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The Liberal Party at the beginning of the 20th century: (un)successfully seeking renewal

Susan FINDING

"Awful Scene of Gloom and Dejection, When the Ministry Heard of the Lords' Decision to Refer the Budget to the Country" Punch, 1909'.



- 1 The fortunes of the Liberal Party between 1906 and 1924 can be summarized as having gone from the foremost political force with a landslide victory and triumphant

government to the third party (which, in a bipartite electoral system, means the loser losses all) with little electoral support and no real influence on either politics or policy. The debate in the historiography has hinged on the reasons for what with hindsight can be termed terminal decline, leading to the disappearance of the great 19th century political force and tradition to a rump of a few dozen MPs (or less) having little impact on the course of affairs in the 20th century.

- 2 This decline was so marked that the first books which addressed the issue used the terms 'death' (George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914*, first published in 1935) or 'downfall'. Trevor Wilson's book, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935* (1966) provides an alternative timescale for the demise². That there was a decline there is no doubt. What caused it, and therefore when to date it back to, gives rise to much discussion. Was the Liberal Party the agent of its own predicament or was it merely a victim of circumstance? Analysts have detected reasons to believe that the internal workings of the Liberal Party either condemned it in advance or, on the contrary, show that the symptoms present in the early period were neither inevitable or irreversible. Alternative external factors are also brought in to explain the phenomenon, the principal ones among these being the rise of the Labour Party and the impact of the First World War.
- 3 George Dangerfield situates the beginning of the decline in 1910: '(...) it was in 1910 that the fires long smouldering in the English spirit suddenly flared up, so that by the end of 1913 Liberal England was reduced to ashes.'³ For Dangerfield, the problems that were responsible for the decline of the Liberal Party were the, mainly external, il-liberal attitudes and attacks from several quarters involving labour unrest, the suffragette movement and the Irish nationalists. For Cook, on the other hand, the war appeared to have been if not the sole cause, then a catalyst, transforming the Liberal Party, plunging it into decline: 'the very totality of the First World War had a profound and disastrous impact on the party. For whatever reasons, the Liberal Party was never again to be the same after 1914 as it had been before.'⁴ This analysis lays the blame for the decline of the Liberal Party on the impact of the war, an external cause hitting a weakened political force.
- 4 Kenneth Morgan places the date at 1916, with the internal crisis in the Liberal Party, partly provoked by war contingencies, which led Asquith to hand the premiership over to Lloyd George. 'Since December 1916, the Liberals have played an increasingly peripheral role; never since then have they shown any sign of a convincing recovery as a party of power.'⁵ Others again date the point of reversal to the 1918 'coupon' election and the pact between the Conservative Party and the Lloyd George Liberals. Herbert Gladstone, Chief Whip at the time, concluded

The result of 1918 broke the party not only in the House of Commons but in the country. Local associations perished or maintained a nominal existence. Masses of our best men passed away to Labour. Others gravitated to Conservatism or independence.⁶

 Or again, the 1922 elections can be seen to have heralded the dismal future with a Conservative government returned to office and a poor showing by the Liberals.
- 5 Half a century after the final throes of Liberal government, in the nineteen-seventies, at a time when Liberal Party fortunes had not recovered, Kenneth Morgan concluded that 'The Liberal Party in the age of Lloyd George was both the main agent of change and the major victim of some of its consequences.'⁷ Was the Party responsible for its own demise?

If so, what factors contributed to this? Or was it society that moved on? Are they to be sought in the First World War? In the social make-up and transformations of the times? Thus, on one hand, causes internal to the party - its own evolution, the changes it introduced, and, on the other, external factors over which it had little control - social evolution, other political parties, the war - must be considered. The contributions in this issue of *Cahiers du MIMMOC* look at reasons which can be adduced to explain this that range through the following explanations : unclear identity (Davis, MacDonald), contradictory and confusing policies (Singeisen, Sloman), personal antagonism and ambition (Morgan, MacDonald), and failure to move with the times (Morgan, MacDonald).

