

# The Geography of Liberal Survival

MUCH INK HAS been spilled in discussing the decline of the Liberal Party, from its barnstorming general election win in 1906 to the catastrophic 1924 campaign, when only forty Liberals were elected, and the party's subsequent descent into near-irrelevance. Rather less attention has been paid to another of the great puzzles of British politics: why did the party survive at all?

In 1929, the Liberals regrouped and made a determined attempt to regain power. Past divisions were pushed below the surface and the party presented a range of fresh ideas to the electorate. The result was a severe disappointment; another third-place finish and only fifty-nine MPs elected. It was confirmation of a seismic shift in the political firmament, with Labour replacing the Liberals in the UK's two-party system. The Liberal Party continued to decline, being reduced to just five MPs between 1957 and 1958. The situation in local government was no better, with there being fewer than 500 Liberal councillors elected across the whole country by the mid-1950s.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the party did survive, reviving in local government and finding ways of winning parliamentary by-elections. Although the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats have experienced some exceptionally tough periods since 1959, the party's survival has never been in doubt, save, perhaps, in the immediate aftermath of the merger of the Liberal Party and SDP.

The question of why the Liberal Party survived is not simply of interest to historians of

the party. The Liberals' stubborn refusal to disappear forced the two major parties to take the party and its ideas seriously. At national level, Liberal Democrats have taken part in governing coalitions in the UK, Scotland and Wales, as well as the Lib-Lab pact in the 1970s; and the party is well entrenched in swathes of local authorities across the country. The unexpected survival of the Liberal Party changed Britain and continues to do so.

Accounts of the party's survival typically focus in on the persistence of the Liberal vote in the UK's 'Celtic fringe', evoking comparison with ancient Picts, Scots and druids retreating before the Romans to the wilds of Wales, Cornwall and northern Scotland. This isn't so much an explanation as a description, based on a characterisation of the areas of the country which, it is suggested, remained Liberal.

The Celtic fringe thesis also fails to account for the stubborn survival of the party at local government level in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. Of the 292 Liberal borough councillors in 1956, 179 were from those two counties.<sup>2</sup> What, if anything, links the party survival in places like Rochdale and Halifax with the extremities of the UK?

In order to analyse the factors underlying the Liberal Party's survival, we need to have a better understanding of where it survived, which is the purpose of this article.

The starting point is the set of parliamentary seats which the Liberals won in 1929. These were, presumably, the seats with the strongest Liberal tradition, where Liberal strength had survived the strong ebb tide

of the 1920s. This thesis will be tested using Pelling's pithy analyses of the politics of individual constitutions in his book, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910*. There are a small number of seats which the party did not win in 1929 but which it did pick up later, before 1955, especially in 1931, when the Labour Party suffered a significant reverse. These are also included in the analysis.<sup>3</sup>

For each of the seventy-eight seats identified in this study, we look at the 1945 election results, to see how the party fared at the time of the Labour Party's landslide victory, and the 1955 election results, shortly before the Liberals' parliamentary nadir. There is then a brief study of what happened between 1955 and 1974 in each constituency, to enable consideration of where a Liberal tradition appears to have survived and where it did not. Constituencies have been split into four categories, based on this analysis. These are heartland seats, where the Liberal Party remained strong throughout the 1929–55 period and that strength persisted; 'bounce back' seats, where the Liberal Party weakened during the 1929–55 period, but there was subsequent revival; seats exhibiting 'glimmers of hope', where there was decline during the 1929–55 period but occasions thereafter where the Liberals polled well; and seats where the party was not competitive in parliamentary elections in the period to 1974.<sup>4</sup>

Analysing parliamentary constituencies over such a long period of time has necessarily involved making some judgements about boundary changes which some readers may regard as cavalier.

It has not been possible to undertake a similar analysis at local government level because of the amount of data which would be involved and the difficulty of finding local election results, especially before 1945. However, some reflections on the persistence of Liberal voting at local government level are included.

## Scotland

The Scottish seats won in 1929 were almost all regarded by Pelling as safe territory for the party before the First World War, with the exception of Greenock, a marginal seat, and Galloway, which was formed from two county seats which were usually Tory. The three urban seats picked up in 1931 had also been safely Liberal before the war, Paisley being Asquith's seat from 1920 to 1924. However, in none of these seats was a Liberal elected in 1945. Roxburgh and Selkirk, a surprise gain for the Liberals in 1950, was made up of two former constituencies which were both earlier regarded as marginal.

