

Reviews

The most confused election

G. H. Bennett, *The 1922 General Election Reconsidered: High Politics and the Birth of the Modern British Election* (University of London Press, 2025)

Review by Vernon Bogdanor

The general election of 1922 was, Bennett believes, ‘almost labyrinthine in its complexities and levels’. It was certainly the most confused election of the twentieth century. It was also perhaps the most consequential of the century. It came about after Conservative MPs had decided at the Carlton Club that they should fight the next election as an independent party, rather than in coalition with the Lloyd George Liberals. This decision sounded the death knell of the last Liberal prime minister, and Lloyd George was never to hold office again. It also signified the end of the Liberals as a governing party.

The Liberals remained split between the followers of Lloyd George and the followers of Asquith. But the Conservatives were also split, since the Carlton Club decision had been made against the advice of the Tory bigwigs – the leader, Austen Chamberlain, the former prime minister, Lord Balfour, and the lord chancellor, Lord Birkenhead, formerly F. E. Smith. Those favouring continuation of

the coalition refused to join the purely Conservative government, led by Bonar Law, which followed it. To add to the complexity, the Labour Party, which had become a national party, independent of the Liberals, only in 1918, was hoping to capitalise upon the unpopularity of the coalition, whose November 1918 promise to make Britain ‘a fit country for heroes to live in’ already seemed quite hollow.

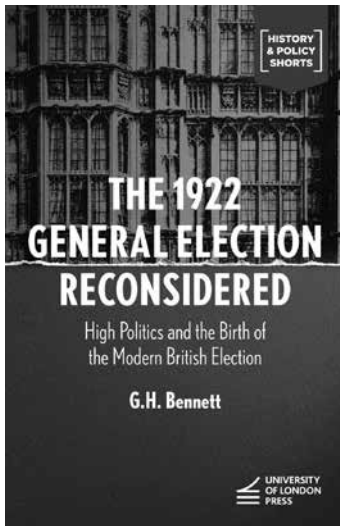
The election, therefore, was fought by what Sir Donald Maclean, a leading Asquithian Liberal, called ‘a veritable cinema show of parties and groups within parties.’ It was widely assumed that no single party would win a majority, and that, in consequence, another coalition would be necessary.

But, to the surprise of many, the Conservatives won an overall majority of seventy-five, their first since 1900, on just 38 per cent of the vote, an outcome only slightly less remarkable than Keir Starmer’s landslide last year on 34 per cent of the vote. Labour became the official opposition with 142 seats and 30 per cent of

the vote. The Liberals who had supported the coalition – known as National or Coalition Liberals – won 62 seats, while the Asquithians won 57.

The election raised curiously few policy issues, apart from radical proposals from the Labour Party for nationalisation and a capital levy to pay for social improvements. Bonar Law’s manifesto proposed ‘tranquillity and stability’, a contrast to the frenetic activity of Lloyd George, prompting Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Asquith’s daughter, to declare that whereas Lloyd George’s government had suffered from St Vitus’s Dance, Bonar Law appeared to be suffering from sleeping sickness. But Lloyd George too fell in with the prevailing mood. Indeed, a cartoon in *Punch* portrayed Bonar Law with a placard proclaiming ‘Tranquillity and Thrift!’, Lloyd George with one reading ‘Peace and Economy’, and Asquith with one reading ‘Repose and Retrenchment’. A bemused voter said, ‘Splendid! Pity I can’t Vote For All Three of Em’.

In fact, the issue was Lloyd George. Indeed, the vote at the Carlton Club had been as much against him personally as a Liberal leading a coalition in which the Conservatives were a majority, as a vote against the principle of coalition. There was widespread disgust at the corruption and dishonesty which had seemed to characterise the coalition – ‘a thieves kitchen’



Stanley Baldwin, a junior member of the cabinet, had called it – for which Lloyd George was generally blamed. With the fall of the coalition, Lord Grey, the former Liberal foreign secretary, believed, ‘Something which was not wholesome has gone out of the political atmosphere’.

The election had three fundamental consequences. The first was to entrench the hegemony of the Conservatives. In every interwar election they secured more votes than any other party and would be in government for all but three years until 1945. The second was to condemn the Liberals to the role of third party, one from which they were never to escape, despite periodic ‘revivals’. The third was to entrench the first-past-the-post electoral system.

In 1917, the Speaker’s Conference had unanimously advocated the single transferable vote method of proportional representation

in urban constituencies, and, by majority vote, the alternative vote in rural constituencies. But PR was the only unanimous recommendation of the conference rejected by the government. Instead, Lloyd George proposed a free vote. He told C. P. Scott, the Liberal editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, as the *Guardian* then was, that PR was a ‘device for defeating democracy, the principle of which was that the majority should rule, and for bringing faddists of all kinds into Parliament, and establishing groups and disintegrating parties’. Asquith too failed to give a lead, declaring, ‘The matter is not one which excites my passions, and I cannot be sure that it even arouses any very ardent enthusiasm’. Many Liberals followed their leaders. In June 1917, the Commons rejected PR by eight votes, fifty-three Liberals voting against it. In July, it was rejected by thirty-two votes, fifty-eight Liberals voting against it. On later votes, it was rejected by even larger majorities.

