats. This imbalance was not simply a reflection of the number of seats being contested in each part of the country. Less than 40 per cent of the seats being contested were located in England outside London, yet over 70 per cent of the party's net gains of seats (as well as all of its gains in councils controlled) were in the English provinces. In truth, it appears that the performance may have been somewhat patchy.

However, while politically important, the outcome of any election in terms of seats is not necessarily a good guide to how well a party has done. The figures of gains and losses can be affected by (i) when the seats in question were last contested (in Scotland and Wales this was 2017, whereas in most – though not all – of England it was 2018), (ii) differences in the electoral system used (in Scotland the elections were held using the single transferable vote, in London and Wales all the council seats were up for grabs in a multi-member plurality election, while in most – though again not all – provincial England only one seat was being contested in a first-past-the-post race in each ward), and differences in the sizes of wards (those in rural areas tend to have fewer electors). We are thus well advised to examine the actual pattern of votes cast – albeit these are not always immediately easily available for analysis. Most of the analysis here is based on the results collected by the BBC in a sample of just over 900 wards in 49 local authorities in England, most of which were wards where all of the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats stood a candidate in 2022 and previously, most notably in 2018 (when most of the seats at stake were last contested) and (outside London) in 2021

Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey celebrates with Lib Dems in Hull after the party won control of Hull City Council, 9 May 2022 (photo: Hull Liberal Democrats)

(where comparison with what happened last time gives us an indication of the change in the parties' standing over the past year).

One reason why the BBC collects these statistics is to enable it to calculate a 'projected national share' for each party. This is an estimate of the share of the vote that each of the parties would have won if the pattern of local voting (in England) had been replicated across Britain as a whole. The statistic is designed to make it

Table 1 Net gains and losses of councils and seats, 2022 local elections

	Net change in councils controlled/seats won							
	London		*Rest of England*		*Wales*		*Scotland*	
	Councils	*Seats*	*Councils*	*Seats*	*Councils*	*Seats*	*Councils*	*Seats*
Conservatives	–2	–80	–8	–256	–1	–86	n/c	–63
Labour	n/c	+12	+3	+10	+1	+66	+1	+20
Liberal Democrats	n/c	+33	+3	+161	n/c	+10	n/c	+20
Greens	n/c	+7	n/c	+19	n/c	+8	n/c	+16
PC/SNP	–	–	–	–	+3	–6	+1	+22
Independent/ Other	+1	+28	n/c	+29	–2	+8	n/c	-15

Source: BBC. Change in council control is as compared with the position immediately prior the election. Change in seats is as compared with the last regular election (in most cases 2018). In the case of local authorities where there were ward boundary changes the comparison is with an estimate of what the outcome in seats would have been if the new boundaries had previously been in place.

possible to compare the performances of the parties from one election to the next, even though which councils see elections held varies from one year to the next. According to this year's calculation, the Liberal Democrats' local election performance was the equivalent of the party winning 19 per cent of the vote nationwide. This, of course, was well above the party's average standing in the national polls at the time of the local elections (10 per cent), let alone what the party has achieved at any of the last three general elections.

However, this is not the right comparison to make. The Liberal Democrats always perform better in each annual round of local elections than the party's standing in the polls. More instructive is to compare this year's projected national share of 19 per cent with the party's estimated performance in previous rounds of local elections. This comparison suggests that, with one exception, this year's results represented the party's best local election performance in any set of annual local elections since the party entered into coalition with the Conservatives. The one exception is 2019, when the party was also estimated to be on 19 per cent. Those local elections, of course, occurred at a time when Theresa May was floundering in her attempts to deliver Brexit while Labour were not at that stage committed to holding another EU referendum, a combination of circumstances in which the party proved able to flourish.

In short, it can be argued that the party's performance in 2021 was its best since 2010 for an election when Brexit was not dominating the political agenda. That said, it should be noted that the performance was still well short of what the party regularly achieved between 1993 and 2010, during which period its projected national share varied between 24 per cent and 29 per cent. While the outcome of the 2022 local elections may be regarded as evidence of improvement, it also confirms that the party still has a long way to go to recover the standing it enjoyed with the electorate before the coalition with the Conservatives between 2010 and 2015.

Of course, one of the party's aims since 2019 has been to try and persuade voters that it has put the battle over Brexit behind it, in the hope that this will enable the party to win back the lost support of Leave voters in Leave-inclined constituencies (not least in the South-West of England). Table 2 addresses how much success the party may have had in the local elections in realising this ambition by showing the average change in the party's share of the vote from three different baselines – 2016, 2018 and 2021 – broken down by the share of the vote won by Leave locally in 2016. This analysis certainly suggests that the party was able to record some kind of

Table 2 Mean change in Liberal Democrat vote since 2016, 2018 and 2021 by outcome of EU Referendum vote 2016

% Leave vote 2016	*Since 2016*	*Since 2018*	*Since 2021*
Less than 42	+4.1	+2.3	+2.8
42–48	+4.2	+3.9	+4.0
48–52	+2.0	+2.1	+2.6
52–60	+2.3	+1.2	+2.5
More than 60	+4.1	+1.9	+2.2

Source: Sample of 906 wards in 49 local authority areas in England whose results were collected by the BBC. Analysis confined to those wards that were fought by Conservative, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats on both occasions.

% Leave is an estimate of the outcome of the 2016 referendum in a ward compiled by Jon Mellon on the basis of data originally created by Chris Hanretty.

In London boroughs where new ward boundaries were introduced, change since 2018 is based on an estimate by Jon Mellon of what the outcome would have been in 2018 if the new boundaries had been in place then.

advance irrespective of the outcome of the 2016 Brexit vote locally. The party's vote increased in Leave as well as Remain-voting wards.