Three of the seats can be regarded as Liberal heartlands. Orkney and Shetland had been Liberal for decades before 1935. It was regained by Jo Grimond in 1950 and remained safely Liberal thereafter.

The Inverness-shire county seat was created in 1918 from the former county and burgh constituencies, and elected a Liberal. In 1929 the sitting MP was Murdoch Macdonald. He became a Liberal National and in 1945 he was elected as an independent Liberal, although not regarded as aligned to the Liberal Party. The Conservatives won the seat in 1950 and there wasn't a Liberal candidate in 1951. However, John Bannerman relit the Liberal flame with a spectacular by-election performance in 1954, taking 36 per cent of the vote. The seat was specifically targeted by the party after 1959, and Russell Johnstone won in 1964 and remained as MP until 1992.

Roxburgh and Selkirk, in the Borders, was also an area of strength for the party throughout the wilderness years, briefly electing a Liberal MP in 1950. A by-election also played a major role here in providing an opportunity for the Liberals to regain the seat, with David Steel being elected in 1965.

In three seats the Liberals seemed to be on a path to irrelevance by the mid-1950s before suddenly reviving. Caithness and Sutherland

<b>Scotland</b>				
<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Pelling's analysis</i>	<i>Lib performance 1945</i>	<i>Lib performance 1955</i>	<i>Liberal performance after 1955</i>
<b>Heartland</b>				
Inverness-shire	County safe Liberal, burghs seat more marginal	3rd (22.2%), Lib Nat won, claiming to be an independent Liberal	2nd (38.7%)	Liberals have held the seat or parts of the seat for most of the time since 1964, although with numerous boundary changes
Orkney and Shetland	Safe Liberal	2nd (34.2%) to Con	Lib victory	Liberal / Liberal Democrat since 1950
Roxburgh and Selkirk	Roxburgh and Peebles and Selkirk seats both marginal	2nd (33.2%) to Con	Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles, 2nd (32.1%)	Won by the Liberals in 1965 and retained.
<b>Bounce back</b>				
Aberdeenshire West and Kincardine	Aberdeenshire West and Kincardine both safe Liberal	2nd (48.5%) to Con with no Lab candidate	Seat split. Aberdeenshire West, Liberal vote 13.8%: North Angus & Mearns not contested (was a Nat Lib)	Aberdeenshire West was Liberal 1966–70 and successor seat
Caithness and Sutherland	Caithness very safe Liberal seat, Sutherland usually Liberal	3rd (33.1%), Con won	3rd (14.5%)	Liberal seat 1964–66
Ross and Cromarty	Safe Liberal	An 'independent Liberal' won who was later Lib Nat	No Lib (Nat Lib won)	Liberal seat 1964–70
<b>Glimmers of hope?</b>				
Banff	Safe Liberal	2nd (29.6%) to Con	Not contested	Liberals 2nd in 1966 but not competitive after that
Galloway	Kirkcudbright usually Con, Wigtown Con even in 1906	Not contested, Independent Unionist won	Not contested	Liberals 2nd in 1959 by-election and general election and in 1964 election but seat not contested in 1966 and not competitive since.
Greenock	Marginally more Liberal than Unionist	4th (12.2%), Lab won	Not contested (had achieved 2nd in 1950 although with no Con candidate)	Liberals 2nd in 1959, even with Con opponent.
Paisley	Strongest Liberal seat in West of Scotland	3rd (10.0%), Lab won	No Lib candidate	Liberals 2nd in 1961 by-election and 1964 general election but 4th in 1970. Liberals 2nd in Paisley South in 1983 and 1987.
Western Isles	Split from Ross and Cromarty and Inverness-shire seats (see above)	2nd (33.0%) to Lab	No Lib candidate (was a Nat Lib)	Liberal was 2nd in 1964 and 3rd in 1966 but the seat was not contested in 1970 or Feb 1974.
<b>Not competitive</b>				
Dumfriesshire	Usually in Liberal control	3rd (16.9%), Lib Nat won	Not contested	Not competitive
Dundee	Safe Liberal	3rd (19.5%) with one candidate, Lab took both seats	Both East and West seats contested by Nat Lib but not Lib candidates in 1955	Not competitive