By 1922, however, the Asquithian Liberals had come to advocate PR in their election manifesto, while Sir Donald Maclean declared that parliament had ‘an obvious public duty to pass a measure of proportional representation forthwith’. But the Conservatives, many of whom had voted for PR in 1917, were now committed to the system which had given them a large majority on a minority of the popular vote. In 1925, Lloyd

George told Scott that he had made a great mistake. ‘Some one ought to have come to me’, he declared, ‘in 1918 and gone into the whole matter. I was not converted then. I could have carried it then when I was prime minister. I am afraid it is too late now’.

The 1922 election has already received thorough treatment in a number of books published some time ago – in particular, *The Fall of Lloyd George*, published in 1973, by Michael Kinnear, based on his Oxford D.Phil. thesis; Chris Cook’s *The Age of Alignment* published in 1975; and Maurice Cowling’s idiosyncratic *The Impact of Labour*, published in 1971. Does Bennett have anything to add? Not really, it must be confessed.

He has, admittedly, conducted a great deal of research in primary sources – including the papers in the University of Queensland, of Sir Leslie Wilson, Tory chief whip in 1922, unused until 2019 – and in local newspapers. But his book does little more than dot the i’s and cross the t’s of conclusions already reached by others.

Bennett’s main conclusion is that the election outcome was largely determined by unofficial local electoral pacts, between Asquithian Liberals and Coalition Liberals, but also between Coalition Liberals and the Conservatives. Forty-four Conservatives were unopposed by Coalition Liberals, primarily in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Liverpool, while

seventy-six Coalition Liberals were unopposed by Conservatives, primarily in Scotland and Wales. Bennett makes no real attempt to quantify the precise impact of such pacts, which are analysed more effectively in the book by Kinnear. And the price of the hardback is outrageous.

Still, although *The 1922 Election Reconsidered* offers little that is

new, it does provide an accessible account for those unfamiliar with the period of a general election whose consequences reverberate even today. ■

Vernon Bogdanor is Professor of Government, King's College, London. His books include *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain* and *Making the Weather: Six Politicians Who Made Modern Britain*.

Lloyd George had underlined the need for an independent Welsh party in 1896, the year which saw the ignominious collapse of the *Cymru Fydd* movement. It took all of seventy years to come to fruition. The second chapter of this fine study examines in some detail the organisation and finances of the Welsh Liberal Party from 1966 until 1979 and the problems faced in attracting candidates of sufficient calibre, all dubbed rather 'a haphazard affair'. As Emyln Hooson was the only Welsh Liberal MP following Elystan Morgan's capture of Cardiganshire, he was inevitably in a pivotal position, especially during the early years, and he was instrumental in the further reorganisation of the Welsh party in 1972. The role of the party's individual secretaries and organisers, people like Mary Murphy and Emyln Thomas, is given critical scrutiny here. And the tables of financial details included here

Rigorous analysis of a key Liberal player

Nicholas K. Alderton, *Emlyn Hooson and the Welsh Liberal Party, 1962–1979* (University of Wales Press, 2025)

Review by Dr J. Graham Jones

This substantial, pioneering study, substantially derived from the author's doctoral dissertation begun in 2012, is a major contribution to our understanding of Welsh politics in the twentieth century. During this period, when the Liberal Party was emerging from the doldrums, Emyln Hooson, elected the party's MP for Montgomeryshire in a famous by-election in May 1962, caused by the death of former party leader E. Clement Davies, was the party's most prominent figure in Wales since the death of David Lloyd George in 1945. He was heavily involved in the root-and-branch reorganisation of his party in Wales. This volume needs to be read in close conjunction with Russell Deacon's breakthrough study *The Welsh Liberals* (Cardiff, 2014).

The first section provides a potted history of the Liberal Party in Wales from the end of the First World War until the general election of 1966. The overriding theme is that, while the Liberal Party in Britain declined quite rapidly after 1918, its experience in Wales was a much more 'long, drawn-out affair' as the party leadership nationally saw the party in Wales as 'holding the Liberal flame aloft, while the rest of British Liberalism slipped into a deep slumber'. Only twelve Liberal MPs were elected in the general election of July 1945; seven of these represented Welsh divisions. The Welsh dimension was enhanced by the selection of Clement Davies, veteran of 1929, as 'chairman' of the party by his eleven fellow MPs.

