

Report

Working with Labour: The Liberal Party and the Balance of Power 1923–31

Conference fringe meeting (online), 11 March 2022, with Professor Philip Williamson and Michael Meadowcroft; Chair: Wendy Chamberlain MP
Report by **Joseph Walker**

PROFESSOR PHILIP WILLIAMSON (Durham University) opened the meeting with the proposition that the Liberal decline had not been inevitable, and that a Liberal recovery during the 1920s had been perfectly possible had things gone differently. He gave an overview of common explanations for the Liberal decline, including the impact of the First World War and the split between Asquith and Lloyd George. Yet he saw none of these as sufficient to explain the extent of the Liberal collapse. Instead, he attributed the real decline to the impacts of the first-past-the-post electoral system. Specifically, and perhaps counter-intuitively, he argued that what really hurt the Liberals was the fact that they held the balance of power in the House of Commons, both during 1924 and again from 1929 to 1931.

The triangle or the millstone?

Liberals of the 1920s regarded themselves as ‘a middle party’,

but there were two competing visions of what this meant. In one, the party was positioned in a triangle with the Conservative and Labour parties – allowing the Liberals to retain power and influence, and even obtain government positions, within the context of a three-party system. Alternatively, the Liberals could be seen as placed between two millstones – Labour and the Conservatives – and hence at risk of being crushed. Until 1931, the idea of a permanent triangle of parties seemed conceivable, but it was the millstone version that was the longer-term reality.

Williamson argued that, even in the '20s, things were tending toward the millstone version of events because of the political pressures of the time. These included issues such as the huge expansion in the franchise that had happened in 1918; the political system was being remade and neither the Conservatives nor Labour were confident, even as late as 1931, that they could become enduring parties of government. They therefore

had much to fight for, and political polarisation was a compelling option for them.

The Liberal collapse to a marginalised rump from 1935 onwards was not inevitable, according to Williamson. The Liberals possessed agency in this process, and they contributed to their own decline by being unable to sustain discipline, collective pragmatism, and tactical dexterity. The Conservatives and Labour were operating a tacit anti-Liberal alliance, and, after the 1923 election, they successfully manoeuvred the Liberals into the worst of all possible political worlds: voting against the Conservatives to allow Labour into office and then, nine months later, voting against Labour and causing another election. In so doing, the Liberals managed to annoy both wings of their own party: the anti-socialists and the progressives. Voters regarded the Liberals as the cause of instability, and they were left with just forty MPs.

Liberal strategies: back to basics vs modernisation

At this point, the party divided into two camps as it debated how to survive. Asquith's Liberals favoured a restatement of traditional Liberal values: peace, free trade, retrenchment (cutting public spending), and temperance. This view of pristine Liberal independence would offer negative opposition to both

the Conservatives and Labour, while waiting for voters to come to their Liberal senses.

Lloyd George had a different approach that focused on modernisation: remaking the party with new policies to address the new post-war problems. If Liberal policy could achieve relevance in this way, then the party could not be ignored or crushed. Between 1924 and 1928, a series of detailed policy reports on issues such as land, coal and power were released. These gained attention and widespread praise, even from Lloyd George's critics. In this context, the Asquith approach could not make headway.

Lloyd George was to spend the modern equivalent of £30 million trying to revive the Liberals. But what were his aims? According to Williamson, although the party fielded over 500 candidates in 1929, this was only so as to look plausible – to look as though the Liberals were aiming for a majority. The real aim was to gain the balance of power by winning about 100 seats, and then to work with whoever necessary in order to secure a Liberal future by achieving electoral reform. Had Lloyd George succeeded, the triangle arrangement would likely have become a permanent reality. Yet he was able to win only fifty-nine seats. This could only be seen as a delay to the inexorable progress of decline.

In March 1930, the Liberals cornered Labour into

supporting electoral reform, in return for passing a vital trade union bill (and in the context of the political pressures of the great depression) – but this was only the alternative vote and not the proportional representation system that Liberals truly sought. Yet despite this watering down, Labour's National Executive rejected it, forcing Lloyd George into a desperate race to obtain electoral reform before the Labour government collapsed.

The Liberal anti-socialists vs the Liberal progressives

One of Williamson's most interesting observations was that Liberal problems were, counter-intuitively, magnified by the possession at various times of the balance of power. While holding the balance of power was exactly what many Liberals wanted, it was in practice debilitating, turning the Liberals into a lightning rod for political discontentment. By March 1931, Lloyd George had persuaded a weak Labour Party into a progressive alliance, but the price was the smothering of the distinctive Liberal economic radicalism of the 1920s, causing a new campaign for a Liberal revival based on free trade. In this situation, the party could not maintain cohesion and was simply torn apart.

Ambitious Liberal politicians (most notably of all, Churchill) were attracted to

either Labour or the Conservatives, leading to defections. Meanwhile, a clear demarcation between anti-socialist Liberals on the one hand, and progressive Liberals on the other, became apparent (a division that arguably still exists within the current Liberal Democrats). By June 1931, the anti-socialists, who comprised maybe a third of the party, were essentially in alignment with the Conservatives. The rest were closer to Labour.

Labour had only agreed to the 1931 alliance because they could see that the Liberals were splintering – though this was postponed by the formation of the National Government, which saw the Liberals gain ministerial office even as it precipitated their end as a major party. However, the 'official' Liberal grouping within the National Government could not accept protectionist policies antithetical to core traditional Liberal values. They left the government in 1932 and were crushed in the ensuing 1935 election.

Problems within the Labour Party

The second speaker, former Liberal MP Michael Meadowcroft, took a rather different approach to the discussion. Focusing mainly on the earlier part of the period – 1923–24 – he identified problems inside the Labour Party as the main issue. He said that, in his view, if he were to stick tightly to

the topic of the meeting – ‘working with Labour’ – then it would be a very short discussion indeed as there had in reality been no cooperation with Labour at all. He also blamed the downfall of the Liberals on an oyster.