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Constituency	Pelling's analysis	Lib performance 1945	Lib performance 1955	Liberal performance after 1955
Edinburgh East	Safe Liberal	No Lib candidate (Lab won)	No Lib candidate	Not competitive
Fife East	Safe Liberal	No Lib, seat won by Lib Nat	No Lib, but was a Nat Lib	3rd or 4th, even in 1961 by-election (3rd)
Leith	Safe Liberal	No Lib: Lab seat, Lib Nat 2nd	3rd (18.3%): Nat Lib was 2nd	Not competitive
Montrose Burghs	Very safe Liberal	No Lib, Lib Nat won	Split between North Angus and Mearns and South Angus. Both seats were Nat Lib with no Lib candidate	Lots of boundary changes affected this area but no significant Liberal results

was the constituency of Liberal leader Sir Archibald Sinclair, but he lost narrowly to the Conservatives in 1945, finishing third behind Labour. A rash promise by the Tory candidate to stand down in favour of Sinclair if he was successful was not honoured; and, by 1955, the Liberals were a distant third. However, farmer George Mackie regained the seat in 1964. Labour won in 1966, and the Liberal vote thereafter declined.

Ross and Cromarty is similar in some respects. The seat was won by an independent liberal in 1945 who took the Conservative whip, but the Liberals regained it in 1964, only to fade away again during the 1970s. The Conservatives only narrowly held off a strong Liberal challenge in Aberdeenshire West and Kincardine in 1945 but ten years later the Liberal vote in Aberdeenshire West had declined precipitously. However, in 1966 James Davidson was elected as the district's Liberal MP.

In the remaining seats, the Liberals more or less disappeared, as far as parliamentary contests go, after 1970, if not before. Four of the seats were contested by Liberal Nationals in 1945 and by their successor party, the National Liberals, in subsequent elections. Five of the seats were not contested by Liberals in 1945 and only one (Leith) had a Liberal candidate in 1955. There was clearly residual Liberal strength in some areas but the failure to stand candidates in seats such as Galloway, where a by-election inspired a brief revival, must have been particularly damaging.

Elsewhere, there was a strong Liberal local government presence in Greenock from the 1950s which underpinned a second-place finish in the 1959 election. There was a revival in the 1960s in Paisley, likely due to the 1961 by-election, where the Liberals finished second, with John Bannerman as candidate. In Fife East there was little sign in the 1950s and 1960s of the party's re-emergence in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Wales

All of the nine seats won by the Liberals in 1929 were regarded as safe territory before the First World War. Four remained Liberal in 1945, discounting Pembrokeshire, where Gwilym Lloyd George was already regarded as a Conservative in all but name. In two of those seats, the Liberals benefited from there being no Conservative candidate, although that reflected the weakness of the Tories in those areas rather than electoral pacts. One seat, Wrexham, was picked up from Labour in 1931, but it had been lost by 1945.

Two of these ten seats can be considered as Liberal heartlands: Cardiganshire and Montgomery. Both elected Liberal MPs throughout the period, although in the case of Cardiganshire the consistent absence of Conservative candidates must have helped.

In three seats, the Liberal vote faded during the 1950s but seemed to retain some residual strength. Merioneth was a Liberal seat until

<b>Wales</b>				
<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Pelling's analysis</i>	<i>Lib performance 1945</i>	<i>Lib performance 1955</i>	<i>Liberal performance after 1955</i>
<b>Heartland</b>				
Cardiganshire	Safe Liberal	Lib seat, no Con	Lib seat, no Con	Liberal until 1966, remained competitive.
Montgomery	Safe Liberal	Lib seat	Lib seat	Liberal until 1974 and beyond
<b>Glimmers of hope?</b>				
Denbigh	Western and Eastern divisions both considered safe Liberal, for different reasons	2nd (29.6%) to a Lib Nat	2nd (32.2%) to a Nat Lib	Liberals continued to challenge in general elections
Merioneth	Safe Liberal	Liberal seat	2nd (26.9%)	Remained in 2nd place until 1970
Wrexham	Part of the Denbigh Boroughs seat and thought to be Conservative	3rd (14.5%) to Lab with a Lib Nat 2nd	Not contested; a Nat Lib stood	Liberals 2nd in October 1974
<b>Not competitive</b>				
Anglesey	Safe Liberal	Lib seat, no Con	2nd (32.6%)	Liberal vote quickly collapsed and the seat wasn't even contested in 1966
Carnarvon Boroughs	Safe Liberal, but ascribed to Lloyd George's influence	2nd (32.0%) to Con	Merged into Caernarvon and Conway seats (see below)	
Carnarvonshire	North and South Carnarvonshire divisions were both safe Liberal	2nd (39.3%) to Lab, no Con	Caernarvon 4th (9.3%), Conway 3rd (8.2%)	Not competitive
Flintshire	Safe Liberal, due to a solid industrial vote	3rd (23.8%), Con won	West seat 3rd (10.8%); did not contest East seat	Not competitive
Pembrokeshire	Safe Liberal	Gwilym Lloyd George elected as a Lib but was regarded as a Con	Lab defeated an Independent.	Not competitive

1951, and the Liberals retained second place until 1970. In Denbigh, the party was the chief challenger to the National Liberal MP in the 1950s. In neighbouring Wrexham, the Liberal vote was less resilient but still sufficient to achieve second place in the October 1974 election.