At the same time, however, there is no consistent evidence that the party was making more progress in strongly Leave voting areas than elsewhere – if anything, there is some hint that the opposite may have been the case, though this did not extend to mostly Remain-voting London, where its share of vote across all 32 boroughs increased since by just +1.3 points. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the party' share of the vote tended to be higher in Remain voting areas than elsewhere. On average in our sample of results outside London, the party won 23 per cent of the vote in wards where 52 per cent or more voted Remain in 2016, compared with just 14 per cent on those wards where more than 60 per cent backed Leave. Although the party may have begun to demonstrate an ability to do well in parliamentary by-elections held in strongly Leave-voting areas, as indicated by the results in North Shropshire and in Tiverton & Honiton, it would be wrong to assume on the evidence of these local elections that the party has necessarily put all of the legacy of Brexit behind it.

Of course, those two by-elections successes were both in constituencies being defended by the Conservatives. No such equivalent success has been registered in by-elections in more Labour-inclined territory. Of this difference there is an echo in the local election results. As compared with any other recent round of local elections, the party found it easier to progress in wards that were being defended by the Conservatives than it did in those being defended by Labour. Compared with the outcome in 2018, for example, the party's share of the vote increased by +4.3 points in wards being defended by the Conservatives, while it advanced by only +1.2 points in wards where Labour were the local incumbents. Equally, as compared with 2021 the equivalent figures were +3.7 and +1.1 points respectively.

This pattern is not unique to the Liberal Democrats. Labour too found it easier to advance in wards that the Conservatives were defending than in wards where they themselves were the incumbents. Both opposition parties profited from a marked tendency for Conservative support to fall more heavily in wards where the party was previously strongest – a sign perhaps of the extent to which 'partygate' had upset many a previously loyal Tory supporter. However, what is certainly the case – and is crucial – is that both opposition parties found it easier to advance in those Conservative-held wards where they were previously in second place.

This is illustrated in Table 3, which compares the performance of the parties as compared with both 2018 and 2021 in the two sets of circumstances. Conservative support fell by not dissimilar amounts irrespective of who was in second place. But in wards where Labour started off in second place, the Liberal Democrat advance was much more modest – between two and three points as compared with both 2018 and 2021 – than it was where the party began in second place - where it registered nine point increases. Meanwhile, Labour actually saw its vote fall slightly as compared with 2018 in wards where the party started off in third place, but advanced by two points where it had previously been second. Similarly, what was only a one point increase in its support as compared with 2021 in wards where it had been third, Labour saw its support increase by six points where it was the better placed challenger to the Conservatives.

These divergent patterns strongly suggest that some voters were willing to vote tactically for which ever opposition party was better placed to defeat the Conservatives locally. No such pattern was in evidence in last year's local elections. It may well be that in the wake of 'partygate' some voters now felt sufficiently antipathetic to the Conservatives that they were to engage in anti-Conservative voting for the first time. In so far as such behaviour depends on the willingness of Labour voters to vote Liberal Democrat, it may well be a sign that they are now willing to forgive, if not necessarily forget, the Liberal Democrats' involvement in the 2010–15 coalition. The pattern also implies that unhappy former Conservative supporters now see the Liberal Democrats as an effective way of expressing their dissatisfaction,

Table 3 Party performance compared with 2018 and 2021 in Conservative-held wards by tactical situation

	Change in % vote since 2018	*Change in % vote since 2021*
Conservative-held wards where Labour second in 2018/21		
Conservatives	–8.1	–8.0
Labour	+2.0	+6.3
Liberal Democrats	+3.2	+1.7
Conservative-held seats where Liberal Democrats second in 2018/21		
Conservatives	–10.1	–8.9
Labour	–1.0	+1.3
Liberal Democrats	+8.6	+9.0

Source: Sample of over 900 wards collected by the BBC. Analysis confined to those wards that were fought by all of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats at both elections. See also notes to Table 2.

much as had often appeared to be the case before the coalition. If so, the party may now be better placed to realise its ambition of making gains in so-called 'blue wall' Conservative-held constituencies at the next general election.

As we noted earlier, the elections in both Scotland and Wales were for seats that were last contested in 2017. This makes comparison of the party's performance in those two parts of the UK with that in England rather difficult, especially as the 2017 elections in England were mostly for county councils rather than for any of the district and borough councils where elections were held this year. However, it appears that in both cases the party registered only modest progress. In Scotland, the party's share of the first preference vote across the whole country was just 1.7 percentage points above what it achieved in 2017. If we confine our attention to just those wards where all four principal parties contested the ward in both 2017 and 2022, the average increase was even slightly lower, +1.5 points, though in similar vein to England that increase was in evidence in the less strongly Remain parts of Scotland as well as elsewhere. Meanwhile, at 8.5 per cent, the party's overall share of the vote was still well down on the 12.7 per cent it achieved in the first round of local elections to be held under STV in 2007 – before the 2010–15 coalition – while, in sharp contrast to the position in England, it was only marginally above its current standing in the opinion polls. While the heavy geographical concentration of the party's vote enables the party to win a number of seats north of the border, there is little reason to anticipate from these results that it is set to erode significantly the SNP's dominance of Scotland's representation at Westminster at the next UK election.

Local elections in Wales are not fought as systematically by the parties as they are in most of England and Scotland. But the party's overall performance – 7.0 per cent of the Wales-wide vote, just 0.2 of a point up on 2017 – does not point to any significant advance in the party's popularity. Again, the performance is well short of what the party was able to achieve before the 2010–15 coalition – in the 2008 local elections, for example, the party won 13.0 per cent across the whole of Wales.

In short, the results in both Scotland and Wales confirm the message from England that while progress has been made, and the party may be well placed to profit from any continuing Conservative unpopularity under the new Prime Minister, it still has a long way to go if it is to present once again a strong challenge to the Westminster two-party system, of the kind that it was able to mount in the nineties and the noughties.

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The author is indebted to his colleagues on the BBC local election psephology team, Patrick English, Stephen Fisher, Rob Ford, Eilidh Macfarlane, and Jonathan Mellon for their support in analysis, and to the Britain Elects website for making its collection of the 2022 local election results freely available. Responsibility for the views expressed here lies with the author.

