Liberal survival

Malcolm Baines introduces this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

The Survival of the Liberal Party, 1931–60

I FIRST LOOKED AT this question some forty years ago as a graduate student at Oxford, intrigued as to why the Liberal Party had survived the thirty-year period between the last hurrah of the 1929 campaign – fuelled by 'We can conquer unemployment' – and the Grimond-led revival that resulted in the spectacular by-election win at Orpington in 1962. At that time, many of the participants were still alive, including amongst others Emrys Roberts, Wilfrid Roberts, Roderic Bowen, Arthur Holt, Jeremy Thorpe and Laura Grimond. It was fun to travel to far-flung corners of the nation and interview them. I was even able to see Sir David Renton, the last leader of the National Liberal Party, my MP in Huntingdonshire when I was growing up. His house was in the next village from where my parents lived. Whilst I was working on the D.Phil., the Liberal Democrats had their own existential crisis following the merger in 1988 of the Liberal Party and the SDP (Paddy Ashdown once famously joked that the party's electoral support was so low it was recorded as an asterisk), and this added to the frisson of my studies.

I was therefore delighted to have the chance to bring together a selection of articles for this special issue of the journal, looking at why the party survived during that thirty-year period. Forty years ago, there were two mainstays of historical writing covering the Liberal Party in this period. These were the general histories written by Roy Douglas (himself a Liberal candidate in general elections between 1950 and 1964), especially *The History of the Liberal Party, 1895–1970*, and Chris Cook's *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900–84*. My thesis therefore relied heavily on the archival sources. Fortunately, the four leading Liberals – Samuel, Sinclair, Davies and Lloyd George – had all deposited substantial collections of papers. There were also local sources, of which the papers of the Cardiganshire Liberal Association, held by the National Library of Wales, were the most voluminous and the most informative. I also discovered that the Conservative Party itself kept detailed records. These included plenty of correspondence on its relations with both the National Liberals and the Liberals, and discussions of the value of electoral pacts and how best to absorb those parties into a common anti-socialist alliance.

Shortly after I handed my thesis in, a series of biographies of the leading protagonists were produced: Bernard Wasserstein's *Herbert Samuel*, Gerard de Groot's *Liberal Crusader: A life of Sir Archibald Sinclair*, and Alun Wyburn-Powell's *Clement Davies: Liberal leader*. Much fascinating and relevant material is also contained in Mark Pottle's *Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter in three volumes (1996 – 2000)*. An updated general history of the Liberal Party was published in 2013 written by David Dutton. Professor Dutton provides an excellent summary of the party's history, with much more material on the survival period than either Douglas or Cook provided. He has also written the definitive history of the Liberal Nationals, *Liberals in Schism: A history of the National Liberal Party*.

We are fortunate enough to have an article from him in this special issue, looking again at the National Liberals and how they tried to preserve Liberalism from within an anti-socialist coalition. Other notable recent publications include Peter Sloman's magisterial review of Liberal attitudes and policy towards the economy throughout the survival period, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964* and Michael Bloch's biography of Jeremy Thorpe published in 2016.

My thesis was very much that Liberal survival was ultimately a result of the need of the Conservative Party to create the broadest possible anti-socialist alliance in an environment in which their fear, after 1945, was that the Labour Party would become the new natural party of government. Although the Liberals were never strong enough to frighten the Conservatives as a whole into supporting some form of PR, they had the local constituency strength to persuade the Tories that electoral pacts made sense. The arrangements in Huddersfield and Bolton delivered the MPs that enabled the Liberals to preserve their status as a significant party in the Commons, as well as one with a local government base in the Lancashire and Yorkshire textile towns. That meant the Liberals were able to rebuild their national standing as the electoral tides turned towards them after the UK government's reaction to the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal showed the hollowness of the Conservatives' claim that liberal ideals were safe with them. The party of the Celtic fringe, in particular in rural Wales, was therefore able to morph into the party of the educated suburbs that was able to challenge to win in Orpington in 1962 and in due course in 1966 Cheadle. William Wallace in his article in this special issue looks at the extent to which the party that had fought the 1929 election was the same as the modern one that traces its origins back to the Grimond revival of the early 1960s.