Elsewhere it is a story of swift decline. For example, in Pembrokeshire, there were no signs of Liberal survival after Gwilym Lloyd George officially switched to the National Liberals and then Conservatives. The Liberals were third in Flintshire in 1945 and never recovered. In Anglesey, the Liberal vote

collapsed shortly after Megan Lloyd George lost the seat in 1951.

## South-west England

The seats in south-west England consist of seven won in 1929 and one gained in 1935, Barnstaple. Only one, North Cornwall, was retained in 1945, the absence of a Labour candidate playing a part in that outcome. Not all of the seats were regarded by Pelling as safe Liberal territory before the First World War, with both Bodmin and Dorset East regarded as marginal.

South-west England				
Constituency	Pelling's analysis	Lib performance 1945	Lib performance 1955	Liberal performance after 1955
Heartland				
Bodmin	Marginal	2nd (38.0%) to Con	2nd (28.0%) to Con	Liberal 1964–70 and Feb–Oct 1974
North Cornwall	Liberal because of strong Nonconformist farmers' vote	Lib (no official Lab candidate)	2nd (42.9%) to Con	Liberal after 1966
South Molton	Safe Liberal	No Lib (Lib Nat won)	Torrington not contested (Nat Lib MP). North Devon 2nd (32.45%)	Torrington was won at a by-election in 1958, lost in 1959 but the Liberals remained 2nd until the seat was abolished. North Devon Liberal after 1959
Barnstaple	Tended to the Liberals because of Nonconformist vote	2nd (32.9%) to Con	North Devon 2nd (32.45%)	See above
Bounce back				
Penryn and Falmouth	Marginal	3rd (19.3%) to Lab	Truro 3rd (18.7%). Falmouth and Camborne not contested	Falmouth and Camborne see below. Truro (later Truro and St Austell) was Liberal from Oct 1974
Glimmers of hope?				
Dorset East	Very marginal	3rd (14.8%) to Con	Poole, 3rd (11.65%) to Con	2nd place in 1974 elections
St Ives	Liberal (but very anti-home rule)	3rd (25.5%) to Lib Nat	3rd (18.6%) to Nat Libl	2nd place in 1964 and the two 1974 elections
Not competitive				
Camborne	Safe Liberal	3rd (27.6%) to Con	Falmouth and Camborne not contested	Consistently in 3rd place in Falmouth and Camborne before 1974

From the perspective of 1955, south-west England was an area where Liberal strength appeared to be on the retreat. There were no Liberal MPs in the area and only in North Cornwall had the Liberals come close to victory at that year's election. In Torrington, the National Liberal MP, stalwart former Liberal George Lambert, did not face a Liberal opponent. St Ives also elected a National Liberal and the Liberals did not contest Falmouth and Camborne.

However, in 1958, when Lambert was raised to the peerage, the Liberals won the ensuing by-election, the first by-election gain since 1929. Although the seat was lost in 1959, North Devon was won, by Jeremy Thorpe, and the party won in Bodmin in 1964 and North Cornwall in 1966. All of these seats can justifiably claim to be Liberal heartlands.

In one seat, the Liberals bounced back to regain territory. Boundary changes confuse the situation, but parts of the Falmouth and Penryn seat were in the Truro constituency won by David Penhaligon in October 1974. There were signs of recovery in St Ives and Poole (the primary successor of the old Dorset East seat), but in Falmouth and Camborne the Liberals looked to have lost significant ground to Labour.