Reports

The 1992 General Election

Evening meeting, 31 January 2022, with Alison Holmes and Dennis Kavanagh. Chair: Lord Foster. Report by **Gianni Sarra**

The meeting's chair, Don Foster, had of course a unique connection to the talk's topic. His victory in Bath, over Conservative Party Chair Chris Patten, was one of the better results for the party in the 1992 vote. The election overall was summed up by Lord Foster rather aptly: 'Paddy Ashdown won the campaign, Neil Kinnock won the polls, John Major won in the end'. Despite Ashdown's personal popularity buoying the party and serving as a major asset, and polls predicting the Tories being returned to the opposition benches, the Conservatives ultimately returned to power with a surprising, albeit reduced, majority.

The first speaker, Dr Alison Holmes, was able to give a rather unique 'inside outsider' perspective. She began her comments by remembering absent friends, including Paddy Ashdown and Richard Holme, who led the 1992 manifesto. Holmes had been working in Ashdown's office when Des Wilson, who was to run the campaign, appointed her to serve as the campaign coordinator. Appointed in December 1990, she acknowledged that, as a '26-year-old Yank' who had been in the country for less than three years, she was a somewhat unconventional choice on the surface.

Three themes animated the campaign. First was the time itself. There was a new zeitgeist, giving a dramatic backdrop to everything that was being done. This included, most dramatically, foreign affairs. The world was in turmoil and upheaval, but liberals saw hope for a potentially radical shift in global politics in the light of this. Thus, there was a global tone that coloured everything about the Lib Dem campaign. The second theme was that every campaign fights the lingering battles of the last campaign through the prism of the new election. For the Liberal Democrats, this meant navigating the wounds of a painful 1987 campaign and a difficult merger between the Liberals and Social Democrats. The third was that the 1992 election occurred amid a seismic shift in the fundamentals of political campaigning. Technologies were adapting, as was the culture. Spin, professionalisation of politics, the 'Americanisation' of politics; these were all things the party had to adapt to.

The scars of the 1987 election were still felt. It had been a messy campaign, bitter and acrimonious, with many candidates refusing to return to the fray. This had been followed by an even messier merger process, mixed with relaunches and renamings, and some awful polling and election results. As Tim Clement-Jones put it, at one point the party was within the margin of error of not existing in the opinion polls. It was perhaps a blessing in disguise that the party had

no documentation from 1987 remaining, and that many of the key figures in the 1992 campaign, Dr Holmes included, had no stake in many of those battles. Thankfully by the time the next general election rolled about, the party had recovered from these depths with wins in the Eastbourne and Ribble Valley by-elections. The party needed to both build on this work but also recover from the mistakes.

How did the party adapt to these circumstances? Des Wilson was driven by three things: loyalty to Paddy; a sense of responsibility and even embarrassment for the discordant and antagonistic 1987 campaign (as chair of the election committee, the impossible task of managing the tensions between the two Davids in that year cast a shadow over everything he did); and a love for the thrill of campaign strategising. There were three key goals underpinning the strategy for 1992: survival; build and develop for the future; and 20 per cent of the vote and twenty seats. Everything had this developmental focus to it, Wilson wanting to avoid blowing a precious opportunity like the party had in 1987.

Targeting was rigorous and methodical, despite some resistance in the party since such a strategy went against egalitarian impulses. Each seat was given a level, to sum up its importance to the party. New initiatives for diversity and accessibility were set up, regional media coordinators were brought on and trained earlier, and Welsh and Scottish liaisons were brought inside the team. This heavy targeting was integrated into the party's policy platform too. There was no point in trying to sell something nationally if it wouldn't sell locally. The party produced, throughout the parliament, substantial policy works, such as *Shaping Tomorrow Starting Today* and *Changing Britain for Good*, integrated with these campaigning priorities. To hammer home these issues, the party made heavy use of press conference packages and mini-campaigns focused on the Five Es: education, economy, environment, Europe, electoral reform. The last one in particular was tackled head-on by the party with the 'My Vote' campaign. Many in the party had concerns about emphasising electoral reform, as it led to discussions about how Lib Dem votes might lead to a hung parliament, yet Wilson wanted the party to adopt the messaging that a vote could be *for* something, rather than merely against it.

The party also adapted well to the changes in news media. The night team, an innovation of the 1987 campaign, evolved into a twenty-four-hour news monitoring team, especially adept at defending the party's share of news coverage. The party's political broadcasts had been in production for almost two years. This often paid off. The party's local election broadcast in 1991 received higher viewing figures than their rivals. Similarly, though both the Tories and Labour also attempted high-profile road events based around their leaders, Paddy's 'challenge tour' and his unique visit to Europe were effective deployments of his charisma. Not even the news of an extramarital affair five years prior, and the resulting jokes about 'Paddy Pants-down', took this advantage away.

This, arguably, all paid off. The party survived in 1992, and had, perhaps even more importantly, built the necessary foundations for their breakthrough success in 1997. The party had been given a place to stand.

The second speaker, Dennis Kavanagh, emeritus professor of politics at the University of Liverpool and co-author of *The British General Election of 1992*, provided a broader overview of the campaign. Change, he observed, is quite rare in general elections. The pendulum tends to shift quite slowly, and most elections result in a 'confirmation' of what is already underway. Ultimately, despite some signs of change, 1992 proved to be such an election. There was, especially after the removal of Thatcher and the dumping of the poll tax, growing economic optimism. This allowed the Tories to effectively utilise fears about then-shadow chancellor John Smith implementing tax rises were he to enter Number 11, and allowed the Tories to scare wavering Con–Lib floating

voters with the fear of letting Labour in.

