Introduction to Liberal history

In our short introductory article series, David Dutton tells the story of the National Liberals, the faction which split from the mainstream Liberal Party in 1931.

The National Liberal Party

Between the mid-1880s and the early 1930s, the British Liberal Party was grievously damaged by internal splits and defections. In 1886, ninety-three disaffected Liberal MPs left the Gladstonian party as a result of the prime minister's determination to grant home rule to Ireland. The rebels cut across the Liberal spectrum and included both Whigs under Lord Hartington and radical industrialists and entrepreneurs led by Joseph Chamberlain. Over the years, the Liberal Unionists' parliamentary strength diminished, but they sustained a Conservative administration from 1886 to 1892 and joined Lord Salisbury in what was effectively a coalition government in 1895. Early hopes of Liberal reunion were never fulfilled, and Chamberlain's elder son Austen came near to capturing the Conservative (or Unionist) leadership in 1911. A formal and painless merger between Conservatives and Liberal Unionists was effected in 1912.

Four years later, the Liberal Party experienced a further damaging split when the supporters of H. H. Asquith and David Lloyd George, two men who had formed the very axis of a successful and progressive Liberal administration, went their separate ways after disagreements over policy and, more particularly, the organisation of the government for the successful prosecution of the war. What might have been a temporary schism was deepened by the bitterness of the 1918 general election campaign which saw Lloyd George endorsing many Conservatives over Asquithian Liberals and by an ongoing antagonism between the two principals and their respective followers. Reunion was achieved in 1923, but this was never total. Many Liberals could never again trust Lloyd George or, after 1926, regard him as their leader. Most significantly, the years of division were also the time when the Labour Party made its most dramatic advance on the path towards forming a government in January 1924, in the process replacing Liberalism in the minds of most progressives as the main left-of-centre alternative to the Conservatives.

The third split of 1931–32 has, until recently, received less attention than its predecessors, but it was of comparable significance. The Liberal Party gave at least the appearance of unity as it entered the 1929 general election, probably the last occasion it had any credible chance of forming a government. Over the next two years, however, divisions reappeared, primarily over attitudes towards Ramsay MacDonald's minority Labour government, but also marked by a readiness among some Liberals to reconsider the party's tenacious adherence to the principle of free trade in the context of a rapidly changing economic and commercial environment. Under the leadership of Sir John Simon, roughly half the parliamentary party defected (though many MPs did not, to begin with, interpret their own actions in these terms) and set up what became the Liberal National group. As in the case of the Liberal Unionists, this split proved to be permanent. Individuals passed

from one Liberal faction to the other, but overall attempts at reconciliation proved abortive. The Liberal Nationals gave wholehearted support to the Conservative-dominated National Government throughout the 1930s, proving in practice to be more loyal to this multi-party administration than were many Tories. Meanwhile, representatives of the mainstream party resigned their governmental posts in September 1932, after the Ottawa Agreements, creating a form of Imperial Preference, had violated the Liberal principle of free trade, and they returned to the opposition benches in the Commons a year later.

But policy differences were not the end of the matter, nor perhaps even its essence. Major issues of strategy, which had confronted the Liberal Party since it first fell into the 'third party trap' and which would continue to face it over the decades to come, were also in play. If Liberals could not form a government themselves, to which side of the new political divide were they inclined to lean: to the Conservatives as fellow opponents of state socialism; or to Labour as the inheritors of at least some of the Liberals' radical aspirations? And was it better for Liberals to struggle on alone in ideological purity but essential impotence or to be ready to compromise in coalition and at least have a chance to exert influence over government policy? The Liberal Nationals appeared to have given a clear answer to these dilemmas.

The damage done by the Liberal National defections may be measured in different ways. Most obviously, Liberalism's effective parliamentary strength was significantly reduced. After the general election of October 1931, a total of seventy-two MPs who bore the title 'Liberal' in their party affiliation made their way to Westminster. In fact, this figure was misleading and a poor guide to the party's underlying strength. An election held in the unusual circumstance of an all-party National Government distorted the reality of party

Sir John Simon, 1st Viscount Simon (1873–1954), Leader of the Liberal Nationals 1931–40

politics in the country. Indeed, the Liberal vote had declined markedly since the contest of 1929. But the apparently healthy size of the parliamentary cohort was nonetheless significant, particularly in the context of a collapse in Labour's tally of MPs. Thus, the defection of half the seventy-two successful candidates to the Liberal National camp was hard to ignore. It was bad for morale and did nothing for the party's pretensions to remain a potential party of government.

