

Liberal History and the Balance of Power

How much influence do third parties holding the balance of power really exert? *John Howe* analyses the Liberal record.

George Dangerfield's study of the *Strange Death of Liberal England* was published in 1935. It is a lively, readable and persuasive interpretation of the years before 1914 and it has provided the starting point for almost all subsequent writing on the period. It depicts the Liberal government fighting a losing battle against a mounting tide of violence generated by trades unionists, suffragettes and Irishmen, and saved from a civil war only by the outbreak of the European conflict. Of course this interpretation has been challenged but it remains influential. It is the purpose of this short essay to examine one of Dangerfield's hypotheses which has been very widely accepted and which, though only part of his case against the Liberal government, has important implications for other periods in political history. This is his evaluation of the effects of the results of the two general elections of 1910.

Dangerfield gives only a brief account of the campaign leading to the first election in January of 1910. The overall Liberal majority gained at the landslide election of 1906 disappeared and 'the Liberals were so reduced and the Conservatives so swollen as to be almost equal in numbers; the Irish and Labour parties held the balance of power'. Thus in Dangerfield's opinion, Parliament was controlled by 'a handful of men to whom England was an enemy'. It soon became clear that 'in order to keep himself in power [Mr Asquith] had made a bargain with the Irish', that they would be given Home Rule in return for supporting the Liberal government. The campaign for the December election, again briefly covered by Dangerfield, produced an almost unchanged result which he describes as 'once

again an Irish-Labour majority'.¹

Dangerfield's assessment has achieved widespread currency. R. Shannon in *The Crisis of Imperialism* writes that 'after January the Irish Nationalists could if they wished by voting against the government turn them out'. He comments that as the Liberals lost seats at subsequent byelections their 'dependence on Labour and Irish Nationalists was cruelly underlined'.² R. Webb says in *Modern England* that after January 1910, 'the balance was held by 82 Irish Nationalist and 40 Labour members'.³ Numerous other examples might be cited but one more from a recent number of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* must suffice. In Graham Lippiatt's review of the recent new edition of the *Strange Death of Liberal England* he suggests that the passage of the Home Rule bill was at least partly 'a consequence of the dependence of the Liberals in parliament on the votes of the Irish Nationalists after the two inconclusive general elections of 1910'.⁴

The origin of Dangerfield's view of the political situation after 1910 is easy to trace. It is the Conservative and Unionist version widespread at the time. In January and even more in December numerous Unionist candidates warned that the government was now enslaved to John Redmond, 'the dollar dictator', the Irish Nationalist leader who had just returned from a successful fund-raising tour of the United States. The fact that no Home Rule bill had been introduced while the Liberals had an overall majority, but appeared in 1911 when the majority had gone seemed to prove the Unionist case, and the opposition fulminated against the government tearing up the constitution and destroying the United Kingdom at the behest of Irishmen backed by foreign gold.

This version is, however, a partisan one and thus should be treated with caution. The reality was rather different. There are two obvious

reasons why the Liberals did not introduce Home Rule between 1906 and 1910. They had fought the 1906 election on a number of issues but specifically not on Home Rule. Over three-quarters of the Liberal candidates did mention Home Rule in their election address, but nearly all did so in order to declare that it was *not* an issue.

It is true that no less than 85% of Unionist candidates did warn of the danger of Home Rule, making this their second most important campaigning point, but this merely reinforces the second reason why Home Rule was not introduced. There was no prospect whatever that it would get through the House of Lords. Any Liberal or Irish Nationalist with any hopes quickly had them destroyed by Balfour, the Unionist leader, who, speaking in Nottingham in January 1906, declared that 'the great Unionist Party should still control whether in power or whether in opposition, the destinies of this great Empire'.⁵ The fate of all the Liberal efforts to amend the 1902 Education Act, which were thwarted by the Lords despite the obvious mandate of the government, was an added proof there was no point in attempting Home Rule.⁶

In 1910, however, the issues were different. The Lords' rejection of the budget caused the January election and by December the proposal to remove the veto of the House of Lords was the main plank in the Liberal platform. This, as most Unionist candidates warned the electorate, was bound to put Home Rule back on the agenda. Peter Clarke has noted that in January Liberal candidates in Lancashire were returning to the Home Rule issue.⁷ More generally, as Blewett notes, Unionists emphasised the threat of Home Rule in both January and December while Liberals tended to stress the powers of the Lords and Liberal social policy, with Home Rule less prominent.⁸ The breakdown of the constitutional conference in November on the question of Home Rule brought about the December election, so it was manifest that a Liberal victory

would mean the end of the Lords' veto and Home Rule could then be expected.