- 6 This paper looks at the different explanations for the unsuccessful attempt by the Liberal Party to renew itself by looking first at the political philosophy and party organisation of the Liberals, and secondly, the Liberal Party's response to challenges it encountered between 1906 and 1924, under two main headings: social and political change, and competition from the Left and Right.

Inside the party

- 7 The party which came to power so decisively in 1906 was a composed of three different historic strands, Whigs, radicals and moderates, lacking a clear united political position apart from not being Conservative, divided over the imperial question (the Liberal imperial mission v. Little Englanders who rejected any foreign intervention) and over the question of defence (see Singeisen). In the pre-war period, in the face of foreign threats perceived abroad and the social threats uncovered at home, the party found it difficult to hold a course dictated by the old Gladstonian triptych of peace, retrenchment, reform - involving non-intervention in foreign fields, non-intervention by the state (reduction of spending and taxation) and the extension of political democracy, stopping short of social intervention.
- 8 The intellectual renewal of Liberalism as a political theory had been given a new impetus through the works of social enquirers and economists (J.L. Hammond, Henry Brailsford, L.T. Hobhouse, C.F.G. Masterman, J.A. Hobson) giving grist to Asquith's 1908 government's reform programme. But a rift was occurring with the 'old' (already split between Little Englanders and Liberal Imperialists) and the 'new' Liberals concerned with the efficient use of resources and social well-being, ready to accept state intervention. The 1908 People's Budget, the 1911 Pensions and Insurance legislation were evidence of these new tenets. J.A. Hobson's book, *The Crisis of Liberalism*, published in 1909, identified the issue as that of 'the intellectual and moral capacity to accept and execute a positive, progressive policy which involves a new conception of the function of the state.'¹⁸ The split between those who saw state intervention, abroad or at home, as anathema to liberal ideas, and those who considered this to be the way forward, made it increasingly difficult to hold together the main strands of thought within the Liberal Party. The contributions here by Sloman, Singeisen and Davis show how the beliefs that Liberals held were no longer clear cut and how the very identity of the party was compromised by this.
- 9 The party had mainly relied on informal social structures and local Liberal associations to give it cohesion. By 1918, detects Morgan, 'With the decline of the chapels and the passing away of the first, most vital, wave of Celtic nationalism, the Liberal Party was losing something fundamental, social forces that had provided it with a built-in local

organization and a transcendent moral appeal.⁹ It had no national 'party' structure, merely local grass-roots organisations and 'clubs'. There were already at the outset, two rival national Liberal organisations (National Liberal Federation - 1877, Liberal League - 1902) to raise support and money. These did not function as 'political party', selecting candidates, campaigning, deciding policy, or raise money and encourage volunteer party workers but merely as conglomerates of like-minded people. The Liberal voice was expressed in cheap daily provincial newspapers supporting liberal tenets like the *Leeds Mercury*, the *Newcastle Chronicle*, the *Manchester Guardian*. National newspapers published in London were less likely to support the Liberal Party's policies.

- 10 Politics was considered the affairs of gentlemen amateurs and a professional attitude to politics was not seen as either necessary or 'becoming' to their 'class' of men. The 1906 party in Westminster comprised essentially of: 'middle-aged men from the commercial and professional middle-class'¹⁰, one-third of whom had attended public school and one-third had received an Oxbridge education: barristers and solicitors, businessmen such as the proprietors of local factories like Sir John McCallum, the soap manufacturer, or the Coats family, whose name is still a synonym for cotton thread in Britain, both in Paisley (see C. MacDonald's article), writers and journalists, teachers, trade-unionists, and doctors.
- 11 Whereas the Liberal Party in the 1880s has been described as 'the principal working-class party in most parts of the country'¹¹, by the 1910s, Liberal voters were now more and more drawn from the middle-classes and élite working-class. For the latter, this meant the Trades Unions, whether industrial or white-collar. It is significant, for example, that senior MP (1900-1922) and junior minister Dr. T. J. Macnamara¹² was a former leader of the National Union of Teachers, a respectable and respectful upper working-class professional group, and editor of the professional weekly *The Schoolmaster* before he entered parliament.
- 12 Urbanisation is probably an underestimated cause of disenchantment from the Liberal Party. By 1881 more than 50% of the UK population lived in urban areas. Over the two decades between its first, heady success in 1906 and its exclusion from a say in the running of the country in 1924, the party's electoral successes shrunk, or rather, in geographical terms, folded from the centre outwards. The industrial heartlands were lost as working-class liberal voters became disenchanted with their M.P., M.P.s who in increasing numbers were throwing in their lot with one of the two camps within the party, and often, conducting electoral pacts with either Labour or Conservative local committees. The areas which continued to elect Liberal MPs were on the fringes, the outlying rural and non-conformist areas. Over the period from the 1906 landslide to the 1924 débâcle, the main cities were gradually regained by the Conservatives. The suburbs too. The urban districts where former working-class support for the Liberal party was strong were going over to the Labour party as the latter gained in political acumen and support (see Catriona MacDonald's contribution on the Paisley constituency in this issue). The 1923 election was notable for the Liberal successes in non-industrial towns, towns with cathedrals, racecourses and esplanades (according to *The Manchester Guardian*)¹³ - indicative of the genteel society who still voted Liberal, the middle-class professional electorate. The party's electoral support remained strong in outlying areas of dissent and chapel. During the bleak period from 1924, Liberal leaders and the dozen or less MPs typically represented fringe constituencies from Cornwall to the Hebrides. Throughout

