

Donald Johnson

Robert Ingham reviews the career of a self-styled 'political entrepreneur' who moved from the radical wing of the Liberal Party to become a Conservative MP.

Donald Johnson

The last Liberal Imperialist

It is well known that several prominent Liberals abandoned the Liberal Party for the Labour Party after the dispiriting election results of 1945, 1950 and 1951, amongst them Megan Lloyd George and Dingle Foot. Perhaps less well known is that there was a similar drift of talent into the Conservative Party at the same time. George Wadsworth, Liberal MP for Buckrose from 1945–50, stood as a Conservative and Liberal candidate for Sheffield Hillsborough in 1951; Eric Johnson, Liberal candidate for Lancaster in 1945, was elected Conservative MP for Manchester Blackley in 1951; Donald Moore, who contested Manchester Moss Side in 1945 and Manchester Blackley in 1950, joined the Conservative Party in 1950 and fought several elections thereafter; and Henry Kerby, a prominent member of Radical Action, joined the Conservative Party in 1945 and was elected MP for Arundel and Shoreham in 1954.

Donald Johnson was one of that company of wartime Liberals who later joined the Conservative Party. His career in both parties was turbulent. He broke the wartime truce to fight a by-election at Chippenham as an independent Liberal, when the Liberal leadership backed the Conservative candidate, and accused the Liberal leadership of being the 'most outstanding example of nepotism of any institution I have ever known'. Elected Conservative MP for Carlisle in 1955, he soon acquired the maverick tag. He resigned the Tory whip in January 1964 and fought the general election of that year as an independent candidate. He chronicled his political career in intimate detail in a series of autobiographical volumes which were published by Johnson's own firm. The most important of these books, from a Liberal perspective, was *Bars and Barricades*, which provides the only published first-hand account of the disputes within the Liberal Party during the Second World War.

Donald McIntosh Johnson was born in Bury, Lancashire, on 17 February 1903, the son of Isaac Welwood Johnson and Bertha Louise neé Hall. He

was educated at Cheltenham College and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, before qualifying as a doctor in 1926 at St Bart's Hospital, London. He practised as a GP in Thornton Heath throughout most of the 1930s, before becoming a Demonstrator of Anatomy at Oxford University in 1937. He detailed his medical career in *A Doctor Regrets* in 1949, later writing that he 'repeatedly became involved in the toil of medical work despite all my best efforts to escape them'.

Like many of his generation, Johnson was inspired to enter the political arena as a result of the deteriorating international situation in the mid-1930s and what he judged to be the inadequate responses to it of the major parties. Employing familiar medical terminology, he described the Conservative Party's foreign policy as resulting from 'senile dementia' and accused the Labour Party's stance on international questions as 'schizophrenic'. Although he had regarded the Liberal Party as little more than a historical curiosity, Johnson judged that his political philosophy – he was a self-confessed 'rebel against the social climate of prestige, family tradition, subservience, moral cowardice and anything which militated against political independence' – tallied with liberalism, and he admired the Liberal Party's stance on foreign affairs. He accepted an invitation by his home town's Liberal Association to become their parliamentary candidate and contested the 1935 general election. His experience in Bury was not happy, however. His adoption meeting went badly when he failed to mention free trade and he came a moderate third. Despite the success of a protest meeting against the Hoare-Laval Pact, he resigned the Liberal candidature in March 1937, later dismissing the Bury Liberals as 'tea-drinking nonconformists, beer-drinking clubmen and businessmen councillors'.

Casting around for a constituency with a more energetic set of Liberal activists, Johnson was recommended to fight Bewdley, where a by-election was pending after Stanley Baldwin was elevated to the

peerage. There was some optimism that Bewdley could be won by a Liberal if a Labour candidate kept out of the field, but Johnson saw only 'a dozen charming elderly and middle-aged people ... [whose] enthusiasm for the languishing Liberal cause knew no bounds'. He polled 8,511 votes – the best Liberal result since 1910 – but was easily defeated. By this time the political scene in Oxford, where Johnson was now based, was becoming more interesting. Johnson met Ivor Davies, who entered the fray of the 1938 Oxford by-election against the wishes of the Liberal leadership. Johnson was angered by what he saw as the pusillanimous attitude of the Liberal hierarchy but when Lindsay emerged as the 'progressive' candidate and Sir Archibald Sinclair personally requested Davies to stand aside he reluctantly did so. This was to be the first of Johnson's brushes with the Liberal leadership which led him to break with the party after 1945.