But the loss of MPs was not the end of the story. By the early 1930s, bereft of both funds and activists, the organisation of the Liberal Party in many parts of the country was already in a parlous state. In Liberal associations where membership and participation were in steep decline, the decision as to the allegiance of the local party often lay with a small number of key individuals. As a result, many Liberal associations were seamlessly transformed into Liberal National Associations, with loyalty to the sitting MP or candidate the key factor. In St Ives in Cornwall, the local association essentially owed its continued existence to the financial

subventions of the constituency's MP, Walter Runciman. When he defected to the Liberal Nationals, he found it relatively easy to take his local party with him. In Huddersfield, William Mabane's position was more difficult, but he handled his critics with skill – and considerable obfuscation – and easily won a vote of confidence at his association's AGM in March 1934.

With hindsight there appears to be a strong argument that the Liberal Party should have made every effort to strangle its Liberal National mutant outgrowth at birth.

Not until 1939 was there a meaningful attempt by mainstream Liberals to regain control of the situation with the formation of the so-called Huddersfield Borough Liberal Association. In Montgomeryshire, where MP Clement Davies enjoyed a significant personal following, the executive committee of the local association, meeting in 1935, recorded their 'continued confidence' in Davies as 'a convinced Liberal'.[1] It no doubt helped that Davies, like Runciman, was the largest donor to his local party's funds. Without either a change of name or even a formal change of affiliation, the Montgomeryshire Liberal Association became in practice the Montgomeryshire Liberal National Association. Meanwhile, in Dumfriesshire, where the MP Joseph Hunter delayed until 1934 before declaring his changed allegiance, the Liberal Party as an organised movement effectively disappeared from the constituency for a generation. Only in 1959, shortly before that year's general election, was an independent Dumfriesshire Liberal Association re-created. Until that time, successive Liberal National MPs could insist that they were nominated by and enjoyed the support of the local Liberal association.

All of this offered plenty of scope for voter confusion. Most Liberal supporters would have been well used to splits within their party, with the Asquith–Lloyd George disputes in no sense ancient history. Even in the 1931 general election, Herbert Samuel, leader of the mainstream party, had stood in his constituency of Darwen as a 'National Liberal'. Granted that at this point all Liberal MPs, except for a small family group loyal to Lloyd George, professed support for the National Government, this designation was reasonable enough. But it did little to clarify the emerging divergence in the ranks of Liberalism. The Liberal National defection is best seen as a process rather than an event. Ramsay Muir, chairman of the National Liberal Federation – a body which, despite its name, was the mainstream party's principal non-parliamentary organisation – initially suggested that the split was not 'really as serious as it appears to be'.[2] It was not until the middle of the decade that what at the outset was described merely as a 'group', assumed the characteristics and apparatus of a 'party'. In the autumn of 1931, it did not seem inconsistent to be a member of the Liberal National group and also to belong to the Liberal Party, especially as Liberal National MPs were as one in declaring that their policies and beliefs remained impeccably 'Liberal'. As late as 1946, a Liberal National activist in Luton insistently responded to a critical antagonist from the mainstream party that 'I am as strong a Liberal as you'.[3]

With hindsight there appears to be a strong argument that the Liberal Party should have made every effort to strangle its Liberal National mutant outgrowth at birth. The Liberal Nationals played a major part in impeding any hope of a revival by the mainstream party for at least the next two decades. Such decisive action would have involved challenging the Liberal Nationals at every electoral opportunity and being unequivocal in denouncing their claim to represent a legitimate version of the Liberal creed. But there were equally strong arguments for avoiding this sort of confrontation. 'Liberal on Liberal' contests were

inevitably bitter and could only display to the public the extent of the party's disunity, while wrecking any lingering chance of reunion by consent. More importantly, by splitting the Liberal vote they risked handing over existing Liberal seats to either Labour or the Conservatives.

These problems were very apparent in the East Fife by-election of February 1933. Here, following the death of the sitting Liberal National MP, a representative of the mainstream party (albeit without the formal endorsement of the party leadership) challenged a Liberal National candidate who had been endorsed by the local Liberal association. While the Liberal National, James Henderson Stewart, easily retained the seat, the hapless independent Liberal, David Keir, ended up in fourth place behind even a maverick 'Agriculturalist'. Not surprisingly, the experience of East Fife determined Liberal thinking – and behaviour – for the remainder of the parliament. No further by-elections featured competition between the two Liberal factions and, in the general election of November 1935, only in two seats – Denbighshire West and the two-member constituency of Oldham – did such intra-Liberal contests take place. When confrontation was resumed at a by-election in St Ives, Cornwall in June 1937, a close contest, ending in bitterness and recrimination, saw the Liberals narrowly fail to recover the seat from the Liberal Nationals. But in electoral contests where only one candidate bore the word 'Liberal' in his party affiliation, it was scarcely surprising if a loyal Liberal voter chose the Liberal National option.

