

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election

In September last year, the Liberal Democrat History Group published a special supplement on the Liberal Party's campaign in the 1945 general election. In December, the publication, along with an article in Contemporary Record by Malcolm Baines, was reviewed by Tony Greaves and Mark Egan, Roger and Pat Thorn, and Michael Steed, contribute to the continuing debate.

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by Roger and Pat Thorn

The Liberal Democrats History Group has recently published several fascinating articles about the 1945 general election, the last being in our December 1995 Newsletter 9, which starts with an excellent review of the debate so far. This election was not so long ago as to leave us without recourse to the views of those then involved. There must be a significant number, happily still with us, who were then intimately involved. I look forward to reading of their observations.

Meanwhile, I preempted this by asking my father to comment upon the interesting article by Peter Joyce. What may be thought of some interest follows, and the reply of my father, J.D. 'Pat' Thorn. He writes first of his own personal involvement as a Liberal in the 1945 election, as a member of Radical Action. He was then aged 25:

'In the election campaign, I was invited to help in the Isle of Ely constituency. I spoke at several meetings, typically in village schools, with a team of us working in relay and I think just one car cleverly timed to move us all one step, one at a time, but keeping the car fully busy. It was quite amusing finishing one's speech almost immediately the next speaker arrived (at what one hoped sounded like the intended end of one's address), because to keep the car waiting put everybody out round the circuit.

I once had to stump-speak for 10 minutes over time and skip one venue altogether. But it was principally the responsibility of the chairman of each meeting to keep the ball in the air. On another occasion the chairman was so interested in listening to himself (or maybe he couldn't believe that a "child" of my age could possibly be the next "speaker"), that I never got his attention to introduce me and hand over.

The eve of poll meeting was something quite else. I suppose the largest town in the constituency was March, and the largest hall there the cinema. The candidate himself was of course the main speaker, but I was honoured to have that meeting included in my itinerary.

I also did quite a lot of loudspeaker van work and one or two street corner set-ups: one in Sutton I remember, which my mother-in-law attended, and was more impressed by hearing my voice from the loudspeaker than by anything I said, I think.

I had previously helped in the byelection in the Bury St Edmund's constituency, supporting Mrs Corbett-Ashby,¹ to the dismay of the Leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, but to the delight of Radical Action members. That time, all travelling

was by bicycle and apart from the "big night" I more or less had Haverhill to myself. As a first experience, that was all great fun.

But the Ely campaign was rather desperate. However at least we did enough to make recovery of the seat later (by Clement Freud) a possibility; and there weren't many seats where that happened, and most of them were in the "Celtic fringe".'

*Roger Thorn, QC
(Political Officer of the Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency)*

The 1945 Election

I've put some thoughts together, prompted by Peter Joyce's paper² – I hope not too haphazardly.

In some particulars I think he misreads his sources regarding the electoral aims, such as the Liberal debates during 1943–45. His best paragraph on the subject is the pre-penultimate one:

'It was also assumed that the electorate viewed general elections as occasions when governments were selected. Alternative objectives were assumed to command little sympathy among the voting public. Many Liberal candidates thus viewed the 1945 election not as an end in itself but as a beginning – the start of a political 'comeback' process which would ultimately result in the formation of a Liberal government. This sentiment was voiced in the last national leaflet issued by the Party during the campaign, which asserted that whatever result was achieved then, 600 candidates would stand in the subsequent contest. This would result in "a clear Liberal majority. A Liberal government will be in power".⁷⁴

With this I largely agree; save that the 1945 election leaflet, to which note 74 relates,³ should be recognised as a bit of last-minute electoral hype, not bearing the weight Joyce appears to put on it.

The ultimate objective was always simply survival to fight again another day. The one clear fact was that the choice was between a Labour and Conservative government. Very few people were prepared to vote for any other party (the Liberal Party was only one of several) without first being assured that the Party or Member, if elected, would support the preferred major party on the major issue.

So the argument ran, and hence the Liberal leaders, with the further inducement of personally continuing in office until a perhaps not very remote retirement, were mainly concerned in arguing the case for the continuation of the coalition. The

thinking was close to declaring support for Churchill even if Labour could not be prevailed upon to agree. The Lib Nats had made similar decisions in 1931 and '35 (and even after '45, still had more declared MP's than did the 'Independent' Liberals; by then more generally known as 'the' Liberals). Nevertheless, most of the Party rank and file considered that would result in certain, even if delayed, oblivion.