If we turn now to the idea that the Irish or Labour parties held the balance of power we find that the situation was very different from that depicted by Unionist speakers at the time and by Dangerfield in 1935. Indeed, R. C. K. Ensor gave a more convincing interpretation in his volume of the *Oxford History* as long ago as 1936, but his careful judgement has had less impact than Dangerfield's colourful drama! Ensor writes that after the January election the government did depend on the minor parties for support but this was a problem, not an opportunity, for them. Indeed, 'for the Labour Party this was particularly embarrassing'. Some Labour supporters wanted to take a strong independent line to distinguish themselves from the Liberals but the party could not do this; 'on the contrary it must cast many reluctant votes in order to avoid defeating the ministry'.⁹

Similarly, the Irish Party now had to support the budget which it had hitherto opposed. Ensor recognised that politics is not about numbers of seats only, but also about issues and policies. The minor parties really had no choice. The Irish Party existed for one reason – to get Home Rule. There was no chance whatever that the opposition, which was still formally an alliance of Conservatives and those Liberals who opposed Home Rule, would ever give the Irish what they wanted; it was thus essential for them to keep the opposition out and the Liberals in.

Labour too had no real choice. A few dedicated socialists argued that there was no difference between Liberals and Unionists, who were all capitalists exploiting the workers. Parliamentary leaders like MacDonald and Henderson responded that Liberal measures were mostly in the interests of the workers and trades unions and took the Parliamentary Labour Party into the government lobby time after time. Trades union legislation provides an interesting illustration of the fact that

the Labour Party had *less* influence after 1910, not more. In 1906 the government, with its huge overall majority, reversed the Taff Vale decision and did so by adopting the Labour Party's proposals lock, stock and barrel. In contrast, it took the Labour Party three years of nagging after 1910 before legislation to reverse the Osborne judgement was proposed, and even then the bill was not at all what the unions or the Labour Party wanted. Nevertheless, it supported the bill in the lobbies because it had to keep the Liberal government in office and the Unionists out.

There are other examples which show that third or fourth parties do not have freedom to choose a partner, and thus that the notion of a balance of power is a myth. The most obvious example is that of 1885–86, when the Irish Party appeared briefly to have a choice. Carnarvon, the Irish viceroy of the minority Conservative government then in office pending the general election of 1885, showed some sympathy for the idea of devolution, while Gladstone's previous Liberal government had done much to placate the Irish. The election produced a Liberal majority of 86 over the Conservatives with 86 Irish 'holding the balance. But in December Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was announced and the Conservatives immediately abandoned Carnarvon to become fervent defenders of the Union. Thus the Irish had no choice. They duly voted with the Liberals to defeat the government and Gladstone formed a Liberal administration to introduce Home Rule. This split the Liberal Party. 93 MPs voted with the Conservatives to defeat Home Rule and save the union and they subsequently formed a separate Liberal Unionist party. The defeat of the bill meant another general election, which in terms of seats won by the two big parties appeared to produce a balance of power. In fact the Irish were bound to vote with the Gladstonian Liberals, but the Liberal Unionists had to vote with the Conservatives, which gave a secure majority to the Unionist

side. At the 1892 election the position was reversed. The Liberals became the largest party and Gladstone formed a government which the Irish had to support.

After 1918 the Irish Party and Home Rule disappeared from British politics, but there were still three parties, Conservative, Labour and Liberal, and two elections between the wars produced no overall majority. In October 1923 Stanley Baldwin, who had followed Bonar Law as Conservative Prime Minister in May, decided to adopt a policy of protective tariffs. Although there was a secure Conservative majority in the Commons he argued that the new policy required a mandate and asked the King for a dissolution even though it was only a year since the previous general election.

Thus the election in December was fought largely as a referendum on the issue of protection versus free trade. This reunited the Asquithian and Lloyd George sections of the Liberal Party in defence of the trade, and Labour, too, vehemently opposed protective tariffs. The results left the Conservatives as the largest party but without a majority, Labour second and the reunited Liberals third.

There was much anxious debate about what to do, but in reality the Liberal leaders had no choice. They could not sustain a Conservative government pledged to protection and the alternative appeared to be a minority Labour government which would stick to free trade. When Baldwin lost a confidence vote in the new Commons in January 1924 he advised the King to send for MacDonald, the Labour leader, who duly formed a minority Labour government. The Liberals gave it general support, perhaps expecting to exert influence over its policies, but MacDonald made no concessions

whatever. Indeed, he and the Labour Party generally continued to attack the Liberals, who found themselves in the disastrous position of having to vote for a government which either ignored or condemned them. Some on the right of the party responded by moving towards an



anti-socialist alliance with the Conservatives; others threw in their lot with Labour. Since MacDonald made no concessions, the government lasted only nine months, but the general election which followed its defeat justified his approach and showed the futile impotence of the third party. Although Labour lost some seats, it gained votes, while the Liberal Party lost 119 of its 159 seats and was eliminated as a major party.¹⁰

The impotence of the third party is more tragically shown by the election of 1929. Despite its weakness in the Commons, the Liberal Party had set the agenda for the election with its manifesto *We Can Conquer Unemployment*, based on the Yellow Book of 1927. It proposed a Keynesian programme of public investment to revive the economy and create jobs. The party did win some

seats, but was still a long way behind in third place and Labour, as the largest party, formed another minority government. It might seem that the Liberals held 'the balance of power', but they had no success whatever in their efforts to persuade the government to make any serious attempt to tackle the mounting economic crisis. Instead the Labour ministers clung to fiscal orthodoxy and were finally overwhelmed by the financial crisis of 1931.¹¹

Both these inter-war examples show that the third party had no power at all. MacDonald ignored the Liberals except when he used them as an excuse when the Labour left attacked him for doing nothing. In reality, of course, the Liberals wanted more action, not less, but they were as unsuccessful as Mosley and the Independent Labour Party in getting MacDonald to do anything. But if they did not support him the result would be a Conservative government which might be even worse!

