Liberals divided

David Dutton analyses the damage caused to Liberalism by the split between Liberals and Liberal Nationals.

A Party Divided: Liberals, Liberal Nationals and the Decline of the Liberal Party

In the 1930s, in addition to struggling between the upper and nether millstones of the Conservatives and Labour, the beleaguered Liberals faced a new front of conflict following the defection of more than thirty MPs, who formed a new Liberal National group. This conflict was not fought out on the traditional battlefields of electoral politics. Between the original defection in 1931 and the outbreak of the Second World War, Liberals and Liberal Nationals confronted one another at just two by-elections (East Fife, February 1933, and St Ives, June 1937) and in only two constituencies at the 1935 general election (Oldham and Denbighshire West). This article seeks to explore the nature of the Liberal–Liberal National contest and to assess the damage it did to the mainstream party.

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According to the old adage, history is written by the victors, a presumption certainly borne out by the conflict between Liberals and Liberal Nationals which began in 1931. The two groups' later fortunes stand in stark contrast and leave little doubt of the outcome of their conflict. Defying widespread predictions of its inevitable demise, the Liberal Party experienced a marked revival in the second half of the twentieth century which, if neither smooth nor consistent, restored it to significant parliamentary representation alongside a major role in local government.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Nationals, renamed 'National Liberals' in 1948, drifted in the postwar years into increasing irrelevance. The 1947 Woolton–Teviot agreement encouraged the amalgamation, under a suitably agreed designation, of Conservative and Liberal National constituency organisations. Thereafter, in most cases, the Liberal Nationals survived only in the antiquated nomenclature by which what were usually unequivocally Conservative candidates chose, or were obliged, to present themselves to their electorates. Even *The Times*, once vocal in its support, concluded in 1962 that 'National Liberalism as a self-consciously maintained political entity has served its turn for the anti-Socialist forces … and has done all the good it is likely to do for the Conservative Party … It survives as the fossil remains of a conflict long ago with the Labour Government of 1929–31 and of a desperate closing of ranks on the Right after the Labour victory of 1945.'[1]

A tale recalled by the newly elected Liberal MP, Richard Wainwright, graphically confirms the final Liberal triumph over their rivals. Arriving at the Commons in 1966, Wainwright found himself without office accommodation until Jack McCann, Labour Member for Rochdale, took him to a large room in St Stephen's Tower 'where, he said correctly, I would find the name of a deceased Liberal National MP who had been the final Whip of that absurd group. Notwithstanding Sir Herbert Butcher being dead, the Vote was delivered daily to this room, and the huge piles of unopened pages did not deter daily delivery to the deceased. With glee, I emptied my suitcase into one of the desks and invited four other homeless Liberal MPs to use the room as well.' Wainwright and his grateful colleagues retained occupancy throughout the 1966–70 parliament without authority, only by leaving the name and title of 'Sir Herbert Butcher, Baronet – Whip' on the door.[2]

The Liberal Party then was the undisputed victor of its battle with the Liberal Nationals. But how did the party portray its opponents and the conflict in which both had been engaged? From the outset, the mainstream party sought to undermine its opponents' claim to be a genuine political party and viable force in Britain's political life. As Archibald Sinclair explained in November 1932, it would be dangerous to allow the Liberal Nationals to pose as an alternative representation of the Liberal creed. 'We don't want to be called Samuelite Liberals as opposed to Simonite Liberals, we want to emphasise the fact that we are the Liberal Party.'[3] The Liberal Nationals were presented as political heretics, Tory converts lacking the courage to stand under their true colours, unprincipled renegades primarily concerned to save their parliamentary seats and prepared to sell their political souls to the Tory devil to maintain a foothold on the seat of power. Herbert Samuel, Liberal leader at the time of the original defection, set the tone when offering a dismissively contemptuous assessment in October 1932:

> That group [the Liberal Nationals] was supported by no organisation in the country. It had failed … to establish such an organisation. It was a plant without root, stuck precariously in the soil; it would not flourish; it would soon wilt and wither. He did not believe there was a single Liberal association … outside their own constituencies which would adopt as a candidate for parliament anyone holding the views of Sir John Simon and his friends.[4]