By the time that the outbreak of war in September 1939 largely put British domestic politics on hold, the Liberal Nationals had become an established feature of the political landscape, quietly gaining in strength. In terms of the future of Liberalism, there was reason to believe that the impetus lay with them rather than their rivals in the mainstream party. Active in more constituencies than ever before, the Liberal Nationals approached the next general election, expected in 1940 at the latest, with some degree of optimism. By 1945, however, the situation was very different. The National Government, which had given the party its primary raison d'être, was no more; and the argument that partnership with the Conservatives offered the best barrier to socialist government looked hollow after Labour's stunning victory in the postwar election.

Understandably weakened by the inactivity of the war years, the Liberal Nationals would find it difficult to renew themselves at local level. To their critics they were now little more than closet Tories. Some Liberal Nationals saw belated reunion with the mainstream party as the best way forward; others were happy to dissolve into the ranks of Conservatism. But ever fewer believed that Liberal Nationalism had a viable independent future. In Luton, Herbert Janes worried that it might be their fate 'to blunder on trying to curry favour from the Conservatives, to grow weaker and weaker and finally to suffer ignominious eclipse'.[4] The party's founder, the now ennobled John Simon, even sounded out Churchill about joining the Tories – only to be rebuffed.

Most Liberal National constituency associations – many of them now pitifully weak – were happy to accept the Woolton–Teviot agreement of May 1947. This accord encouraged the amalgamation of Conservative and Liberal National organisations in constituencies where both had a viable presence. It was the best that the Liberal Nationals could hope for. They were, noted the Tory chief whip, 'almost completely dependent upon us for their very existence'.[5] Yet, against all odds, the Liberal National Party would maintain a theoretically independent existence for a further two decades. This curiosity was almost entirely a function of Conservative Party strategy. In the late 1940s and after Labour's landslide victory in 1945, many leading

Tories including Churchill believed that their best chance of returning to power lay in capturing the 'Liberal vote'. Ideally, this would mean swallowing up what remained of the mainstream party, itself in seemingly terminal decline. Having a well-publicised association with Liberalism through their partnership with the Liberal Nationals (renamed National Liberals in 1948) might, Tories hoped, ease the path of hesitant Liberals as they contemplated a move to Conservatism. The National Liberals thus acted, in the words of one local Tory chairman, as 'a stepping-stone for wavering Radicals'.[6] At the same time, in many constituencies what were, in practice, Conservative MPs were unwilling to drop their National Liberal nomenclature for fear of forfeiting votes that 'Conservatives' *tout court* could never attract. Prominent Tories such as John Nott and Michael Heseltine fought their first parliamentary elections under the nomenclature of combined local party associations. Not, therefore, until 1968 was reality finally faced. With a minimum of fuss, the National Liberal Council was now disbanded, the party's funds were handed over to the Conservatives and the National Liberal Party passed into history. ■

Since retirement from academia, David Dutton has focussed his research attention on the political history of South-West Scotland. He is currently President of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society (founded 1862). His predecessors in this post include the Liberal cabinet minister, Robert Reid, Lord Loreburn (Lord Chancellor, 1905–12).

1 National Library of Wales, papers of the Montgomeryshire Liberal Association, C1988/27/3, executive committee meeting 21 Sep. 1935. Ultimately, Davies returned to, indeed became leader of, the mainstream Liberal Party.

2 *Liverpool Post and Mercury*, 12 Nov. 1931.

3 Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Service, Herbert Janes papers, JN330, Janes to Francis Felch, 2 Aug. 1946.

4 Ibid., JN297, memorandum on Luton's political situation, May 1946.

5 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Woolton MSS 21, fol. 58, James Stuart to Lord Woolton, 25 Jan. 1947.

6 Denbighshire Record Office, papers of the Denbighshire Conservative Association, DD/DM/80/9, Lt Col. J. C. Wynne-Edwards, 'Future Policy', Nov. 1951.

Reports

Breakthrough: The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2024 election

Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting, 27 January 2025, with Paula Surridge and Dave McCobb. Chair: Lord Wallace of Saltaire
Report by Peter Truesdale

Though a mere six months had elapsed since the 2024 general election, already it seemed a different world. Not, admittedly, quite as different as the Trumped-up world we now inhabit, but different, nonetheless.

The only section of society that seemed not to have recognised the change were the print and broadcast media. Not for them: 'O brave new world, that has such people in't!' but rather a continuation of the Labour/Tory duopoly