

# Journal of Liberal History

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**The Rainbow Circle**

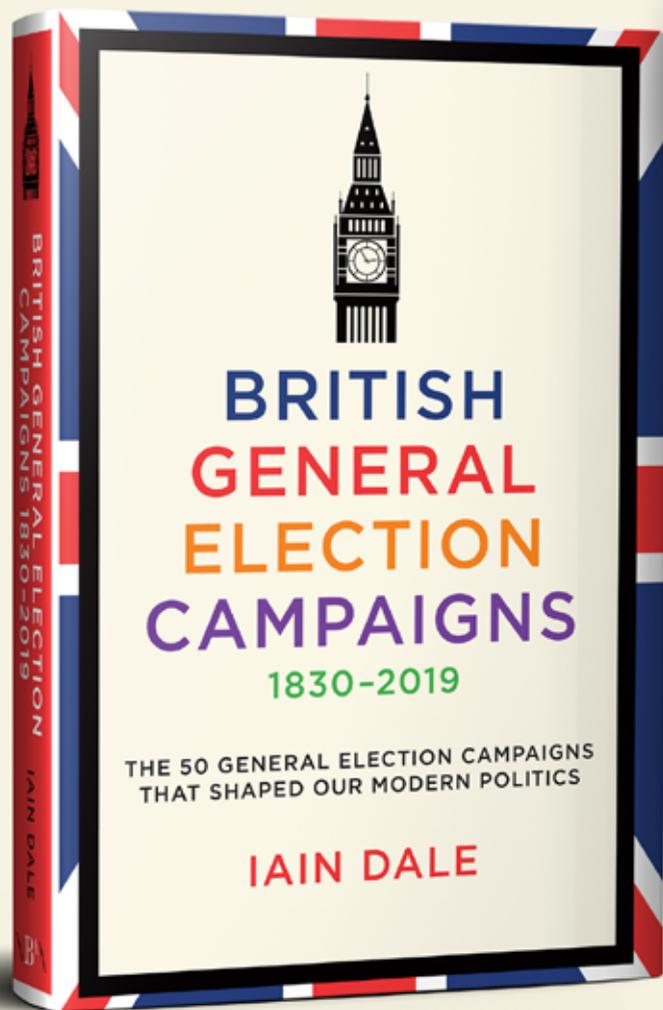
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## Journal of Liberal History

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For more information, including historical commentaries, details of publications, back issues of the *Journal*, and archive and other research resources, see: [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk).

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## Coalition

Matt Cole examines the effects of participation in government on twelve constituency campaigns during the 2015 general election.

# Liberalism in Power: Watching the Titanic

The Conservative party desire to kill us, the Labour party desire to eat us, and, if we do not take care, there will be nothing left of us.

Captain F. E. Guest MP, 21 January 1924

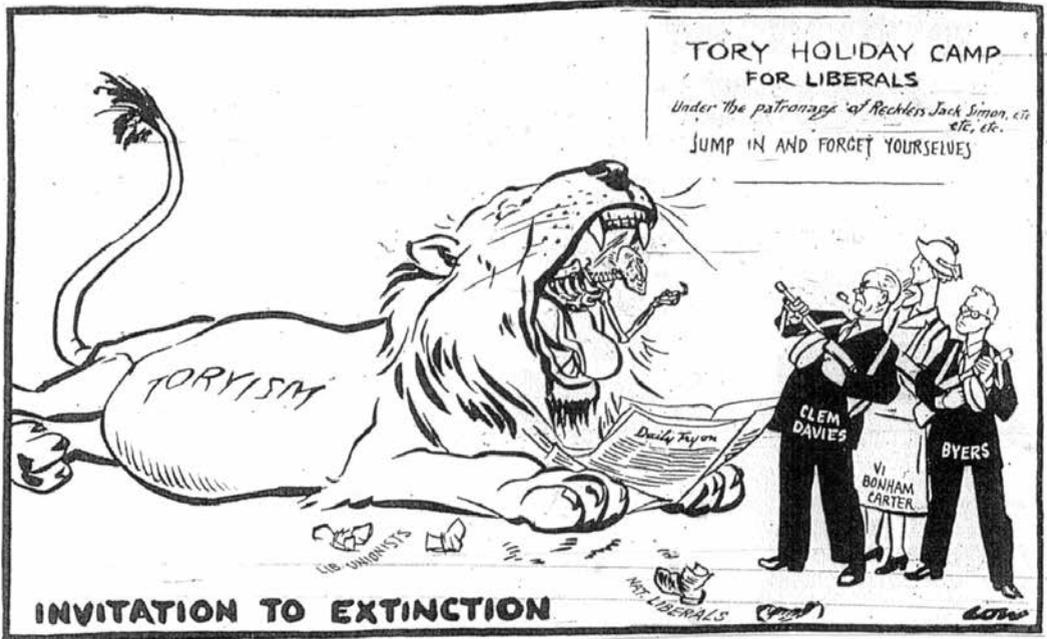
WHEN THE LIBERAL Democrats went into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010, the historical precedents were as plentiful as they were pessimistic. Arrangements with other parties to share in government, as the examples above illustrate, are the corollary of the pluralistic politics of Liberalism, but at the same time jeopardise the party's identity and even its existence by entering into an unequal relationship with an ultimately hostile partner. This was the dilemma of the Liberal Democrat MPs after 2010, and its challenges were every bit as severe as the historical precedents suggested. With the approach of the election following the coalition, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust supported a study of the costs and benefits to Liberalism, its aims and identity, of the arrangement. The electoral consequences are only too obvious; but a decade later, following another dramatic general election contest, it is worth Liberal Democrats reflecting on the experience of working with either of the major parties. Some of the benefits were more real than visible; yet the dangers were entirely predictable and sometimes avoidable. The following is the text of that

report: *Liberalism in Power: a report for the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.*

The findings of *Liberalism in Power* are based on monitoring of twelve constituencies held by the Liberal Democrats during the 2010–15 parliament, in the context of the 2015 general election campaign. The twelve constituencies were chosen to include a balanced range of situations by length of incumbency, location, size of majority in 2010 and challenger party. At each constituency interviews were held with the campaign organiser and team as well as, in ten of the twelve, the MP.

Ten campaign teams were interviewed both before and after the election, and two either before or after, at least one of these meetings in each case being conducted *in situ*. All but one of the pre-election interviews were completed in November 2014; the post-election interviews were completed in May 2015. The aims of these visits and interviews were to ascertain:

- Fluctuations in levels of electoral support and membership under the coalition;
- Reasons for these changes, noting perceptions of what Liberal Democrats stand for;
- Strategies used in these constituencies to maximise the benefits to Liberalism, and minimise the liabilities, of coalition;
- Effect of the short campaign upon those fortunes, and lessons to be learned from it.



Top: *Evening Standard*, 1 December 1949

Bottom: *The Guardian*, 13 May 2010

A brief interview was also conducted in October 2014 with the chief executive of the Liberal Democrats to confirm approval of the project, and another with the party president in July 2015. Consideration has also been given to public comment by party figures in the autumn of 2015 and academic analysis published then and in the New Year. These offer useful context, but this report is primarily an account of campaigning on the ground in a representative sample of Liberal Democrat-held seats. The focus of the report is also qualitative rather than quantitative; it is the effect of coalition on party values.

### Summary of findings

- No MP or campaigner expressed dissent at the decision to join the coalition, and many regarded it as a brave and virtuous decision; all campaign teams sought to use Liberal achievements in office in their campaigns, though these differed by audience.
- The Liberal Democrat election campaign at national level was widely criticised for its negativity and lack of focus on Liberal values. Its images and themes failed to integrate into campaigning in the seats visited, and in many cases the campaign organisation was considered to suffer from overbearing management.
- Votes were lost to Labour because of the damage to the Liberal Democrats' reputation for attachment to social justice caused by the conduct of the coalition. Some of this damage was considered by some MPs to have been avoidable.
- Votes were lost to the Conservatives because of a combination of scare tactics, particularly late in the campaign, and colossal spending in their target seats. The first of these factors was made more significant by the damage to Liberal identity indicated above; the second highlights deficiencies in electoral law regarding party

expenditure which the Trust may wish to consider at greater length.

- Liberal Democrat constituency campaigns showed many traditionally successful and distinctively Liberal features, but these, incumbency and municipal representation were of unprecedentedly limited effectiveness in protecting the MPs monitored.

### Trapped in the Rose Garden: the 'Betrayal' problem

It was widely acknowledged that a proportion of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters regarded participation in coalition with the Conservatives, or specific decisions which it came to entail, as a betrayal of the party's values and commitments it had made. This perception cost votes, and some members, who migrated to Labour, the Greens, or into abeyance. These votes were lost to Labour candidates who beat Liberal Democrat MPs and to third-placed Labour candidates who had no hope of winning but refused tactical support given in the past. All interviewees acknowledged that this problem was to some extent unavoidable; all recognised points at which its impact could have been diminished with better strategy and management by the party. Considerable difference existed amongst MPs and activists over the balance between these two observations.

Some interviewees took the view that this syndrome was inevitable as soon as the coalition was agreed: one MP argued that the 2015 results could have been predicted 'on the Tuesday after the 2010 election, when the Parliamentary Party agreed to go into coalition.' This was the fatalistic message embedded in the party leader's rebuke to the left in his resignation speech, and by the Liberal Democrats' election strategist who concluded that 'it is probably not possible to succeed electorally in coalition government under first-past-the-post while remaining equidistant from the

two big parties.<sup>1</sup> It is also reflected in the subsequent analysis of some academic observers: Philip Cowley characterised the Liberal Democrats' position as one of *zugswang* (the position in chess in which any move results in a loss).<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, the organisers and MPs in Labour-facing seats were more ready to concede likely defeat in November than their Conservative-facing counterparts, and municipal results usually gave them good reason for anxiety. But even the MP who claimed to have foreseen defeat in May 2010 agreed that no one had foreseen its scale or scope. This had been determined by a number of policy decisions which had – partly unnecessarily – merged the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives too closely in the public mind. These included the trebling of tuition fees; the 'Bedroom Tax' (though certain MPs rejected this as a factor); and association with the austerity programme more generally. The central controversy of the break of the pledge on tuition fees was recognised by all as a mistake, but in different ways:

- Some (including the party leader) saw the pledge itself as a mistake, often blaming a small number of party figures for imposing it on colleagues some time before the election under pressure from the Labour-sympathetic leadership of the NUS, who used the episode cynically (as these Lib Dems claimed) against the party after the election;
- Some thought the presentation, including the title and political marketing, of the new student finance scheme – effectively a limited graduate tax – was badly conducted;
- Some thought the decision to enter this into the coalition agreement, and then to support it when the agreement did not require ministers actively to vote for it, was the mistake.

All agreed that the perceived breach of promise was symbolically significant in a way in

which the policy itself was not. Voters unaware of and unaffected by the policy (including those in Scotland, where the policy did not apply) expressed indignation at it. A Scottish MP said that for some months streets full of previously welcoming doors were slammed to Liberal Democrat canvassers on this issue alone. An MP with a large student electorate claimed that the voters most aggrieved about tuition fees were women in their fifties. This confirms the view taken by Philip Cowley, who points to the collapse in Liberal Democrat poll ratings at the formation of the coalition, some six months prior to the tuition fees debacle. Yet precisely because of this, to have retained more public independence on this issue and some others – including the health reforms where real concessions were wrung from the Conservatives – could have strengthened Liberal Democrat claims to a different role in government from the Conservatives', and might have robbed Labour of some of the effectiveness of the 'betrayal' weapon already established. This is the view taken by David Cutts and Andrew Russell: 'the little party does not need to get smashed ... the Liberal Democrats were overly supportive.'<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the divisions created by the issue wounded the parliamentary party in a way which was wider than the student finance question. One MP involved in persuading colleagues to vote for fees reported the damage to the parliamentary party, which had been 'like a family: everyone [knew] everyone else; everyone [had] everyone else's mobile number.' The MP still felt 'very angry' towards named 'selfish' rebels who could have abstained, but whose 'No' votes (in this MP's view) necessitated others to vote in favour. 'There were stiff drinks and hugs in the Whips' office that night; there were tears.' Even one of those who rebelled over tuition fees later came to the view that 'some [MPs] were not loyal enough'.

The campaign team of the only successful candidate were clear that his 'disloyalty' had immunised him from much criticism, and he himself argued that without his defiance of the whip on key issues 'I would have been toast.' It is noticeable that the three MPs studied here with the smallest falls in their vote share were three of the four most rebellious against the coalition whip (see Appendix). The MP who was second best in England of those studied at holding on to the 2010 Liberal Democrat vote agreed that 'being an independent-minded person prepared to stand up to the party helped.' Another argued that Liberal Democrat whipping throughout the 2010–15 parliament had been 'aggressive', and that party managers became like the victims of sci-fi 'bodysnatchers', saying things they would previously have 'laughed at' about re-presenting coalition policies in a way which was palatable. The new reality of being in government had not been acknowledged by whips: 'they thought it was like before – that we were all the same. But some were on ministerial salaries and had to vote with the payroll.' This was in stark contrast to Conservative whips who watched rebellions on their backbenches over equal marriage, Europe and Lords reform with sanguinity. The raising of HE fees, the MP argued, was the key error because it destroyed trust which could not be recovered. This was particularly true given the high profile of the 'Broken Promises' broadcast in the 2010 campaign, and extent to which the party leader's appeal rested upon a presumption of honesty.<sup>4</sup>

One campaign organiser complained that Liberal Democrat achievements in government were not publicised early or proudly enough 'like we do in Focus leaflets every time we achieve something against opposition in the local council.' An MP reflected following defeat that 'we spent the first two years apolo-gising for being in government'.

As well as greater policy differentia-tion there was room for a different structural

relationship in government, an issue given some thought by parliamentarians during the coalition and by academic observers afterwards.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the Liberal Democrats were left with no official speakers in parliament apart from government ministers, and they were the minority of ministers in every department. The predicament this created was fully illustrated by the episode in which the party leader was forced to contradict the schools minister for views he had expressed about the employment of unqualified teachers in Free Schools. An attempt was made to remedy this situation with the institution of backbench committees in both houses of parliament (which had some impact in, as a peer put it, 'prodding' Lib Dem ministers on health, justice and schools), and with the appointment of Simon Hughes as deputy leader – but his freedom to criticise government policy was curtailed by his own ministerial appointment. The image of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative leaders in the Rose Garden at No 10 Downing Street in May 2010 was symbolic of the impression of a culture of suffocation of independence, and the image was a difficult one to escape.

This problem was exacerbated by the repeated insistence of the party leadership to members and opponents alike that the coalition was a full-term agreement with no escape clause.<sup>6</sup> Liberal Democrats who questioned this publicly quickly reviewed their position.<sup>7</sup> Those who saw the coalition as an historic exercise in changing British political culture feared any perceived fragility in the arrangement would undermine it; the price, however, was that, as David Davis put it in 2011, the Liberal Democrats had 'the best seats on the plane but no parachute' and were therefore unable to leave regardless of the direction of travel.<sup>8</sup> It is worth considering that the departure of the Liberals from the Lib–Lab Pact in 1978 began a period in which the party's poll rating rose from 6 per cent to 14 per cent before

the 1979 election – a benefit the Liberal Democrats did not enjoy in 2015.

For any future parliamentary cooperation, the party should consider ways of sustaining an independent voice whilst in government. This issue was raised by one constituency organiser experienced in municipal power-sharing in a presentation after 2010 to the parliamentary party, but MPs were (according to the organiser) unreceptive; they had also been made a presentation by continental Liberal politicians with the express purpose of stressing the need for undiluted public loyalty to any coalition the party joins. Lord Greaves complained that throughout the parliament the party leadership's message had been that 'we had to own the policies of the coalition'<sup>9</sup> and one constituency organiser complained of being 'fed the mantra' about the virtues of coalition by national election strategists. This strategy was keenly reiterated in interview by the chief executive of the party, who again raised comparison with continental experience. It was born of determination to make coalition respectable; but the price paid was needlessly high.