Isaac Foot, head of a distinguished West- Country political family in one of the few remaining redoubts of orthodox Liberalism, dismissed the Liberal Nationals as 'yes-men', 'rubber-stamp MPs' who had forfeited their right to independent opinion.[5] On another occasion he likened them to the 'janissaries and eunuchs of the royal palace'.[6] For his son Dingle, a Liberal MP in Dundee, writing during the Second World War, the appropriate comparison was with the collaborationist government of Marshal Pétain in wartime France. Liberal Nationals, he suggested, were 'Vichy Liberals'.[7] Supporting the Liberal candidate in Huddersfield in 1945, the local press subjected his Liberal National opponent to a seemingly unending campaign of denigration. The Liberal Nationals were 'mere camp-followers of the Tories', 'mere appendages of the Conservatives', 'merely Conservatism-under-camouflage' and, borrowing from Disraeli, 'an organised hypocrisy'.[8] Finally, Edward Martell's handbook for Liberal speakers in the 1950 general election offered a couple of quips to be used at the expense of Liberal National candidates. A Liberal National was 'one who is Liberal to save his soul and National to save his seat'. Alternatively, in the words of Archibald Sinclair, 'a Liberal National has neither eyes to see, not tongue to speak, nor ears to hear save as his local Conservative association directs him'.[9]

Just as important as these contemporary slights, their underlying message was taken up by many historians, particularly those of a Liberal disposition. John Ramsden, though not subscribing to it himself, described a portrayal of 'traitors, knaves or dupes, men whose tenure of office relied on their political masters and who toed the Tory line in order to survive'.[10] Roy Douglas, party historian and several times a Liberal parliamentary candidate, judged that the Liberal Nationals 'had become Conservatives for all practical purposes' by the end of 1933.[11]

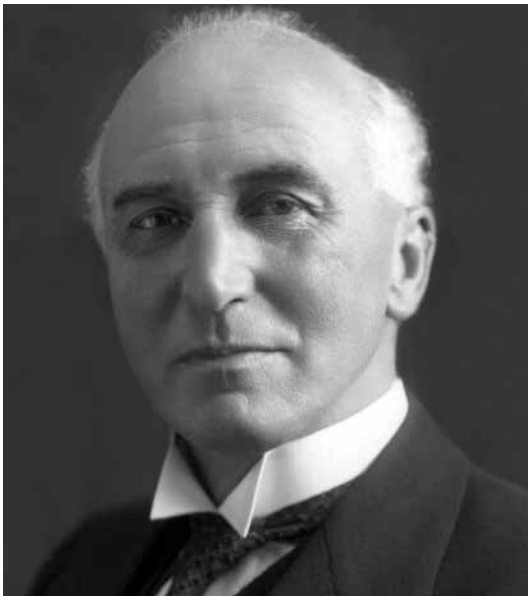
Yet is this Liberal narrative really tenable? Was it the case that around half the parliamentary party, largely simultaneously, renounced the Liberal faith to which they had tenaciously adhered – often for many years – and became closet Tories? Were they motivated purely by cynical determination to hang on to their Commons seats? Or should the Liberal National case be taken more seriously? At the time he delivered it (October 1932), there was much truth in Samuel's critique of a genuine Liberal National Party infrastructure. But such an edifice could not be created overnight, and the Liberal Nationals lost no time in trying to rectify this deficiency. By early 1933, the Liberal National Organisation had been established in Old Queen Street, Westminster, under the direction of the chairman of the Liberal National Council, Lord Hutchison, a former Liberal chief whip. It was then soon agreed to set up area organisations to handle propaganda and platform work in the constituencies, those already held by Liberal National MPs and those that were not.

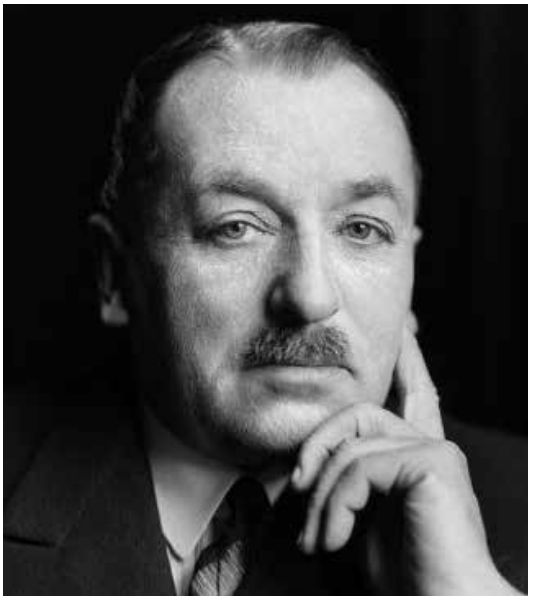
By the mid-1930s the Liberal Nationals had most of the apparatus of a national political party in place and they held their first national convention in June 1936, with the aim of drawing up a constitution. Attended by over 700 delegates, this was deemed a 'great success' by Henry Morris-Jones, Liberal National MP for Denbigh.[12] His colleague William Mabane had confidently invited Huddersfield's Liberal Association to send delegates to the convention and also to the meeting shortly afterwards of the National Liberal Federation, which, despite its name, was the chief extra-parliamentary organisation of the mainstream party. In this way, suggested Mabane, the delegates could 'assess on their merits which they think is most likely to serve the interests of Liberalism'.[13]