Thus, the ingredients were set for an upset Conservative victory, in a dreadful election for the opinion pollsters. One thing didn't sway the election, however. 'It Wasn't *The Sun* Wot Won It', Professor Kavanagh contended, despite the newspaper's post-election claims of playing such a crucial role with its anti-Kinnock headlines, noting there was no sign of a bigger switch among *Sun* readers than anyone else. Still, it was a tight election. An extra half a percent swing against the Tories would have deprived them of their majority. Two things could have boosted the Lib Dems in particular. One was that, though tactical voting did help win seats such as Bath, it was still a relatively small force, and it was only in 1997 when it began delivering big results. Similarly, a more presidential-style election, such as with leader debates, would have allowed the party to make better use of Paddy's popularity.

Ultimately, though, it might well have been a blessing in disguise to lose the election. The economic downturn and Maastricht chaos was coming, and it was, Professor Kavanagh argued, best for both Labour and the Lib Dems to lose such an election. It was especially good for the Liberal Democrats, for both their long-term development and the credibility of coalition governments. Professor Kavanagh also emphasised the importance of the Scottish dimension in prospects for the Liberal Democrats – nearly half of the seats in 1992 were Scottish.

Also in attendance were former MPs who won seats in the 1992 election. Lord Foster emphasised the centrality of the 'Labour cannot win here' message in his race, as well as the 'almost cartoon-like' contrast his own approachable campaign had with Chris Patten's more elusive and distanced approach. Paul Tyler, who won North Cornwall, noted that the local ground war allowed his team to exploit the national air war. Like Foster, Tyler was helped by his opponent's attitude to constituency affairs. His opponent, Gerry Neale, didn't want to be a 'parish pump politician' and was hurt by the central government sitting on an inquiry into local water pollution. Nick Harvey, who won North Devon, noted many candidates who won in 1997 had been on track to win in '92, but were hurt by last-minute events such as the backlash to John Smith's shadow budget and some mistaken final week strategy calls.

Gianni Sarra is a PhD candidate at King's College London, working on issues of political ethics and liberal political theory, and is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.

Reviews

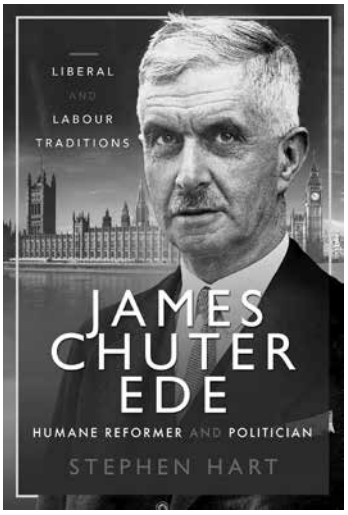
A life of public service

Stephen Hart, *James Chuter Ede: Humane Reformer and Politician – Liberal and Labour traditions* (Pen and Sword Books, 2021)

Review by **Robert Ingham**

The Labour government of 1945–51 included titans of twentieth-century British politics. Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, Cripps, Bevan – the names still resonate. James Chuter Ede is now largely forgotten, but he served as home secretary throughout the entire period. He was the longest serving home secretary since Viscount Sidmouth in the early nineteenth century. In modern times, only Theresa May ran him close.

Inevitably, most of this well researched book – the first ever



biography of Ede – is devoted to his time in government. There is a very detailed account of his role in piloting the 1944 Education Act through parliament, when he was a junior minister, and of the various pieces of legislation for which he was responsible at the Home Office. There is less on the 'Liberal tradition' promised in the title, although the author works hard to link Ede's later career to his Nonconformist upbringing and youthful involvement with Liberal politics.

Ede was born in Surrey in 1882. His father was a baker, and both of his grandfathers were small businessmen. The family was Nonconformist and Ede himself later became a Unitarian. His maternal grandfather was a local councillor, and his mother was described as a 'staunch Nonconformist radical'. Unsurprisingly, Ede was brought up as a Liberal. He trained as a teacher, and by 1903 was secretary of the Epson Liberal Association. He spoke at meetings on free trade and religious equality and had been identified as someone who could speak for candidates at the next election and, no doubt, as a potential future candidate himself. As part of his teacher training, he studied at Cambridge for a time, where he joined the university Liberal Club. In 1908 he was elected to Epsom Urban District Council. He had the backing of the local Working Men's Association and was well known as a Liberal but it's not clear whether he stood on a party label. I suspect he did not. Ede was also active in the Surrey County Teachers' Association and in 1914 was elected to the county council.

How did someone with such a strong grounding in the Liberal Party, active in Liberal politics into the 1910s, end up standing for the Labour Party in Epsom in 1918? It is not clear when Ede joined Labour. In 1960 he said he had joined the party in 1914, but this seems unlikely as the contemporary evidence is that he was still regarded as a Liberal when elected to Surrey County Council. Ede suggested that his wartime experience, particularly being refused a commission because he lacked a private income, had moved him to the left. Disillusionment with the Liberal leadership, particularly Lloyd George, may have been a further factor and the author suggests that Ede's wife, Lilian, may also have contributed.

What is striking is how easy the switch from Liberal to Labour seems to have been for Ede. He himself did not seem to have agonised over the change and nor did there seem to be any strong emotional attachment to the Liberals. Nor did the local Liberal organisation appear to have made any effort to keep him. Perhaps he had been the most active figure in the Epsom Liberal Association and with his departure to France in 1915 the party organisation had become moribund. Whatever the principal reasons for Ede's switch, he never looked back. After a brief period as Labour MP for Mitcham, he represented South Shields from 1929 to 1931 and 1935 to 1964. Although he had no links with the town and rarely visited it, he was the perfect Labour candidate. South Shields had a strong Liberal tradition: indeed, Ede lost the seat to a Liberal, Harcourt Johnstone, in 1931. Ede's background as a Liberal Nonconformist and his lack of interest in internal Labour politics helped attract Liberal voters, and by the time of his retirement South Shields was a safe Labour seat.

During Ede's long political career his Nonconformist beliefs and commitment to administrative reform, particularly in relation to local government matters, are evident. He was a solid administrator and House of Commons man who, in earlier times, would have remained a Liberal throughout. Most of

all, he wanted to get things done and I suspect a long career failing to be elected as a Liberal candidate, on the margins of British politics, would not have appealed. The Liberal Party's loss was the nation's gain.