the 20th century, the few remaining Liberal MPs continued to hold seats in these areas, confirming this phenomenon.

- 13 While grassroots local politics suffered from a lack of distinctiveness, at the head of the party, the leadership displayed difficulties understanding their own shortcomings. If personalities were as much at work as party strategy and structure, it is due to a party organisation that was not geared to collective decisions, leaving the policy-making to the parliamentary party and to its ministry. The three successive leaders from 1906 to 1924, Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith and Lloyd George, demonstrate leadership issues that went from virtual absence to overbearing presence. Campbell Bannerman is considered to have been too weak, Asquith, giving no or little lead, as too consensual and Lloyd George too 'presidential', taking little or no heed of the party or indeed parliament, relying on his own personal campaign funds, Lloyd George's so-called 'treasure chest'.
- 14 Lloyd George's forceful leadership and his status - even before becoming Prime Minister in 1916 - as the 'father' of the 1911 Old Age Pensions and the People's Budget, then as the victorious war leader, obfuscated the lack of unity within the party. His presidential style, geared to getting results, and not getting bogged down in democratic procedure, bypassing the elected representatives of the people, was ill-accepted by the Liberal Party in parliament and in the country. In 1916 (after the reluctant introduction of conscription by Asquith under pressure from Lloyd George, and the so-called Buckingham Palace Plot, which led to Asquith relinquishing the premiership to his Chancellor), the party was split into two camps: that of Asquith -leader of the party- and that of Lloyd George -Prime Minister.

The Liberal Party, with its middle-class core and massive working-class attachment, was very far from being a dying party in this period: it showed some evidence of turning itself into a kind of grand popular coalition of the dispossessed (...) But, in the event, the harmony of Old Liberalism and the New depended too much on their identification with Lloyd George himself. As a result, confronted by the obscene tragedy of the first world war, which mocked at every moral value that Liberalism embodied, Lloyd George's own manoeuvres were not merely damaging to the Liberal Party as an organization, but fatal for the union of the various strands which it contained. As a result, after 1918 the Liberal Party, without Lloyd George, was an outdated, backward-looking movement which had lost contact with the New Liberalism of the pre-war period.¹⁴

- 15 From 1916 on, the party was beset by problems personified by Lloyd George and Asquith: sleaze (honours scandal, campaign treasure chest), schisms, presidentialism, paternalism, misplaced pride, problems which reveal that, behind the 'grand popular coalition', the party was in fact rift in two.
- 16 The Paisley by-election of 1920 at which Asquith regained his seat in parliament, previously lost in 1918 (famously sketched in a *Punch* cartoon showing the two leaders on Westminster Bridge, dapper Lloyd George inviting the forlorn, unemployed figure of Asquith, back to the House) reinforces this impression. As C. MacDonald relates here, the local daily paper commented: 'There are Liberals who want Mr. Asquith and no other. There are those who want any Independent other than Mr. Asquith.' By 1923, this had reached such proportions that independent Liberal candidates (supporting Lloyd George) stood against the official Liberal candidate endorsed by the Party and Asquith, the 'wee frees' or 'Squiffies'. Despite having rallied to a single clarion call in defence of Free Trade in the 1923 election, going back to its 19th century roots, the party was unable to capitalise on its refound unity. With the control of financing in the hands of one man,