Lancashire and Yorkshire

Eight seats are included in this analysis from urban Lancashire (excluding Manchester) and Yorkshire – the cotton belt, an area of Victorian prosperity in decline after 1945. Three were won by the Liberals in 1929 and three

<b>Lancashire and Yorkshire</b>				
<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Pelling's analysis</i>	<i>Lib performance 1945</i>	<i>Lib performance 1955</i>	<i>Liberal performance after 1955</i>
<b>Bounce back</b>				
Colne Valley	Liberal, challenged by Labour	3rd (18.4%) to Lab	Not contested	Liberal 1966–70 and from Feb 1974
<b>Glimmers of hope?</b>				
Huddersfield West	Liberal because of Nonconformist strength	Huddersfield: 3rd (16.2%) to Lab	Lib because of pact with Con	2nd in 1964 when Labour stood for first time but 3rd thereafter.
<b>Not competitive</b>				
Bolton West	Bolton tended Conservative before 1906 but Liberals and Labour shared representation 1906–18	Bolton: 3rd (2 candidates polled under 10%) to Lab	Lib because of pact with Con	Not competitive
Bradford South	Bradford Central, East and West seats were all Liberal with Labour challengers	3rd (14.4%) to Lab, with Lib Nat 2nd	3rd (12.4%) with Nat Lib second	Not competitive
Darwen	Very marginal	3rd (24.26%) to Lab	Not contested	Not competitive
Dewsbury	Safe Liberal	3rd (13.9%) to Lab	3rd (12.4%) to Lab	Not competitive
Heywood and Radcliffe	Heywood and Radcliffe cum Farnworth seats both Liberal	Not contested (Lab seat)	Successor seats – Heywood and Royton and Bury and Radcliffe not contested	No successor seat ever competitive
Spen Valley	Liberal due to Nonconformist vote	Not contested. Lab seat, with Lib Nat opponent	Successor seats – Brighouse and Spenborough and Batley and Morley not contested. Dewsbury 3rd (12.4%)	No successor seat ever competitive

were taken from Labour in 1931. All were lost by 1945. In addition are two seats won by the Liberals after 1945 because of local pacts with the Conservatives: Huddersfield West and Bolton West.

Most were regarded by Pelling as safe Liberal territory before the First World War because of the strength of Nonconformity in this area. In a number of places, the rise of the Labour vote was noted. However, in many cases, before 1918, the Labour Party was helping to buttress the Liberals' position against their Tory opponents.

Two of the seats – Spen Valley and Heywood and Radcliffe – were not contested by Liberals in 1945. Only in Darwen, which an independent Liberal came close to winning in

a wartime by-election, did the party poll over 20 per cent. In 1955, the seats won in 1929 or 1931, or their successors, were either not contested or saw unremarkable Liberal performances. The Liberals largely disappear from view in these seats and in Bolton, after the end of the electoral pact in 1964.

However, in Colne Valley there was a remarkable revival. This seat, comprising a number of small towns and villages between Huddersfield and the Lancashire border, was not contested in 1955 but was won by the Liberals in 1966 and retained for over twenty years. The Liberal revival in Colne Valley was testament to the charisma and organisational abilities of the Liberal MP, Richard Wainwright, perhaps reviving Liberal strength based on

Rural England				
Constituency	Pelling's analysis	Lib performance 1945	Lib performance 1955	Liberal performance after 1955
Bounce back				
Berwick	Safe Liberal	2nd (36.4%) to Con	Not contested	Liberal after 1973 (by-election)
Isle of Ely	Cambridgeshire East and North both marginal but with Liberal strength concentrated in the villages	3rd (24.9%) to Con	Not contested	Liberal after 1973 (by-election)
Glimmers of hope?				
Buckrose	Distinctly Liberal because of tradition of primitive methodism	Lib seat	Bridlington not contested	2nd place in Bridlington in 1974 elections
Eddisbury	Fairly safely Conservative	3rd (14.4%) to Lib Nat	4 successor seats, with Lib contests in Crewe, 3rd (10.5%) and Knutsford, 3rd (15.3%).	Liberals often 2nd in Knutsford
Eye	The most heavily Liberal seat in East Anglia	Lib seat	3rd (11.8%) to Lab (former Lib MP Edgar Granville)	2nd place in 1974 elections
Harwich	Marginal seat	Not contested. Lib Nat won.	3rd (9.5%) to Nat Lib	2nd place Feb 74
Hereford	Safely Conservative after 1892	3rd (23.4%) to Con	2nd (24.8%) to Con	2nd in 1956 by-election and 1959 and again in 1974
Huntingdonshire	Marginal	3rd (19.1%) to Lib Nat	Not contested	2nd Feb 1974
Not competitive				
Ashford	Conservative even in 1906	3rd (13.3%) to Con	Not contested	Not competitive
Bedfordshire, Mid	Both Bedfordshire county seats tended towards the Liberals	3rd (30.9%) to Con	Not contested	Not competitive (3rd in 1960 by-election)
Bosworth	Safe Liberal	Not contested. Lib Nat 2nd to Lab	Not contested	Not competitive (no Liberal candidate 1970)
Cumberland North	Trending Liberal	Lib seat	Penrith and the Border: 3rd (18.5%) to Con	Not competitive
Great Yarmouth	Conservative even in 1906	Not contested. Lab seat, Lib Nat stood	Not contested	Not competitive
Holland-with-Boston	Marginal, tending Liberal	Not contested, Lib Nat won.	3rd (7.0%) to Nat Lib	Not competitive
Norfolk East	Trended Liberal from 1892	Not contested. Lib Nat won	Split across 4 Norfolk seats, none of which were contested in 1955	Not competitive