Stephen Hart should be congratulated for producing a readable biography from material which is, to be polite, unspectacular. There were no skeletons in Ede's closet: no scandals, no salacious correspondence, no catty remarks about colleagues. His was a life of stolid public service, with far more substance than style.

Robert Ingham is Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

From Addis Ababa to Downing Street

Jonny Oates, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (Biteback, 2020)

Review by **Duncan Brack**

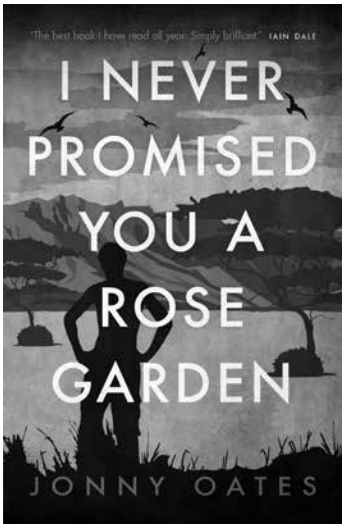
Jonny Oates was the Liberal Democrats' Director of Communications during the 2010 general election campaign, and then chief of staff to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg throughout the 2010–15 coalition government. This book is therefore of interest to anyone seeking to understand the Liberal Democrats' impact on the coalition and the coalition's impact on the Liberal Democrats – but the book is much more than that.

It starts with the impact of the Ethiopian famine of 1984 on its author – at the time, as Oates describes himself, a 'messed-up fifteen-year-old boy'. Messed up he may have been – depressed, unhappy at school and uneasy about his awakening gay sexuality – but he was also, clearly, enormously self-reliant. He managed to steal his father's new credit card, apply for a visa, get the requisite vaccinations, book an airline ticket and fly to Addis Ababa to volunteer to help with famine relief. At his age I cannot imagine myself taking a single one of those steps.

Unfortunately he was also naive, failing to realise that an untrained fifteen-year-old would be of little use to the aid agencies in Ethiopia. Saved from his hopeless situation – and from near-suicide – by a hugely understanding Anglican priest who had been asked to make contact by his parents, he took the priest's advice to return home, gain some qualifications and not to forget about Africa, as the TV cameras inevitably would.

The first part of the book ('Wherever you go') deals with his Ethiopia adventure and its aftermath, including a happier time in his last years at school. The second part ('Finding myself') describes Oates' time putting the priest's advice into practice, teaching English at a secondary school in Zimbabwe and working for the Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa. In many ways these are the best parts of the book, including many deeply personal stories told with humour and insight.

However, this is the *Journal of Liberal History*, so this review will concentrate on the third part ('Towards the Rose Garden'), from Oates' appointment as Director of Communications in September 2009 to the end of the coalition in 2015. (His involvement in the party started at university and included working as political assistant to the Liberal Democrat group on Kingston council, getting elected to the council, being agent for Ed Davey for his successful parliamentary election campaign in 1997, and briefly working at party HQ in 2007.)



His main task was to ensure Nick Clegg's inclusion in the proposed televised leaders' debates, the first in a British general election. Expecting objections from the two larger parties, he took the trouble to learn from the experience of negotiations between the parties and the media before US presidential debates, particularly those in 1974. The key lesson was to focus on the fundamental principles first and refuse to discuss any matters of details before the principles were agreed. This would make it much harder for any party subsequently to withdraw, as it would make them look petty to quit over a matter of detail.

In fact, the key principle – that Clegg should participate on an equal basis – was conceded immediately. Although the details took several further months to hammer out, Oates and his colleagues felt 'like errant schoolchildren who can't believe they have got away with a major transgression and are expecting at any moment to be called back to answer for it' (p. 280).

As we know, conceding Clegg's inclusion was a major error for the larger parties (and not one they repeated in 2015, insisting on a format that marginalised Clegg, much to Oates' anger). YouGov's snap poll after the first debate showed 61 per cent rating Clegg as the best performer, compared to Cameron on 22 per cent and Brown on 17 per cent. Oates covers well the preparations for the debates, and their impact, including the lengths he and his team had to go to to refute the negative stories planted by the Tories and their media allies as the Liberal Democrats soared in the polls. He concluded that: 'Regardless of whether the stories are damaging us – and I think they are – even more significantly, the need to deal with them is denying us the space to think creatively and deliver a strong finish to the campaign' (p. 293).

The last eight chapters of the book deal with the negotiations over the coalition and the following five years of coalition government, in which Oates played a central role in Clegg's office. Oates describes the challenges of setting up a Deputy Prime Minister's operation, within a civil service machine wholly unused to anything other than single-party government, and the various crises the Liberal Democrats, and the coalition, faced, including over ministerial scandals (Laws, Huhne and, less seriously, Cable), tuition fees and Europe. I wish he had written much more on this period – it's been well covered by David Laws, of course, but Oates' account adds colour and flavour. I'm sure he could have offered additional insights.

Like Laws' and Clegg's accounts of the coalition, a strong theme of these chapters is just how different Conservative politicians could be from Liberal Democrats. In the very first days of the new government, when decisions that would shape the next five years were being taken, one matter that Clegg was asked to settle was a request by George Osborne – relayed by Cameron – to be able to use Dorneywood, the grace-and-favour country house previously occupied by the country's last DPM, John Prescott, but also by the previous Chancellor. Osborne had apparently set his heart on it, and particularly wanted to host his fortieth birthday party there. Clegg:

> … was genuinely bewildered that on the first day of this historic coalition Osborne's key focus is on securing a stately home rather than on the considerably more pressing issue of the huge economic challenges that face the country … His bewilderment is still with him when he shares the story with us later that day: 'Who are these people?' he asks.' (p. 306)

More serious is Osborne's response when Clegg vetoes his proposal to freeze benefits, in the coalition's first autumn statement (Oates, and two other key advisers, had previously decided that they would resign if the Lib Dems agreed to that, but had kept it quiet, wanting to see the argument won on its merits, not on their threats).