Measures to avoid this might include:

- Appointed party representatives or committees capable of drawing public distinctions between Liberal Democrat policy and that of any administration in which the party is engaged;
- Greater acceptance of division in the parliamentary party by whips;
- Readiness to end any arrangement before the completion of a term of office and, if necessary, at short notice.

### **Incumbency, policy and local campaigning**

The traditional strengths which have protected Liberal and Liberal Democrat MPs from fluctuations in the national party's poll ratings are personal appeal of the incumbent,

constituency campaigning and a solid municipal base. All of these strengths were drawn upon in 2015, and for the first time none made a significant impact on Liberal Democrat MPs' fortunes.

### **Incumbency**

If anything, incumbency was a liability at the 2015 election to Liberal Democrat MPs. Those studied here first elected in 2010 saw an average fall of 4.4 per cent in the Liberal Democrat vote; in the seats first won in 2005 the average fall was 17.2 per cent; in those held for more than ten years the average was 18.2 per cent (see Appendix). One long-serving former MP argued retrospectively that there is a point of diminishing returns in incumbency, at which the electorate becomes complacent about the local MP's prospects; but this never affected Liberal Democrat fortunes in, for example, Berwick-upon-Tweed or Southwark and Bermondsey before 2015. In 1979, the last time Liberal MPs went to the country having supported the government, most of those returned owed their seats to the fact that they resisted in their own constituencies the national fall in the party vote share. The fact is that in 2015 long service as a Liberal Democrat was no longer an asset.

All of the MPs studied here made explicit appeals across party lines and often avoided their party label altogether in campaigning, issuing unbadged literature in the format of glossy lifestyle magazines and campaigning in vehicles without the party logo or using stickers and posters showing only the candidate's first name. One campaign organiser said of their candidate that 'what sells [X] and the Lib Dems is [X]. We fought an intense ground war and ignored the air war.' Another said their campaign was 'super-localised. [X] was our key to winning, hugely. People didn't vote Lib Dem; they voted for [X].' The MP who retweeted national campaign materials more regularly than any other nonetheless

## Liberalism in power: watching the *Titanic*

commented afterwards that ‘most of the focus was on local material. There wasn’t an awful lot of mileage in national material given our poll position. It was very much a local campaign.’ The only MP of the twelve to retain a seat did not retweet any national materials. Much emphasis was placed on cross-party campaigns in which the MPs had participated, or local construction or employment projects which had been achieved with the MP’s help. In most cases, however, this did nothing to stem the decline in the Liberal Democrat vote.

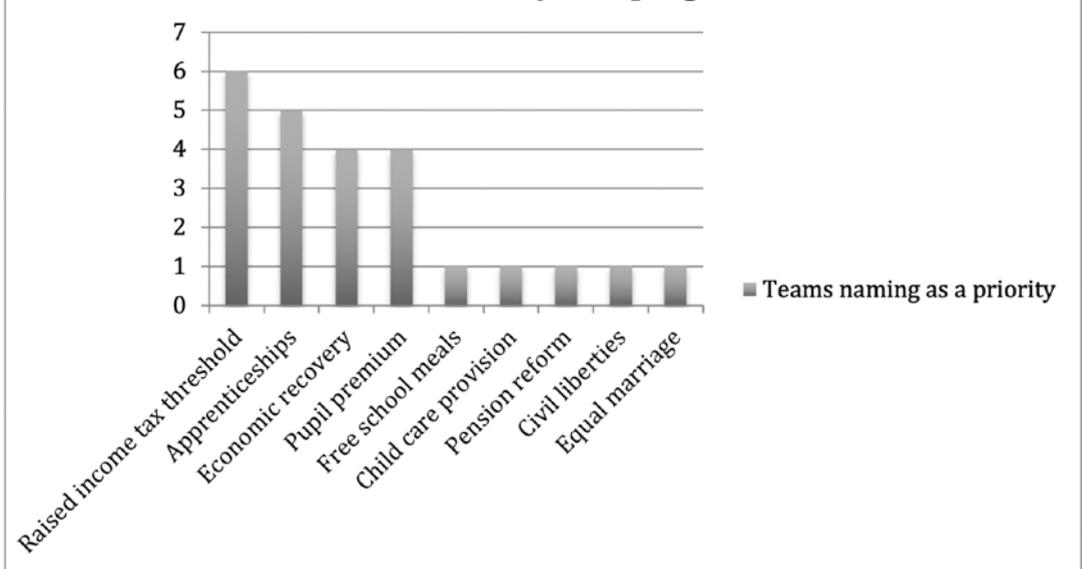
### Municipal election success

All twelve of the local parties studied had impressive records of local election success within their constituency boundaries, usually winning over half of the seats in the relevant wards, and in three cases holding all of them in 2010. Conscious efforts were made to bind the campaigns of these candidates together throughout the parliament, usually by combining Focus leaflet campaigns, or in one case by listing seventeen councillors on the

parliamentary candidate’s Christmas card to voters. But there was no relationship between the retention of these seats and of the Liberal Democrat vote in 2015 (see Appendix): good municipal representation was no help in saving a coterminous parliamentary seat. The seat in which the smallest percentage of councillors (3 per cent) was lost during the parliament nonetheless had the third highest loss of vote at the 2015 general election (over a fifth); yet the constituency party with the highest retention of the Liberal Democrat general election vote (over 95 per cent) had never had more than a third of the council seats in that constituency, and lost most of these during the 2010 parliament. One former MP said after the election that ‘the party was disconnected’ between the leadership and its local government base, where ‘the smashing of the local government base’ in 2011 was ‘dismaying’.

All interviewees who responded to the question reported larger numbers of activists – usually in healthy three-figure totals – than in 2010, more vigorous and committed

**Table 1: Priority Liberal Democrat achievements in constituency campaigns**



in terms of hours devoted to the campaign. Some – though not all – used social media very effectively to supplement their campaign. But none of this made any discernible difference. It is true that the most tweets were issued in the last week of the campaign by the only MP to hold his seat; but the one with the most followers on twitter lost over a fifth of the vote; and the MP whose vote share fell least managed barely a tenth of the number of tweets of the most active MP.

### *Liberal Democrat policy achievements*

The campaign role of Liberal Democrat achievements in government was positive but varied in both scale and character between constituencies. Invited to identify two Liberal Democrat achievements which would be used to recruit support in their campaigns, the twelve teams in aggregate produced the choices presented in Table 1. Some of these had been identified following polling in the constituency; others were the result of canvassing or of a more intuitive interpretation of continuous communication with constituents.

It was unsurprising given the national context that the two-thirds of the key issues were economic, but gratifying for the Liberal Democrats that they felt they could claim credit for these policies. Similarly predictably, different achievements recruited different voters, with working-class voters in Labour-facing seats attracted to employment measures or increased spending on schools and childcare; Conservative-facing seats were more likely to favour pension reform or economic growth. The raising of the income tax threshold had appeal across class boundaries, whilst some policies (such as the pensions ‘triple lock’) were held to be difficult to convey simply, and others, including free school meals, provoked a backlash as a ‘waste of money’ in certain elements of the electorate. It is noticeable that traditionally distinctive

Liberal Democrat concerns with civil liberties and minority rights had little purchase. The JRRT may endorse wholeheartedly the Liberal Democrats’ central campaign’s efforts to raise the profile of mental illness in the 2015 election campaign, but its impact on the ground as an issue was probably limited.

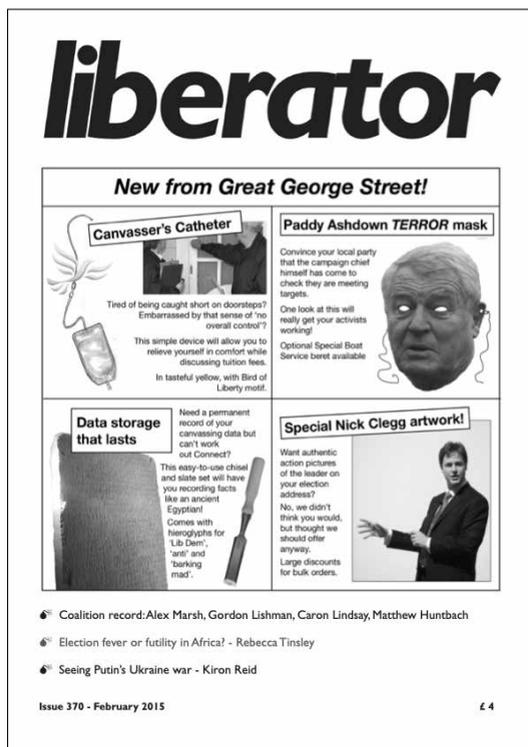
### **‘Splitting the Difference’: The national campaign**

#### *Central direction: technology and logistics*

The campaign, as with other parties, made more intensive use of IT to identify target seats, districts and voters than in any previous election, and used this information to set targets based on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for each constituency campaign team. At the start of the 2015 campaign this system, called Connect, won plaudits from observers.<sup>10</sup>

Most constituency organisers were keen to collect and deliver the data, seeing the advantages of its electronic collation and national aggregation. The most outspokenly critical of the constituency organisers commended Connect as ‘brilliant.’ Another described Connect as ‘a Mercedes-Benz with no petrol’ – the petrol being the ‘real’ canvas data, which is supplied by the local party. That party had by November 2014 entered canvas data for between 13,000 and 14,000 voters, and planned to have another 8,000 completed by March, but not all organisations were so ambitious. Another showed figures averaging over 1,000 contacts a month by October 2014. A third claimed to have data for four-fifths of the constituency gathered ‘over the years.’

By no means all activists were ready to collect data on the doorstep electronically. Amongst the reasons for this were lack of familiarity with the technology and personal preference for the traditional ‘shield’ of



*Liberator* (February 2015) captured some of the activists' criticisms of the campaign organisation at the outset

the clipboard and paper sheet; and the suspicion created amongst voters by the electronic collection of data. Some complained that the computer programme directed them to houses no longer in existence or to neglect new homes; others that materials prepared for delivery in the constituency based on the data in the programme – including at least one official election address – had to be abandoned as unsuitable. Another constituency held by the Liberal Democrats but not included in this study notoriously suffered the delay of a leaflet delivery because of a dispute with HQ about font size. Similar stories of data-driven erroneous judgements about constituency opinion were reported from the previous year's European elections, too.

More significant was the unequal power relationship some organisers and MPs felt that

the technology exacerbated between the centre and constituency teams, and the way this played into the contest over values reflected in the campaign. There was understandable criticism from rural constituencies, or those with older activist bases, that KPIs were used to make critical comparisons with other 'better performing' constituencies with concentrated populations and young memberships able to deliver more leaflets, or to set unrealistic targets for seats with distinctive circumstances. One MP complained of HQ using the technology in a 'grinding' way to punish perceived under-performance by what the campaign team in the constituency had come to call 'marking our homework'. This punishment included determining how much 'pocket money' constituencies got. The punitive use of technology by a central campaign determined to sell the virtue of coalition as its central message was unrepresentative of parts of the Liberal Democrats and turned out to be counterproductive.

### Siege tactics

A key feature of the campaign was a more robust targeting operation by parliamentary seat than has been used at any previous campaign, referred to by one academic observer as a 'Rourke's Drift' strategy.<sup>11</sup> Different reports referred to 75 target seats, or to the 57 Liberal Democrat-held seats, others to only a proportion of those: in all cases it was clear that the differential between activity, and resources deployed, in these seats and in non-target seats would be dramatic. Though there was resentment at the systems used to distinguish between constituencies hitting their activity targets and those failing, the principle of targeting was accepted by all interviewees. It was, however, not without its costs in longer-term campaigning potential, and brought no benefits in terms of representation.

All those asked confirmed that the circulation of neighbouring constituencies'

membership lists to target seats by regional offices had been a vital asset, even if some neighbouring constituencies were more helpful than others. The regional layer of the party received some criticism in the first round of constituency visits for delivering the leadership message too uncritically to MPs and activists; but in the election regional officers were held by some constituency organisers to have been a practical, mitigating force in tensions between leadership and constituencies.

On the other hand, monitoring of a wider range of constituency campaigns showed strong evidence of the costs of this strategy. Paper or parachuted candidates were often absent from hustings, or gave indifferent performances at them; some missed national media exposure opportunities on the openly acknowledged basis that they were campaigning elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, candidates directed centrally to do this found that they were required to give full reviews of their campaigns to HQ within days of the polls closing on pain of removal from the candidates' list.<sup>13</sup> This, together with the decline in local government representation endured during the coalition, will set back the Liberal Democrat recovery in many constituencies.

Most importantly, this strategy failed, brutally weakening the platform for Liberalism in the 2015 parliament from fifty-seven MPs to just eight. Only one of the twelve seats monitored was held. Some have argued that the siege strategy was in fact not pessimistic enough, and that '20 seats were fought which there was no hope of winning',<sup>14</sup> but the suggestion of the outcomes in the seats studied here is that resources in fact made little difference, however distributed. The average fall in the Liberal Democrat vote in the twelve seats studied, 15.0 per cent, is only 0.2 per cent lower than the national decline in the Liberal Democrat vote. Those with the lowest declines were in fact those with least help as target seats. The reasons for this pattern were longer-term or

more external to the party than any targeting campaign could overcome; however, the nature of the targeting may have damaged the cause of Liberalism on the ground whilst failing to protect it at Westminster.

### *Splitting the difference*

The national campaign accompanying the manifesto was widely and severely criticised amongst interviewees for its failure to integrate with their constituency campaigns or to win support from the public. Its central theme (reflected in the slogan 'The era of single party government is over' and the party leader's insistence in a TV debate that the Conservative and Labour leaders should 'go and lie down in a darkened room' if they thought a single-party government could be formed) was the anticipation of another coalition and the proposed moderating role the Liberal Democrats would play in it: cutting less than the Conservatives and borrowing less than Labour, for example. In this the Liberal Democrats were presented as better governing partners than SNP would be to Labour or UKIP to the Tories. Within this framework, there were individual claims to achievements in the coalition, and commitments for future government, particularly on protecting education spending, raising the priority of mental health services, and raising the income tax threshold further. There were two out of over two dozen formal interviewees – both constituency organisers – who expressed muted approval of this saying (unprompted) 'I didn't have a problem with it' and that 'it would be stupid of me to complain about the national campaign when I haven't got a better one – and I haven't. I felt completely empowered about the national campaign.'

All others who expressed opinions were at best disappointed and more often angry at the perceived weakness and negativity of the material provided. The emphasis on the Liberal Democrats' relationship with other

parties rather their own identity – particularly as the policy position of the two main parties shifted during the campaign – was commonly regarded as ineffective (the 160-page manifesto itself, conversely, was criticised for being too heavy and diffuse). Highlighting the threats of UKIP and the SNP was thought to have been counterproductive: one MP described the ‘BluKIP’ playing-card materials (pointing up the dangers of a Conservative government dependent on UKIP MPs’ support) as ‘useless’ and abandoned them.

Another MP dismissed the campaign at its start as ‘bland’ and ‘an afterthought’ the belated unveiling of which was caused by the leadership’s preoccupation with the siege strategy and micro-management of key seats; some of the less brutally scatological comments of organisers and MPs argued that ‘the national strategy was crap’, ‘the messaging was appalling’, said ‘I can’t see what the campaign was’; that ‘the national campaign never took off’ and that there was ‘not enough of a pro-active campaign’ and ‘too much of a split-the-difference message: we didn’t define ourselves as a progressive, radical party.’ In Scotland an organiser said the main theme of the national campaign simply ‘doesn’t apply up here’ because it didn’t address the SNP threat and that when any English leader visits ‘it feels like [they’re] lecturing the Scots.’ One former MP described the party leader’s answers to questions in the seven-way leaders’ TV debate as ‘awesome’ but was shocked that his prepared opening and closing statements reflected a ‘wishy-washy’ national message which was ‘not inspiring’:

I hated the messaging. People need a reason to be voting Liberal Democrat. It wasn’t about what we would do. I didn’t want to vote Liberal Democrat after that, and if I didn’t, who did?

It was noticeable to more seasoned observers and campaigners that the materials of the

national campaign looked derivative, echoing the equidistance strategy of the SDP–Liberal Alliance in the 1980s. Both the images and the messages show the resemblance.