Radical Action upheld this view until there were sufficient PPCs to call the meeting held in London in January 1944. That also prepared the way for an Assembly, eventually called for January '45. Throughout this period there was a degree of distrust of the leader's intentions. Much was said and done for the purpose of putting a shot across the bows of those contemplating a virtual merger with the Lib Nats under the Tories, and needs to be interpreted in that light. It had to be hoped that in spite of the two-party character of the election contest there were enough voters still around here and there who, like us in Radical Action, cared more about providing some sort of future for the Party, and would vote Liberal if given the opportunity. There were real hopes of winning a few seats that way. It turned out to be just possible, whereas by 1950 every single erstwhile Lib Nat remaining had adopted the title 'Conservative'.

Tactics

I am still inclined to defend the tactics of attacking the Conservative record. It was certainly right where I was, in the Isle of Ely. It could be said that that constituency was atypical. We had a retiring Member standing again (Rothschild) and in 1935, Labour hadn't thought it worth while to put up a candidate at all and there was still, in '45, little trade union influence.

In relating the tactics to the aims, as described above, 'The Isle' was definitely one of the few tens of seats where we had a chance. The tactic had to be to keep as many Liberals as possible within the fold, rather than doing a 'Lib Nat', about which there was still much discussion among Liberal voters, whilst recognising that whatever else, the Liberal Party was unlikely to attract any convinced socialists. Our efforts weren't wasted as, although we didn't win the seat, it became Clement Freud's later.

There was certainly a gross miscalculation of the strength of the Labour vote, but the press and the other parties shared in that. Peter Joyce quotes various Mass Observation polls, but it was the vote from the forces, mostly serving overseas, that put the Labour Party in. I believe that Labour activists had been very energetic at all possible opportunities to exert an influence. Apart from man-to-man contacts there were numerous more formal, even semi-official, occasions when political discussions or debates were arranged, often in small groups, to 'entertain the troops', 'good for morale', 'educational', and all that sort of thing; even mock elections towards the end. Young men from country areas such as most of East Anglia, who in more normal circumstances would have shared many of the views formed for good reasons by earlier generations, were being more or less brain-washed by their city-bred comrades. They were mostly absent from electoral meetings within the constituencies so they were almost isolated

from the usual campaign influences; nor was there much possibility of feedback from them.

If the strength of the Labour support had been known earlier, I don't think either the Liberals or the Conservatives could have done much about it, except to avoid a snap election, as they had tried but failed to do. Nor do I think that the Labour Party themselves were fully aware of the position until quite late. I wouldn't accuse the party as such of responsibility for what their amateur supporters in the forces were doing. Ironically, they were quite unable to live up to public expectations and meet all the promises made unofficially on their behalf, and eventually had to suffer for it.

Some observations

After the divisions of the Liberal Party in 1931, there were 35 Lib Nat MPs, and 33 'Independent Liberals' (including 4 Lloyd George supporters who were doubly independent and therefore counted as zero, if you follow the arithmetic).

By 1935, instead of the originally hoped-for recombination, the coalition situation persisted but with even more dominant Tory control. Again, individuals in both wings of the Party had to reconsider their positions. In the event, 33 declared Lib Nats were elected and only 21 Independent Liberals. It was very clear that many Lib Nats were swayed by purely personal considerations.

When the wartime Coalition was formed, Independent Liberals under Sir Archibald Sinclair also enjoyed the delights(?) of office in a similar position to the Lib Nats already there.

After 1945, the Lib Nats in parliament became 13, and the Liberals 12. Meanwhile, other parties had come and gone, including the Acland/J B Priestley Common Wealth Party, which in 1942 had looked to be a real threat to the Liberals, not unlike the SDP of 1981 – except that, instead of starting as a rebellion against Labour, it did the opposite and disappeared into it.

Not until 1974 did the Liberal Party recover its 1945 strength.

JD Thom

1 This was at the time of the Coalition Government. I am led to believe that an all party agreement meant that none would stand against a party holding an existing seat. The seat is recalled as having been held by the Tories; but whatever, a 'Liberal' could not contest the seat. So we think that she must have stood without a declared party affiliation – albeit, as a Liberal supporter, and as a Radical Action supporter at that! [RT].

2 See Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter No 9, December 1995.

3 Note 74: 'Liberal Party Organisation, Late News, London, 1945, election leaflet.'

Note to potential authors: personal reminiscences of aspects of Liberal, SDP or Liberal Democrat history similar to the article above are very welcome. If you are willing to prepare any such – or know anyone who can – please contribute them for publication. Feel free to contact the Editor if you wish to discuss your contribution first.