Lloyd George could decide which strategy to pursue and ignore the will of the parliamentary party. In the mid-1920s Lloyd George, no longer either in power or in opposition, preferred policy over politics, diffusing his own ideas through summer schools and pamphlets, rather than financing local by-election campaigns and seeking to strengthen the Party in parliament. The party could agree on little else apart from Free Trade and the 1923 interlude is seen as an accident in the downward trend which was to end with the *débâcle* in the 1924 election.

Outside the party

- 17 Historians long concentrated less on internal factors for the Liberal decline and more on external ones, the greatest of which was the rise of the Labour Party as a viable and credible political party, one which, in the bi-partisan British political set-up, was able to oust the Liberal Party from its pedestal as the traditional alternative to the Conservative Party. However here again, the Liberal Party is seen as being partly or wholly responsible for not recognising the threat from that direction.
- 18 Jeremy Thorpe (Liberal party leader in the 1960s and 70s) comments 'The Liberals were to blame for giving room to the Socialist cuckoo in the radical nest.' He explains that even in 1906, there had been no need to have an electoral pact by which the Labour Party was given seats in Westminster and MPs 'whose only opportunity for expansion lay in replacing the Liberal Party'.¹⁵ By 1923 the latter was making inroads into the Liberal Party's electorate in the industrial areas of South Wales, the Midlands and Scotland (on the latter see C. MacDonald's contribution to this issue). Historians of the Labour Party pinpoint the importance of the affiliation of the trades unions (formerly representing skilled labour and inclined to support the Liberals) to the Labour Representation Committee, in particular the Miners Federation (1909), and to the phenomenal pre-war increase in trade union membership (2.5 million in 1910, 4 million in 1914) which continued unabated reaching 8 million in 1918¹⁶ supporting and enhancing Labour Party strength and growth.
- 19 The Liberal Party can be said to have dug its own grave by supporting the Franchise Act which in 1918 tripled the electorate, giving the vote to a further section of working-class men and to women. Both were not necessarily fervent Liberal supporters. The Liberal Party was being overtaken on its left flank, while support for its right flank was ebbing away. There appeared to be little to distinguish the old Liberals from the Conservatives with the Liberal Party sharing government with Conservative (and to a much lesser degree Labour) Ministers during the war and after. The 1918 Representation of the People Act enfranchised large numbers of people as property qualifications and gender requisites were swept aside. Whether the new electorate voted exclusively Labour (and explaining rise of Labour Party) or not (the influx of working-class voting Labour nullified by that of women who were expected to vote Conservative or Liberal), or whether the success of Labour was due to the new electoral boundaries creating working-class constituencies in London, mining areas and northern industrial areas¹⁷, the challenge was also ideological. Bernstein explains that the Liberal Party was not able to withstand this challenge: 'Liberalism was a set of beliefs which assumed harmony between capital and labour. It was not equipped to defend the interests and redress the grievances of a labour movement which was hostile to capital.'¹⁸ Once more, the Liberal Party appears to have been unable to deal with the forces of change it had unleashed.

- 20 Dangerfield's analysis assumed external factors were responsible: the rise of working-class political awareness, women's social and political enfranchisement, and the enduring question of the Celtic areas. However, once more, it is considered that these issues were made even more acute by Asquith's Liberal Government's inability or unwillingness to tackle the questions head on. Irish nationalism tipped over into violence and reached a point of no return due to the inability of the pre-war Liberal government to impose Home Rule on Westminster.
- 21 Similarly women working to obtain the vote had become equally frustrated with the Liberal Party's lack of clear support for the Franchise question and, for them, Asquith's contradictory position. A rally in Hyde Park gathering two hundred and fifty thousand people on 21st June 1908 failed to move the Cabinet.