The unveiling of the last of these images prompted the editor of *Liberal Democrat Voice* to ask: ‘is that really the best statement of our values that we can find?’<sup>15</sup> The ‘Look left, look right’ motoring metaphor in election broadcasts was attacked by a characteristically loyal MP as ‘appalling crap’. The very provenance of the national campaign materials was mysterious. Even senior party officials were unable to say with certainty who had designed them, but believed that they had been prepared by one of the party leader’s staff. MPs recalled that, although the parliamentary party had ‘an awful lot of presentations at meetings and awaydays from Ryan Coetzee and Hilary Stephenson’ and that MPs came up with the ‘stronger economy, fairer society’ slogan, they were never shown the actual campaign materials during development. An MP who attended the parliamentary party meeting at which the campaign was unveiled remembered criticising it in common with colleagues, and being told by campaign staff that the themes reflected what polling evidence indicated were the Liberal Democrats’ key strengths.

The national campaign materials were nonetheless used by most candidates in a secondary, bolt-on or default way, (what one organiser called ‘fill-in’), retweeting the latest output from HQ, particularly where there was a connection to local issues such as apprenticeships, the pupil premium, tax cuts and sometimes mental health. There was little evidence of the images and text being integrated into constituency campaigns, nor was this likely given the way the campaign was presented as a *fait accompli*.

In the same way, national speakers including the party leader were welcomed to most seats where offered, though their impact



Election adverts:  
 Liberal-SDP Alliance, 1983 and 1987  
 Liberal Democrats, 2015

was doubtful. Organisers stressed that the visit of the party leaders were accepted as a way of mobilising existing supporters rather

than to gain local press coverage or appeal to the public, amongst whom they were commonly named unprompted as a reason for not voting Liberal Democrat. It may be noteworthy that the only seat amongst the twelve case studies to be held in 2015 refused the offer of a visit from the party leader, and the only three candidates studied to suffer declines of less than 10 per cent in their vote had only one visit from any national party figure (not the leader) between them (see Appendix).

Nor can it be contended that this animus towards the national campaign is merely wisdom after the event, for it was foreshadowed in the first round of constituency interviews in November. One MP argued then that the party leadership did not understand the provinces, that ‘the effect of front-loading cuts in local government funding was not appreciated’ and that ‘the disconnect has not been learned from.’ Another described the national leadership and its campaign team as variously ‘arrogant’, ‘naïve’ and ‘stupid’ in certain of their tactical decisions and methods during the 2010 parliament, notably in not acknowledging mistakes early enough.

### ‘The Fear’: the SNP and the late Tory surge

The Liberal Democrats’ chief election strategist referred, in reflecting on the results, to ‘what I call the Fear’<sup>16</sup> – a panic return by soft Tory voters to their party prompted by the prospect of a Labour government supported by the SNP. This appeal ranged from the official Conservative contrast between the ‘competence’ which they claimed to represent and the ‘chaos’ threatened by ‘all the other parties’, to Boris Johnson’s less restrained outburst later in the campaign against what he characterised as ‘Ajockalypse now’. Baroness Grender pointed to this factor in post-election discussions and claimed that ‘four weeks out we knew what was doing us damage was this

'one of 23 seats' message from the Conservatives' which was countered by the 'BlUKIP' campaign.<sup>17</sup> The issue was raised unprompted in most post-election interviews in English seats as a feature of the last week of campaigning. This was a problem, as Coetzee pointed out, in Conservative-facing seats, but also in some Labour ones where the Conservative tactical vote disappeared in the last days of the campaign. One constituency organiser in such a seat found that Conservative tactical votes hardened between autumn and spring and that 'the squeeze on the Conservatives just didn't happen' partly because of Conservative leafleting late in the campaign.

The unanticipated crash in Liberal Democrat support was most notoriously demonstrated by Paddy Ashdown's assertion on seeing the BBC's exit poll that he would 'eat his hat' if the party were reduced to ten MPs, but it is notable that all MPs – even those who anticipated losing from as far back as November – believed that they would do better than they did until polling day, often even at the count. In some Conservative-facing seats Liberal Democrat organisers also reported that their Conservative opponents fully, but wrongly, expected to lose, even after the polls closed. One MP interviewed for this study stated that his team's spontaneous reaction to the BBC exit poll was 'bollocks' and that all of the team believed '30 MPs would be a bad result.' Another said that the result was 'a lot worse' than expected nationally – fifteen seats was regarded by the end as a worst-case scenario; thirty were hoped for (though colleagues in Conservative-facing seats had had some impression of the growing Fear later in the campaign).

These beliefs were based on canvassing data, in places on recent polls by Lord Ashcroft, by betting odds which showed the Liberal Democrat candidate as clear favourite, and sometimes strengthened by the evidence

pointed to by John Hemming – that postal votes showed a significantly better level of support than votes cast on the day.<sup>18</sup> Lord Ashcroft's polls between autumn 2014 and the campaign showed better Liberal Democrat performances in nine of the ten constituencies polled than were gained on May 7, and four seats which were lost anticipated a Liberal Democrat victory in Ashcroft's polls (see Appendix). Although polls generally under-reported Conservative support, Ashcroft's was in fact the only organisation to anticipate the real outcome in a national poll (on April 26). Of the eight campaign organisers who claimed to know the outcome of postal voting in their seat, two thought the distribution was the same as on 8 May, three thought it closer than on polling day, and three whose MP lost claimed that they won the postal vote. One MP with a slim majority felt able to say after losing that 'if the election had been held two days earlier I might have won by 100 votes.'

This was the unexpected (and largely invisible)<sup>19</sup> element of the campaign which accounted for a number of the losses, yet its impact is not unrelated to the values adopted in the national campaign. Having chosen to sell the Liberal Democrats predominantly as an equidistant party of coalition rather than on their independent values, the party would be especially vulnerable to hysteria about coalition amongst a small but strategically important group of voters.

To this was added the collective amnesia of the other parties about the Liberal Democrats' contributions to government, and an evident Conservative determination – spotted by some organisers in November – to spend unprecedentedly heavily in Liberal Democrat seats. One measure of the Conservatives' strategy of claiming credit for coalition achievements is language: constituency campaign material habitually targeted Liberal Democrat candidates as 'the current MP'

rather than by party name, and national propaganda followed suit (Liberal Democrats who had held junior ministerial office were criticised by Conservative challengers as ‘career MPs’). The Conservative manifesto attacked Labour by name thirty times, but mentioned the Liberal Democrats only once (in a dismissive comparison with UKIP); the word ‘coalition’ does not appear in the Conservative manifesto (nor in Labour’s, where the Liberal Democrats are also absent by name), but the Liberal Democrats promoted the virtues of coalition half-a-dozen times, particularly in the early parts of their manifesto.

The Liberal Democrats had chosen a battlefield to which no other party (at least in England) turned up, and which made them vulnerable to the Fear. This was, as the British Polling Council’s own report confirmed, only exacerbated by the insistence of survey data that an unpredictable period of negotiation was likely follow the general election outcome if the Liberal Democrats and SNP held the balance of power.<sup>20</sup>

There is also strong evidence that the Conservatives spent heavily to target Liberal Democrats. One long-serving MP with a large majority which was overturned claimed that £200,000 had been spent in his constituency, and the view of his staff was that ‘the Tories bought this seat’. Electoral law was circumvented not only by spending outside the campaign, but also by party billboard and press publicity not mentioning the local candidate. Other MPs and organisers spoke of unprecedented use of telephone canvassing and paid delivery of election material or use of social media which could be matched by volunteers. One seat held for decades was lost partly, according to its organiser, because ‘the Conservatives out-leafleted us for the first time’ using paid staff. Since the election, Channel 4 News has made similar accusations of over-spending by Conservative candidates.<sup>21</sup>

The Electoral Commission should be encouraged to find ways of ensuring that this undemocratic practice is prohibited.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The coalition did a lot of good stuff, making things better for people.

Coalition has made it less clear to people what we stand for.

These two remarks after the election reflect the dichotomous situation of the Liberal Democrats and their identity: significant achievements to make Britain a freer and more just society – such as the pupil premium, equal marriage, raising the income tax threshold and some limited constitutional reforms including the Fixed-term Parliaments Act – were effected because the party took part in government. The party leadership claims that this amounted to three-quarters of the aims set out in the 2010 manifesto, and few have come forward to dispute that claim specifically. Other illiberal steps which a minority Conservative government might have attempted, such as repeal of the Human Rights Act, were shelved. Liberal values in this sense did well out of coalition.

Yet in May 2015 this went unrecognised and unrewarded by the electorate, who for reasons of resentment or fear too often set aside the very practical benefits which Liberal Democrat MPs pointed out had come to their constituents from these reforms; instead, they chose to punish or abandon MPs with whom they had kept faith in some cases for a generation. Liberal Democrats have two competing narratives to explain this:

- As a party principally of protest, the Liberal Democrats’ reputation as ‘insurgents’ would inevitably suffer substantially from participation in government.<sup>22</sup> Little which was done by the party between 2010 and

2015 could have altered this, and targeting by the Conservatives and the national weakness of Labour during the 2015 campaign merely exacerbated this;

- The independent, progressive values of Liberalism were not promoted firmly enough in the coalition negotiations, in the implementation and development of policy and in parliament between the elections, or in the final campaign – in short, the party allowed itself to be trapped in the Rose Garden instead of treating the coalition strictly as a business arrangement.

Support for both these views was found amongst MPs and their teams in this project, both before and after the election. Though, as might be expected, the former narrative was more popular amongst those who had held ministerial office (and who were usually most ready to discuss future possible coalitions), it is interesting to note that the MP responsible for the first quotation above had been a backbench ‘outsider’ throughout the coalition, where the second remark came from a frontbench ‘loyalist’. No Liberal Democrat MP disowned coalition, and none denied any errors in government. The central finding of this report is to identify where there was avoidable damage to Liberal profile and to effectiveness in asserting Liberal values, and to emphasise that this should be avoided in future.

There is some reason to believe that the Liberal values brought to government will be recognised by the public in the absence of the party from office. The next five years may be a better advertisement for coalition than the last five. All candidates and organisers reported that they had benefitted from the surge in membership experienced by the party in the days following the election defeat and noted that the great majority of those joining were new members rather than prodigal returners. Whilst sketch writers for *The Times* mischievously write (as they have done for decades) that the party should pack up, *The*

*Guardian* remains positive, and even Kevin Maguire at *The Mirror* took little more than a fortnight after the polls closed to begin referring wistfully to the absence of ‘the restraining influence of the Liberal Democrats.’<sup>23</sup> Liberal values have had a better, if clearly imperfect, expression in government than for a hundred years; they remain present though they were unseen by many at the 2015 election; and the Liberal Democrats will be the vital, if regrettably and partly unnecessarily wounded, vehicle for those values.

The Liberal Democrats achieved more in implementing liberalism in government than they (or any other party) have done for generations. Yet in doing so, and in their presentation of that record, they damaged their chances of doing so at local and national levels for some years to come. The second half of this scenario was held by many MPs and organisers to have been unnecessarily costly, both in terms of the ‘Betrayal’ and the ‘Fear’. The party leadership, these critics argue, conducted and marketed the Liberal Democrat brand in a way which made it needlessly vulnerable. The experience of the election campaign gives substance to their claim.

### Recommendations

- Participation in government was held at all levels and in all branches of the Liberal Democrats to have been right both for policy and constitutional reasons, and it promoted Liberal values albeit imperfectly and sometimes imperceptibly.
- In future, however, specific internal and external structural steps should be taken to protect the party’s ideological territory and identity and to encourage a spirit of independence in its officers. These could include retention of separate official speakers and fuller control of distinctive policy areas and departments.
- The Trust should sustain pressure for electoral reform and for measures to tighten

electoral law on expenditure and to provide support for more equal access to campaign funding.

- The Liberal Democrat Party should be urged to reassess critically the equidistance strategy of 2015 in national campaigns.
- The Liberal Democrats should be supported in targeting a small number of parliamentary seats with the best hope of retrieving representation and should reconstruct local bases in areas neglected by the targeting strategy but with a history of municipal success, drawing on these to inform national policy and strategy.

Dr Cole is grateful for their support and guidance to all of the participating constituency teams and to Hanneke Hart, Tina Walker and Alex Davies, but the contents of this report are entirely his own.

19 February 2016

## Afterword (2024)

The lessons of the coalition for Liberalism – of the need to restore traditional Liberal scepticism about such deals whilst celebrating their achievements more boldly – came into focus with varying degrees of delay. Liberal Democrat Leader Tim Farron announced before the next election in 2017 that the party would not go into government with either major party; the experience of Brexit and single-party Conservative government drew enough voters back to the party to win the Richmond by-election in 2016 and to come second nationally at the last European Parliament elections in the UK in 2019. Since the last election there have been more by-election triumphs, and the party's percentage share of the polls has, on average, been in double figures. David Cameron's memoir that year went as far as to describe the Liberal Democrats' role in the government as 'proper partners, getting stuck in, making big decisions and working with us.'<sup>24</sup> The party's opponents

refer increasingly rarely to its record in government as a point of criticism, though the Liberal Democrats themselves are still reluctant to point to their achievements in coalition. This changing public perception of the coalition will doubtless continue to fluctuate, but the conclusions about inter-party relations for Liberal Democrats must be as they have always been: that tension is what makes the mechanism of coalition productive.

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- 1 R. Coetzee, 'The Liberal Democrats must reunite, rebuild or remain in opposition', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015.
- 2 P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 100.
- 3 D. Cutts and A. Russell, in A. Geddes and J. Tonge (eds.), *Britain Votes 2015* (Hansard Society, 2015) pp. 80–1.
- 4 A YouGov poll on 12 April 2010, for instance, showed that 30 per cent of respondents considered Clegg honest, compared to 22 per cent for Brown and 18 per cent for Cameron.
- 5 N. Baker, *After the Rose Garden* (Institute for Government, 2015).
- 6 See, for example: 'Clegg says Coalition beak-up would be disaster for the UK economy', Bloomberg.com, 12 Dec. 2011; 'Lib Dem Future lies with the Tories: Nick Clegg insists party must not break up coalition', *The Mirror*, 26 Sep. 2012; 'Nick Clegg: Coalition Government will not break up', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 May 2013; 'Nick Clegg: Lib Dems will not pull out of coalition', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 May 2014.
- 7 G. Gibbon, 'Farron regrets coalition divorce talk', *Channel Four News*, 20 Sep. 2011.
- 8 *Dispatches: A Year in No 10* (Channel 4, 2011).
- 9 Lord Greaves, 'Catastrophe: the 2015 Election Campaign and its outcome', Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, House of Lords, 13 July 2015.
- 10 See 'Digital gurus find Obama campaign tough act to follow', *The Times*, 8 Apr. 2015.
- 11 Prof. Philip Cowley, 'Catastrophe: the 2015 Election Campaign and its outcome', Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, House of Lords, 13 July 2015.
- 12 In three hustings broadcasts organised by BBC Coventry & Warwickshire, for example, only one Liberal

## Liberalism in power: watching the Titanic

- Democrat candidate took part, whilst a BBC Radio 4 report from Swindon South found that the Liberal Democrat candidate was unavailable for interview because he was campaigning in Bristol West, from where he told listeners that only 'a miracle' would win Swindon South for the Liberal Democrats.
- 13 A discussion of this letter, in which several paper candidates reflected on their experiences, took place at Lib Dem Voice on 19 May, <http://www.libdemvoice.org/how-not-to-motivate-your-exhausted-defeated-candidates-46046.html> (accessed 29 May 2015).
  - 14 Cowley, 'Catastrophe'.
  - 15 Caron Lindsay, *Liberal Democrat Voice*, 11 Dec. 2014.
  - 16 Coetzee, 'The Liberal Democrats must reunite'.
  - 17 Baroness Grender, 'Catastrophe: the 2015 Election Campaign and its outcome', Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, House of Lords, 13 July 2015. The same timing of this realisation was confirmed by Ryan Coetzee in *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015.
  - 18 Hemming claimed on his blog on 8 May that 'the postal votes in Yardley which were cast about two weeks before polling day gave me 40%, but on the night I only got just over 25%' (<http://johnhemming.blogspot.co.uk/>)
  - 19 Prof. Philip Cowley has commented since the election that the BES poll data show some evidence of this rising fear of the SNP, but the significance of this was not recognised at the time. See <http://revolts.co.uk/?p=897>
  - 20 P. Sturgis, *The Inquiry into the Failure of the 2015 Pre-election Polls: Findings and Preliminary Conclusions* (British Polling Council, Jan. 2016)
  - 21 'Election spending claims 'serious' says Conservative MP', *BBC News*, 9 Feb. 2016.
  - 22 This was a key theme of the Liberal Democrat leader's speeches at both the spring and autumn party conferences of 2013.
  - 23 See D. Finkelstein, 'RIP the Liberal Democrats', *The Times*, 27 May 2015; 'If they didn't exist, they'd have to be invented', editorial, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2015; Kevin Maguire, *The Mirror*, 25 May 2015.
  - 24 David Cameron, *For the Record* (William Collins, 2019), p. 241.