> After a heated discussion in which Nick refuses to shift his position, Osborne exasperatedly, almost

> spitefully, blurts out, 'Nick, you do know that these people don't vote for you and are never going to vote for you, don't you?' Cameron gives Osborne a patrician glare, as if to say that is not the sort of thing we say in front of the children. Nick responded firmly, with an edge in his voice. 'George, I think we have rather wider responsibilities in government than simply who will vote for us.' Osborne looks genuinely bewildered by this statement.' (pp. 318–19)

(Of course, it can be argued – as I have done, in *Journal of Liberal History* 109 – that the Lib Dems' failure to deliver enough for their voters, or potential voters, was one of the party's key mistakes – but, clearly, that is a long way from adopting Osborne's approach – and that of most Tories – that almost everything a government does should be aimed at maximising its electoral support, no matter the impact on the country.)

Hardly surprisingly, Oates is a staunch defender of Clegg's actions throughout the coalition. He defends his decisions on tuition fees, contending that the basic problem was the Liberal Democrat position in the first place (though I would argue that it was the pledge to vote against any increase in fees, signed by all Lib Dem MPs, rather than the manifesto position – to phase out fees over six years – that was the real problem). In retrospect, Oates thinks that the decision, by Vince Cable and the Treasury, to rule out any form of graduate tax as a solution, was wrong and should have been over-ruled, not least because the policy the coalition finally implemented was similar in many ways to a graduate tax. Not for the first time, Treasury short-sightedness got in the way of intelligent solutions.

Also in common with Laws' accounts, Cameron comes over as a very poor Prime Minister. He establishes the National Security Council not out of any great concern with long-term strategy, but probably, Oates suspects, because:

> he has just watched too many episodes of *The West Wing*. Certainly, long-term strategy is not his interest. He is all tactics and tomorrow's newspapers. Nowhere is this clearer than on Europe. (p. 325).

Cameron: 'can't be bothered with the boring intricacies of alliance-building, or listening to the views of others, of showing real understanding of their concerns and issues. He is used to getting his own way, so he has little purpose to learn these skills.' (p. 326)

After Cameron vetoes the EU treaty change to allow the Eurozone countries more effectively to tackle the debt crisis (against all other member states), Clegg criticises him publicly (Cameron didn't care; his stance went down well with the right-wing press) and warns him:

> 'It doesn't matter how much red meat you feed the Eurosceptics, David, their appetite is insatiable and they'll be back for more. They won't be happy until we are out of Europe and you are out of your job.' Cameron says cheerfully and complacently, 'why don't you let me worry about my party, Nick?' (p. 327)

Conservative flouting of coalition agreements steadily got worse, particularly over Europe, but also over energy and environment policy, and constitutional reform. Oates recalls how, in 2012, Mark Harper, the Conservative deputy to Clegg on constitutional issues, grew so frustrated with Cameron's blocking of reform of the House of Lords that he actually asked Oates to try to persuade Cameron's office to change the Prime Minister's mind. As Oates observed, he didn't fancy his chances.

The book concludes with the grim story of the 2015 election and one mark of hope for the future. A few days after the election, Oates was in Lib Dem HQ, working on finding Liberal Democrat special advisers – now unemployed – new jobs.

> At some point in the morning, Austin [Rathe, in charge of the Membership

> Department] comes around from the other side of the office and says, 'Something very strange is starting to happen: the website is being flooded with people signing up as party members'.

Over 20,000 people joined the party over the following few days, 'providing much-needed cheer for those of us left battered and bruised by the election and fearing for the future of liberalism' (pp. 357–58).

Unlike some of those associated with Nick Clegg's period as party leader, Jonny Oates is still very much active in the party, filling the role of climate spokesperson in the Lords. His book is a mixture of a personal story and a political one. Although I wish there'd been more on the politics, there is a good deal, and it's thoroughly worth reading. And the personal story is deeply affecting. Very highly recommended.

Duncan Brack is Editor of the Journal of Liberal History. *During the first two years of the coalition he was a special adviser to Chris Huhne at DECC.*

Liberal navy or Conservative army?

Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the battle for a national strategy* (Yale University Press, 2021)
Review by **David Boyle**

Reading this book has been something of a revelation for me, and especially perhaps for someone deeply into naval and Liberal history. It explained what went wrong in the First World War – and why there was such terrible suffering and loss of life. It was, in short, because our government briefly forgot that the UK has a traditional way of making war, developed since the days of Drake, which had served us very well.

This is an intellectual biography by a leading naval historian of one of the leading naval historians of the century, Sir Julian Corbett. Corbett was a Liberal, but he turned down the opportunity of becoming a politician, to be a leading visionary – a kind of official historian to the Admiralty – tasked with drawing out from the previous centuries what this 'British way of war' was.

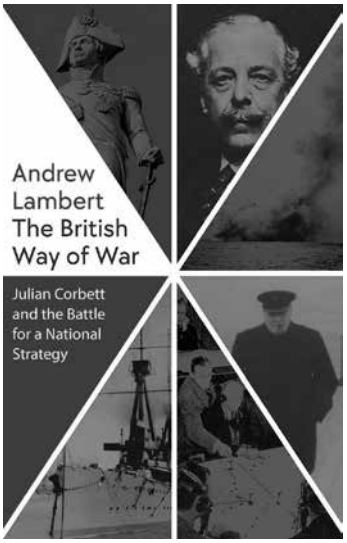
In this respect, he was supporting the radical reforming First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher. And, as such, he was swept up in the great strategic controversy that so divided the forces in the early years of the twentieth century – not just between Fisher's enthusiasts at the Admiralty and those around Lord Charles Beresford, commanding the Channel fleet and a Conservative MP, but between a Liberal navy and Conservative army.