A Women's Social and Political Union poster, prior to the 1910 elections, showed a two-faced Asquith



It reads, 'Citizen Asq--th: "Down with privilege of birth up with democratic rule!" Monseigneur Asq--th: "The rights of Government being to the aristocrats by birth--men. No liberty or equality for women!"' and appeals to women canvassers to 'work against the Liberal Candidate' and on voters to 'Vote against the Government and keep the Liberal Out.'¹⁹

- 22 At the same time, the alliance with the Labour Party, in operation up until and including the 1918 election, gave way to a more determined and hard-line on the part of the trades unions, while the growth of syndicalism, international socialism and communism led to a radicalising and theorising which the Liberal Party was unable to match. By 1918, 'The old Liberalism was in retreat: the new Liberalism was already being pre-empted by the Labour Party as it assumed leadership of the British left.'²⁰ The moderate members of parliament, the middle-class businessmen, were moving towards the right. This can only have been encouraged by the five years of coalition government during the war, followed by the 'coupon' election in 1918. Despite successes against Lords (1911 Parliament Act)

the Liberal Party had not grasped fact that business would not support its social policy unless given economic guarantees, that Establishment would fight tooth and ear to maintain its predominance. The issues of Tariff Reform, Land Reform, the power of the House of Lords were to prove this. Political historians also point out that the Conservative Party prior to 1914 had recovered in electoral terms, while after the war, under Arthur Balfour it went from strength to strength - with the interwar period being essentially a period of Conservative government.

- 23 The First World War can be said to have exacerbated or revealed trends that were already present in the party and in society. The war proved fatal to both Asquith as leader and to Liberal tenets of peace and retrenchment. The illiberal measures taken in pursuit of the war, went against traditional liberal credo : peace, retrenchment, pacifism, internationalism, free trade, non-intervention of state. The conscription issue in particular raised the question of compulsion versus individualism.
- 24 For a Liberal administration to lead Britain into war and to direct a wartime administration seems almost a contradiction in terms. Its task of international pacification had automatically disappeared. And it had little hope of preserving intact those principles and practice identified with Liberalism: free trade, protection of minorities, the 'pacification' of Ireland, liberty of individuals and voluntary service in the armed forces²¹.
- 25 The war thus blew a hole in Liberal beliefs, split asunder the 'old' from the 'new' Liberals, and caused the irrevocable rivalry between its two leaders, Asquith and Lloyd George. It gave rise to a new form of state intervention and its acceptance by the electorate, it induced new attitudes to government and leaders among the soldiers and civilians, men and women, and it led to political and economic problems that were to further test Liberal beliefs in the 1920s. For Wilson (1966), the Liberal Party, already showing symptoms of illness, was run over by 'a rampant omnibus which mounted the pavement'²². For him, it was the war which dealt the fatal blow to the party, no matter what other problems it was beset with. But it also emphasises one of the main ideological divisions in the 20th century: the totality of the war brings a new dimension to politics, totalitarianism versus freedom, collectivism versus the market, which were inevitably to affect a party which stemmed from 19th century radicalism and opposition to government intervention. (See R. Davis's analysis of the identity crisis within the party in this issue).
- 26 Further confusion was added by the discussion of a new political formation in 1919, with Conservative and Liberal members in the New Members Group (MPs who had served in trenches) discussing a United Reform Party, rejecting the futility of old-style politics after horrors of war. Lloyd George supported this initiative but it failed to take off. Even more crucially, this initiative is seen as having scuppered any idea or chance of reforming the Liberal Party internally. Tearing itself apart, its self-inflicted wounds continued to bleed and weep, sapping the life-blood of party morale.
- 27 By 1924, when the 400 Liberal M.P.s elected to parliament in 1906 were reduced to a mere 40, the former Prime Minister and Leader of the Party, Herbert Asquith, having lost his seat for Paisley, commented 'We are a dying party, set between the upper and the nether millstones.'²³