## Appendix: constituency data

Constituency	2010 LD lead	Ashcroft poll LD lead	Postal vote	Incumbency (terms of office)	LD lead 2015	Fall in LD share	MP rebellion rate (%)	% councillor loss	Leadership visits
A	Very high	High	Unknown	2	Very high	25 to 30	0 to 1	65 to 70	3
B	Very high	Medium	As on 7 May	NA	Very high	20 to 25	NA	25 to 30	1
C	Medium	Very High	Closer	1	Very high	20 to 25	1 to 2	0 to 5	3
D	Very high	High	Win	4	High	20 to 25	3 to 4	15 to 20	3
E	High	Medium	Win	5	High	15 to 20	1 to 2	10 to 15	1
F	Very high	Medium	Unknown	4	Low	15 to 20	0 to 1	35 to 40	2
G	High	High	NA	2	Very high	10 to 15	1 to 2	55 to 60	4
H	High	High	Closer	2	High	10 to 15	0 to 1	45 to 40	1
I	Very high	NA	Unknown	2	Medium	10 to 15	7 to 8	25 to 30	3
J	Low	Very high	As on 7 May	1	Very high	5 to 10	2 to 3	25 to 30	1
K	Low	Very high	Closer	1	Very high	Under 5	6 to 7	5 to 10	0
L	Medium	NA	Win	1	Medium	Under 5	2 to 3	15 to 20	0
Very high	Worse than minus 15								
High	Between minus 10 and minus 14.9								
Medium	Between min 5 and minus 9.9								
Low	Between 0 and minus 4.9								
Low	Lead of 0.1 to 4.9								
Medium	Lead of 5 to 9.9								
High	Lead of 10 to 14.9								
Very high	Lead of over 15								

## Sources of Liberal history

Alexandra Foulds and Isobel Goodman describe 'Gladstone's Writing', the Gladstone Library's first large-scale digitisation project.

# Searching for Gladstone: Bringing nineteenth-century liberal history into the digital age

**I**N SEPTEMBER 2023, Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, North Wales, completed its first large-scale digitisation project. Entitled 'Gladstone's Writing' and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the project sought to scrutinise William Ewart Gladstone's life as a reader and a writer by creating a new, open-source digital catalogue of Gladstone's most annotated books and the papers created

by him held at the library that he had founded. In order to do so, just under 200 books featuring Gladstone's annotations and just under 9,000 letters and drafts of papers, articles, and books written by Gladstone were digitised. In addition, volunteers started to create a new,

Gladstone's Library (photo: Geoffrey Scotland Photography)



## Searching for Gladstone

enriched catalogue for the archival items to enable them to be individually searchable in new ways. In doing so, the project revealed details – about Gladstone as politician and liberal thinker and the inextricability of Gladstone’s political life, as member of parliament, chancellor of the exchequer, and eventual four-time prime minister of the United Kingdom, from his personal life as son, sibling, husband, father, and friend – that the team at the library are beginning to explore.

In October 1895, William Gladstone outlined the vision and the reason behind his creation of a residential library in his preliminary paper entitled ‘St Deiniol’s Trust and its Purposes’. He writes:

Convinced that the future of the human race depends, in the main, upon the great question of belief, and that the most special and urgent of present needs is the need of sufficient means for the effective promotion of Divine learning, I am engaged in the foundation of a Library, which I trust may serve as the nucleus of an Institution, under the name of St Deiniol’s, Hawarden, adapted to that end.<sup>1</sup>

To accomplish this end, he had a corrugated iron structure built in Hawarden, the village that had been his home since the 1840s, into which he transferred a selection of books from his personal collection. The library, now known as Gladstone’s Library, today holds historic and contemporary printed collections and archives focused on areas of Gladstonian interest, particularly history, literature, theology, and politics. It continues to be one of the few residential libraries in the world, and to be a place for research, discussion, reflection, and learning, with a programme of events, courses, and literary festivals. It is also the only prime ministerial library in the United Kingdom. Its current neo-Gothic building was constructed as the memorial to Gladstone after his death; as such the library is also a

trusted source of information about the four-time prime minister, and a site that strives to provide a balanced viewpoint of his life, career, and the times in which he lived, as well as a space to explore his legacy and relevance today.

Gladstone’s books now make up the library’s Foundation Collection. This collection of 20,000 books is arranged into Gladstone’s own classification scheme and bears the marks of his use. Around 6,000 of the books have his marginalia, including indexes created by him. In other cases, books feature an inscription from the author or publisher who sent the volume to Gladstone, as attested to by letters in the library’s Glynne-Gladstone Archive. This archive contains the personal, family, business, and estate correspondence and papers of the Glynne and Gladstone families, including part of the records of William Gladstone. After Gladstone’s death, his correspondence and papers held in the Octagon at Hawarden Castle were moved to a purposely built Muniments Room at Gladstone’s Library, where they were arranged and classified by Arthur Tilney Bassett. In the 1930s, they were then transferred to the British Museum, who had expressed an interest in 1887, according to Bassett, to obtain ‘Mr Gladstone’s papers “on any terms and conditions he might impose”’.<sup>2</sup> At the British Museum, Bassett re-sorted the letters, and anything that was not to be kept by the British Museum was sent back to Hawarden.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘Gladstone Papers’ at the British Museum, now the British Library, in the years since have often been described as his ‘public and political papers’, whereas the around 50,000 papers of William Gladstone’s at Gladstone’s Library have been said to be ‘[l]etters from members of Gladstone’s family’ and letters of a ‘private nature’.<sup>4</sup> Records of Gladstone’s life as politician and statesman were said to be held at the British Library, whereas his records as a family man and a scholar

were said to be at his library. This belief about the division of Gladstone's collections was reflected in documentation related to the collections created by both institutions. The page of the British Library's website related to the Gladstone Papers described them as his 'Official papers'<sup>5</sup> and situated them within their collection of the papers of later prime ministers whose papers were required to be preserved for the nation by law. The handlist created in 1990 for the Glynne-Gladstone Archive, on the other hand, referred to its contents as his 'family correspondence'.<sup>6</sup> Delving into Gladstone's collections at his library as part of the 'Gladstone's Writing' project, however, and looking at his letters alongside his books, as well as edited copies of his diaries, has revealed that to describe the relationship between the two collections in this way would be an oversimplification not only of their contents, but of Gladstone's own engagement with and use of them. There was far less of a separation between the public and private spheres of Gladstone's life than this arrangement would suggest.

Many of the figures in Gladstone's private life were also involved in politics in a variety of ways, and Gladstone's family was a political family. His father (Sir John Gladstone), two of his brothers (Sir Thomas Gladstone and John Neilson Gladstone), and two of his sons (William Glynne Charles Gladstone and Herbert John Gladstone) were all members of parliament. His other brother, Robertson Gladstone, was mayor of Liverpool, and one of his other sons, Henry Neville Gladstone, was an alderman on Flint County Council. His nephew, George William Spencer Lyttelton, and his son Herbert both served as his private secretaries, and, unusually for the time period, his daughter Mary also served as an unofficial private secretary.<sup>7</sup> The family that Gladstone married into was equally political. The Glynnes were related to four previous prime ministers,<sup>8</sup> and both of Gladstone's brothers-in-law through

his marriage (Sir Stephen Glynne and Lord George Lyttelton) were members of parliament. As a result, Gladstone's correspondence to all of these people is filled with discussions of political affairs. These are particularly detailed in the letters to his father and his wife, Catherine.

Gladstone wrote to his father almost every day, and his letters are filled with news from parliament. While some of this is a son updating his father on his career and activities – letting his father know, for example, of his new appointments – he also seems to feel the need to provide his father with updates on political matters, including information about bills being debated and passed, committees being formed, and resignations and appointments. Gladstone frequently comments on the amount of news he has to give his father, such as in a letter dated the 30 April 1833 when he writes 'There is little to [sic] news to communicate today, except that [John] Hobhouse, the Secretary for Ireland, has been forced to resign his seat in Parliament, as he could not remain a member of the Government and vote for the repeal of the House and Window Taxes, nor remain member for Westminster and vote against it'.<sup>9</sup> Some of his letters to his father are written from the House of Commons suggesting an urgency felt in relating the latest news, and on some occasions a new update merits a second letter on the same day. This, for example, is the case on the 7 August 1833 at 6.30pm when, after months of giving his father updates about the Slavery Abolition Bill, he writes 'I have written to you already this day but I add this line to say that the Slavery Abolition Bill is just passed. God prosper it'.<sup>10</sup>

Gladstone would also write to his father to discuss qualms he had about his positions on votes going through parliament. One of particular interest, dated 11 March 1835, discusses Gladstone's concerns about a vote on West Indian Education in which he worries that 'Lord Aberdeen may probably or at least

## Searching for Gladstone

possibly adopt a scheme, which I could not in any conscience approve, and which therefore if ultimately adhered to might render it necessary for me to choose between the forfeiture of my principles and the resignation of office'.<sup>11</sup> He states that he is apprehensive that Lord Aberdeen will apply for national funds for the education to be provided 'in that sect to which they belong, whether churchmen, dissenters, or Roman Catholics', and Gladstone is anxious that this will mean the Protestant state giving money to the Roman Catholic Church. These anxieties show early indications of Gladstone's feelings as expressed in his 1838 publication *The State in its Relation with the Church*, and which would lead to his resignation over the Maynooth Grant in 1845. He asks his father to 'repose confidence in [him] to act for the best if necessity should arise', hinting at the influence he allowed his father to hold over his political stances, at least early in his political career.<sup>12</sup>

After his marriage letters contain more personal details, discussing Catherine and the couple setting up their home, their children, and the Hawarden estate. Gladstone does, however, continue to give his father updates on debates and bills going through parliament, as well as sending him copies of reports.

With Catherine, parliamentary news also takes up a significant amount of all of his letters, updating her on debates in the House of Commons, committees, reports, bills, and his meetings with Queen Victoria. This was in part because it dictated his travel arrangements and his ability to go between London and Hawarden to see her and their family. Frequently he writes that political matters are keeping him in London for longer than he had hoped. In a letter dated 21 January 1840 and written from the House of Commons, for example, he explains that after already having been delayed in London for several days longer than he had planned he must stay longer. He writes to Catherine:

I fear my poor dear is worrying herself upon this very plaguing subject [of his detention in London]. I assure you new difficulties spring up continually. [Thomas] Fremantle has within the last five minutes summoned me to a meeting at Peel's about Prince Albert's allowance: but I am stuffy and rebellious, and threaten not to go unless I find in the meantime some great necessity. Now I am afraid you will hardly believe me whatever I may say on these matters, so little have I been able to fulfil the expectations under which I left you – but my own own<sup>13</sup> will see how difficult it is to manage these matters, and will know that the delays are anything but agreeable to me.<sup>14</sup>

There is a notable difference in tone between these letters and those to his father. Here Gladstone is more conversational, and his feelings on political issues are more obvious as he expresses his frustrations. In doing so he often confides in her about sensitive matters and several of his letters to her mention the need for secrecy. One, dated 24 December 1852, is marked 'Lock & key' at the top of the first page, and in it he writes that John Russell, the prime minister at the time, 'is weak as water, a puppet pulled by strings from without. He does not know his own mind for 12 hours together: & it is wholly owing to his incessant shifting that we lose day after day & threaten to become ridiculous'.<sup>15</sup>

This is not the only time that Catherine became his political confidant. In May 1885, in the midst of a diplomatic crisis with Russia following the Panjdeh Incident, and increasing questions about Irish home rule, Gladstone wrote to Catherine: 'What was a ray of light yesterday, is a flood today, and the great Russian question is, according to all human probability, amicably settled ... this great event ... will not solve the difficulties of the Govt. concerned with Ireland – on the contrary it may even increase them'.<sup>16</sup> The

GLA/GGA/2/2/1/152/74

H. of C. Aug 7.  
6 1/2 P.M.

My beloved Father,

I have written to you already this day but I add this line to say that the Slavery Abolition Bill is just passed. God prosper it.

Love you affly

W.G.

10. Wobbling Street,  
Whitehall.

May 2. 84-

My own C. ✓

(What was a ray of light yesterday, is a flood today, and the great-  
Romanian question is, according to all human probability amicably settled; as far as the present stage, and the point of threatening difficulty, are concerned.

letter is full of references to previous conversations between the two on similar subjects and it is clear that they were discussing these pressing political matters as a topic of regular conversation.

We can trace the development of Gladstone's opinion on different political issues through his correspondence, and we can also map this onto his reading practices. His library attests to the importance he placed upon books in shaping his opinions, and his books essentially functioned as a nineteenth-century search engine with Gladstone often reading material reflecting both sides of a debate. By bringing together the printed editions of Gladstone's diaries with the books held at the library, we can glean an insight into his research methods by seeing the books he recorded reading at particular times and the annotations he made in those books as he read.<sup>17</sup> A good example of this is in his reading about Ireland.

At the same time as the above letter to Catherine was written, his diaries show that Gladstone was also reading widely on the topic of Ireland and Irish home rule. This period of 1885 to 1887 was a key time in political discussions of Ireland, with the Hawarden Kite incident where Gladstone's private support for home rule was made public in *The Times* by his son in late 1885, swiftly followed by the defeat of Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill in April 1886. It was clearly a topic he was thinking about extensively at this time, as he prepared bills for parliament, or addresses and speeches to deliver to people across the UK. As well as contemporary publications about the ongoing crisis, Gladstone also records reading several histories of Ireland such as Francis Plowden's *The History of Ireland*, George John Shaw-Lefevre's *Peel and O'Connell*, and Daniel O'Connell's *Memoir on Ireland*.<sup>18</sup> It is clear from the thorough annotations throughout these titles that Gladstone read them all in great

## Searching for Gladstone

detail. His marginal marks include his typical notice lines, question marks, tick marks, 'NB' and occasional exclamation marks, but there are also several marginal comments in these volumes too, generally correcting, or adding emphasis or additional details to the printed text. He has also added his characteristic indexes to the back of each volume.

Gladstone's reading shows us that he wanted to get a broad scope of several different views on each subject, so his collection includes books written from very different perspectives. Daniel O'Connell, for example, was the political leader of the Roman Catholic majority in Ireland and campaigned strongly for Catholic emancipation and home rule. His *Memoir* speaks very strongly in support of the Irish Catholics and their treatment by the English parliament. In contrast, Gladstone also read S. E. B. Bouverie-Pusey's book *The Past History of Ireland*, and his note in the front reads that although 'excellent', he thought it was 'a little too English ... in the division of blames on certain occasions'.<sup>19</sup>

The 'Gladstone's Writing' project included only a snapshot of the Gladstonian collections held by Gladstone's Library, and an even smaller proportion of the wider paper legacy of William Gladstone held in institutions across the UK. Further work on our collections would allow us to continue to investigate the link between Gladstone's political and personal lives. This would include creating item-level catalogue records for 101 boxes containing letters from the general public and Gladstone's extended family, many of which are letters from authors and publishers that accompanied books sent to him in his capacity as prime minister and popular public figure, as well as people from all over the world writing to him to about his response to specific issues. The project also excluded more ephemeral materials, such as Gladstone's large collection of pamphlets, many of which are also annotated and

referenced in his diaries as research materials.<sup>20</sup> Another avenue to pursue would be the wider legacy of Gladstone's family and their involvement with chattel slavery and indentured labour, and William Gladstone's role in this. This research is already being done by scholars, many of whom are recipients of scholarships provided by the library, but it could be expanded through the creation of a more detailed catalogue of the plantation records and associated correspondence held at the library and potential further digitisation projects.

