

The Rebuilding and Reorganisation of the Party

- 9 Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, p. 54.
- 10 Meston, 'Ramsay Muir', p. 198.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *The Liberal Magazine*, Apr. 1936, p. 99.
- 13 Cyr, *Liberal Party Politics*, pp. 189–90.
- 14 *Liberal Year Book*, 1937, p. 2.
- 15 *The Liberal Magazine*, May 1936, p. 129.
- 16 Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, p. 63.
- 17 *The Liberal Magazine*, July 1936, p. 196.
- 18 Ibid., May 1936, p. 129.
- 19 Ibid., July 1936, p. 200.
- 20 Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, p. 71.
- 21 Ibid., p. 70.
- 22 Ibid., p. 76.
- 23 Ibid., p. 64.
- 24 Ibid., p. 55.

Liberal personalities

Sir Archibald Sinclair (1890–1970) Liberal Party leader 1935–45

Whilst Sinclair's chiselled matinee idol appearance may have made him the most handsome Liberal leader, he can also claim the title of the most obscure Liberal leader. Always seen as Churchill's protégé, Sinclair struggled for most of his time as leader to make much of an impact on the British political scene. If his name is remembered at all today, it is as one of the many politicians in the late 1930s who argued against Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. Minister for Air after the formation of the coalition government, his impact was overshadowed by the huge personalities of Beaverbrook and Churchill against whom he rubbed, whilst his electoral defeat in 1945 and subsequent stroke in 1952 removed him from postwar politics.

Like Churchill, Sinclair was the product of the union of the British (in his case Scottish aristocracy) and an American heiress.

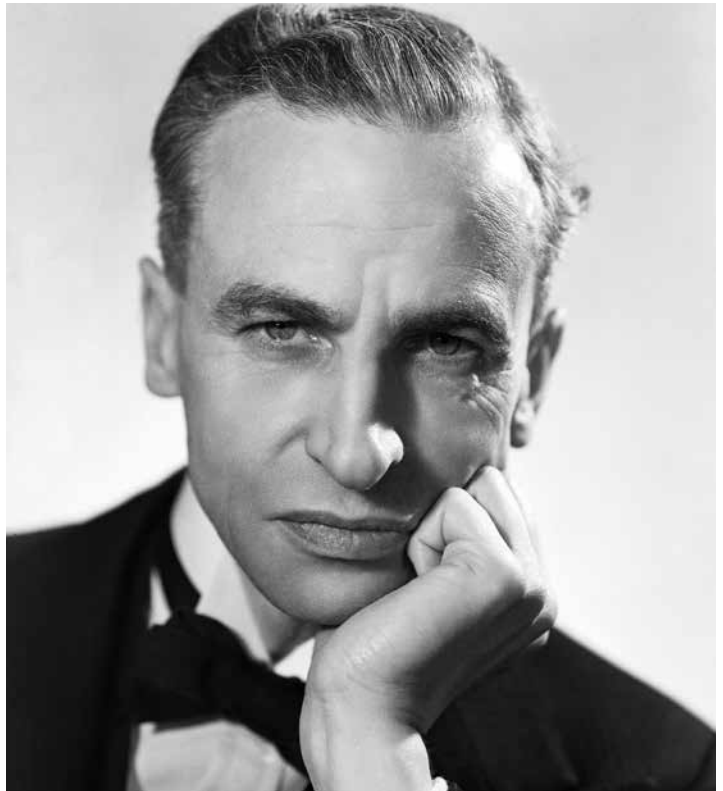
Also, like Churchill, Sinclair's father died of syphilis, leaving him orphaned at 5 years old. Thereafter, he was brought up by his very strict Scottish grandfather and sent first to Sandhurst and then into the 2nd Life Guards. With his good looks, love of daredevil activities such as flying, and strong Liberal convictions, he had already attracted Churchill's attention by 1914, who tried to find him a safe Liberal constituency. The First World War intervened, and Sinclair was quickly on the Western Front, serving initially as an adjutant with the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. When the Asquith coalition with the Conservatives was formed in 1915, Churchill was dismissed and went to the Front as commander of the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers – asking for Sinclair as his aide. Sinclair was a courageous, conscientious and hard-working soldier who detested war, but his chivalric sense of duty meant he would not avoid service. However, after a serious episode of

appendicitis, Sinclair was invalided out. Whilst in Britain, he met Marigold Forbes, and they married six months later. They had four children, and their grandchildren included John Sinclair, Liberal Democrat MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, from 2001 to 2015.

After the First World War, Sinclair became the candidate in his home seat of Caithness & Sutherland, winning in the 1922 general election. For the rest of the interwar period, he was an assiduous constituency MP conducting annual summer tours to reach out to the electors. Keen on the party's reunion, whilst politically Sinclair leaned towards Lloyd George, in personality he was more in tune with Asquith. Involved with policy development once Lloyd George became leader in 1926 of the reunited Liberal Party, Sinclair was made chief whip in 1930. Samuel took over as Liberal leader in July 1931 as the Labour government was replaced by the National

Government. Sinclair took the view that prudence dictated that the party join that government and fight the ensuing election on the well-established Liberal policies of free trade, justice and equality. Unfortunately, the Tories were arguing for tariffs as the cure-all for the UK's problems. The 1931 election delivered a National Government led by Ramsay MacDonald, former Labour leader, but with an overwhelmingly Tory ministry and back bench. In January 1932, a cabinet committee dominated by protectionists proposed a 10 per cent general tariff. The Liberals then reached an Agreement to Differ within the cabinet, which meant they could oppose its trade policy but remain part of the government. Sinclair felt tariffs had to be given their chance to fail. The Ottawa Conference with the Dominions, in July 1932, further embedded tariffs, and Sinclair proposed the party go straight into opposition. In the event, the Liberals resigned from the cabinet but did not go into opposition until November 1933.

