

'God Gave the Land to the People!'

A report of the History Group discussion meeting in July, with Roy Douglas; by Malcolm Baines

Roy Douglas, author of *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970*, treated the History Group to a dissertation on the role and significance of land value taxation to the Liberal Party in the years to 1914.

He began by placing it within the agricultural context of the late nineteenth century in the four nations of the British Isles, pointing out that due to harvest failure in 1879, the UK had started to import grain and meat from North America and New Zealand. This had led to a permanent fall in food prices. The main victims of this fall were the landowners who increasingly were seen as economic parasites rather than as pillars of the community. This made them vulnerable as a class to philosophic and economic attack.

This attack was given shape by Henry George, an American philosopher and economist, in his book *Progress and Poverty*. He concluded that the cause of poverty was lack of access to land and that the community should redress this through a land value tax.

This was enthusiastically adopted by the Liberal Party and included in the 1891 Newcastle Programme. Events then moved swiftly on to the 1906–10 Liberal government, which did make several efforts to introduce land value taxation only to see them fall in the Lords. Dr Douglas then argued that it was the inclusion of a national survey of land values in the 1909 'People's Budget' which led to its defeat by the Lords. Even though the budget ultimately became law in 1910 the actual survey was not complete at the outbreak of war, and Dr Douglas could offer no convincing explanation as to why this was so.

Politically, however, Dr Douglas argued that land value taxation was electorally very popular, citing the Liberal victory in the August 1912 Hanley byelection in a Labour seat as evidence. It would, in his opinion, have been the issue on which the 1915 election would have been won. However, the war intervened, and like all the other great Liberal issues it was swept under the carpet in the interests of national unity. The Tory dominance in the inter-war years meant that, except briefly in the 1929–31 Labour government, it never reemerged as a live political issue.

A stimulating discussion followed in which the audience focused on the popularity of land value taxation amongst the working class, the Labour Party's toying with the policy and its significance in the Lloyd George split with Asquith. The discussion became steadily more like a revival meeting and Dr Douglas ended with a call to ensure the cause of land value taxation was communicated to the today's electors.

A lively and interesting meeting, Dr Douglas provided a basic grounding in the history of Liberals and land value taxation up to 1914 but did not develop for the sceptical sufficiently the economic justification for the tax. As a result the meeting suffered from being hijacked by enthusiasts towards the end, leaving the more historical members of the audience – including myself – rather bemused as to the relative strengths of the case for and against land value taxation in either the Edwardian period or modern times.

Malcolm Baines is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.

Keeping the Peace?

Book Review: A Military History of Ireland, edited by T Bartlett & K Jeffrey (Cambridge University Press, 1996; £45). Reviewed by Tony Little

No doubt, it is an unspoken tradition of reviewers to skip parts of books but I want to admit honestly that I only read around half of this heavyweight (in the literal sense) tome. The book is a series of essays which covers the interaction of armies and government from Celtic through to modern times. It is not limited to a detailed description of the bloody battles and atrocities which continue to breed mistrust between England and Ireland. In fact battles are, if anything, under-represented. Rather it shows the way in which armies developed and their equally tense relations with the civil powers and the local population.

I picked up the fascinating story with the Tudors, when determined efforts were made to conquer Ireland, and

followed the progress up to 1922 when the Free State came into being. England did not set out to secure full central control over Ireland until the scale of rebellions around the Pale demanded a reaction. Religious elements compounded local squabbles among powerful war lords until William III's defeat of Jacobite forces secured a Protestant domination. The spirit of the native Irish was never fully conquered and there was never an entirely trusting relationship between the British government and the Irish Protestants – the 1798 rebellion and the Irish Home Rule Party were both Protestant-led.

From the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries,

[concluded on page 12]

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

Landslide for the Left

Speakers: Andrew Adonis; John Grigg

Chair: Earl Russell

Massive Tory defeatsweeping opposition landslide victory major gains by small third party but what does the new government stand for other than opposition to unpopular Conservative policies?

The outcome of the next general election? No – it happened in 1906, when Campbell-Bannerman led the Liberal Party to a crushing victory over Balfour's Unionists, with the newly-formed Labour Party making important gains on the back of an electoral pact with the Liberals. And despite the lack of any clear Liberal election programme other than reversal of unpopular Tory policies, the following eight years were to see one of the most sustained periods of political and social reform of the twentieth century, as the Government put into practice the thinking and policies of the New Liberalism.

Nine decades later, are similar ingredients in place once again? Discuss the topic with **Andrew Adonis**, Political Editor of the *Observer*; **John Grigg**, biographer of Lloyd George; and **Earl Russell**, historian and Lords spokesman on social security.

Sunday 22 September, 8.00 – 9.30pm
Norfolk Room, Metropole Hotel, Brighton

The Liberal Party's Performance in 1945

[continued from p. 10]

However, the increasing number of Liberal candidates probably meant that the party was moving out from its strongest areas and contesting weaker areas. This would explain a drop in the average vote per opposed candidate and also allow one to praise 1945.

This is where the ratio in the last column comes in. That the ratio comes out at only 0.7 severely restrains the scope there is for, to quote Steed, 'a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies.' First, there was clearly not such a great increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal as to completely overcome the depressive effect of more Liberal candidates meaning less promising places were contested (this would give a ratio greater than 1.0). Second, it either means the increase was not great, or that the number of constituencies in which it occurred was very limited. Both a deep narrow advance, and a broad shallow one are consistent with the numbers, but neither really chime with Steed's claim.

Either way, the case for praising the 1945 Liberal result still very much remains to be proven.

Mark Pack currently works at Exeter University, helping to support computing in the Arts faculty, but will shortly become an IT Support Specialist at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Special issue, December 1996

Following the success of our last special issue (*The Liberal Party and the Great War*, Newsletter 10, March 1996), our next scheduled theme issue will cover the Liberal Revival of the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Ideas for articles, and offers of contributions, are very welcome; contact Mark Egan (University College, Oxford OX1 4BH; email uv94003@sable.ox.ac.uk). The deadline for articles is **15 October 1996**.

Keeping the Peace?

[continued from p. 11]

the army's main concern in Ireland was the risk of involvement in wider European wars with our enemies, predominantly France, invading Ireland to stir up difficulties for England. The government's main concern was generally with maintaining peace among a population which often needed little encouragement to riot or worse. The army always wished to concentrate its forces within easy reach of likely invasion sites while Dublin Castle wished to see it dispersed among the more troublesome population centres. The army's main need was always to hold up its manpower which could most easily be recruited from among the majority of Catholics. The government always worried that it would be training likely rebels. Great efforts were made to move Catholic soldiers out of Ireland while English officers regarded Ireland as a poor posting. Interestingly, Catholic units generally remained loyal but in the end the government was right. The main fighting in the successful Irish rebellion of 1916–22 came after 1918, when there were large numbers of recently demobbed and unemployed soldiers available.

For anyone looking for fresh insights on Irish history this thoughtful but non-partisan book is a worthwhile read even to those whose eyes glaze over at the sight of a uniform.

Tony Little is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. His article tracing the evolution of Gladstone's Home Rule policy appeared in Liberal Democrat News in August.

Membership of the Liberal Democrat History Group costs £7.50 (£4.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

Contributions to the Newsletter – letters, articles, and book reviews – are invited. Please type them and if possible enclose a computer file on 3.5 inch disc. The deadlines for the next two issues are **15 October** and **7 January**; contributions should be sent to the Editor, Duncan Brack, at the address below.

Printed and published by Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ. email: dbrack@dircon.co.uk.

September 1996