The situation was the same in 1910. The Labour and Irish parties were both tied to the Liberals and it was inconceivable that either would promote a Conservative and Unionist government. Fortunately for the minor parties the Liberals had long-established commitments to Home Rule and to social reform policies, and these were introduced, not to build a Commons majority but because they were Liberal policies. Of course Conservative and Unionist propaganda produced a different explanation. It was not very successful at the time – it did not win the 1910 elections – but it has been remarkably successful in beguiling unwary historians.

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of various articles on early twentieth century politics in Gloucestershire.

Notes:

1. G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (first published 1935, Granada edition, 1970). The quotations are from pp. 36, 37, 49.
2. R. Shannon, *The Crisis of Imperialism* (1976), pp. 400, 435.
3. R. Webb, *Modern England* (1980), p. 465.
4. *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 17, 1997–98, p. 18.
5. Cited by R. Jenkins in *Mr Balfour's Poodle* (1954), p. 36.
6. In 1907 the government did produce a bill to set up an Irish Council. The Irish Nationalists did not like the scheme because the Council would have only limited powers, and the government dropped the proposals. The episode demonstrates both Liberal sympathy for Irish views and willingness to respond to them even when there was an overall Liberal majority.
7. P. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (1971), Ch. 14, pt. 3, p. 338, pt. 4, p. 381.
8. N. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People* (1972), Chs. 6 and 9.
9. R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870–1914* (1936), p. 418.
10. C. Cook, *The Age of Alignment* (1975), Ch. 11, pp. 180–98.
11. R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump* (1967), pp. 84–85.

In this Month ...

From *Liberal News*

12 December 1963

A solicitor wrote to Mr Quintin Hogg on Tuesday asking for compensation and an apology for Roy Grundon, a 20-year old Lewisham Young Liberal. Roy, a member of the 'Votes at 18' campaign, claims he was struck by Mr Hogg, Minister of Science, after the count at the St Marylebone byelection last week. Mr Hogg has denied any assault. He says that he was blinded by a banner while leaving Marylebone Town Hall after the count, and merely pushed it aside.

17 December 1968

There is a vital urgency to create a new and more stable monetary system if the West (not just Britain) is to avoid these recurring crises. The Labour Government is doing a disservice to the solution of this problem, by laying the blame on the backs of the speculators. *Comment by Frank Byers.*

13 December 1973

At a time when the number one concern of the ordinary elector is the rising cost of living, and particularly the steeply rising price of food, the party's policy for the general election should be based on withdrawal from the Common Market, sound money and free trade. *Letter from R. C. Grinham, Chingford.*

19 December 1978

With Labour ranks in a state of disarray following the resignation of Agent Dick Hughes, the chances of a Liberal victory in a parliamentary byelection at Edge Hill, Liverpool, look stronger than they have ever been ... Liberal PPC David Alton, who came second with 6,171 votes fewer than Sir Arthur [Irvine] in the general election of October 1974, is confident. He said: 'if Liberals go all out to win this seat I really think we can do it.'

Archive Guide

The Papers of Neville Sandelson; by *Mari Takayanagi*.

The papers of Neville Sandelson, Member of Parliament for the Hayes & Harlington constituency 1971–83 (Labour 1971–81, Social Democratic Party 1981–83), have been fully catalogued and are now available for consultation in the Archives Reading Room, British Library of Political & Economic Science, 10 Portugal Street, London WC2A 2HD.

Sandelson was born in 1923, joined the Labour Party in 1939 and unsuccessfully contested eight elections as a Labour Party candidate in six different constituencies before being elected in a byelection in 1971. He was a moderate Labour MP and opposed the activities of extreme left-wing organisations inside and outside the Labour Party. His relationship with left-wing members of his Constituency Labour Party was a stormy one, and he survived various attempts to deselect him as MP. He was a founder member and treasurer of the Labour Party Manifesto Group (1975–80). In 1981 he was one of the founding members of

the SDP, and continued as an MP until losing his seat in the 1983 general election, standing as a Liberal-SDP Alliance candidate. He campaigned in support of the return of a Conservative government in the 1987 general election and rejoined the Labour Party in 1996.

The collection includes a series of scrapbooks of press cuttings covering Sandelson's period as an MP, files relating to the Hayes & Harlington constituency, and papers on the Labour Party and the foundation of the SDP. Sandelson took a keen interest in foreign affairs, and there is material on the Middle East, Afghanistan, Gibraltar and Northern Ireland. There is also an extensive series of photographs documenting his political life.

Mari Takayanagi is an Assistant Archivist at the British Library of Political and Economic Science, who recently sorted and catalogued the collection of Sandelson papers.