All of the items that we have quoted in this article can now be found online in our digital catalogue, which can be accessed through the homepage of our website. The books can be searched on the digital platform by title, author, classmark, and subject headings. They can also be accessed by links in their record on our 'GladCat' catalogue, where details of Gladstone's annotations can be found to direct you to pages of particular interest in the digitised books. The archival items can be searched by reference number, creator, correspondent, date, and to a limited extent by keyword, although this searchability is continually being expanded as a team of in-person and remote volunteers work to summarise the content of each letter and add subject headings and details about the places that letters were sent from and to. At the moment, reference numbers can be found in the main catalogue for the Glynne-Gladstone Archive in the 'Archives' section of our website, however, in the near future the catalogue will be available to search in the database Archives Hub, where you will be able to link from the record in the catalogue to the digitised file.

More information and tips about searching the digital catalogue can be found in the 'Digital Collections' section of our website. Enquiries about items in the digital catalogue can be sent to the library team through the 'Contact Us' section of the catalogue. We

look forward to seeing the research this new resource produces.

Alexandra Foulds is the archivist at Gladstone's Library and was the project manager for the 'Gladstone's Writing' project. She has an ARA-accredited Master's degree in Information Management and Preservation and a PhD in nineteenth-century literature and culture, both from the University of Glasgow. She is also the chair of the Archives and Records Association for Wales and a curator and archives liaison for the British Association of Victorian Studies.

Isobel Goodman is the librarian at Gladstone's Library. She has a CILIP-accredited library Master's degree in Book History and Material Culture from the University of Edinburgh, and has previously worked in university and rare book libraries in Cambridge, Edinburgh, and Oxford. She is also an editorial assistant for the forthcoming Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland, vol. 1, and a member of the CILIP Rare Books & Special Collections Group Bibliographic Standards Committee.

- 1 St Deiniol's Trust and its Purposes: Preliminary Paper, 9 Oct. 1895, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/4/24/1/27.
- 2 Arthur Tilney Bassett, *The Gladstone Papers* (Cassell and Company Ltd, 1930), p. 5.
- 3 During the period the collection was at the British Museum, Gladstone's diaries and some of his pamphlets, which had remained at Hawarden Castle, were deposited with Lambeth Palace and the National Library of Wales respectively.
- 4 R. J. Olney, 'The Gladstone Papers 1822–1977', in John Brooke and Mary Sorensen (eds.), *The Prime Ministers' Papers Series: W. E. Gladstone IV: Autobiographical Memoranda 1868–1894* (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1981), pp. 118–30 (p. 124).
- 5 'Gladstone Papers. Series B. Official Papers' <<https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&p=ed7c9f61750b-270bJmltdHM9MTcxMTY3MDQwMCZpZ3Vp-ZDoyOGFiNTkzMio4MzY0LTZlMzktVjEoY-10oZDYzODI3MTZmNjgmaW5zaWQ9NTAwMw&pt-n=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=28ab5932-8364-6e39-214b-4d6382716f68&u=a1aHRocHM6Ly9zZWYyZ2h-hcmNoaXZlcy5ibC51ay9wcm1tb19saWJyYXJ5L2x-pYndIY9hY3Rpb24vZGxEaXNwbGF5LmRvP2RvYolk-PUIBTVMwMzYtMDAyMDM4OTMoJnZpZD1JQU1TX-1ZVMiZpbmR4PTEmZHI1PWZhbHNIJmRzY25oPTEm-b25DYW1wdXMgZmFsc2UmZ3JvdXA9QUxMjmlu-c3RpdHVoaW9uPUJMmNoPXNlYXJjaCZ2bChmc-mVlVGV4dDAPTAzNiowMDIwMzgsMzQmc3Vib-WloPXNlYXJjaA&ntb=1> (accessed 03/05/2023).
- 6 C. J. Williams, 'Handlist of the Glynne-Gladstone MSS in St. Deiniol's Library, Hawarden', *List and Index Society Special Series*, xxiv (Athenaeum Press, 1990), p. v.
- 7 Anne Isba, *Gladstone and Women* (Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 132.
- 8 'Gladstone [née Glynne], Catherine (1812–1900)', in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, xxii (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 373–4 (p. 373).
- 9 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Sir John Gladstone, 30 Apr. 1833, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/2/1/152/44.
- 10 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Sir John Gladstone, 7 Aug. 1833, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/2/1/152/74.
- 11 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Sir John Gladstone, 11 Mar. 1835, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/2/1/153/26.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Gladstone frequently refers to Catherine in his letters as 'my own' or 'my own own'.
- 14 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Catherine Gladstone, née Glynne, 21 Jan. 1840, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/10/1/15/19.
- 15 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Catherine Gladstone, née Glynne, 24 Dec. 1852, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/10/1/18/104.
- 16 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Catherine Gladstone, née Glynne, 2 May 1885, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/10/1/26/57.
- 17 *The Gladstone Diaries*, with cabinet minutes and prime ministerial correspondence, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and M. R. D. Foot, 14 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1968–1994) [M 34.9 G/184].
- 18 Francis Plowden, *The History of Ireland, from its Union with Great Britain, in January 1801, to October 1810* (John Boyce, 1811) [WEG/M 46.4/PL0]; George John Shaw-Lefevre, *Peel and O'Connell: A review of the Irish policy of Parliament from the Act of Union to the death of Sir Robert Peel* (Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1887) [WEG/M 46.4/SHA]; Daniel O'Connell, *A Memoir on Ireland Native and Saxon: 1172–1660* (Charles Dolman, 1843) [WEG/M 46.15/OCO].
- 19 S. E. B. Bouverie-Pusey, *The Past History of Ireland: A brief sketch* (T. Fisher Unwin, 1894) [WEG/M 46/BOU], half title page.
- 20 See John Powell and Bertie Dockerill, 'The Tracts and Pamphlets of W. E. Gladstone', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 172 (2023), pp. 109–30.

## Introduction to Liberal history

In our short introductory article series, Michael Freeden tells the story of the Rainbow Circle, a discussion group of progressives founded in 1894.

# The Rainbow Circle

**I**N HIS 1831 volume of essays, *The Spirit of the Age*, J. S. Mill wrote of a ‘change [that] has taken place in the human mind ... an age of transition’, embodying its ‘indefinite progressiveness’.<sup>1</sup> Sixty years later, Britain was permeated by another wave of ideological ferment, ostensibly more modest but of huge significance in the twentieth-century domestic renewal of social visions and practices. A remarkable concatenation of discussion and activism groups, many with overlapping membership, flourished in London and beyond. The best-known of those is, of course, the Fabian Society – that seedbed of intellectual middle-class socialism – that disseminated a vast range of closely researched and argued pamphlets packed with information and policy proposals. But there also existed an abundance of secular ethical societies, campaigning journalists, conscientious clerics, and urban missions centring on the educational needs of underprivileged youths. They all subscribed to what we would now call a left-of-centre persuasion, in which the boundaries between an advanced social liberalism and a moderate ‘socialist’ reformism were blurred. Once Labour revealed itself as a distinct political force, however, the progressive British political parties began to impose their institutional straitjackets on the political

landscape, transforming the term ‘socialism’ into a label that increasingly separated liberalism and socialism from one another.

## Origins and mission

Among all those left-of-centre eddies was the Rainbow Circle, established in 1894 and convening monthly on a Wednesday evening for almost forty years.<sup>2</sup> Emerging from an informal discussion coterie in the National Liberal Club, it began by meeting regularly at the Rainbow Tavern in Fleet Street (hence the name), initially seeking a counterbalance to the dogmatic individualism and anti-statism of the old Manchester School. As one discussant pertinently observed in 1908, ‘The contrast between Liberalism and Socialism is beside the mark: the real contrast is between Socialism and Individualism’.<sup>3</sup> The moniker ‘Rainbow’ proved to be a fortuitous designation, as observed by the Circle’s long-serving and cherished third secretary, the civil servant Ambrose Parsons: ‘The lowly origin of the name was not known to later members who were pleased by the imaginative notion that the Rainbow Circle was so called because, combined in one harmonious whole, it included every shade of progressive opinion (from the all red Socialism of Mr Herbert

Burrows [the co-founder of the Social Democratic Federation] to the violet Liberal Imperialism of Mr Herbert Samuel).<sup>4</sup>

The Circle may not have been a crucible of dramatic ideational innovations, but it was unique in moulding and honing a progressive ideology drawing from its diverse membership of notable activists, some long-term, others transitory. Ramsay Macdonald was its first secretary, addressing the Circle on eleven occasions between 1895 and 1924 on matters such as the referendum, industrial affairs, state educational policy, or state compensation for industrial accidents. His talks on the Labour Party induced debates that, among others, queried the awkward fit between trade unionism and socialism. The leading Liberal Herbert Samuel gave an early talk in 1895 on the new liberalism that preceded his important book: *Liberalism: Its Principles and Proposals*.<sup>5</sup> He argued for ‘a third social philosophy’ independent of the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabians. As against class sectionalism and an exaggerated emphasis on narrow political action, and in the face of some scepticism in the ensuing discussion, Samuel envisaged ‘a very positive view of the State as “a partnership in every virtue & all perfection”,’ adding that, while wedded to individual liberty, the new liberalism’s ‘root idea must be the unity of society – complex in its economic, cooperative, ethical and emotional bonds’.<sup>6</sup>

### **A commingling of personalities and professions**

Two of the Circle’s intellectual heavyweights were J. A. Hobson and J. M. Robertson. Hobson, the new liberal theorist, economist,

Members of the Rainbow Circle:  
Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937)  
Herbert Samuel (1870–1963)  
Sir Richard Stapley (1842–1920)



## The Rainbow Circle

writer and journalist – a regular contributor to the *Manchester Guardian* and the pathbreaking liberal weekly the *Nation* – read twenty-two papers to the Rainbow Circle. Together with his colleague L. T. Hobhouse, who was

**‘The lowly origin of the name was not known to later members who were pleased by the imaginative notion that the Rainbow Circle was so called because, combined in one harmonious whole, it included every shade of progressive opinion (from the all red Socialism of Mr Herbert Burrows to the violet Liberal Imperialism of Mr Herbert Samuel).’**

elected to the Circle in 1903 but never took up his place, he shares the distinction of being Britain’s most original liberal thinker in the half-century following T. H. Green’s death.<sup>7</sup> Hobson’s diverse talks included a forerunner to his seminal book on imperialism, an analysis of the relationship between unemployment and underconsumption (the latter an economic theory that was later praised by Keynes), accounts of, separately, American capitalism and South African industrial monopolies, feminism, the newspaper, and Hobson’s influential insistence on the organic psycho-physical nature of society. Robertson, the impressively learned and accomplished Liberal politician, literary critic, rationalist, and freethinker, also delivered twenty-two papers on topics ranging from figures such as Machiavelli, Paine, Disraeli, or Joseph Conrad, through discussions of politics and economics in France and India, to problems concerning Malthusianism and eugenics, taxation, tariff reform, and the minimum wage.

Among other significant members were A. G. Gardiner, editor of the *Daily News*; G. P. Gooch, the historian, Liberal MP and long-term editor of the *Contemporary Review*; C. P. Trevelyan, the Liberal MP; Percy Alden, the Liberal, then Labour, MP whose career was devoted to public sector social service;

Graham Wallas, the Fabian Essayist and LSE-based political scientist; and F. J. Matheson, secretary of the British Institute for Social Service.<sup>8</sup> The philanthropist Sir Richard Stapley chaired the Circle at his house at 33 Blooms-

bury Square until shortly before his death in 1920. Alongside them were entrepreneurs, government employees, lawyers, and organisers in the voluntary sector. No women were members, although women were invited to attend meetings and on

a couple of occasions gave talks themselves. Over the years, ten of the Circle’s members were elected as Liberal MPs, while an equal number were unsuccessful parliamentary candidates. Eight members obtained seats in the landslide 1906 general election alone. The ethicist and lecturer H. J. Golding recalled that ‘membership of the Rainbow Circle ... gave me chastening intercourse with some of the strongest minds in the liberal movement in thought and politics ... leading progressives were of the company.’<sup>9</sup>

The London Ethical Societies, in particular South Place Ethical Society in Conway Hall, Red Lion Street, were parallel hubs for leading Circle members. Conway Hall became a major forum of secular humanism and the site of the well-regarded Conway Annual Lecture. Burrows, Hobson, and Robertson were regular Sunday lecturers under its secular auspices, later joined by the social philosopher Cecil Delisle Burns.<sup>10</sup> Of that venue Hobson wrote: ‘My close connection with this liberal platform, lasting continuously for thirty-six years, was of great help to me in clarifying my thought and enlarging my range of interests in matters of social conduct ... I found myself driven to put ethical significance into a variety of current topics and events, many of

which belonged to the fields of politics and economics.’<sup>11</sup>

### **The minute-books: an intellectual and ideological treasure trove**

The particular value of the Rainbow Circle for liberal historians and for explorers of the rise of a community-inclined welfare ethos lies in the survival of its minute-books – the first volume graced with Ramsay MacDonald’s beautifully rounded handwriting. They testify to the richness, variety and intellectual curiosity of the subjects that exercised the Circle’s humanists, professionals and practitioners and afford an edifying glimpse into the fashioning of so many of the arguments, proposals, and concerns that eventually, if unevenly, matured into policy documents such as the Liberal Yellow Book, the Beveridge Report and more broadly into the post-1948 welfare state.

Sadly, only four of the five minute-books remain, up to 1924. They had been removed to the house of Percy Alden, where the meetings continued after the east side of Bloomsbury Square was demolished in the late 1920s to make way for Victoria House. However, the fifth volume, concluding in 1931, disappeared after a German bombing attack destroyed Alden’s house. The others ended up in the Hampstead home of the Rainbow Circle’s last secretary, Stephen S. Wilson. When I traced the minute-books down there in the 1980s, Wilson graciously permitted me to photocopy them around the corner at a newsagent’s. I gingerly carried these precious and weighty tomes in a shopping bag, in an uneasy mixture of excitement and trepidation. Deciphering, transcribing and editing them for the Camden Series of the Royal Historical Society became a labour of love that occupied me for a year of evenings. After Wilson’s death, the minutes were safely deposited at the London School of Economics.

The meetings were organised thematically, each annual session having an overarching heading. Among the early ones were ‘The New Radicalism’, ‘Democracy’, ‘The Duties of the State to the Individual in the Industrial Sphere’, ‘A Practical Programme for a Progressive Party’, ‘The Newer Demands of the Political Left Wing’, ‘Imperialism’, and ‘Ethics and Social Reform’. That solid contemporary political angle was later relaxed in favour of two series on political thinkers and occasional literary figures, though the gatherings continued to track events and to reflect challenges of the time such as pre-1914 social unrest, land reform, and of course foreign policy and affairs, the First World War, and post-war reconstruction.

Unlike the discussions they inspired, the papers themselves were not fully reproduced – though their gist was usually recorded – except in one instance when the Rainbow Circle published its 1910–11 papers as a book, *Second Chambers in Practice*, against the backdrop of the crisis and reform of the House of Lords.<sup>12</sup> But the Circle also ventured separately on the launching of a journal, *The Progressive Review* (1896–97), that aimed to be a mouthpiece of the progressive movement. Samuel later reminisced in his *Memoirs* that ‘Finding that we were more or less at one in many things the Rainbow Circle decided, in 1896, to publish a review to propagate those doctrines that we held in common’.<sup>13</sup> Passionately, and true to the Circle’s credo, the *Review*’s first issue proclaimed that ‘Liberal thought and the enthusiasm of social reform are sprouting from a thousand seeds sown by education in a thousand spots’.<sup>14</sup> The epithet ‘progressive’ summoned up the new liberalism, deliberately avoiding too close an association with the Liberal Party, its pre-1906 incarnation believed to be mired in an increasingly irrelevant mindset. Indeed, Hobson – a key driving force of the *Review* – had already drawn attention in an

## The Rainbow Circle

1899 Circle lecture to the ‘widely held intellectual affinities which ... place the leaders of the Radical, the Socialist & the Labour groups much nearer to each other than their followers imagine’. Among those, Hobson listed the extirpation of heredity in government, old age pensions, and – in a warning to some of his colleagues – the need to resist the ‘yielding of certain progressives to imperialism’.<sup>15</sup> But the Review was short-lived, foundering on those very ideological divisions over imperialism, on too modest a circulation, and on personal grievances between William Clarke, the editor, and Ramsay MacDonald, acting as its secretary.