The popular version of the wider story is that the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald had set out to kill the Liberals and had done so. Meadowcroft argued instead that MacDonald had intended to show that Labour could govern responsibly, and for his government to last for a much more significant period of time than in fact it did in 1924. The fact that it did not was blamed on the party whips.

The basic problem was that Labour, as newcomers both to government and, relatively, to parliament, simply did not understand the way things worked. In particular, they did not appreciate just how crucial the party whips were to managing any sort of cooperation with the Liberals. For example, Labour, which was not even the largest party in the House after the 1923 election, would regularly announce what it was going to do without first coordinating with the Liberals to ensure that they had enough MPs present to allow parliamentary business to continue. On many occasions, not enough MPs were present, meaning that the Conservatives could simply stop business continuing. Labour was not helped by its Chief Whip,

Ben Spoor, who suffered from twin personal problems: recurrent malaria, first contracted during the First World War, and alcoholism. Spoor held his position from 1924 until his death in 1928, meaning that Labour’s parliamentary business was not conducted well during this period.

Problems in the Liberals, and the little-known oyster theory

Meadowcroft also focused on the Liberal whips. He told the story of highly competent Liberal Chief Whip, Percy Illingworth, who, in 1915, ate a bad oyster that resulted in his death from typhoid fever. Then Liberal leader Asquith subsequently went through a series of unsatisfactory whips, before alighting on Vivian Phillips who, although he was competent, held a deep dislike of David Lloyd George. This contributed strongly to the split in the Liberal Party between Lloyd George and Asquith; Lloyd George is said to have commented that had Illingworth not died, then the problems between him and Asquith could have been entirely averted. Seen in this light, the entire demise of the Liberals can theoretically be pinned on an oyster.

A complete lack of Lib-Lab cooperation

Returning to Labour, Meadowcroft discussed other

ways in which the party had been mismanaged, including MacDonald being hugely overworked by insisting on holding the position of Foreign Secretary as well as Prime Minister. Labour had also behaved badly by selecting candidates to stand against Liberals in Conservative-facing seats, thus risking splitting the anti-Tory vote, even as the Liberal and Labour parties were supposedly cooperating. One such action resulted in the loss of a Liberal seat at the Oxford by-election in June 1924. This severely damaged trust between the two parties, and resulted in Lloyd George publicly accusing Labour of using the Liberals as an ‘oxen’ to drag their party along the rough roads of Parliament and then to slaughter them when they were no longer needed.

Although the final act that brought down Labour in 1924 was Conservative support for a Liberal motion for an inquiry into the Campbell case (the decisions by the government first to prosecute the journalist John Campbell for incitement to mutiny, and then to drop the prosecution), this had never been the Liberals’ intention. The government foolishly declared that they would treat the matter as a vote of confidence, the Conservatives supported the motion and the Liberals could not then be seen to oppose their own motion. Meadowcroft’s case was essentially that the Liberals had not intended

to bring down Labour, but that it happened because Labour and the Liberals were not well-managed enough to cooperate. The 1924 Labour government fell over what was in reality an insignificant procedural matter, and the subsequent election was a disaster for both Labour and the Liberals.

Discussion

The first questioner asked whether animosity toward David Lloyd George had been a major factor in limiting Liberal influence. Williamson argued that Baldwin had had a strong dislike of Lloyd George, while Meadowcroft pointed out that MacDonald 'had no problem with Liberals' since he had never been opposed by them personally in his Leicester constituency. Williamson concluded that the Lloyd George aspect was important, 'but could have been overcome if the political dynamics had been different.'

Other questions focused on electoral reform. Did the Liberals only support it because it benefited them? And when did the Liberal Party first support reform? The answer to this from Williamson was that the Liberals had supported a move away from first-past-the-post from the late nineteenth century. This raised a further question: why hadn't they implemented it when they had had the power to do so? The answer, again from

Williamson, was that Lloyd George was ready to do so in 1917 but was persuaded not to by the Conservatives on the basis that changing the voting system was just going to be too difficult in wartime. Presumably, had Lloyd George

seen what was to become of the Liberals after the First World War, he would have acted rather differently.

Joseph Walker is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.

Reviews

Asquith and his background

V. Markham Lester, *H. H. Asquith: Last of the Romans* (Lexington Books, 2019)

Review by **Katheryn Gallant**

ALTHOUGH H. H. Asquith was the longest-serving British prime minister between Lord Liverpool and Margaret Thatcher, he has not had many biographers. J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith's two-volume biography, published in 1932 (four years after Asquith's death), verges on hagiography, as might be expected for a book written by (respectively) a friend and a son of the subject. Roy Jenkins' biography, published in 1964, although sympathetic to Asquith, has a far more spritely and accessible style. It was this book that first revealed to readers the existence of Asquith's letters to Venetia Stanley, which Jenkins extensively cited. This was despite the doubts of Asquith's devoted daughter,

Lady Violet Bonham Carter, who was reluctant to publish the excerpts from her father's letters to the young woman who had been Lady Violet's best friend during her youth, but nevertheless gave Jenkins permission to do so. Stephen Koss's biography, published in 1976, although shorter than the Spender/Asquith biography and the Jenkins biography, was perhaps the most scholarly until now. The Koss biography was more nuanced than Jenkins', but not as well-written. George H. Cassar's *Asquith as War Leader*, published in 1994, is an extremely helpful monograph on Asquith's governance during the First World War, but it is not a biography that covers Asquith's entire career. Colin Clifford's *The Asquiths*, published in 2002, is also