Conclusion

- 28 The achievements of the Liberal governments of the time prove that Liberal Party was a force prior to and following the war, still had the ambition to govern and put progressive action into play (eg. Fisher 1918 Education). It won three successive elections in 1906 and in 1910, had an impressive legislative record and gained enduring public sympathy for the welfare reforms, notably old age pensions, it inaugurated, becoming an agent of social reform. However the failures of the Liberal Party are numerous. The Liberal Party was the victim of the changes it brought about and its own shortcomings. It was unable to provide a credible alternative to Conservative policies and showed a lack of prescience concerning rival parties' strengths. It endured erosion from both sides of political spectrum as more radical beliefs ate into its core tenets. It found it difficult to justify the paradox of combining state intervention on the domestic front with free trade. Failure to find an ideological niche and a leader capable of uniting party led to the loss of leading lights who, after 1918, left the Liberal Party for the Labour Party or the Conservative Party. The Liberal party was suffering from a split personality syndrome that would also have led to difficulties in the post-war period of economic stringency and rising antagonism between capital and labour (1926 General Strike, 1929 Great Depression) had it not been routed in the 1924 election. As Richard Davis concludes in this issue, "the internal contradictions... become evident."
- 29 Parallels with the early political history of the twenty-first century can be drawn from the 1906-1924 period. Catriona MacDonald, in her article in this volume on Liberalism in Scotland at the beginning of the twentieth century, asks where the Liberal 'radical thread' can be traced in today's Scottish politics and whether it is the Liberal Party, the Labour Party or the Scottish National Party which has inherited that radicalism. As the third party it became after 1924, was the Liberal Party able to draw on its refusal (or inability) to define itself along the traditional two-dimensional political setup, left or right, to stand above the fray and posit a non-partisan third way? Should the Liberal Party be wary of coalitions which blur the differences with between political allies? Richard Davis here invites the reader to consider whether the definition of liberalism as a political concept is now impossible. He pinpoints the dangers of coalitions and pacts for such an endeavour as such strange bedfellows become increasingly inseparable in the pundits' minds. Perhaps, after all, politicians should read political history as a grounding, and, for the politicians in power in Britain today, the history of the 1906-1924 Liberal Party and Coalition governments, holds, if not lessons, at least examples to refer back to.

NOTES

1. The 1909 Asquith Ministry from top left, clockwise: Haldane, Churchill, Lloyd George, Asquith, Morley, Birell, Crewe, McKenna.
2. Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935*, London, Collins, 1966.

3. George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914*, New York, Harrison Smith & Robert Haas, 1935, (London, Constable, 1936), Foreword, pp. vii-viii.
4. Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900-1084*, London, Macmillan, 1984 (2nd ed.), p. 63.
5. Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Age of Lloyd George, The Liberal Party and British Politics 1890-1929*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1971, p. 68.
6. Herbert Gladstone, Liberal Chief Whip, quoted in P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 396.
7. Morgan, *The Age of Lloyd George*. 1971, p. 110.
8. J.A. Hobson, *The Crisis of Liberalism: New Issues of Democracy*, London, King and Son, 1909, Preface, p. xi.
9. Morgan, *op.cit.*, 1971, p. 76.
10. Cook, *op.cit.*, 1984, p. 43.
11. Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918*, Cambridge University Press, (1990) 2003, p. 19.
12. Robin Betts, *Dr Macnamara 1861-1931*, Liverpool University Press, 1999.
13. Quoted on the Liberal Democrat History Group website, 'The 1923 general election', but no reference given, http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item_single.php?item_id=60&item=history.
14. Morgan, *op.cit.*, 1971, p. 109.
15. Jeremy Thorpe, Foreword, in Roy Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party 1895-1970*, Sigdwick & Jackson, 1971, p. xii.
16. Henry Pelling, *Labour and the Downfall of Liberalism*, 1968; Roy Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics 1906-1914*, 1968; Ross McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924*, 1974.
17. Duncan Tanner, *Political Change*; Michael Hart, "The Liberals, the War and the Franchise", *English Historical Review*, 97, 1982.
18. George L. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England*, Boston, Allen & Unwin, 1986, p. 166.
19. Copyright The London Museum.
20. Morgan, *op.cit.*, 1971, p. 76.
21. Wilson, 1966.
22. Wilson, 1966, 1966, p. 17.
23. Quoted by Cook, *op.cit.*, 1975, p. 315.

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