

# Reports

## *The Strange Death of Liberal England Revisited*

Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting, 10 July 2023, with Professor Vernon Bogdanor CBE and Professor Richard Toye; chair: Anne Perkins.

Report by Nick Alderton

Back in 2012, when I started my PhD journey, the very first book that I purchased was George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, first published in 1935. My first chapter was to assess the link between the collapse of the Liberals in England and the Liberals in Wales. I read it within a few days, it was a hard book to put down. The story just flowed and the plot unravelled like a great whodunnit. However, I noted its contradictions, the ire directed at the key actors, in particular, Lloyd George and the Conservatives. I was struck by the animosity that Dangerfield directed at Lloyd George and the Welsh.

However, as the first book that I had read on the subject, I thought it to be a plausible description of the decline of the Liberal Party and, had I read nothing else on the subject, I very may well have accepted it as the definitive account. In fact Dangerfield's book was the start of a rabbit hole into which any historian of the era must descend. What became obvious was that *The Strange Death of Liberal England* formed the beginning of a debate, and it is a testament to Dangerfield's work or, at least, its effect on the academic and public consciousness, that it took around 30 years for the next major work on the same subject to be published. Trevor Wilson's *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914–35*, published in 1966,

identified the cause as the illiberal actions of the Liberals during the First World War. Then came Peter F. Clarke's *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, Duncan Tanner's *Political Change and the Labour Party*, and a whole host of other articles and books on the English and Welsh Liberals' decline by, among others, Kenneth O. Morgan, Tanner and E.H.H. Green, Russell Deacon and J. Graham Jones.

With each new work, it became obvious that all of these authors were using Dangerfield's work as their jumping-off point. While none of them fully agreed with the arguments in the *Strange Death of Liberal England*, they all acknowledged the debt owed to this work. As a contemporary historian, no matter whether you are looking at the Liberals, the cultural changes of the period, the rise of the Labour Party or the dominance of the Conservative Party, you must acknowledge a debt, make reference to or actively engage with *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Dangerfield's work looms large and cannot be ignored.

It is in this context that the Liberal Democrat History Group convened a discussion meeting on Dangerfield's work: *The Strange Death of Liberal England* revisited.

The meeting was chaired by the journalist Anne Perkins, who is currently writing a biography of Violet

Bonham Carter. The guest speakers were the historians Vernon Bogdanor and Richard Toye. Bogdanor had recently published his own contribution to the debate, *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain: Politics and Power Before the First World War* (Biteback, 2022) and Toye has published widely on the period, including *Lloyd George and Churchill: Rivals for Greatness* (Pan Books, 2008) and, as co-editor with Julie V. Gottlieb, *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918–1945* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

### **Vernon Bogdanor: The strange survival of Liberal Britain**

Bogdanor began by issuing two warnings. The first was that he would not be talking about the 'strange death of the Liberal Party, but of a Liberal culture which he (Dangerfield) thought had died in 1914 and I think had not died in 1914'. The second was that the Liberal Party before the First World War was a 'very different animal' to the Liberal Party that emerged after the Second World War, and the Liberal Democrats. He qualified this by stating that the Liberals before the First World War were in favour of single-chambered government, having fought the hereditary House of Lords on issues such as land reform and Lloyd George's 'People's Budget'. He also reminded us that the Liberals were very much in favour of the first-past-the-post electoral system, having won a landslide general election victory in 1906, albeit on a minority of the vote – almost 49 per cent.

Bogdanor set out his case that Liberal Britain was in a state of flux in the pre-World War One era: the Liberals were challenged but not fatally wounded. There were ideological

challenges to traditional Gladstonian Liberalism, Joseph Chamberlain was calling for the end of free trade and politics was moving from an aristocratic to a democratic system. Women and trade unions were demanding representation and recognition. A major turning point of the era was that the economy was becoming part of the political debate, in contrast to the previous century, where political debates had been primarily over constitutional and religious issues. The economy and Westminster were no longer seen as separate spheres, where neither could influence the other – as exemplified by William Harcourt’s famous remark, ‘We’re all socialists now’. This newfound focus on the economy opened up the social question and the realisation that social inequalities were no longer ‘divinely ordained’; they could be tackled by the state through its management of the economy.

For Bogdanor, Dangerfield’s thesis that Liberal England was killed by the inability of the Liberal Party to meet the challenges of labour, the suffragettes or Ireland, was incorrect. Indeed, he argued that these and other issues of the pre-war era had been, largely, resolved. The House of Lords had been dealt with, the trade unions were being incorporated into the state, Ireland was on the way to a solution and the suffrage issue was eventually to be resolved after the war.