By this time, there were area councils in nine districts across England. In addition, there was a Scottish National Council with district councils in Glasgow and Edinburgh, a South Wales Council and one in the process of formation in North Wales. Following the meeting of the National Convention, some 150 women attended the first gathering of the Women's Division of the Liberal National Council, and the following year saw the establishment of a Liberal National League of Youth. It marked the culmination of a period of intense organisational activity, making it 'clear that the organisation of the Liberal National Party is being extended and strengthened as a permanent medium of political thought and activity'.[14] Perhaps most important, and in marked contrast to the mainstream party, the Liberal Nationals were well financed, enjoying the support of wealthy benefactors including the motor manufacturer, Lord Nuffield.[15]

'We don't want to be called Samuelite Liberals as opposed to Simonite Liberals, we want to emphasise the fact that we are the Liberal Party.'

But the Liberal Nationals had severely damaged their erstwhile colleagues even before these administrative and institutional developments took shape. The defection of

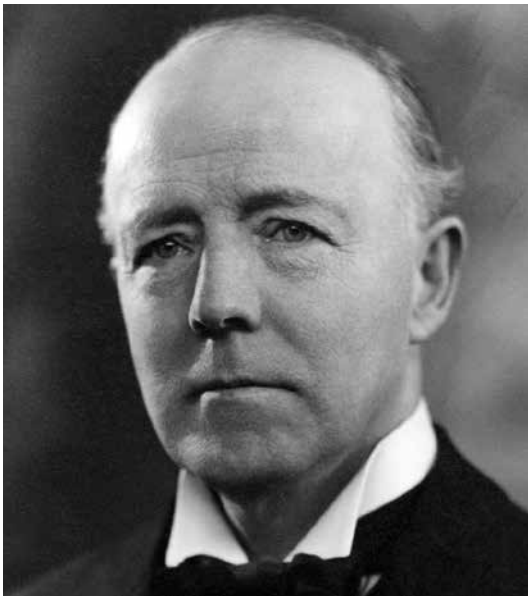




Liberal National leaders: Sir John Simon (1873–1954, leader 1931–40) in 1931; Ernest Brown (1881–1962, leader 1940–45) in 1939 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

so many MPs was a hammer-blow to hopes of Liberal revival. In the wake of the 1931 general election, there appeared to be thirty-five Liberal Nationals and just thirty-three standing by the mainstream party, though precise numbers are disputed as some MPs left their affiliations obscure. Taken alongside four MPs in a small group owing personal allegiance to Lloyd George, this gave a 'Liberal' total of seventy-two. Such a figure was undoubtedly inflated by the arrangements entered into by the parties and groups pledged to support the National Government, but it was still a heartening tally (the best since 1923), especially set against a Labour opposition now reduced to fifty-two MPs. Walter Rea, soon to become Liberal chief whip, boldly claimed that the party was 'now once more the second largest' in the country.[16] But for this boast to have any hint of credibility, it would need all Liberals to come together as a coherent whole. This never happened and, with its parliamentary ranks depleted, the mainstream party began to lose the characteristics and credentials of a national political force.

Liberal woes did not end with the loss of numerical strength in parliament. Individual circumstances inevitably differed, but in many constituencies this was only the start of a process leading to the effective elimination of independent Liberalism as a viable political force. And this was in areas where a considerable Liberal voting tradition persisted. As a consequence of Liberal National defections, an institutional infrastructure was inevitably damaged or even destroyed and an existing pattern of voting lost. The defections could not have come at a worse time. The Liberal Party's condition in many parts of the country was already parlous. Its seemingly inexorable decline at the local level throughout the 1920s has been well chronicled.[17] The experience of Labour government from 1929–31 made matters worse. Alienated by the antics of their MPs, who seemed incapable of producing a united policy or strategy to make use of their holding the balance in the Commons, Liberal constituency officers and activists struggled to sustain their own morale. In an already weakened organisational structure, the decision



Key Liberal Nationals: Walter Runciman (1870–1949) in 1935; Leslie Hore-Belisha (1893–1957) in 1930 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

of a few key individuals could be enough to determine the loyalties of the local party.