Corbett's view was that we had usually fought limited wars, based on economic blockades – using superior naval forces – which often had the effect of drawing enemy fleets out to fight, as at Trafalgar. It was a doctrine which assumed that there would be no invasion of the UK, as long as we kept enough troops at home to deter any small, sneak attacks. As long as we kept 70,000 troops at home, then an enemy's invasion fleet would need to be big enough to overwhelm at sea.

That depended on the primacy of the navy and on civilian, political control of the armed forces. It was opposed by what Corbett called the 'continental' or the 'German', *Götterdämmerung* approach to war, backed not only by the most conservative elements in the army, but also by Charles Repington, military correspondent of *The Times,* and the author of the 1915 'shell crisis' that was eventually to topple Asquith.

For Corbett, the purpose of the navy was to police the freedom to trade. In wartime, it was to make possible a war of closing down the enemy's ability to trade.

It was sometimes a difficult strategy to square with popular opinion. Keeping defence



spending manageable and under control may have been tough enough; but suggesting that battles were not actually that important must have upset the old guard of both services.

But these were also ways of avoiding the illiberal fate of conscription, which was, of course, the issue that split the party most of all during the war. Peacetime conscription was a particular anathema for Corbett – it would make the empire seem aggressive and would draw down the rage of the world upon it.

Corbett died relatively young in 1922, having finished only three volumes of the official naval history of the war, *Naval Operations*. So he wasn't there to press home his message – about why his ideas were not used in 1914.

First, perhaps, because, the Asquith government would not take a decision between these two, rival naval and military factions. Second, they may also – though Lambert does not really speculate about this – have been nervous of upsetting the army so soon after the Curragh mutiny in March 1914, which had been so encouraged by the Conservative leadership. Third, there was the fear of encouraging imperialist divisions on the Liberal side – which was why Sir Edward Grey's 'Entente' negotiations with the French stayed secret (by the way, it is extraordinary that our opponents in two world wars were *surprised* when we declared war – so much for deterrence…).

What was supposed to happen was a similar chain of events to 1905, when relations with imperial Germany had reached crisis point. At that time, Fisher had sent the Channel fleet into the Baltic – after which Germany backed down. This had been Fisher's plan in the event of war with Germany, which is why he built three battlecruiser-monitors to be ready in 1916, to go back into the Baltic to stop the flow of iron ore into Germany. As Nelson had found before Trafalgar, that was also the best way of getting an enemy fleet out and into action – something that only happened once in the whole war (and the Battle of Jutland seemed pretty indecisive at the time).

Here was the real reason why Fisher resigned as First Sea Lord in 1915 – not because he was going senile, as Churchill implied, nor that he was smarting from all the subtractions from his Grand Fleet to go to the Dardanelles – but because Churchill had transferred submarines from the Baltic to the Dardanelles (including my cousin's E14, the subject of my book *Unheard, Unseen*). The Dardanelles venture was the only proper attempt made during the whole war to fight in the traditional way, not including other smaller efforts by Keyes at Zeebrugge or Lawrence of Arabia. It was beset by foot-dragging by both services and too many delays to be successful. But it wasn't the obvious failure of this attempt to knock Turkey out of the war that upset Fisher so much. It was the evidence that his Baltic project no longer had official approval.

The trouble in 1914 was that the army took control of the agenda. The first meeting of the war cabinet included four ministers, including Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, plus seven generals and only one admiral (Battenberg) – who said little. Churchill was a young man in a hurry – he didn't want to wait for Fisher's Baltic fleet to be ready. But he agreed on the importance of avoiding having a mass conscripted army on the western front 'chewing barbed wire'. The result was the Dardanelles venture, with only lukewarm support from either Fisher or the War Office. That was why he was bundled out of office just as the Liberal Party was.

A sad end for Fisher; and yet, despite himself, Churchill

found himself fighting a Corbett-style war of national survival in 1940.

I have no idea what Lambert's politics are, and the book – as he warns us at the beginning – is far too long. Yet I feel I so much better understand those critical years of the last Liberal government as a result of reading it.

David Boyle is the author of Unheard, Unseen: Submarine E14 and the Dardanelles *and a former editor of* Liberal Democrat News.

Public office and public trust

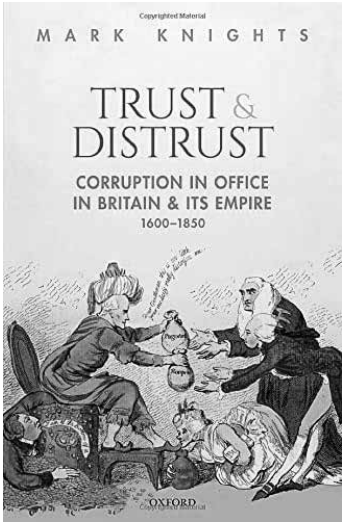
Mark Knights, *Trust & Distrust: Corruption in Office in Britain and its Empire, 1600–1850* (Oxford University Press, 2021)

Review by **Tom Crooks**

The idea that officeholders should serve the public interest, rather than their own, is now a fundamental axiom of public life. Public office is a public trust and officeholders are accountable to the public on precisely this basis. It is an axiom that nineteenth-century liberalism, in its various party-based forms (as liberal Toryism, Whig reformism and Gladstonian Liberalism especially), can justly lay claim to having done most to institutionalise in Britain, thereby purifying the state from all manner of official abuses and forms of corruption. It was liberalism that did most to root out sinecures and the sale of office, restrict the use of official patronage and nepotism, bring an end to Anglican and aristocratic fiscal and administrative privileges, not to mention liberate the press from stamp duties and introduce mechanisms of official auditing. It was liberalism, in other words, that principally put paid to what historians call 'Old Corruption'.