Nonconformity in the constituency's small communities and the incorporation into the seats of parts of the Huddersfield West constituency. This is perhaps the best example of the impact individual Liberal candidates could make in contributing to Liberal survival during this critical period.

Rural England

The Liberals won twelve rural English seats, outside of the south-west, in 1929 and picked up three more subsequently: Berwick, North Cumberland and Buckrose, in the East Riding of Yorkshire. The seats are spread throughout the country and are not all in areas which



<b>Urban England</b>				
<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Pelling's analysis</i>	<i>Lib performance 1945</i>	<i>Lib performance 1955</i>	<i>Liberal performance after 1955</i>
<b>Glimmers of hope?</b>				
Bethnal Green North East	Liberal seat	2nd (30.9%) to Lab	Bethal Green 3rd (14.1%) to Lab	2nd in Bethnal Green and Bow in 1974 elections
Bethnal Green South West	Liberal due to prevalence of small employers	2nd (36.2%) to Lab	As above	As above
Middlesbrough East	Middlesbrough safe Liberal, very working class	Not contested	Not contested	2nd in 1962 by-election but didn't contest in 1964.
<b>Not competitive</b>				
Birkenhead East	Birkenhead and Wirral both tended Conservative	2nd (31.1%) to Lab	Neither Birkenhead nor Bebington contested	Not competitive
Bristol North	Marginal	Not contested. Lab seat, Lib Nat contested	Bristol North East: 3rd (8.7%), Nat Lib stood	Not competitive
Durham	City seat safe Conservative	Not contested. Lab seat, Lib Nat stood	Not contested	Not contested until 1974 when the Liberals were 3rd in both elections
Lambeth North	Usually Conservative	3rd (13.3%) to Lab, Lib Nat stood	Vauxhall not contested	Not competitive
Leicester West	Safe Liberal or Liberal/Labour	3rd (12.0%) to Lab	North West and South West seats not contested	Not competitive
Luton	Seen as strongly Liberal, part of Bedfordshire South	Not contested. Lab seat, Lib Nat contested	3rd (6.5%) to Lab, Nat Lib stood	Not competitive
Manchester Blackley	Manchester North safe Liberal, North West a little less so: Prestwich also Liberal	3rd (21.7%) to Lab	Not contested	Not competitive
Manchester Withington	Manchester South mostly Liberal; Stretford tended Conservative	3rd (19.7%) to Con	3rd (11.6%) to Con	Not competitive
Middlesbrough West	Middlesbrough safe Liberal, very working class	2nd (46.5%) to Lab, no Con	Not contested	Not competitive
Newcastle East	Newcastle was Liberal, with strong Labour vote	Not contested. Lab won, Lib Nat stood.	Not contested	Not competitive
Norwich	Marginal, becoming safe for Liberals/Labour	Not contested. Lab won both seats. Con stood alongside a Lib Nat	North and South seats not contested	Not competitive
Nottingham East	Marginal	3rd (18.8%) to Lab	Central and South seats not contested	Not competitive
Plymouth Devonport	Marginal	Not contested. Lab seat, Lib Nat contested	3rd (5.9%) to Lab	Later David Owen's SDP seat but never competitive except in this context
Preston	Usually Conservative	3rd (6.1%) to Lab	Preston North 3rd (4.5%), Preston South not contested	Not competitive