In Luton the MP's defection effectively transformed Luton Liberalism into Liberal Nationalism. Describing the local political scene in 1946, one prominent activist made this point with commendable clarity: 'It was more or less accidental that Luton is a National Liberal constituency. It was due to our member, the late Dr Leslie Burgin, who was a National Liberal.'[18] The MP's change of allegiance was enough to effect the virtual elimination of mainstream Liberalism in Luton for a generation. Confirmation comes from the fact that the new Liberal National Association never found it necessary to be known as such. It could remain the 'Luton Liberal Association' because there was no rival organisation. When, finally, in 1950 the Liberals managed to field a candidate against the sitting National Liberal MP, Dr Charles Hill, he secured just 9 per cent of the vote. Yet this was a seat which the Liberals had won in 1923 and 1929 (before retaining it as Liberal Nationals in 1931 and 1935). If nothing else, the Liberal Nationals had been extremely effective in appropriating Liberal support and the Liberal tradition from their Liberal opponents.

In Huddersfield, the defecting MP, William Mabane, faced a more difficult challenge. The local Liberal Association and the voters who gave him a massive 27,000 majority in 1931 had every reason to believe that Mabane remained a loyal member of the mainstream party. Only slowly did his true affiliation emerge. Almost up to the outbreak of war, Mabane maintained a precarious unity among Huddersfield Liberals, even though, by 1935 at the latest, he was clearly a fully-fledged Liberal National. The local association, firmly under Mabane's personal guidance, had held to the pretence that it was the representative body in Huddersfield of Liberalism without prefix or suffix. The doubts of the local party agent had been overcome, and the association's leading officers were fully loyal to the MP. In the absence of an alternative Liberalism in the town, unequivocally committed to the mainstream party, most Liberal voters were prepared to give Mabane the benefit of

the doubt. The MP, by acting as if Huddersfield Liberalism was the same animal that it had been before 1931, sought to retain as many local party members as possible, to maximise his hold on the constituency's Liberal vote and thus tighten his grip on his parliamentary seat. Again, the title of 'Huddersfield Liberal Association' was never changed to 'Liberal National' before the end of the decade. When orthodox Liberalism became sufficiently organised to create a rival body in April 1939, it had to adopt the title of 'Huddersfield Borough Liberal Association'.[19] Mabane lost his seat in 1945 to Labour (victors also in 1923, 1924 and 1929), but it is striking that (with Conservative support), he still finished 13,000 votes ahead of the Liberal, even though, in the economist Roy Harrod, the mainstream party had nominated a thoroughly credible candidate.

Life was easier for Liberal Nationals in Dumfriesshire. The allegiance of the sitting MP, Joseph Hunter, a protégé of Lloyd George, was obscure largely because of his absence through long-term illness during and after the 1931 general election. Indeed, a by-election was widely predicted. In the event, however, it was announced in late May 1934 that Hunter had accepted appointment as national organiser of the Liberal Nationals, thus ending the ambiguous position that he had held within British Liberalism.[20] Almost immediately, the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association announced that it would 'acquiesce in the step that Dr Hunter was about to take'.[21] With the local newspaper, the *Standard*, whose Liberal pedigree went back deep into the nineteenth century and whose editor, James Reid, was fortuitously also president of the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association, also offering support, Liberalism in Dumfriesshire transmogrified seamlessly into Liberal Nationalism, again without needing to change name. At the same time, the organisational infrastructure of the mainstream party effectively disappeared. Efforts in the east of the constituency to resurrect traditional Liberalism soon fizzled out. After a half-hearted effort at the 1945 general election, the Liberal Party again almost disappeared, and it was not until 1955 that the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association was finally renamed 'National Liberal'. Meanwhile, the *Standard* unhelpfully added to muddied waters by frequently describing its Liberal National/National Liberal representatives as 'Liberals'.

If the nature of the Liberal–Liberal National conflict is to be fully understood, we need to examine what separated the two groups. In other words, what lay at the heart of the Liberal National defection? The conventional answer is 'free trade'. There is some truth here, and it certainly fits into the Liberal narrative outlined above. But the overall picture is more complex and nuanced. Free trade/protection was never the invariable distinction between Liberals and Liberal Nationals. It is true that the majority of MPs who left the mainstream party in 1931–2 signed a memorial to Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald in September 1931, pledging unqualified support for any measures the government saw fit to take in the interests of the country's finance and trade.[22] Granted that the Conservatives were, even before the general election, comfortably the largest component of the National Government and that it was widely understood that they would

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press to introduce tariffs to deal with Britain's economic crisis, the memorial's implications were clear. Similarly, it was the government's success at Ottawa in August 1932 in setting up a scheme of Imperial Preference that prompted the resignation of the Samuelite ministers and their subsequent return to the opposition benches.