Yet, as Mark Knights argues in *Trust & Distrust*, we need to recast entirely how we understand this achievement. Conventionally, the successes of nineteenth-century liberalism are understood in the context of an 'age of reform' that began in the 1780s with the birth of popular radicalism, the loss of the American colonies, and a short-lived campaign for 'economical reform' designed to curb the corrupting 'influence of the Crown' over parliament. For Knights, however, we need to probe much deeper than this and set the blows struck for purity by liberalism in the context of a pre-modern landscape – 'a long early modernity' (p. 422) – that began with the political struggles of the early seventeenth-century Stuart monarchy. Early modernists, the book's principal audience, will no doubt find much to admire in this rich, expansive and meticulous work; but it raises questions for historians of modern liberalism, too, offering, among other things, a kind of archaeology of the multiple concepts, reformist ambitions and institutional designs that finally came to fruition in the nineteenth century.

Crudely speaking, the ten chapters (chapters 3 to 12) that make up the main body of the book, following the introduction and a scene-setting chapter on the East India Company, fall into two sorts. Chapters 3 to 6 are more discursive in orientation, excavating the pre-modern roots of a cluster of concepts that we now take for granted. Chief among these is the one noted above: the fiduciary premise that 'public office' is a 'public trust'. As Knights details, this was pieced together over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries via a series of political skirmishes, some of which indeed were fundamental. The Civil War (1642–51) was, conceptually at least, partly fought in these terms (ch. 5). Each side invoked the idea that 'public office' was a 'trust', consolidating conceptual and linguistic innovations that had seeped into public life from the start of the century. The key question by mid-century



was from who or what, ultimately, this trust derived: God or humans? In time, the latter, more secular source was privileged, transforming trust in public officeholders into something that was granted only conditionally, not absolutely – and hence, as Knights suggests, introducing an element of accountability and, paradoxically, *dis*trust into the equation (pp. 141–3). To be sure, thanks to the work of J. G. A. Pocock and others we know of the role that Christian, civic humanist and Enlightenment ideals played in stimulating the process of reforming public office. What Knights adds to the mix, with unique rigour and consistency, is the crucial role played by the law and legal disputes. However ambiguous and poorly enforced they may have been, common law and statute law were crucial to redefining the abuse of public office as a series of specific, corrupt transgressions. There are some fascinating sections which detail the early-modern evolution and legal application of the terms 'bribery', 'extortion', 'fraud' and 'embezzlement' (pp. 93–8).

The remaining chapters are more concerned with what was done in practice to secure the probity of officeholders, from the introduction of formal mechanisms of financial accountability (ch. 7) and the role of the press and whistle-blowers (chs. 8–9) to the scrutiny of political opponents, the eradication of sinecures, and efforts to regulate the exchange of gifts (chs. 10–12). As we might expect, there was much resistance on the part of the elites. Government officials sought to censor the press prior to 1695 when faced with allegations of corruption; and thereafter, when their powers in this respect were abolished, they relied on the common law of libel (ch. 9). More generally, critics of official corruption were often met with the countercharge that they were only indulging in self-interested, partisan attacks and were themselves responsible for undermining public trust. Then, as now, there was a lively, if sometimes petty, politics of corruption (ch. 10).

Yet, as Knights stresses throughout, resistance to reforms or charges of malfeasance was not always the product of self-interested officeholders clinging on to perks and privileges that they knew were widely recognised as 'corrupt'. In fact, it was often unclear quite where the lines should be drawn between the legitimate and illegitimate. At the very least there was scope for dispute. This brings us to one of the core features of the book: the incremental, stop-start nature of reform in the context of a hierarchical society still wedded to inherited customs and conventions that precluded delegitimising the private interests of officeholders. In 1725, when he was impeached for selling offices in the Court of Chancery, Lord Macclesfield protested that established 'usage' under common law rendered the practice 'a sort of right'. Gift-giving was especially ambiguous (pp. 363–5). A splendid example is given in chapter 2, where the case of Sir Edward Colebrooke, a high-ranking official in the East India Company, is detailed. In 1829, Colebrooke was charged with corruptly accepting gifts from native rulers. Colebrooke's defence, in what became a minor *cause célèbre*, was that he was merely complying with British and Indian codes of behaviour that ensured deference and sociability through exchanging gifts. In both cases, the charges stuck; but as Knights suggests, the ambitions of reformers were often far in advance of norms and practices deemed essential to the maintenance of social order.

None of this necessarily diminishes the achievements of nineteenth-century

A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

Was the coalition a mistake? Why did we fail to stop Brexit?

Launch of *Partnership & Politics in a Divided Decade*, by husband-and-wife team **Vince Cable and Rachel Smith**.

This new book tells the inside story of Vince Cable's political career during the turbulent decade of the 2010s. The book covers Vince's time as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills in the Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition government, from 2010 to 2015. Having lost his seat in the calamitous 2015 election, Vince returned to Parliament in 2017, and six weeks later was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats. The book includes his time as party leader and the Liberal Democrats' role in the attempts to force a second referendum on the terms of the Brexit deal. Chair/interviewer: **Anne Perkins**, journalist and historian.

6.30pm, Friday 7 October 2022
David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club (1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE). Drinks refreshments will be provided, and you will also have a chance to purchase *Partnership & Politics in a Divided Decade*.

Those unable to attend in person will be able to view the meeting via Zoom. Please register for online access via the History Group website (https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/). For those attending in person, there is no need to register.

liberalism. But in light of Knights' account, we should certainly revise our sense of the novelty – indeed history – of liberal principles of public service and accountability. As Knights concludes, the ideal of the selfless, impartial, accountable official was first forged in the seventeenth century, as were the idioms and concepts through which it was articulated: 'public office', 'public trust', and so on (p. 420). By the same token, his recovery of the painfully slow pace of change suggests that the progress secured by liberalism after roughly 1800 was possible only on the basis of social changes, rather than political and cultural ones: the final displacement of personalised, patrimonial forms of authority from the heart of public life and the economy. The achievements of nineteenth-century liberalism should still stand, then, but not without adding some significant qualifications regarding their place within a long succession of anti-corruption initiatives, stretching over two hundred or so years.

Tom Crook is Reader in British History at Oxford Brookes University and is currently writing a history of corruption and public life in modern Britain, from roughly1880 to the present.