The second part of Professor Bogdanor’s talk expanded on two of the issues that Dangerfield identified as finishing off Liberal England: women’s suffrage – which the Liberals were not managing to settle – and Ireland – which they were on the way to.

On the suffrage question, Bogdanor noted that Britain had claimed to fight the Boer War over a question of democracy. The Uitlanders – British citizens living in the Transvaal – were not given the vote and their grievances could not be dealt with; they were marked with a badge of inferiority. The same argument could be used by women at home, in the land of their birth. Nevertheless, as he pointed out, by the mid-1880s women made up 17 per cent of the local electorate and by the 1890s, 1,500 women were being elected to local government. In fact there was a majority in parliament in favour of women’s suffrage, as demonstrated by votes on private member’s bills, but the government would not take the issue further. He acknowledged that the misogyny and antipathy of Asquith and others had played a part in delaying the progress of women’s suffrage, but it was not the only reason. Other factors in play included the animosity of several prominent women who were openly opposed to women gaining the vote, including Florence Nightingale, Mrs Asquith, Lady Randolph Churchill, the archaeologist Gertrude Bell and, until November 1906, Beatrice Webb.

Although there was a majority in favour of the principle, however, there was disagreement over the terms on which women should be given the vote. Should it be on the same terms as men currently held, which was based on property ownership, or should full adult suffrage be granted? The issue was further complicated by two prominent organisations whose *raison d’être* was to gain the vote for women. The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) both wanted women to obtain the

vote on the same basis as men, but neither wanted full adult suffrage. It was this lack of clarity, from all sides, as to how to progress, coupled with the suffragettes’ militancy and a lack of political will that stymied the suffrage cause before the outbreak of the war. In the end women were granted limited suffrage in 1918 and full adult suffrage in 1928.

Bogdanor then moved on to the issue of Ireland and Ulster, noting that this was broadly a success for the Liberals. Before the outbreak of the First World War, the Liberals had accepted that there was no way to force Ulster to be part of an Irish Home Rule Parliament and it therefore had to be given the right to exclude itself. In turn this raised two problems, however: for how long should Ulster exclude itself, and what counted as Ulster? The first was solved when Asquith agreed that Ulster could exclude itself for an unlimited time or until Unionist opinion changed. The second problem was the demographic of the nine counties of Ulster. It was agreed that Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, with their large Catholic majorities, should join the Dublin Parliament, while Antrim, Derry, Armagh and Down had large Protestant majorities and should be excluded. But Fermanagh and Tyrone had only small Catholic majorities; both sides could lay claim to these counties.

Bogdanor argued that had the war not intervened, the issue of Fermanagh and Tyrone would have been settled by force, and a civil war could have ensued. However, as war on the continent became ever more likely, the prospect of civil war in Ireland became less so, since Ulster unionists would have had to look to English unionists for support, but in

England, the unionists were worried that any civil war could prevent Britain from entering a continental war, therefore playing into Germany's hands. As Lloyd George asserted, 'Men would die for the Empire but not for Fermanagh and Tyrone'. Bogdanor concluded by pointing out that 'the British parties were actually much closer on Irish matters than appeared or that they were willing to admit. Home Rule on the basis of partitions was a *fait accompli* and the years of party struggle had produced the materials for settlement by consent.' Bogdanor believed that if the war had not intervened, then a very moderate Dublin Parliament would have been placed on the statute books.

### **Richard Toye: 'the strange survival of George Dangerfield'**

Whereas Bogdanor directly engaged with Dangerfield's arguments, Richard Toye took a different approach, focusing on 'the strange survival of George Dangerfield', and exploring why people are still arguing about a 90-year-old book. He asked that the audience think of his talk as him making notes on how to write a book that will not only survive but will still be debated 100 years after it was written.

Toye noted that Dangerfield was born in 1904 and his recollections of the period about which we were writing were, by his own admission, 'not very helpful.' This opened up Dangerfield to resentment from those who had 'lived it', pointing out that he had been too young to remember the events. However, as Toye pointed out, those who had 'lived it' do not always get it right either. Toye observed that the sources Dangerfield cited were vague, based

on published materials and 'private information'; it is not clear what the 'private information' was or if it involved any interviews. Nevertheless, Toye argued that the book should be seen more as an early contribution to the field of contemporary history, a term that was not readily recognised at the time as an academic discipline. The book was reviewed not only in the *Journal of Social Science* but also in the mainstream press, weeklies and quarterly journals, achieving a level of coverage that an academic work would rarely receive today. As Toye points out, Dangerfield was not looking for traditional academic acceptance; R.C.K. Ensor's criticism that his book was written like a novel would not have bothered him.