However, the alternative approach to the question of why the Liberal Party survived is to look closely at the patterns of constituency organisation and electoral strength during the period under review. Mark Egan has done a sterling job in reviewing the patterns of Liberal strength. He looks at the continuities across the period and beyond, starting before 1914 and finishing in 1970. Mark concludes that there were very few constituencies in which Liberal electoral strength persisted throughout the period and that, in fact, there are very few continuities in political support between 1929 and 1964. This special issue also contains an in-depth regional review by historian, Garry Tregidga, of Liberal survival in Cornwall, which complements Mark's piece.

As well as electoral politics, the other theme of Liberal survival during this thirty-year period is the extent to which the party maintained a distinctive policy outlook. Andrew Loader looks at the role of Sir Herbert Samuel in leading the party through the challenge of the formation of the National Government in August 1931. This included the degree to which, despite the country's abandonment of its traditional free trading approach to the economy, the Samuelite Liberals continued to support free trade and oppose tariffs. This policy led first to the Agreement to Differ which suspended collective responsibility with respect to trade matters, then to the resignation of the Samuelite ministers from the government in September 1932 over the Ottawa agreements. Finally, the party crossed the floor into Opposition in November

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1933. Andrew has also produced a note on the Meston Commission reorganisation which provided the constitutional framework for the Liberal Party Organisation for the period from 1936 until the merger with the SDP. I have added to that some brief biographical overviews of the key Liberal leaders who succeeded Samuel in that role, Sinclair and Davies, as well as the two senior Liberal women of the period, Violet Bonham Carter and Megan Lloyd George.

It has been suggested that the work of Keynes and Beveridge outside the party-political system had a greater impact on postwar policy than the actions of the parliamentary or national Liberal Party. Stuart Jones, in his article, compares Beveridge with Ernest Simon, the Manchester-based politician and industrialist. He concludes that, whilst they were both influential in social policy, neither of them was particularly partisan.

Little light is also shed on Liberal survival by international comparisons. In many countries, in particular Australia and New Zealand, the Liberal Party had already been coopted into a broader anti-socialist alliance with the Conservative Party against the threat from socialism. Elsewhere the Canadian Liberal Party is immensely successful in establishing itself as the governing party of that country. The continental Liberal parties' position was, of course, supported by the widespread use of proportional representation, and it is hard to disentangle its role for those parties in their survival from any electoral and high politics explanations. It is, however, perhaps interesting that there is a very close match between the location of the voters that supported the French Radical Party during its heydays in the Third and Fourth Republics and those that backed Macron's Renaissance Party more latterly in the Fifth. This perhaps indicates that there is a peculiarly liberal constituency that Liberal parties wherever they are in the world appeal to.

The survival of the British Liberal Party during that thirty-year period remains therefore something of a mystery. Neither the high politics explanations nor those focused on residual electoral strength appear convincing: the former too dependent on chance and the balance of power between Labour and the Conservatives during the postwar period; the latter showing the weakness of the party among the voters and the lack of consistency in its support. Nevertheless, the Liberal revival from 1960 or so onwards made both its decline before 1929 and its survival thereafter a fascinating subject to scholars. There has therefore been a rich historiography, looking at the 'inevitability' of Liberal decline and the sociological changes that ultimately perhaps led to its rebirth in the Grimond era. Since then, the Liberal Party, and later the Liberal Democrats, have had a chequered electoral history culminating in the current upswing of seventy-two MPs elected in the 2024 general election. There has been no consistency in their political performances. The continuing survival of a liberal party in the UK under these circumstances remains a mystery worth looking at. These articles try from a variety of perspectives to unpick what happened to the Liberals between 1930 and 1960. ■

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