This series of events plays into the Liberal narrative of the split. Given the central importance of free trade to the Liberal creed, the mainstream party's supporters would later argue that here was proof positive that the Liberal Nationals had abandoned their faith and no longer had any claim to the noble title of 'Liberal'. David Marquand has argued: 'Free trade for [Liberals] was what the Thirty-Nine Articles were for the Church of England: though individual Liberals might have doubts, the Liberal Party could not abandon it without destroying the chief justification for its existence as an organised body.'[23] But was this any longer the case? During the 1920s, as the British economy faced new and intractable problems, including ever-mounting unemployment, even this most sacred doctrine had come under review. This was particularly true among Liberals operating within industrial constituencies where cheap foreign imports threatened domestic production and jobs.

The great economist J. M. Keynes became converted to the idea of tariffs in 1930, while E. D. Simon, no relation of John Simon and never associated with the Liberal National group, found himself questioning whether traditional free trade, whatever the case when Britain was the undisputed workshop of the world, remained relevant in changed twentieth-century circumstances. For growing numbers of Liberals, free trade was no longer an imperative article of their faith, but rather an impractical liability in a world where many other nations imposed tariffs. They saw the British economy locked into a collapsing world economy and believed that, while it remained committed to free trade, no escape was possible. Not surprisingly, 'the march of protectionist ideas in 1930–31 made more headway than in the whole of the previous quarter-century'.[24]

The salience of free trade as a defining feature of British Liberalism continued to decline as the 1930s progressed. In October 1933, even Sinclair conceded that, whatever 'the greater ultimate advantages of free trade, it was difficult to convince anyone that it was possible in the present world'.[25] This was strikingly close to the thinking of prominent Liberal Nationals. Walter Runciman, MP for St Ives, declared that he remained a committed free trader, but was prepared to accept tariffs for the moment and use them as a bargaining-counter to reduce the general level of tariffs. Clement Davies, who spent eight years as a Liberal National before returning to the diminished ranks of orthodox Liberalism, later explained that he had joined the breakaway group because he saw free trade as 'a very narrow and out-of-date question' and regarded tariffs as a means of increasing Britain's bargaining powers.[26] In Walsall, still professing loyalty to the orthodox party but destined soon to align himself with the Liberal Nationals, Joseph Leckie insisted that he remained 'as strong as ever on free trade', but would not carry his conviction 'to the last point' in the case of imported manufactured luxuries.[27]

By 1935, even Lloyd George was no longer a 'true believer'. An extract from his mistress's diary, written in the wake of that year's general election, is revealing: 'He is … sorry that one or two did not get in who might have done had they not clung to the fetish of Free Trade. One of them he advised to leave free trade alone. "I must stick to my principles", was the reply. "Do you want to get to heaven or to Westminster?" was D[avid]'s slightly cynical retort.'[28]

The last years before the outbreak of world war saw existing trends in the Liberal–Liberal National contest confirmed. The

mainstream party emerged from the 1935 election with only twenty-one MPs compared with thirty-three Liberal Nationals. For the first time in its history, the Liberal Party had seemed irrelevant in the eyes of most of the electorate. In particular, the case for free trade had largely been ignored.[29] Even that figure of twenty-one MPs flattered perceptions of Liberal strength. No more than half the parliamentary party were regular Commons attenders. Leading figures, including the chief whip, Walter Rea, the west-country grandee, Isaac Foot, and Samuel himself, had been defeated. Ever more responsibility fell on Sinclair, who took over Samuel's mantle without enthusiasm, doubting whether his party could even survive. While there was some improvement in the party's organisation at the centre, constituency infrastructure continued to decline. Given the party's ever-weakening financial position, Sinclair wondered whether he could hope for anything better than cooperation with others as a parliamentary group.[30] As Lord Lothian put it, 'it may prove to be the best, perhaps the only course, for Liberals to join one or other of the two main parties and liberalise from within'.[31] Few activists anticipated Liberal gains in the general election expected in 1939/1940.

