

strike might have been avoided. Samuel ended up leading the pro-government Liberals after the 1933 split in the National government. He was home secretary in 1931–32.

Similarly, Sir John Simon, who had declared the strike illegal and published a book of his speeches to this effect, served in four cabinet posts across the fourteen years of the 1931–45 National and other governments. He led the Liberal National Party in the Commons between 1931 and 1940. Archibald Sinclair was an MP until 1945, in the National Government cabinet 1931–32 and in Churchill's wartime coalition cabinet 1940–45.

Asquith is alleged to have used the strike's aftermath 'to move against Lloyd George' (p214). This is curious as Asquith had been in the Lords as Earl of Oxford and Asquith since 1925, and two years before his death in 1928 had largely given up political scheming. Certainly, Torrance's bald assertion requires further explanation.

Lloyd George remained an MP until he was ennobled in 1945, the year of his death. As the political wizard par excellence, he had long since seen off the Asquith faction but had torn the traditional Liberal Party apart. He would suggest solutions for unemployment in the 1930s, but National government politicians were wary of his reputation and even Churchill, a fellow maverick,

considered but eventually resisted bringing Lloyd George into his wartime cabinet.

Keynes gets credit for his role in the party's inquiry report *Britain's Industrial Future* (better known as the 1928 Yellow Book). As the *Journal of Liberal History* website puts it:

the report made a compelling case for state intervention in the economy and planning and advocated great programmes of public works, it also contained detailed proposals for profit-sharing and co-ownership.

None of this applied in the coal, dock or major transport industries in 1926. Had it done so, the strike would likely not have happened.

There are clear parallels with the 1984 miners' strike in that coal

stocks were built up in advance, government planning was far ahead of that of the miners' union and its trades union supporters, and the strike was undermined by the action of 'blacklegs'. The major difference, of course, was the government, police and judicial response. There was no Orgreave in 1926. The latter certainly did shake Britain, and its continuing aftermath (community blight and unemployment hotspots) is still evident today. By contrast the general strike soon faded from memory and generally is resurrected only when historians and publishers mark major anniversaries such as 2026. ■

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Coalition and cooperation

Alan Wager, *Cross-Party Politics in Britain, 1945–2019* (Oxford University Press, 2024)

Review by William Wallace

What if Britain's two-party system is broken, in spite of the cultural and institutional foundations that have maintained it for the past 200 years? Alan Wager took this question as the focus for his PhD, now published as an Oxford academic book. He

starts from Disraeli's famous quotation that 'England does not love coalitions' and from David Butler's assumption that the electoral system has built-in resistance to coalitions, and goes on to explore seven attempts at cross-party cooperation since 1945 – in all of which, except



for the attempts at competing alliances among ‘Remainers’ and ‘Brexiters’ in 2017–19, the Liberals (and later Liberal Democrats) were central players.

His examination of Churchill’s wooing of the Liberals to form an ‘anti-Socialist front’ between 1845 and 1951 show both Churchill’s affection for his former Liberal allies and the deep resistance of his party to any such move. He leaves out Grimond’s pursuit of a ‘realignment of the left’, Wilson’s flirtation with the idea of cooperation in early 1965, and his dismissal of Grimond’s naïve idealism as soon as Labour’s poll ratings recovered. Chapters on the Thorpe–Heath discussions in February 1974, and the Lib–Lab ‘Pact’ of 1976–78 illustrate both the amateurism and lack of preparation of Liberal leaders and their party and the bitter opposition within both major parties to any concessions to a third party. But he underplays the deep divisions

within both of the major parties, and by the late 1970s also the complications of the Scots and Welsh Nationalists and the Ulster MPs; though he quotes Denis Healey as describing a deal with the Liberals in 1976 as ‘infinitely better than relying on the nats and the nutters.’

When he reaches the formation of the Liberal–SDP alliance, he was able to interview some of those who negotiated and held it together. His analysis, however, is curiously apolitical, leaving out the human and social dimension of cross-party politics – and crucially also the importance of Europe as an issue in dividing both major parties and creating links between discontented Tories and Labour MPs and Liberals. He says nothing about the backstory of the relationship between Jenkins and Steel, which began before 1970 when Jenkins was home secretary and the ‘young David’ was promoting the legalisation of abortion, or the contacts and conversation between Liberals and the social democratic wing of the faction-ridden Labour Party, from the 1960s on.