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Constituency	Pelling's analysis	Lib performance 1945	Lib performance 1955	Liberal performance after 1955
South Shields	Very safe Liberal	Not contested, Lab won, Lib Nat stood	Not contested	Not competitive
Whitechapel and St George's	Whitechapel Liberal because of Jewish vote. St George's in the East more Conservative but trending Liberal	3rd (7.7%) to Lab	Stepney: 4th (4.3%) to Lab	Rarely contested
Wolverhampton East	Safe Liberal, stronghold of Nonconformity	2nd (30.1%) to Lab	Neither South West nor North East seats contested	Not competitive in Wolverhampton

Pelling identified as areas of Liberal strength. While Eye was East Anglia's best prospect for the Liberals before 1918, Great Yarmouth, Ashford and Hereford resisted the Liberal tide in 1906. Three were won by the Liberals in 1945: Eye, North Cumberland and Buckrose, which was gained from the Conservatives. In seven seats there were Liberal National candidates, mostly not opposed by Liberals.

Most of these seats went uncontested in 1955. These included Bridlington, which replaced a large part of the Buckrose seat lost in 1950, and Berwick, where the Liberals polled 36 per cent ten years earlier. None of the results where Liberals stood in these seats, or their successors, could give the party any encouragement. Nevertheless, there were signs of resilience in a number of seats after 1955, with by-elections playing prominent roles. For example, in Hereford, the former MP, Frank Owen, revived the party's fortunes with a good second place at the 1956 by-election. Liberals won by-elections in Berwick and the Isle of Ely in 1973.

Urban England

The Liberals won thirteen urban English seats in 1929 and a further seven in 1931. These were not all in traditional Liberal territory. While South Shields had never returned a Conservative, Plymouth Devonport was marginal before 1918, and Preston was regarded by Pelling as usually Conservative.

The party's record in these seats after the 1930s was poor. Eight seats were not contested in 1945, with Liberal Nationals standing in seven. The party won over 30 per cent of the vote in five seats, likely in most cases because of support for incumbent MPs. In Middlesbrough West, the sitting Liberal lost despite there being no Conservative opponent.

Few of the seats, or their successors, were contested in 1955, and the results in the seats where Liberals stood were poor, the best being 14.1 per cent in Bethnal Green. After 1955, the seats were rarely competitive for the party. The standout is Middlesbrough East, where the Liberals came second in a by-election in 1962. However, astonishingly, no Liberal contested the seat at the subsequent general election so any momentum arising from the by-election was lost.

Conclusion

There are nine parliamentary constituencies in four parts of the UK which could be considered Liberal heartlands, where the Liberals maintained a parliamentary presence after 1945 which persisted at least until 1974. These seats were in northern Scotland (Orkney and Shetland; and Inverness-shire), the Scottish borders (Roxburgh and Selkirk), mid-Wales (Cardigan-shire and Montgomery) and south-west England (Bodmin, North Cornwall, North Devon and Torrington). This would appear to vindicate the Celtic fringe thesis for the party's survival.

However, there still remain the questions of what factors connect these disparate places, other than their distance from the UK's main centres of population, and why these seats remained Liberal while neighbouring seats with apparently similar characteristics did not.

For example, Caithness and Sutherland would seem at first sight to be a good example of a Celtic fringe constituency. Comprising the most northerly parts of the British mainland, the seat was Liberal until 1945 and was regained by the party in 1964. However, Labour took the seat in 1966, and the Liberal vote slipped to third in October 1974, behind the SNP. This situation looks not dissimilar to the position in Anglesey and Merioneth where the Liberal vote slipped badly after the seats were lost in the 1950s.

In a number of 'Celtic fringe' constituencies, the Liberals were eclipsed by the SNP and Plaid Cymru in the 1960s and 1970s. The Liberals were second in 1964 in the Western Isles and in 1966 in Banff, but quickly thereafter sank into irrelevance. Only in Cardiganshire, and to a lesser extent Caithness and Sutherland, did the party seem able to resist the rise of the nationalists. There are individual factors in play in each of these areas which must be analysed to understand why the Liberal Party's fortunes in neighbouring seats could be so different.

There are a number of factors which are clearly relevant to the question of why the Liberals remained capable of winning its heartland seats after 1945. One is to do with the weakness of the Labour Party in some rural areas, which enabled the older Conservative–Liberal rivalry to continue. This seems to be compelling in North Cornwall, where the Labour vote has never exceeded the 16.4 per cent recorded in 1951. However, in other parts of Cornwall, the Liberals remained competitive despite the development of a significant Labour vote. Likewise, and as we have seen, Caithness and Sutherland became a Liberal–Labour marginal in the 1960s.