In the wake of the 1935 election there was a further, if small, defection to the Liberal National camp. The most important was probably that of Robert Bernays, MP for Bristol North, in September 1936, who might have defected earlier but for a personal antipathy towards John Simon. In so far as policy issues were involved, international affairs rather than free trade came to the fore, with support for the government's appeasement policy confronting a new Liberal focus on collective security. Heavily defeated as Liberal candidate in the Ross and Cromarty by-election of February 1936, Russell Thomas soon decided to join the Liberal Nationals. He criticised the Sinclairites' 'blind devotion to what is called "collective security" with a tendency to ignore the facts of the European situation and to hinder the rearmament of our country'. This showed 'a lack of realism I can no longer support'.[32] Following the Munich settlement of September 1938, Herbert Holdsworth, sitting MP for Bradford South, also jumped ship. In an open letter to his erstwhile leader, Holdsworth declared that he 'supported the actions of the Prime Minister in the agreement at Munich. I am convinced that the alternative to that agreement was war. You obviously believe otherwise.'[33] As with free trade, however, the lines of division were never precise. Prominent Liberals, including the journalist J. A. Spender and even the party's recent leader Samuel, openly backed Chamberlain, while four of the eighteen Liberal MPs voting in the Commons debate on Munich also supported the government.

Strikingly, the *Twenty Points of Policy* published by the Liberal National Organisation in January 1938 were, apart from a continuing commitment to support the National Government, largely compatible with traditional Liberal beliefs.[34] Beyond differences over specific areas of policy, however, the Liberal–Liberal National divide is best viewed in strategic terms. Once the Liberal Party fell unequivocally into third place in the national political competition, as had happened by the mid-1920s, Liberals faced a dilemma. With realistic aspirations now limited to holding the parliamentary balance – which was achieved in 1923 and 1929 – the party inevitably tended to fragment. Themselves covering a broad spectrum of opinion, Liberals faced the crude choice of whether they preferred to sustain a minority Conservative or a minority Labour administration. Opinions inevitably differed, but many believed that Lloyd George's efforts to reach a formal understanding with MacDonald's second Labour government had, at best, been misguided. That government, they thought, was completely discredited by

the time that the mounting economic crisis swept it away, while the manner of its disintegration – 'running away' in the commonly used phrase – disqualified Labour from governmental responsibilities for the foreseeable future. According to Morris-Jones in Denbigh, the Labour government's performance showed that 'the Labour and Socialist party as at present constituted is a danger to the State'.[35] It was the duty of all anti-socialists to combine; and cooperation with a moderate Conservative Party – partnership, indeed, inside the National Government – offered a credible way forward. Speaking at the annual conference of the Scottish Liberal National Association in 1937, Simon suggested that new dividing lines had been drawn in British politics. The contests of the future would not pitch old-style Conservatism – now a thing of the past – against the old Liberalism, which remained stuck in its trenches, unable to recognise the new reality.[36]

The mainstream party under Samuel and Sinclair appeared intent on maintaining independence and ideological purity, even if this led inevitably to political oblivion. When an independent Liberal candidate challenged the Liberal National nominee at the East Fife by-election of February 1933, the *Liberal Magazine* heaped praise on this 'young Free Trader marching out to fight the combined hosts of Tories and Simonites'. It was 'a Charge of the Light Brigade' in which he covered himself with glory.[37] A moment's reflection on the disastrous outcome of that brigade's failed assault might have prompted a different analogy! The Liberal Nationals always insisted they were genuine Liberals, albeit Liberals prepared to modernise their ideas in the face of changing circumstances. Their success in convincing substantial numbers of Liberal voters of the continuing reality of their Liberalism made them a significant ongoing threat to the mainstream party. By the end of the 1930s, while many leading Liberals pondered their own futility, Liberal Nationals could point to participation in government – Simon, Runciman, Hore-Belisha, Godfrey Collins, Ernest Brown and Leslie Burgin all held cabinet posts during the decade – and, somewhat more questionably, their liberalising influence on overall government policy. Liberal Nationals increasingly referred to the mainstream party as the breakaway group, as it was they who had not stayed loyal to the National Government which both groups initially supported in 1931. Looking forward to the next general election, Liberal Nationals could also note that, after agreement with the Conservatives, they would be fighting on a broader front than before. Liberal National candidates would contest seats as diverse as Motherwell and Hackney South, Sheffield Hillsborough and Gower. Few of these were likely to result in Liberal National victories, but all had the capacity to obliterate any lingering local presence of the mainstream party.