Of equal, if not greater, interest were the detailed accounts of the discussions – pro, contra, and off-piste – that followed a paper’s delivery and indicated the wealth of opinions and backgrounds of the Circle’s members. On their own, those fascinating and invaluable summaries enable readers and researchers to get a handle on the myriad swirling and informed tributaries at the disposal of British leftwing liberalism. Even when watered down in the interwar years, their survival power propelled them to infiltrate and endure in major post-1945 conversations, often appropriated – consciously or not – by Labour Party policies.

### Legacy beyond evanescence

The demise of the Rainbow Circle in 1931 marked a double decline. The one was a result of biological attrition: the ageing or death of most of its founding and active members and its inability to recruit a new generation of social reform aficionados and ideational luminaries. The other was the crumbling of a coherent annual programme that could furnish continuity and fire up lasting engagement. Years of sustained advocacy aimed at recasting the quality of Britain’s public agenda gave way to a disjointed assemblage of unrelated topics more befitting a genteel and casual

monthly club. Thus, the financial situation, education, the constitution of Andorra, and thrillers were lumped together in the Circle’s final full year.

The interwar era saw the waning of the public dominance of British liberal thinking – notwithstanding the success of the Liberal Summer Schools, the advent of a more technical interest in Keynesian economic strategy, and Beveridge’s plan.<sup>16</sup> The Labour Party had drained political and contemplative liberalism of some of its most creative thinkers and essayists, whose voices now blended into brands of socialism that possessed their own pedigree and identity. As for personalities, stimulating scholars, journalists and ideological innovators who could match Robertson’s erudition or Hobson’s effervescent originality, these were in short supply or wedded to different forums. The programmatic output of the Liberal publicist Ramsay Muir was a dull substitute for the new liberals at their passionate prime. As much of the left-liberal vision had been subsumed into sections of Labour social planning, liberals tended to fall back on notions of individualism and property. Rather than upholding some forms of collectivism, the remaining liberals demonstrated a more tepid and inconsistent commitment to state regulation. In its diminished form, the Rainbow Circle could no longer contribute, either in inclination or in the current aptitudes of its members, to its initial ethos of intertwined social life and benign public-spiritedness. It had outlived its purpose.

Given today’s reduction in dedicated face-to-face group meetings, one is more likely to encounter them in hard-nosed specialised think tanks, in amateur book clubs, or in academic workshops. The decorous and conscientious endeavours of the Rainbow Circle now appear to be largely rooted in past social customs and practices. Here was a small private group recruited from

disparate walks of life, comprising various professional sub-cultures, exuding political fervour, displaying mainly well-mannered disagreements alongside bridge-building, and a quasi-formal conviviality in very comfortable surroundings. Yet that elite association of individuals, crucially sporting democratic and altruistic instincts, was gifted with the capacity to generate an extraordinary social and cultural impact on a scale far beyond its numbers, aligned with the broader progressive vanguard from which it drew nourishment and into which it injected urgency and imagination.

Michael Freeden is Emeritus Professor of Politics, University of Oxford and Emeritus Professorial Fellow, Mansfield College, Oxford. His books include *The New Liberalism* (1978), *Liberalism Divided* (1986), *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (1996), *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (2003), *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* (2013), *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (2015), and *Concealed Silences and Inaudible Voices in Political Thinking* (2022) (all Oxford University Press). He was the founder of the *Journal of Political Ideologies* and its editor for 25 years. He has been awarded the Sir Isaiah Berlin Prize for Lifetime Contribution to Political Studies by the UK Political Studies Association, and the Medal for Science, Institute of Advanced Studies, Bologna University.

- 1 J. S. Mill, *Essays on Politics and Culture*, ed. G. Himmelfarb (Anchor Books, 1963), esp. pp. 1–8.
- 2 *Minutes of the Rainbow Circle 1894–1924*, edited and annotated with an Introduction by Michael Freeden (Royal Historical Society, Camden Fourth Series, vol. 38, 1989).
- 3 *Minutes*, p. 170.
- 4 A. Parsons (ed.), *Second Chambers in Practice* (P. S King & Son, 1911), p. v.
- 5 H. Samuel, *Liberalism: An Attempt to State the Principles and Proposals of Contemporary Liberalism in England* (Grant Richards, 1902).
- 6 *Minutes*, p. 28.
- 7 See M. Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Clarendon Press, 1978).
- 8 For the full list, see the *Minutes*, appendix II.
- 9 H. J. Golding, *The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Ethical Movement* (D. Appleton, 1926), p. 180.
- 10 S. K. Ratcliffe, *The Story of South Place* (Watts & Co., 1955), pp. 60–76.
- 11 J. A. Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* (George Allen & Unwin, 1938), pp. 57–8.
- 12 Parsons (ed.), *Second Chambers*, p. v.
- 13 (Viscount) H. Samuel, *Memoirs* (The Cresset Press, 1945), p. 24.
- 14 'Introductory', *Progressive Review*, vol. 1 (1896), pp. 1–2.
- 15 *Minutes*, p. 68.
- 16 See M. Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought 1914–1939* (Clarendon Press, 1986).

# Letters to the Editor

## Asquith

I enjoyed Radio 4's recent dramatisation of Robert Harris's latest novel, *Precipice*.

The actor reading out the book gave Asquith a conventional 'received pronunciation' accent. However, I'd always been under the impression that he had a very slight Yorkshire accent, but perhaps I'm wrong? (Similarly, I'd been given to understand that

Gladstone had a slight Liverpool accent – but again, perhaps I'm wrong.) Can anyone advise?

Incidentally, Asquith's Wikipedia page has an audioclip of him supposedly delivering his Budget speech in 1909. Does anyone know if this recording is genuine?

York Membership

# Research in Progress

If you can help any of the researchers listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information, please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

## Sir Robert Torrens (1812–84)

I am looking for the papers of Sir Robert Torrens, who was elected to Parliament for the Borough of Cambridge in 1868, representing the Liberal Party. He lived for many years in South Australia, where he developed the land titles system that still bears his name. He moved to England in the 1860s, where he remained until his death (1884). Most of his papers from his 'Australian' period are held in Adelaide (South Australia). But I have been unable to find any repository of his 'UK' papers. Torrens was confident of his place in history, and (in my view) would have ensured that his UK papers and correspondence were preserved for posterity. Yet, despite considerable efforts, I have been unable to find them. *Peter Butt, Emeritus Professor of Law, University of Sydney; peter.butt@sydney.edu.au.*

## The emergence of the 'public service ethos'

I am interested in analysing how self-interest and patronage was challenged by the advent of impartial inspectorates, public servants and local authorities in provincial Britain in the mid 19th century. Much work has been done on the emergence of a 'liberal culture' in the central civil service in Whitehall, but much work needs to be done on the motives, behaviour and mentalities of the newly reformed guardians of the poor, sanitary inspectors, factory and mines inspectors, education authorities, prison warders and the police. I am currently co-editing a collection for Manchester University Press. *Ian Cawood, Stirling University; ian.cawood@stir.ac.uk.*

## Professor Reginald W. Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans' Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in

campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. *Dr Yury Boshyk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk.*

## Russell Johnston, 1932–2008

Scottish Liberal politics was dominated for over thirty years (1965–95 and beyond) by two figures: David Steel and Russell Johnston. Of the former, much has been written; of the latter, surprisingly little. I am therefore researching with a view to writing a biography of Russell. If any readers can help – with records, other written material or reminiscences – please let me know, either by email or post. *Sir Graham Watson, sirgrahamwatson@gmail.com; 9/3 Merchiston Park, Edinburgh EH10 4PW.*

## Liberal song and the Glee Club

Aiming to set out the history of Liberal song from its origins to the days of the Liberal Revue and Liberator Songbook. Looking to complete a song archive, the history of the early, informal conference Glee Clubs in the 1960s and 1970s, and all things related. *Gareth Epps; garethepps@gmail.com.*

## Anarchism and Liberalism 1880–1980

Some anarchists were successfully influential in liberal networks, starting with many New Liberal networks around the beginning of the 20th Century. My thesis focuses on this earlier period but I am interested in anarchist influences on liberalism throughout the twentieth century. If any readers can help with informing me of their own personal experiences of anarchist ideas or works in liberal networks or relevant historical information they might have I would greatly appreciate it. *Shaun Pitt; shaunjpitt@gmail.com.*

# Report

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## Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel and Palestine: Background and Legacy

Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting, 25 July 2024, with Dr Peter Shambrook

Report by Nicholas Alderton

The 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israeli communities and military bases resulted in the murder of nearly 1,200 people and kickstarted a devastating war in the region. The war has seen accusations of genocide and other war crimes levelled at both sides, with Israel bearing the brunt of these accusations due to its continued subjugation of the Palestinian people and its refusal to allow its actions to be scrutinised by foreign press or the international community. The current war is the latest chapter in a deadly conflict that has been flaring up since the creation of Israel in 1948 and, following the 1967 Six-Day War, the continued Israeli occupation and expansion into former Arab Palestinian land.

However, the 1948 creation of Israel did not start the conflict. In fact, this all began at least thirty years before, as a result of British diplomacy. More specifically, the roots of the conflict(s) can be seen in the decisions made during the First World War and those of the Liberal-led wartime coalition government, which was determined to win the war by any means necessary. Accordingly, the question posed to the

Liberal Democrat History Group's guest speaker, Dr Peter Shambrook, at our meeting in July 2024 was: 'Historically, to what extent did the Liberal Party contribute to the present nightmare in the Middle East, and particularly the Israel/Palestine conflict?'

Dr Shambrook gained his PhD in Modern Middle Eastern History from the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Cambridge. He has held positions at the British-Arab University Association, Durham University and the Centre of Lebanese Studies in Oxford. He is now an independent scholar and historical consultant to the Balfour Project. His latest book is *Policy of Deceit: Britain and Palestine, 1914–1939*. The talk was ably chaired by Layla Moran MP. Layla is of Palestinian descent and still has extended family members in Gaza, many of whom have been caught up in the conflict.

Shambrook began his talk with what would turn out to be his conclusion, namely that 'the hundred year war for the control of Palestine – that we are still witnessing – started in London, in 10 Downing Street and Whitehall, during the First World War.' Britain's policies could only be

'understood in the context of its relations with other Great Powers ...' when '..."trading" territories and colonies, and dividing buffer states into zones of influence was normal Great Power diplomacy'. When the war started in 1914, there was no plan as to how the Ottoman Empire's Arabian territories would be dealt with after its defeat. General Kitchener saw a role for an Arabian Raj, styled on England's relationship with India, whilst others wanted the area to be little more than an adjunct to India. Asquith, Prime Minister until 1916, was reluctant to take more territory for the British Empire but, if other countries were to stake a claim, then he did not want to miss out.

This indecisiveness had begun to change by early 1915, with Britain promising the French that they could have Palestine. In October 1915, Britain then agreed that the Arabs, via Sharif Hussein of Mecca, could have it as part of a wider Arab state. In 1916, it was then promised that the French, via the Sykes-Picot Agreement, could have a role in Palestine, which would be governed under an Anglo-French arrangement. Then, in 1917, Britain promised Palestine to the global Jewish

## Report: Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel and Palestine: Background and Legacy

community. Shambrook argued that these promises were made because of Britain's desire to win the war and appease her allies. The 1915 promise to Sharif Hussein, which was reneged on when Britain made the promise to the Jewish community in 1917, would lay the foundations for the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Sharif Hussein was promised the land in exchange for leading a revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which he duly began in June 1916. After Lloyd George took over as Prime Minister in December 1916, the government began to move away from its previous stance and started conversations with Chaim Weizmann, the Russian-born leader of the Zionist Organisation, and other Zionists. These conversations would ultimately lead to the November 1917 Balfour Declaration, a public statement promising the establishment of a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine. As Shambrook explained, the Declaration may have been issued in the name of Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, but it was the result of many individuals including the Herbert Samuel (Liberal MP and leader of the Liberal Party 1931–35), Chaim Weizmann, Leo D. Brandeis, Lord Milner, General Jan Smuts, Leo Amery and William Ormsby-Gore – 'in prove-nance, the Declaration was a joint Anglo-Zionist initiative'.

The next part of the talk focused on the peace arrangements

after the war and Shambrook went into some detail about how the Great Powers divided up the Ottoman territories. Britain's administration of Palestine began in 1918; it was officially awarded Palestine, along with Iraq, in 1920. The choice of Palestine's Governor was a foregone conclusion, as Lloyd George, Weizmann and Sir Herbert Samuel had met in December 1918, at which the offer was made to Samuel, a committed Zionist. Samuel took over in 1920 and ran Palestine as a 'Crown colony style administration – an inflexible dictatorship – and arbitrarily passed hundreds of laws during his five-year rule of Palestine'.

Shambrook explained, under the Ottomans, Palestinians had enjoyed a traditional style of government, with political parties, taxes, newspapers, schools and a judiciary. These systems were quickly eroded by Samuel's rule. While most of the Palestinian land was owned by the Palestinian Arabs, many of the new laws that Samuel passed saw an increasing dispossession of Arab tenant farmers. Samuel's priority was 'to create the conditions, political, legal and . . . economic necessary for the Zionists themselves to carry on their work'. Furthermore, Samuel actively encouraged the creation of the Jewish state through increased Jewish immigration, a language act that made Hebrew an official language and the recognition of the Va'ad Leumi (the Jewish

National Council) as a representative Jewish body in Palestine. At the same time, the British refused to accept the legitimacy of an Arab Executive that claimed to represent the views of the majority. Lloyd George and Balfour informed Weizmann that 'by the Balfour Declaration they always meant an eventual Jewish state'. Even the British Mandate for the administration of Palestine, which was ratified by the League of Nations on 22 July 1922, was contradictory. It called for a Jewish national home while instructing the 'Mandatory Power, Britain, to prepare Palestine for self-government'.

Shambrook ended his talk by examining how the actions of the Liberal government, which came to an end in 1922, shaped British policy for the next century. The Liberals' (in particular, Lloyd George's and Samuel's), insistence on a Jewish homeland 'unambiguously painted all future Conservative and Labour governments into a corner'. These policies led to the mass immigration of Jewish people into Palestine during the mid-1930s, fleeing Nazi persecution, and the Palestinian Arab revolt that started in 1936 as a direct consequence of this immigration and continued British rule. Between 1936 and 1939, the revolt was brutally suppressed; it was disturbing to hear that water-boarding was being used 60 years before the Iraq invasion. Shambrook described the 1948

British withdrawal from Palestine as akin to Pontius Pilate washing his hands.

In conclusion, Shambrook was damning of Britain's historical role. There had been no acknowledgement, by successive governments, of the role that Britain had played in its 'one-sided, often deceitful Mandate policies, which led inevitably to the destruction of Palestinian society in 1948'. Since 1967, British governments had been focused on the special relationship with the USA, arms sales, intelligence-sharing and oil security. At the date of the talk in July 2024, there had been very little criticism of Israel. Shambrook believed ultimately that there would be meaningful negotiations to end the conflict.

Responding to a question on why Britain did not recognise

the rights of the Arab Christians, Shambrook argued that the British did not see Palestine as being made up of one people but of different sects and religions. Layla Moran disagreed with the British attitude, pointing out that in Palestine, you are Palestinian first and your religion is secondary. This is why the dismissal of the Palestinian delegation was so egregious – they were Palestinians and did not differentiate between themselves.

Moran was encouraged by the fact that the 2024 Liberal Democrat position on Palestine had been carefully developed over many years, had not split the party and had not been watered down in the election manifesto. She was heartened by Foreign Secretary David Lammy's change of tone, compared to the previous government.

