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## Preface

Trevor Harris

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The logo for MIMMOC, featuring the acronym in a bold, sans-serif font over a faint background image of a globe.

# Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain

Cahiers du MIMMOC

7 | 2011

Le parti libéral au Royaume-Uni hier et aujourd'hui :  
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# Preface

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- 1 The papers in this volume explore the history and the enigmatic, elusive identity of Britain's Liberal Party. Clearly, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition formed in May 2010 provides an excellent opportunity and context in which to do so.
- 2 It is a question which has, in various ways and at various times, risen to the agitated surface of British political life, to remind us that beneath the near century-old Conservative-Labour hegemony there still lurks, in the quieter depths below, what some might argue is a more august political creature: though others would insist that it is an eccentric throwback to a political age far removed from our own. Or, in today's vampire-obsessed idiom, the Liberal tradition is, as it were, trapped in a permanent twilight zone, a political un-dead, able only to prevent a definitive passage into oblivion, it would seem, by resorting to dubious aristocratic alliances, or by drawing life from unsuspecting youth...
- 3 Such occasional returns to the political real world are not usually an unqualified success for the Liberals. We are, indeed, already a long way from the heady days of May 2010 when a *Guardian* columnist felt sufficiently emboldened to proclaim that "Clegg has come out on top"<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps the kindest way to sum up the Liberal Democrat contribution during the first year of the Cameron-Clegg administration is that it seems to prove beyond reasonable doubt the adage that in opposition one can write poetry, but in power one can only write prose. Between a party desperate to govern and an electorate which seems increasingly desperate to be governed, there was surely only one likely outcome: disenchantment. And the disenchantment underlines the extent to which all parties to the agreement may have succumbed to the lure of yet another "new" politics.
- 4 It remains to be seen what will be the long-term consequences for the Liberal Democrats of the current situation. But the lessons of history are there: there have, after all, already been a number of false Liberal dawns: "the Alliance" from 1981 which attempted to "break the mould", the "Lib-Lab pact" of 1977-78, and the Liberal "revival" sparked by the Orpington by-election of March 1962... The period of near

extinction, in electoral terms, which had preceded this itself merely confirmed the decline which had become apparent to all in the early 1920s.

- 5 And yet, on the eve of the First World War, the party must have seemed to many – whether Liberals or not – to be at the very top of its form and in a virtually unassailable position as one of Britain’s two natural parties of government. What, then, turned the dynamic, radical, reforming Liberal Party of 1909 into what, by 1918, was clearly an organisation on the wane? This is the main question the following pages set out to answer.
- 6 Given the difficulty of that task any answers will necessarily prove tentative. The contributors analyse different aspects of the problem – historical, political, economic, sociological, psephological – and carefully work through the complex influences affecting the evolution of the Liberal Party and of liberalism. Defining even these basic terms, however, is a considerable challenge: attempting to relate them to the wider context adds a further layer of complexity. Yet, despite these difficulties, a number of crucial factors are identified: chief among these, no doubt, the consequences of the Great War on the fortunes of the Liberal Party.
- 7 The phenomenon of Liberal decline, however, cannot be tied up into a neat package by recourse to any monocausal explanation. The authors here are constantly at pains to remind us that the interaction between the national and the local, between the ideological and the pragmatic, and between what was planned and what could not be, created circumstances which, if they indeed proved toxic to the Liberal Party, might none the less have produced very different results. The apparent impregnability of the party a century ago, and the apparent inevitability of its decline seen from our own vantage point, are equally misleading.
- 8 What the articles here point to is that the Liberal Party possibly embodies a massive and fecund paradox. In one sense, the party only dominated British politics for a short time: arguably from Gladstone’s 1868 government to the “coupon” election of 1918. Both the Conservatives and Labour have obvious claims to far greater political longevity than this Liberal half century. And yet, few would deny that liberalism itself is deeply rooted in the British political conscience, having a profound and durable influence on both of today’s main parties.
- 9 We perhaps have to see the Liberals as having been born and as having died with an essentially “Victorian” ethic, reaching its logical conclusion and its outer limits with the social reforms carried through by the 1906 government. True, Britain’s brief, but intense domination of manufacturing and world trade had propelled the Liberals to the summit of political power. But the Liberal theology – peace, prosperity, progress – was perhaps too tightly bound up, in the end, with the glories of “industry and empire” to make the transition to a more prosaic politics and the demands of managing relative decline. A party derived from oligarchy, community, and a radical, non-conformist ethics, necessarily found it difficult to adapt to modern democracy and to an increasingly secular society. The essays in this volume help us better understand that fascinating process.

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## NOTES

1. Jackie Ashley, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), Tuesday 11 May 2010.

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## INDEX

**Chronological index:** XXe siècle

**Keywords:** decline, Liberal Party, liberalism, radicalism, renewal

**Mots-clés:** déclin, libéralisme, Parti libéral, radicalisme, renouveau

**Geographical index:** Europe, Royaume-Uni

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