The disastrous 1935 election led to the defeat of all the Liberal frontbenchers apart from Sinclair, who therefore inevitably became Liberal leader. The surviving twenty-one MPs were a disparate and demotivated group, and it was largely due to the leadership of Sinclair that the party was rebuilt in the later 1930s. The first strategic opportunity came as a result of the Abyssinian crisis, when the British



Archibald Sinclair as Secretary of State for Air during the Second World War

and French governments tried to make a unilateral deal with the invader, Mussolini's Italy, called the Hoare–Laval pact, rather than work through the League of Nations. Public opinion supported the League, in line with Liberal policy, a response which Sinclair hoped the party could capitalise on. He pointed to strong performances in the St Ives and North Dorset by-elections in 1937 as evidence. As a result, he had no enthusiasm for the Popular Front strategy that some Liberal MPs such as Richard Acland supported. Instead, once Neville Chamberlain became prime minister in May 1937 and started to pursue an active policy

of appeasement, Sinclair hoped foreign policy divisions would split the Tories. This would provide an opportunity for a Labour and Liberal revival, resulting in a hung parliament and the prospect of electoral reform being introduced. However, Munich also split the Liberals, with the previous Liberal leader Samuel and four of the MPs backing Chamberlain.

Sinclair's steadfast opposition to appeasement was his finest hour. His achievements as leader before the Second World War – including the reorganisation of the party as a result of the Meston Commission

and pursuing rapprochement with the Lloyd George family – ensured the party's survival, if not its revival.

The government was reorganised at the outbreak of war and, whilst Churchill and Eden joined it, Sinclair declined to do so. Allied efforts to assist Norway, after the German invasion in April 1940, failed leading to a major parliamentary debate. Both Sinclair and Lloyd George spoke powerfully in the debate, and Chamberlain's position in the Conservative Party was so weakened that he resigned. Churchill, the new prime minister, disappointingly only offered Sinclair the same post that Chamberlain had done six months earlier. Despite leading Liberals, including Crewe, Samuel and senior backbencher Sir Percy Harris, arguing that Sinclair should not take the post without a War Cabinet seat, Sinclair this time did so, along with a vague promise that he would be consulted on major issues that came to the War Cabinet. He therefore became Minister for Air, worked hard and navigated not only rivalries with Dowding and Beaverbrook (Minister for Air Production) but constantly having to deal with the perception that he was Churchill's protégé. During the war, Sinclair turned down the ambassadorship to Washington and the viceroyalty of India – roles which would have removed any meaningful Liberal element from the government. Despite the surge in support for independents, many from

a Liberal background, in by-elections during the war, Sinclair had no choice but to continue supporting the wartime coalition electoral truce. Liberal political discussion focused on the Beveridge Report and the possibility of reunion with the Liberal Nationals. Sinclair's focus was winning the war and the reestablishment of the international order.

Once Germany had been defeated, the Labour Party triggered a general election. Sinclair led the Liberals. Of course, his support in Caithness & Sutherland had eroded as a result of no real electoral nurturing since 1935 and no visits since the outbreak of war. The Liberals campaigned on the basis of traditional liberalism, enlivened by the themes of the Beveridge Report, whose author had joined the party in September 1944. Despite being forced to abandon the national campaign and focus on his own seat, the day after polling Sinclair still expected a hung parliament and to hold his constituency. In the event, Labour won a substantial majority, and the Liberals were reduced to twelve MPs. Sinclair himself came a narrow third – sixty-one votes – behind the victorious Conservative candidate. The new MP had offered to stand down during the campaign should he win. However, there was no by-election and Clement Davies remained leader.

During the 1945 parliament, Sinclair was concerned that, under

Davies, the Liberals were slipping into pragmatism. His argument that the Liberals should stick closely to their traditional ideals, including free trade, and wait for the country to return to them was ignored. He fought Caithness & Sutherland again in 1950, but the Tories held the seat with a new candidate and Sinclair came second. Sinclair decided not to stand again. Davies tried to persuade Churchill to give him a peerage, on the expectation that he would take up leadership of the Liberals in the Lords, However Sinclair suffered a serious stroke before breaking a femur and didn't enter the Lords until July 1952. By the time Samuel resigned as Liberal leader in the Lords in 1955, it was too late, and a series of milder strokes left Sinclair permanently disabled both physically and mentally from 1959 onwards. However, it was not until 1970 that he died.

Sinclair's leadership of the Liberal Party was a vocation rather than a job. His ideals chimed better with popular opinion in the decades after his death rather than at any time during his active political life. However, his Liberal vision was never realisable, and his success was in keeping the party going as a vehicle for that vision even in the most unpromising circumstances of protectionist economic policy, appeasement, and the demands of total war. ■

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