Toye noted that the book is fun to read and is written in an irreverent way, possibly influenced by Margot Asquith's autobiography and J. Maynard Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Both of them offered blunt portraits of historical figures and did not conform to the norms of how a public figure should write about others. Toye also pointed out, however, that the book's arguments could be incoherent, contradictory and opaque. For example, Dangerfield placed strong emphasis on the years between 1910 and 1914 as the period during which Liberalism died, but he also claimed, at various points, that the Liberal Party was doomed by events varying from the 1906 general election to the Curragh incident in 1914 and the death of Rupert Brook in 1915. Dangerfield undermined his own thesis, not just once but on multiple occasions.

On the issue of Dangerfield's title and what exactly it was that had died, Toye noted that those who

argued that Liberalism had survived did not appear to have paid attention to Dangerfield's assertion in the book's preface that the: 'true pre-War Liberalism – supported, as it still was in 1910 by Free Trade, a majority in Parliament, the ten commandments and the illusion of Progress – can never return. It was killed, or it killed itself, in 1913.' Toye explained that all four of these tenets of the old Liberalism had passed and Dangerfield was suggesting that a kind of moral order had died with them. Some of the contemporary reviews of the book made it obvious that Dangerfield's thesis was questioned even when it was first published.

Toye put forward his suggestions on how to write a book that will last for 100 years. It would need a catchy title; the book must be highly readable; and it needs to have a plausible argument – but not one that is uncontentious; it needs to be something that people want to disagree with. Toye argued that Dangerfield's book survived because it proved a foil for historians. 'It gave them something to argue against and sometimes, I think it's fair to say, that historians have argued against a caricatured version of the argument or a simplified version of the argument, as opposed to what Dangerfield actually said himself.' In conclusion, he noted that the work: 'raised important questions, even if it did not get all the answers right'.

### **Discussion**

Following the speakers, it was obvious that the audience had been thoroughly engaged, and many questions were asked. One focused on Campbell-Bannerman's attitude to giving women the vote; Bogdanor responded that he was

mildly in favour of it. Another asked if the electoral decline of the Liberals between 1906 and the 1930s was more a reflection of the increased size of the electorate than of other factors. Bogdanor didn't think it was; the Liberals were not putting up enough candidates and the party was seen as divided and unhelpful on women's suffrage. Toye thought it was too late for the Liberals to present themselves as being on the side of women. There were other questions, including whether the Liberals failed because they had lost their nerve and whether Dangerfield should be read as serious history or not.

In concluding this report, it has to be said that by framing their talks in two distinctive ways, the audience was treated to an interesting, entertaining and rounded example of why Dangerfield's book still matters. Almost 90 years after publication, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* still has the power to provoke debate amongst academics and the public alike.

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speech and diversity during and after the Civil War and the Restoration, the emergence of the authoritarian Tories and the limited-government Whigs. After the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–89, Andrew Loader explains in the essay on Human Rights, 'this developed into a broader philosophy of accountable government, equality before the law and religious tolerance.' Faced with the corruption of 18<sup>th</sup> century parliamentary politics, the radical MP John Wilkes introduced the first electoral reform bill into Parliament in 1776. Entrenched opposition from government and peers, and the wars with revolutionary France, meant that fears of public disorder, as well as the skills of the Whig government, carried the first Reform Bill through Parliament in 1832. Tony Little sketches the successive campaigns to extend voting rights and regulate elections, against Conservative resistance that remains today.

There follow contributions on government reform, gender equality, internationalism, the economy, education, welfare, health and the environment, with a Timeline appendix that runs from the Exclusion Crisis in

# Reviews

## Liberal achievements

*What Have the Liberals Ever Done For Us? 350 years of Liberal and Liberal Democrat achievements* (Liberal Democrat History Group, 2023)

Review by William Wallace

The English history I was taught as an undergraduate (and it was very English, with few references to Scotland, let alone Ireland) didn't tell me much about the competing traditions of Liberalism, Conservatism and socialism, and very little about the domestic achievements of past British governments. Those who haven't specialised in History will have gathered even less on the threads of our political history that focus on policy rather than leadership. So this 50-page collection of essays on Whig, Liberal and now Liberal Democrat shaping

of British policy in a range of fields will be welcome to party members and sympathisers.

When I joined the Liberal Party the sad comment was that the Liberals were full of good ideas, from which the other parties would pinch the best and claim them as their own. Listening to Jeremy Hunt as Chancellor claim credit for the Conservatives for taking so many lower wage earners out of income tax shows that this habit has not disappeared. These essays, however, take us far further back, starting with the vigorous debates on liberty, freedom of