Another significant factor is the effect of the split in the Liberal Party in the 1930s and the development of the Liberal National Party (subsequently National Liberals), which aligned with the Conservatives and was eventually incorporated into that party. There are numerous examples where the Liberals did not stand against Liberal Nationals or their successors, or stood and polled badly. However, it should not be overlooked that there are also some seats where the existence of National Liberals did not lead to the long-term eclipse of the Liberal Party, Torrington being the prime example.

A number of sociological studies have shed some light on the persistence of Liberal voting after 1945. A. H. Birch looked in detail at the small Derbyshire town of Glossop, where the Liberals retained a strong local government presence into the 1950s. He found that, in the 1950s, over 80 per cent of the population had been born in the town or lived there for over twenty years. This, it was suggested, led to the persistence of prewar social structures and voting patterns.<sup>5</sup> Margaret Stacey came to a similar conclusion in analysing the impact of industrial development in Banbury on older social and political structures.<sup>6</sup>

In many areas where the Liberals retained some strength, there were well-known local families known to be Liberals, whose members were often councillors or aldermen, either representing the party or in local anti-Labour groupings, often with connections to Non-conformism. Liberal clubs also played a part in some areas, providing a focus for local organisation and a continuing presence, even if sometimes in name only.

However, further research in each area is needed to establish which of these factors explained Liberal survival in the 'heartland' seats and whether there was one set of circumstances which can explain why the party survived in those seats but declined elsewhere.

Other examples of Liberal survival are, arguably, stories of revival. The importance

of by-elections in reinvigorating Liberal tradition – in Berwick, Isle of Ely, Hereford, Truro and Roxburgh and Selkirk – cannot be overstated. In all of these areas there would have been a recent tradition of Liberal voting to tap into and the combination of a good candidate, a clear message of opposition to the government of the day, and national resources won the day. As early as the mid-1950s Liberal activists began travelling to promising by-elections to campaign, an important element in the party's survival and revival. In a battle for electoral relevance, by-elections were and are an opportunity to regain the initiative.

Starting this analysis in 1929, several of the seats won that year were not regarded as safe territory for the Liberal Party and a few had not even been won in 1906. There were many seats which Pelling regarded as safely Liberal before 1918 where the party finished third in 1929. Significant demographic and political changes were rewriting the UK's electoral geography and continue to do so. This analysis would look very different if 1974 were the baseline year. There would be more Liberal heartlands – in south-west London, for example, the suburban area south of Manchester, and in a much broader swathe of south-west England. Local government strength would more closely align with the picture at the parliamentary level.

Aside from the seats where by-elections inspired Liberal revival, the electoral geography of Liberal revival bore little relation to areas of previous strength. The local government revival after 1955 barely touched Scotland, Wales or Cornwall, where it was unusual for the party to contest local elections. Southend, Liverpool, Orpington, Finchley – all areas where the Liberals made great strides in the late 1950s and early 1960s – do not feature in this analysis of survival. This raises an intriguing question. Aside from the handful of 'heartland' constituencies, to what extent did the pre-1945 Liberal

Party survive at all? Other than the party label, what connected the new Liberal councillors in the Home Counties in the 1960s with Liberal voters in Skye or North Cornwall? Was the Liberal Party of the 1960s a largely new creation, its ethos significantly different from the party of Asquith and Lloyd George?

What the party's survival into the 1950s did achieve was to establish a platform from which Jo Grimond could lead the party's revival after 1956. Without a parliamentary presence, or with just one or two MPs clinging on, the Liberal Party would have struggled to project itself as a national political entity. By retaining seats in Scotland, Wales and England, as well as maintaining a small, but geographically dispersed, local government base, the Liberal Party was able to maintain its status as a national party – just. It was the changing nature of the Liberal Party after 1945 which ensured its survival after 1964. How British politics would be different today if the Liberal Party had not survived is an interesting counterfactual to consider. ■

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- 1 M. Egan, *Coming into Focus: the Transformation of the Liberal Party 1945–64* (VDM, 2009), ch. 6.
- 2 Ibid., p. 167.
- 3 I have excluded university seats won by the Liberal Party, as the franchise for those seats was based on graduation from the university rather than geography.
- 4 An earlier draft of this article attempted to take the analysis forward to the present day, but it was difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from the results, given the significant changes in social and political geography over the last fifty years.
- 5 A. H. Birch, *Small Town Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1959).
- 6 See R. Ingham, 'Through the Magnifying Glass', *Journal of Liberal History*, 44 (Autumn 2004), pp. 37–8.