The experience of Scotland, where the Liberal National Godfrey Collins was the National Government's secretary of state from September 1932 until his death in October 1936, reveals how close the Liberal Nationals came to 'victory' in their civil war with the orthodox party. In the wake of the First World War, the once dominant Liberal Party went into precipitous decline north of the border. By the end of the 1920s it was 'reduced to a bunch of squabbling factions united only by a name and its memories'.[38] Much of what remained tended to lean to the right and was thus particularly susceptible to the Liberal National embrace. For several months in 1935, the mainstream party effectively lost control of the Scottish Liberal Federation. Sir William Baird, the federation's chairman, motivated, it appeared, by the Liberal Party's chronic shortage of money, moved tentatively towards the Liberal National camp. Yet at this stage Sinclair seemed sympathetic towards Baird's position: 'The financial situation of the Federation

is bad, even though some subscriptions are being obtained from Liberals whose sympathies are with the National Government. Without such support it may be difficult for the SLF to carry on.'[39] Most local associations throughout Scotland were, Sinclair admitted, 'simply dead'.[40] There followed a period of shadow boxing between the two sides, but Sinclair, through his close ally James Scott, arranged for the submission to the SLF's executive committee of a statement reaffirming the independence of the federation from both the Liberal Nationals and the National Government. Emboldened by further evidence from a by-election in Edinburgh West of the weakness of the mainstream party, Baird in July circulated a memorandum to his fellow office holders, gently suggesting 'genuine (if to some extent qualified) cooperation with the National Government, especially at the coming general election'.[41] Again, Sinclair used his influence to convene a special meeting to consider this memorandum, which was then referred back to the chairman's committee.

Sinclair was probably happy with this stalemate, recognising that at the coming election the Samuelites were likely to support the government's declared policy of upholding the League of Nations, a stance difficult to reconcile with further censure of Baird's position. At the same time, he was reluctant to 'damp down ... sparks of genuine Liberal enthusiasm' when a group of independent Liberals produced a counter-memorandum repudiating Baird's arguments.[42] This was debated by the federation in Glasgow on 17 October. The counter-memorandum was supported by Sinclair, Scott and others. After an acrimonious debate, it was carried by 166 votes to 102, after which Baird and several other officers resigned their posts, with most soon joining the rival Liberal National Organisation.[43]

This was a victory for the mainstream party, but a pyrrhic one. *The Times* suggested that the federation's 'unhappy week' ended with its Glasgow headquarters 'in charge of a solitary typist'.[44] Over the following weeks, several who had backed the counter-memorandum withdrew their support.[45] At the November general election, Scottish Liberal representation fell to three MPs; the Liberal Nationals secured seven. Two and a half years later, from the vantage point of his new office as chairman of the Scottish Liberal National Federation, Baird reviewed the situation:

> Beginning as we did with small but enthusiastic bands, we have developed in the short space of two years to be a strength in the land and, I trust, a help to the Government. Slowly but surely Liberals joined our ranks and the attendance at our first Annual Conference ... proved beyond doubt that large numbers of Liberals throughout Scotland would have drifted had we not fashioned and built a home for their thoughts and ideals, and a meeting place to express them.[46]

World war transformed the whole course of British politics, including the contest for the soul of the Liberal Party. In the postwar world, Liberal Nationals found it difficult to renew themselves with a fresh generation of adherents. As the circumstances that had brought them into existence faded into history, they became little more than a historical curiosity. The National Government was no more and, if their primary goal was to help block the path to a further period of Labour rule, the 1945 general election showed how spectacularly they had failed. Yet, as one historian has put it, Liberal Nationalism enjoyed a 'long afterlife' and remained capable of inflicting damage on a still-declining Liberal Party.[47] After 1945, and particularly after Woolton–Teviot, it did so less as an independent political force than as an instrument in Conservative hands in a broader strategy of capturing the 'Liberal vote' as the only way of recovering power in the face of a rampant Labour Party. This involved attempts to swallow up the mainstream Liberals, as

well as draining the last vestiges of Liberal National autonomy. Throughout the 1950s, there remained Conservative MPs determined to maintain, often to the confusion of their electorates, a National Liberal element in their local association and nominal affiliation for fear that its abandonment would prompt a haemorrhage of 'Liberal' votes.[48]

For all that, it seems reasonable to conclude that, for around fifteen years after 1931, there were two British Liberal parties, each with a plausible claim to be the authentic voice of the Liberal tradition. Though the Liberal Party survived, and Liberal Nationalism did not, this outcome was not inevitable in 1939. Furthermore, it is indisputable that the latter had inflicted serious harm on the former and, having done so, acted as an impediment to any meaningful recovery by the mainstream party. It is striking that no parliamentary seat which passed into Liberal National hands was recovered by the mainstream party until the Torrington by-election of 1958. Small wonder that Violet Bonham Carter, Asquith's daughter and mother of the Torrington victor, later recalled a 'strange sense of being a member of an army of liberation entering occupied territory which for years had been ruled by quislings and collaborators and that their day was over once and for all'.[49] ■

David Dutton has had a long-standing interest in the cross-over between Liberal and Conservative politics. This led inevitably to a focus on the Liberal National Party. His book *Liberals in Schism* was published in paperback by I.B. Tauris in 2014.