Cross-party cooperation during the 1974 referendum campaign, in which many Liberal activists around the country worked with pro-European Labour members, built links that later developed into what became the Alliance. Liberal, Labour and Conservative coordinators of the referendum campaign worked alongside

each other at regional and local levels, often building long-term links. David Steel’s wooing of Labour ‘social democrats’ went back to supporting Dick Taverne’s by-election win in Lincoln; his conversations with Jenkins, and his calculation that a distinct SDP would attract a much larger number of MPs away from Labour than simply persuading Jenkins to join the Liberals, were part of his realignment strategy. The role of personalities and personal relations is underplayed in favour of systemic factors here and at other points in the book. Without David Owen’s undisguised contempt for Steel and the rest of the Liberal Party, the outcome of the Alliance might have been significantly different.

The chapter on the Ashdown–Blair relationship addresses rather better the gap between personal relations and party constraints. ‘Ashdown appeared to fundamentally underestimate the level of antagonism that existed towards electoral reform within the Parliamentary Labour Party’ as well as from trade union leaders, in trusting that Blair’s ‘big tent’ would be wide enough to leave space for another party. Straw and Prescott actively opposed cooperation, Brown was suspicious, and Blair wanted to absorb the Liberal Democrats into a broad social democratic party.

Similarly, Clegg was too willing to trust Cameron in 2010, while

Cameron saw the Liberal Democrats primarily as a useful aide to resisting pressures from his right wing and as providing a secure Commons majority. Governing alone from 2015, he failed to manage the loss of that constraint, stumbling into a referendum which he lost. The political chaos of 2016 onwards is covered here in terms of the cross-party manoeuvres of the EU referendum campaign and after. But what the study also shows, without fully exploring, is the growing contradiction between an entrenched two-party system and the internal divisions within both of the two main parties. Theresa May's efforts at cross-party cooperation to achieve a 'soft' Brexit were defeated by tribal and factional groups within her own party. Attempts at cross-party cooperation to defeat the Conservatives in the 2019 election campaign were blocked by Corbyn's insistence that he was the only alternative prime minister available.

Wager concludes that the institutional and cultural aspects of Britain's two-party system continue to provide strong barriers to coalitions and multi-party cooperation. Electoral reform has been on the agenda for a century, robustly resisted by both major parties whenever pressed upon them. The power of the prime minister, and the need for a credible alternative prime minister in every election,

squeezes insurgent parties out. Yet he also notes both the difficulties that the rise of the SNP posed for Labour in 2010 and later, and those that the rise of UKIP threatened for the Conservatives in 2018–19. Reading this in 2025, with a government which won a massive Commons majority on 33 per cent of the votes cast, with the 'official Opposition' winning less than 24 per cent and seven other parties with four or more seats in the Commons, the two-party hold on British politics

looks weakened. This study reminds us that the resistance to change is powerful, and the reluctance of successive Conservative and Labour governments to alter Britain's constitutional and political rules is undiminished. ■

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Isaiah Berlin and liberal pluralism

George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin in the Twenty-First Century: Liberal pluralism for troubled times* (Routledge, 2025)

Review by Eugenio F. Biagini

Isaiah Berlin was a celebrated defender of liberal democracy in the bipolar world of the Cold War, but does he have much to say to our age of proliferating populism and fragmenting identity politics? For Crowder the answer is yes; his book argues that Berlin's liberalism is as relevant as ever. The author identifies the key to Berlin's continuing importance in his commitment to 'value pluralism', about which Crowder has written extensively (see for example his *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 2002). Berlin himself never used this expression, but Crowder argues that it represents the best way to account for Berlin's

understanding of the interaction between universal values and cultural and national specificity. For Crowder, value-pluralist liberals engage with and listen to a broad range of views – including those of people with whom they disagree, believing that there is much to learn in the process – but without compromising the integrity of their own fundamental principles. Using value pluralism as a tool, Crowder seeks both to clarify the question of 'how much cultural fragmentation a society can tolerate' before it loses its viability (p. 10), and to refine the method in order to address the key question in