Shambrook's talk was an eye-opener and well worth listening to in full. As both he and Moran argued, history viewed in the region is very different from the history we are taught in Britain. Shambrook was adamant that Britain needs to face up to its historical role and its part in the continued history of Palestine and Israel. Like so many aspects of British Imperialism, an honest conversation needs to happen.

Dr Nicholas Alderton is Deputy Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History* and a committee member of the Lloyd George Society. His first book, *Emlyn Hooson and the Welsh Liberal Party 1962–79*, will be published in 2025.

The recording of the meeting is available at <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/lloyd-george-herbert-samuel-and-palestine-background-and-legacy/>

# Reviews

## A Prime Minister's Love Affair

Robert Harris, *Precipice* (Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024)

Review by Alan Mumford

This journal would not usually review a novel, but this book is accompanied by assertions about Venetia Stanley which may be taken as fact by some readers of the book and accompanying interviews.

Robert Harris has received justified praise for his historical novels on political personalities – Cicero, Dreyfus, the Cromwellian regicides and an anonymised version of Tony Blair. *Precipice* is based primarily

on more than 600 letters H.H. Asquith, Liberal Prime Minister 1908–16, wrote to Venetia Stanley, a young woman of the landed upper class. These are supplemented by letters she exchanged with Edwin

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Montagu, a protégé of Asquith, who had placed him in the cabinet. His letters to her repeat his desire to marry her. The factual content includes material from government files.

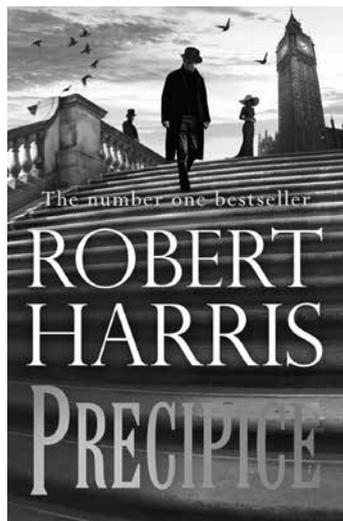
The letters from Venetia to Asquith were probably destroyed by Asquith, so Harris has created his version of what she might have written, together with oral dialogue between them. He also brings in a fictional police officer to investigate the source of screwed-up government papers found in different parts of London (in fact, discarded by Asquith while in his car with Venetia). This provides a dramatic element to the story: will Asquith as the source be discovered, and will his affair be revealed? An extramarital affair would be scandalous; for it to be with a woman thirty-five years younger than him would bring further opprobrium. The policeman discovers the fictional letters from Venetia, filling in a large hole in the account.

Asquith fell desperately in love with Venetia in 1912, but the book starts in June 1914. Asquith's concern then was primarily with home rule for Ireland, but this quickly changed to the prospect and actuality of war with Germany. The number of his letters to her increases as does his pressure for meetings and the fervour of his declarations of love. He also reveals cabinet secrets through letters and telegrams. The insouciance with which he betrays secrets to her is evident, but

Harris does not invent a revelation of the material to Germany.

Asquith by 1914 was increasingly desperate to maintain their relationship, as he began to suspect that she was thinking about marriage. He had no idea that this would culminate in her finally accepting a proposal from Edwin Montagu, a rich Jew for whom she had a physical distaste. Harris includes the real letters between Venetia and Montagu which reveal her indecision and his agony. Asquith received her letter revealing their engagement on 12 May 1914. Harris does not quote his response on the same day: 'Most loved, as you know well this breaks my heart. I couldn't bear to come and see you. I can only pray God to bless you – and help me.' He quotes instead an undated unpublished longer letter essentially conveying the same feelings. The subplot of Montagu's wish to marry Venetia is well presented, although the author does not quote N. Levine, *Politics Religion and Love*, as a source.

Is this a balanced and fair portrait of Asquith? No – it is a novel, not a biography, with invented dialogue and elements of introspection (the latter, in fact, not Asquith's style). It is a narrative of a relationship, with no substantial explanation of it. Harris gives his views on some of the real history at the end of the book which need to be examined, and in some cases contradicted. Reviewers and interviewers have



concentrated on the novel and Harris' assertions on the facts. Neither Harris nor the Brocks (M & E Brock (editors) *H.H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley*) suggest that she gave advice on Ireland or the Great War. In an interview with the *New Statesman* (30 August 2024) Harris speculates that if she had not announced her engagement to Edwin Montagu, she would have advised him against the formation of the Coalition in 1915; but there is no evidence on what her views might have been, or how important to him that advice might have been.

In terms of influencing high politics, this is nonsense. Venetia's involvement mostly consisted of reading and listening to Asquith's accounts of decisions, with occasional specifics such as advising him to arrange for a minister to meet Redmond, the Irish leader. She advised on a new Chief Whip, but his secretary, 'Bongie', and daughter Violet agreed with her

– which was the more influential? Neither reviewers nor interviewers have challenged Harris' assertion about her influences.

Harris claims in 'acknowledgements' to have used material from Asquith's unpublished letters. I was excited by the possibilities implied. There are of course no footnotes to identify the material, nor does he always give dates, so I compared all his entries with the Brocks' version. I have found eleven – none of any personal or political significance. I found sixteen similarly unimportant by S. Buczaki in *My Darling Mr Asquith* (2016). One possible exception is an unpublished paragraph from an undated letter in which Asquith writes 'I am on the eve of the most astounding and world-shaking decisions – such as I wd never have taken without your counsel and consent'. Without a date is it impossible to be sure this was written during Coalition negotiations. This is consonant with frequent references by Asquith to her helpful advice. The question is how influential that advice was, as distinct from his wish to make her advice sound important.

In an interview in *The Sunday Times* (25 August 2024) Harris claims that Asquith was incapable of taking many major decisions without involving Venetia. In his historical note Harris describes her as 'one of the most consequential influential women in British political history', a risible claim not supported by any

evidence. On the question of whether Asquith was seriously affected in discussions over Coalition government I am on Harris' side in believing that Venetia's decision to marry Montagu did have an impact on Asquith's decision-making at that time. His mind had previously been significantly occupied by his love for her and this came as a total surprise. As he told his new confidante, Sylvia Henley (Venetia's sister), Venetia and Montagu were devoted to him so 'it is the irony of fortune that they should combine to deal a deathblow to me'. So far from being the helpful distraction that some have argued, Venetia gave pain as well as pleasure. In the novel Harris encourages the canard that Asquith frequently wrote to her during cabinet meetings. In fact, there were only four such letters.

Historians and biographers, from Roy Jenkins, in his unsurpassed biography *Asquith* (he thought it 'an epistolary romance') to Judge Oliver Popplewell, who believes sexual activity took place, have debated whether the affair involved full sexual congress. Harris writes that 'it strains credibility ... that the affair was not at least in some sense physical'. In the novel he inserts a description of alternative sexual activity, including frottage, with suggestive phrases: 'she adjusted her dress', 'the curtains were closed', 'he laid his coat on the ground' to support his case – but this is not evidence.

Harris does not comment on whether such a relationship was unusual for Prime Ministers. Asquith will have known of three previous men who had sexual affairs, some as Prime Minister – Melbourne, Wellington and Palmerston. At this time, he probably did not know about Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, who celebrated their 'marriage' in 1913 when Lloyd George was 51 and Frances 26. (Nor have later Prime Ministers always adhered to marriage vows – Harold Wilson, John Major and Boris Johnson.) Asquith did not reveal any worries about this relationship being revealed, even after the discovery of the material he had thrown away while with her in the car.

There is no comment on the moral turpitude involved in Asquith's betrayal of his wife Margot. Reviewers have commented on the thirty-five-year gap between Asquith and Venetia, rather than on the wider issue of a Prime Minister with a love affair. Neither in the novel nor in real life did he or Venetia express any doubts about the morality. Asquith was positively opposed to introspection. Readers may feel some sympathy towards this besotted and distraught man (also directing a war), but this will be diminished by reading the pitiful letter from Margot, published by the Brocks, 'I fear she has entirely ousted me in your affections'. She is certainly ousted in the novel, since

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there is very little of significance reported, an omission which reduces the impact of the novel. Venetia's escape from an increasingly needy man is similarly not preceded in her fictional letters

by any doubts about the morality of her friendship, with or without any sexual activity.

This reviewer's conclusion – read the novel and ignore the history.

Alan Mumford is the author of several articles in the *Journal of Liberal History*, including 'Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal' and 'Five Liberal Women' and a review of S. Buzacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith*.

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## Biography of an extraordinary woman

Jane Robinson, *Trailblazer: Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, the first feminist to change our world* (Doubleday, 2024)

Review by Sarah Richardson

**B**arbara Leigh Smith Bodichon had an impeccable political pedigree. She was the granddaughter of the abolitionist MP and member of the Clapham Sect, William Smith. Her father, Benjamin, followed William into Parliament and represented the same two constituencies: Sudbury and Norwich. Both were Unitarians, active in leading Dissenting circles, promoting the radical causes of the day. In her new biography of Barbara, Jane Robinson sketches out her illustrious connections in the form of a sunflower, with Barbara at the centre, radiating links with significant political, literary and cultural contemporaries. Her cousin was Florence Nightingale, she was friends with Dante and Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Emily Davies (to name but a few).

Benjamin Leigh Smith was a wealthy businessman, making his fortune in the distillery trade. He had even bailed out his father

who had been on the brink of bankruptcy. When Barbara reached the age of 21, Benjamin gave her a portfolio of shares which yielded around £250–350 per year, making her an independently wealthy woman, free to pursue her own philanthropic and political projects. Although she married in 1857, her relationship with her eccentric husband, Eugène Bodichon, was unconventional. They often lived separately, even in different countries, and she continued to pursue her own separate projects.

Yet, in spite of this seemingly gilded life, Barbara was tainted by the stigma of illegitimacy. Her father embarked on a relationship with her mother, Anne Longden of Alfreton in Derbyshire. She bore him five children before her untimely death at the age of 32, but the couple were never married, meaning that Barbara and her siblings were shunned by many in the family (including Florence Nightingale and her mother Fanny) and in society.

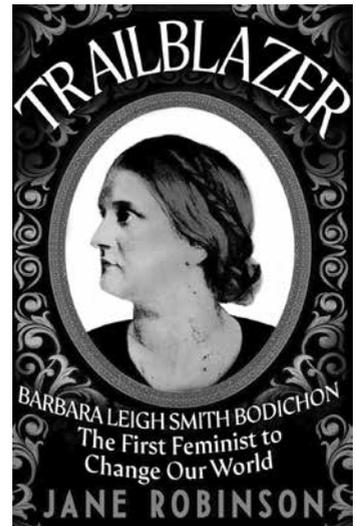
Robinson's lively prose teases out the paradoxes of Barbara's life breathlessly. The book is meticulously researched, using private and public archives in the UK and abroad. However, historians may hesitate at her use of her imagination when factual sources are scarce. In her discussion of Ben and Anne's relationship for example, Robinson rejects the view of historians that he was acting in concordance with his radical ideology, which eschewed the inequalities in marriage. Instead, she alludes to her favourite Shakespeare play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, imagining a different ending where Kate stands up to Petruchio who falls in love with her feistiness. Thus, she envisages Anne as a high-spirited woman who refused to marry Ben, rather than the other way around.

Later, Robinson acknowledges that she 'can't avoid speculation. And I can't resist anecdote, rumour and trivia: they all play

their part in reimagining the past' (p. 272). She then departs from a scholarly narrative and paraphrases from a random selection of sources a list of Barbara's thoughts. This creates unevenness and appears to be unnecessary when there is such a wealth of source material.

Robinson is also given to hyperbole. The frontispiece states: 'You may not know the name Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. It has quietly been erased from history.' This is not true. The author, herself, cites a wide range of secondary sources which include multiple biographies of Barbara. Readers taking a brief glance at studies of nineteenth-century feminism, women's suffrage or higher education will not fail to find Barbara's name prominent in discussions of female political activists. She played a significant part in, and financed, some of the key feminist projects of the nineteenth century including the right of married women to retain their property, widening the scope of women's employment, suffrage and education. But was she the *first* feminist to change our world as stated in the sub-title? As the biography itself notes, she was part of a network of significant women activists and her contribution should be viewed alongside the work of others. Public recognition of her role was more muted though, in part because of her radicalism but also because of her unconventional background.

Like many female politicians of the period, Barbara primarily used her pen to influence opinion. She published key pamphlets on the laws pertaining to women, women and work, and reasons for and against female enfranchisement. However, she was also instrumental in co-founding the Langham Place circle, the pre-eminent group of talented women campaigners, artists, writers and intellectuals in the mid nineteenth century. The group was established because of the friendship between Barbara Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes and encompassed many of the leading women's rights campaigners of the day including Matilda Hays, Jessie Boucherett, Adelaide Procter and Emily Davies. The activities of the circle and their publication the *English Woman's Journal* provided a platform for the advancement of feminist projects including the suffrage, the reform of married women's property rights, education and increased employment opportunities for women. Again, Robinson resorts to a fictional account of what it must have been like working at the office of the *English Women's Journal* rather than drawing upon the extant sources and rich archives of the women who worked there. This does distinguish her account from the many books and articles which explore this important organisation, but it is not always convincing.



In May 1866, Barbara was the inspiration for the launch the first mass women's suffrage petition which proved pivotal in creating national movements campaigning for women to gain the vote. Barbara spoke on women's suffrage at an early meeting of the Kensington Society, which met to converse, debate and critique important contemporary issues. Her talk led to the decision to petition parliament to include a measure of female enfranchisement within any reform of the electoral system. Barbara had a strong track record in well-positioned petitioning to further feminist causes. In 1856 she, along with Bessie Rayner Parkes, had coordinated a petition to reform the laws on married women's property rights with over 3,000 signatories, among them high-profile women such as Jane Carlyle, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Martineau. The petition was drafted by Helen Taylor, stepdaughter

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of John Stuart Mill, and its wording was honed by Barbara, Jessie Boucherett and Emily Davies. Mill, MP for Westminster, had agreed to present the petition to parliament if there were over one hundred women signatories, in the event, there were 1,521, achieved in a matter of weeks. The petition was presented to the Commons by Mill in front of a packed Ladies' Gallery. However, as Robinson notes, Barbara was absent, perhaps because of her illegitimacy. It is her absences, as well as her commanding contributions which form a key motif to the biography.

Her name was also missing from the executive committee formed to establish the first college for women at the University of Cambridge, although she was the major donor and an equal driving force along with Emily Davies. Barbara ultimately succeeded in her desire to locate the college from distant Hitchin to Girton on the outskirts of Cambridge. She donated paintings and furnishings and also left the college £10,000 in her will, which

safeguarded its future. Barbara's influence on future feminists thankful for her activism and achievements led to Irene Baker and Lesley Abdela repairing her grave in Brightling in 2007 and Girton College recognising her key founding role, along with Emily Davies, with a blue plaque, unveiled by Baroness Hale in 2019. Barbara's important legacy is not directly addressed in the biography perhaps because it runs counter to the view that she has been erased from history.

The book is lavishly illustrated with colour plates and black and white sketches demonstrating Barbara's skill as a professional artist as well as depicting aspects of her life, family and friendship circle. Many have come from the private archive of Barbara's descendants and provide powerful visual insights into, especially, her personal life. They also serve as a reminder that in her art, as with other aspects of her life, Barbara was a campaigner and activist. She helped to establish the Society for Female Artists and

petitioned the Royal Academy to admit women students. Robinson notes that her bequest of her watercolours to the Tate was refused, which means that much of her work is now lost.

*Trailblazer* is a highly readable commemoration of an extraordinary woman. It focuses most attention on Barbara's personal unconventional connections: with her father, her aunts, her eccentric husband, and her friends and protégés. This means that coverage of some of her feminist projects are compressed. However, the biography does much to remind us of the eclectic, colourful and pioneering lives of many female Victorian campaigners which run counter to dominant views of strait-laced, retiring, pious individuals. It is important that the contributions of women like Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon are celebrated and remembered.

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## Fifty election campaigns

Iain Dale (ed.), *British General Election Campaigns 1830–2019* (Biteback, 2024)

Review by Mark Pack

Iain Dale has carved out an impressive niche as the driving force behind a series of multi-authored compilations of political history (and alternative

political histories too, exploring topics such as what if Jeremy Corbyn had become Prime Minister). His latest, *British General Election Campaigns 1830–2019*, continues

his tradition of putting together highly impressive author lists for very readable volumes.