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20 *The Times*, 2 June 1934.

21 *Dumfriesshire and Galloway Standard*, 26 May 1934.

22 Churchill Archives Centre [CAC], Hore-Belisha MSS, HOBE 1/1, diary, 18 Sep. 1931.

23 D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1977), p. 556.

24 P. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900–1990* (London, 1997), p. 155.

25 Sinclair to Rea, 9 Oct. 1933, cited M. Baines, 'The Survival of the British Liberal Party 1932–1959', Oxford D. Phil (1991), p. 15.

26 National Library of Wales, Davies MSS, C/1/16, Davies to S. Clement-Davies, 3 Nov. 1943.

27 Walsall Local History Centre, papers of Walsall Liberal Association 31/1/3, minutes of executive committee meeting, 29 Sep. 1931.

28 A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London, 1971), p. 319.

29 CAC, Thurso MSS II, 71/2, Sinclair to J. Scott, 19 Nov. 1935.

30 Baines, 'Survival', p. 26.

continued on page 54

fellow radical Liberals, Roberts and Granville, also lost their seats. Noel-Baker and James Callaghan then suggested to her that the time had finally come to join the Labour Party.

Within the Liberals, the radicals continued to debate the way forwards whilst staying away from party meetings. However, they did not act together and one by one they moved across to Labour. Megan focused much of her energies on the cross-party campaign to get a Parliament for Wales. Joining Labour was delayed by Megan's concern about Labour infighting between Bevan and Gaitskell and the lack of suitable parliamentary opportunities in Wales for her to re-enter the Commons as a Labour MP. Even as late as 1953, the remaining radicals in the Liberal Party hoped that Megan could be more active and swing the party to the left. Finally, Megan joined Labour just in time to speak for them in the 1955 election.

Her opportunity to rejoin parliament came in November 1956, at the height of the Suez crisis, with the sudden death of Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris, the Liberal MP for Carmarthen. As a largely Welsh speaking and rural constituency, Labour's national executive saw it as an ideal opportunity for Megan. However, Megan won the selection by only one vote. The Liberals selected a candidate who supported the Tories' Suez policy, and the Conservatives did not stand. Megan campaigned on Suez even though the Labour organisers would have preferred her to focus on less controversial domestic issues. In the end she won by 3,000 votes.

As a Labour backbencher Megan was never really comfortable within a party whose traditions and ethos were so unfamiliar to her. She had lost the battle to save the Liberal Party as a significant, progressive and genuinely Radical force. Despite being diagnosed with cancer in 1962, Megan fought both the 1964 and 1966 elections but was too ill to visit the constituency in 1966. Even so, the seriousness of the cancer was not at all widely known and her death two months later in May 1966 was a surprise.

Megan Lloyd George didn't really have her own separate political identity until after her father's death in March 1945. She is probably most fondly remembered for her leadership of the Parliament for Wales campaign in the 1950s. Megan's lack of drive, relying on her charm to make a political impression, meant that she was never able to mould the Liberal Party in her image and her departure was probably only a matter of time. ■

Malcolm Baines

'A Party Divided' *continued from page 39*

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39 Samuel MSS, A/155/9, Sinclair to Samuel, 4 May 1935.

40 Sinclair to R. Findlay, 27 May 1937, cited in M. Fry, *Patronage and Principle* (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 179; D. Torrance, *A History of Scottish Liberals and Liberal Democrats* (Edinburgh, 2022), p. 78.

41 Stannage, *Baldwin*, p. 109.

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43 *Liberal Magazine*, Nov.–Dec. 1935.

44 *The Times*, 26 Oct. 1935.

45 Stannage, *Baldwin*, p. 113.

46 *Liberal National Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 7, June 1938.

47 M. Petrie, 'Anti-Socialism, Liberalism and Individualism: Rethinking the Realignment of Scottish Politics 1945–1970', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), p. 204.

48 See the case of Niall Macpherson: D. Dutton, 'Niall Macpherson: Dumfriesshire's Last Liberal MP?', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, vol. 95 (2021), pp. 63–84.

49 A. Cyr, *Liberal Party Politics in Britain* (London, 1977), p. 101.