The fifty general elections in this volume are covered by 49



names, including many big-name academic stars such as Vernon Bogdanor and John Curtice, high-profile political journalists such as Sue Cameron and Adam Boulton, experts in the details of elections such as Peter Kellner and Kathryn Rix, some frontline politicians, such as Robert Buckland and David Laws (who gets to do both 1910 elections), and a clutch of others I know who I now worry will be offended for not being called out in the earlier part of this sentence [Editor – including me!! on the 1906 election].

That cast list demonstrates both the book's strength and the restrictions of the format. Each individual chapter stands well on its own. They do each tend to reflect their author's own expertise and, in the case of those politically active, their political backgrounds. That can make for a somewhat inconsistent read, as different chapters have differing takes on the same people and

events that span more than one election. It also means there is some duplication, with the Tamworth Manifesto making more than one appearance, for example, even though it was the manifesto for just the one election. Yet it also means that for such controversial figures as Benjamin Disraeli the reader gets both the hagiography and the criticism, making for a more informative overall read.

Each chapter stands well on its own, making it a good book for dipping in and out of. Each author, understandably, tends to like ending their chapter with an assessment of how important their own election was, with as a result the book taking you through an impressively long list of electoral firsts. Some especially stand out, with Robert Saunders making a particularly good case for the 1886 election being at least as important as those of 1945 or 1979 in reshaping British politics for the long term.

Each chapter gives a good basic grounding in knowing what happened in the run-up to and during each general election. Analytical controversies, such as the impact of the Sheffield rally speech in the 1992 general election, are often treated briefly, so the interested reader will often be prompted to turn elsewhere for more information. That is though, in my book, a sign of a good introductory reference guide as this book aims to be.

Although the book has an enjoyable preface by Iain Dale himself, reflecting in part on his own attempts to win an election, it does not have a scene-setter to tell the newer reader just how different many elements of elections were in 1832 – the big role of uncontested seats, for example, or the different electoral dynamics of multi member first-past-the-post constituencies, or public voting over multiple days or the absence of financial controls. It is therefore a bit of a bumpy and inconsistent ride in the early chapters to learn about just how different elections were back then.

The unwary reader may therefore also be taken in by the apparent surgical precision of the voting and MP statistics given for early general elections, giving figures to one decimal place as if counting up how many votes each party secured is a matter of simple maths rather than a complex set of judgements requiring decisions over which party to allocate candidates to, how to cater for uncontested seats, what to do with under-voting in multi-member seats or the simplest but most annoying of problems for the electoral researcher – how many basic numbers vary between different sources. And that is without getting into the special issues with trying to calculate turnout figures ...

As that approach to electoral statistics reflects, this is not a book to turn to for revealing

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new details or unorthodox viewpoints. Such questionable facts as whether Palmerston ever did really say the famous line about the Schleswig-Holstein question (the earliest sources crediting it to him came after his death) are presented as if definitely true. But this is the conventional wisdom of such political history being presented, so it would be unduly harsh to call it wrong. Rather, it is just that the truth, on

both electoral numbers and that quote, is less certain than most readers will think from the book.

However, the book is nicely rounded off by a concluding chapter on how campaigning has changed in recent general elections, providing a handy summary of the changing realities and political science theories and showing the continued importance of some – though only

some – of the traditional election campaign techniques that would have been familiar to those standing in the very first election in this volume.

Dr Mark Pack is President of the Liberal Democrats, and has worked or volunteered for the party in various roles at each general election since 1992.

For a reader offer for *British General Elections 1830–2019*, see page 2 of this Journal.

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## Forgotten Scot

Lachlan Munro, *R. B. Cunninghame Graham and Scotland: Party, Prose and Political Aesthetic* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022)

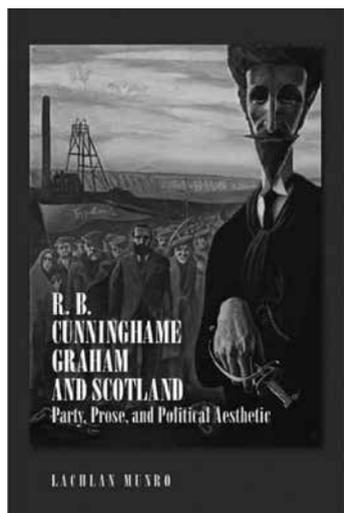
Review by Ian Cawood

In 1927, at the height of his fame, an article in the *Sunday Post* noted that ‘there are few men nowadays so well known as Mr R. B. Cunninghame Graham’, yet on the anniversary of his birth in 1952, the Scottish poet and songwriter Hamish Henderson asked, ‘Who remembers Cunninghame Graham?’ Lachlan Munro’s new biographical study, the tenth written (so far), attempts to explain why the man, known variously as ‘Don Roberto’, ‘King Robert IV’ (he claimed descent from Robert II) and ‘the modern Don Quixote’, was so famous in his age, drawing on a political and professional life of dizzying activity, but who seems to have been forgotten within a decade of his death

in 1936. He attributes Cunninghame Graham’s current obscurity to the contradictory nature of his various careers – a romantic adventurer who was also a fire-brand socialist (he was jailed for his involvement in the Trafalgar Square riot in 1887), a committed internationalist who co-founded the Scottish National Party.

Munro’s study is divided into three parts: his first career as a radical Liberal under the Conservative minority government of Lord Salisbury; the literary career that he forged after failing to be re-elected in 1892; and finally, the impact of the First World War on his subsequent campaign for Scottish home rule. Within this structure,

certain themes are brought out – Cunninghame Graham’s attitude towards the working class, towards the British empire (then at its peak of popularity in Britain), and towards Scotland as it entered the twentieth century. Sadly, the result is sometimes highly frustrating. Many of the chapters are less than ten pages in length and feature digressions into the literary and political context of the age, rather than focusing on Cunninghame Graham’s significance. For example, there are two chapters each in parts one and two on ‘Empire’ and ‘Colonialism’, when it would have been far more advisable to have one single substantial chapter. Part three does have a chapter on ‘Empire and Colonialism’, but



it is barely over four pages long. The result is a highly disjointed and often distracted study of Cunninghame Graham's political outlook, which renders his unique journey from aristocracy, through Marxism, to nationalism as puzzling to us as it was to his contemporaries.

Munro's study does succeed in his analysis of the genesis of Cunninghame Graham's Scottish Nationalism where, thankfully, the chapters are long enough to enable context, analysis and explanation of a greater depth than he manages elsewhere. Here, Munro explains that many of the Scottish Labour politicians were increasingly frustrated by their own leadership and the sidelining of Scottish issues in the years after the First World War and that this was the cause of the rise of Scottish nationalism – not a nostalgic, blood-and-soil romanticism, which is how it is usually described in the post-war

years. This explanation of Scottish nationalism as a product of the frustration of left-wing politicians with the centrism of the Westminster system was mirrored, of course, in the rise of the SNP in Scotland after 2005, whose politics offered a locally focused, more communitarian approach than the technocracy of New Labour, with considerable political success (at least until 2024).

Munro makes a valiant effort to justify Cunninghame Graham as a heroic figure, worthy of reappraisal, through an analysis of Cunninghame Graham's vast literary outpouring (he produced nearly forty books of stories, essays, sketches, travelogues, biographies and history), but, having read John Walker's 1982 edited collection of Cunninghame Graham's Scottish sketches, I felt that Munro was excessively cherry-picking his evidence to suit his argument. Most of Cunninghame Graham's Scottish writings are elegiac, melancholic and evocative of place and the national character, but they are hardly ever political or polemical. Most typical is the story of a consumptive Scot, travelling back to Dumfriesshire, who dies on the platform, 'Beattock for Moffat', three miles from home. Full of longing for home, full of pathos and very maudlin, it reproduces the Scots dialect with great skill, but reveals nothing about the author's ideology.

Munro would have been much better advised to have spent longer on Cunninghame Graham's political writings and especially on his relations with Ramsay MacDonald, James Maxton and Tom Johnston, all of whom shared Cunninghame Graham's approach of combining socialism with Scottish nationalism, even though, as members of the Labour Party, they were barred from membership of the National Party of Scotland (NPS) when it was formed in 1928. This was especially needed in the case of Johnston, whose role as editor of the Independent Labour Party journal, *Forward*, and whose later role in the Scottish Socialist Party helped to bring nationalists and socialists together in Scotland in the 1930s while NPS failed even to come second in any of the parliamentary election they contested.

Ultimately, despite his best efforts, Munro's study fails to shift the lingering impression of Cunninghame Graham as an aristocratic flaneur, flirting with radical ideas, including women's suffrage, abolition of the House of Lords, land nationalisation and animal rights but never committing himself for long. Munro admits to this when he describes Cunninghame Graham as a 'dilettante' and 'politically promiscuous'. His half-hearted attempt to be elected for West Stirlingshire in 1918 as a Liberal (without a coupon) and in opposition to

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Johnston (standing for Labour), which resulted in Cunninghame Graham coming a poor third, certainly does seem to be the act of man who lacked conviction. His failure to speak out after the riot in George Square in Glasgow in January 1919 appears to confirm this impression. He appeared to fall into Scottish nationalist politics, prompted by others who saw him as a useful figurehead, at a time when most of his family were dead and he

was in his seventies. Although Cunninghame Graham was the first president of the NPS, he only attended two executive meetings in six years and only played a peripheral role when the NPS amalgamated with the right-wing Scotland's Party to form the Scottish National Party in April 1934. Cunninghame Graham ultimately emerges in Munro's book as a flamboyant, but marginal figure in political history, whose time in both the socialist and

Scottish home rule movements produced little electoral success but who was, almost accidentally, present at the birth of the Scottish Labour and Scottish National Parties, both of which other, less amateur figures would develop to greater significance.

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## Churchill at the Home Office

Duncan Marlor, *Churchill the Liberal Reformer: The struggle for a modern Home Office* (Pen & Sword History, 2024)

Review by Iain Sharpe

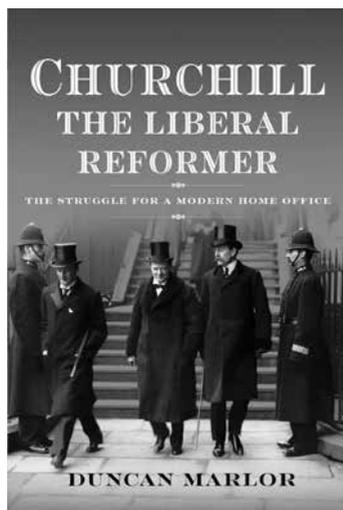
Winston Churchill may have started and finished his political life as a Conservative but his near two decades in Liberal ranks after his defection over free trade in 1904, mark a significant part of his career, including his first experience of ministerial office and his rapid rise to be appointed to the cabinet at the age of just 33. His reputation as a Liberal reformer rather than a mere opportunist rests primarily on his period as a minister covering domestic portfolios, as president of the Board of Trade (1908–10) and home secretary (1910–11) when he played a part in creating the foundations of the welfare state and

was responsible for substantial prison reform.

It is on this latter period that Duncan Marlor focuses in this volume, and he has provided a very readable book, whose thirty chapters are essentially short essays on aspects of Churchill's tenure of the Home Office, each covering a different theme or episode and loosely organised in chronological order. It makes some use of archival material, but is mainly based on secondary and published primary sources. Therefore, it does not break much new ground, but provides an interesting summary of a period in Churchill's career that, while hardly ignored by his many

biographers, should be better known.

Marlor makes a strong case for Churchill as a humanitarian prison reformer, his concern for the wellbeing of prisoners perhaps stemming from his own experience as a prisoner of war in South Africa just a few years earlier. Among the changes he effected were reducing the use of solitary confinement, ensuring that entertainment such as lectures and concerts were provided in prisons, creating a distinction between criminal and political prisoners, ending automatic sentences for non-payment of fines, reducing the use of prisons for young people and



the use of the birch in reform schools. He also drafted and proposed a wider scheme for consistent sentencing and treatment of prisoners based on offences committed, although this was not implemented.

Churchill was admittedly building on the record of his predecessor Herbert Gladstone, who had also implemented significant penal reform measures. Indeed Gladstone, from exile as governor general of South Africa, remonstrated with Churchill for claiming credit for measures that had already been in the pipeline when he arrived at the Home Office. Yet Churchill brought a sense of verve and energy to the role that Gladstone, a poor parliamentary performer, had entirely lacked. He also brought his own ideas to the role and was typically unafraid to challenge the institutional wisdom and the views of his senior officials.

Marlor devotes much space to Churchill's approach to considering appeals for commutation of death sentences. He was not afraid to offer reprieves, even where this went against his officials' advice. His priorities for displays of leniency might not align with progressive sentiments of today: for example, he was inclined to commute sentences of men who had killed their wives or lovers in fits of sudden anger, on the basis that their actions were not premeditated. By contrast, he was adamant in refusing clemency for the notorious Dr Crippen. But it was this aspect of the role that led him to say in later years that 'There is no post that I was more glad to leave.'

The author defends Churchill's reputation on some of the more controversial elements of his career. For example, at the notorious 1910 incident at Tonypandy, Churchill did not, contrary to legend, deploy troops against striking miners, but rather resisted pressure to do so, facing criticism in the Conservative press as a result. His well-known and much-misrepresented enthusiasm for eugenics is put in context – not, as is sometimes claimed, support for compulsory sterilisation of the so-called 'feeble-minded' but rather as a way of offering them freedom in exchange for voluntary sterilisation. Even this, to modern sensibilities, may seem bad enough, of course.

While the book offers a lively and vivid account of key aspects of Churchill's tenure of the Home Office, its title suggests a clear thesis of this period as one of transformation of the department, and I fear it does not quite live up to this. While the case for Churchill as a penal reformer is well made, there is no real sense of him struggling for a 'modern Home Office' and implementing structural reform. Indeed, the author highlights occasions where Churchill was every inch the enforcer of public order, whether at the famous Siege of Sidney Street or in ensuring that food supplies were delivered during the 1911 railway strike. I am sceptical too of Marlor's contention that Churchill instituted a Liberal outlook in the Home Office that lasted until the 1990s. One need only consider the record of, say, Sir William Joynson-Hicks in the 1920s or Sir David Maxwell Fyfe in the 1950s to doubt whether this is quite so.

Despite such grumbles, however, the book provides a readable account of an important episode in Churchill's long career and will be enjoyed by anyone with an interest in Churchill's time as a Liberal.

Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London Universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era in 2011. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford from 1991 to 2021.

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A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

## Breakthrough: the Liberal Democrat performance in the 2024 election

The outcome of the general election on 4 July 2024 was extraordinary. Compared to the 2019 election, the Liberal Democrats' share of the vote rose by less than 1 per cent, to 12.2 per cent, but the number of MPs jumped from 11 (plus 4 by-election gains) to 72, the highest number since 1923.

Highly effective targeting of campaigning resources and a narrowly focused message, combined with an unprecedented collapse in the Conservative vote and a high degree of tactical voting by anti-Tory voters meant that, for the first time ever, the first-past-the-post electoral system did not seriously disadvantage the party.

Discuss the Liberal Democrat campaign and what the result means for the party with **Professor Paula Surridge** (Bristol University) and **Dave McCobb** (Director of Field Campaigns, Liberal Democrats). Chair: **Lord Wallace of Saltaire**.

**6.30pm, Monday 27 January**, following the AGM of the History Group at 6.00pm.  
David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club, London SW1A 2HE.

*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.*

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A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

## A new economic policy for the Liberal Party?

Discuss the economic ideas of Keynes, the clash with the party's free trade and sound money orthodoxy and the extent to which the views of Lloyd George and the Liberals changed ahead of the 1929 election. What are the lessons for today?

Speakers: **Professor Peter Sloman** (Cambridge University, author of *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964*) and **Rev. Peter Walker** (John Maynard Keynes specialist).

**8.00pm, Friday 21 March**

Meeting Room 2, Harrogate Convention Centre.

*This is a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrats' spring conference. You must be registered for the conference to attend the meeting.*