When war broke out, Johnson was one of the first politicians to consider how the political mistakes of the inter-war period could be avoided in future. He drafted a memorandum on the subject for Sinclair in 1940 which he expanded into a book, *Safer than a Known Way*, which was published in 1941 under the pseudonym 'Odysseus'. *Safer than a Known Way* was a rambling personal manifesto, in which Johnson argued for industrial co-partnership and federal world government in order to save 'Liberal capitalism' from the evils of state socialism. Senior Liberals gave a lukewarm response to Johnson's ideas, but he circulated them to Liberal candidates, winning some support from the likes of Clement Davies, Richard Acland and George Grey. Johnson was also an early opponent of the wartime electoral truce, by which the major political parties had agreed not to contest by-elections during the war, effectively ossifying the party balance in the House of Commons. Johnson persuaded Bewdley Liberal Association to back a resolution questioning the truce for consideration at the 1941 Liberal Assembly. Opposed by the party leadership, the resolution was placed last on the agenda and was never reached.

Dissatisfied with the party's organi-

sation, its reluctance to embrace new ideas and the successful attempt to prevent discussion of the electoral truce, Johnson formed the Liberal Action Group immediately after the Assembly ended. Its aim was to 'activate and energise the Liberal Party, both as regards policy and organisation'. The Group comprised mostly younger Liberal candidates and attracted the support of several Liberal MPs, including, at first, Richard Acland and George Grey and, later, Clement Davies and Tom Horabin. It met on occasional weekends in London and provided a ready audience for Johnson's memoranda on domestic and international affairs. The Action Group was far from being Johnson's poodle, however, and he was frustrated that it was divided over the question of the electoral truce. Despite Johnson's prompting, the Action Group did not propose a motion for the 1942 Assembly opposing the truce. Although such a motion was debated, in the last hour of the Assembly, only one other member of the Action Group was prepared to support it, leading to Johnson's resignation as secretary of the Group.

Johnson remained a member of the Action Group, now renamed Radical Action, but, with Ivor Davies, focused his attention on fighting a by-election. In his words, 'the time was ripe for the political entrepreneur who could stake a claim in the unexplored territory of anti-party truce sentiment'. Johnson drew up a list of a hundred constituencies which he regarded as promising territory for an independent Liberal candidate and it was decided that he would contest those in the south of the country while Davies would contest those in the north. Much effort was devoted to ensuring that Davies and Johnson would not be faced with other independent candidates when the right seat came up — eight independents initially emerged to contest the Central Bristol seat in February 1943 — and there were attempts to reach a deal with the Common Wealth Party towards the same end.

Eventually, one of Johnson's hundred seats, Chippenham, fell vacant, with polling day set for 24 August 1943. Johnson put his name forward, but faced formidable difficulties from the outset.

He had no base in the constituency and received practically no help from the local Liberals. All three party leaders backed the Conservative candidate, David Eccles. Members of Radical Action 'discovered a variety of reasons for not being able to help at Chippenham on the crucial dates' and there were no offers of help from the Common Wealth Party, independent MPs Vernon Bartlett and A. D. Lindsay, or from previously friendly Liberals such as Clement Davies. The local press waged a vicious campaign against Johnson, accusing him of being 'unbalanced' for contesting the seat and 'diverting effort from the winning of the war'.

Nevertheless, his small campaign team, which included independent MPs W. J. Brown and George Reakes, as well as Radical Action stalwart Honor Balfour, found that they had no difficulty in attracting crowds to their meetings and Johnson was confident of victory. In the event, he lost, but by only 195 votes. It was an amazing result, considering the uneven balance of resources between the two candidates, but Johnson reflected bitterly on the 'betrayal of Destiny' he had suffered, caused by the refusal of the Liberal Party leadership to show some political courage and grasp the opportunities afforded by the electorate's increasing disillusion with the pre-war order and its Conservative defenders. Johnson had left the Liberal Party to fight the by-election and did not rejoin it. He helped other independent Liberal candidates at the Darwen and Bury St Edmunds by-elections and stood as an independent candidate for Chippenham, with the backing of the Liberal Association, in 1945, finishing third.

Johnson's career within the Liberal Party was over — he predicted that the party had 'perished' and that 'we shall have no more "Liberal revivals"' — but he had been bitten by the political bug and wished to continue in politics. He faced a choice between embracing socialism or forgiving the Conservative Party its sins of the 1930s. Frank Pakenham, a colleague from the campaign against Quentin Hogg in the Oxford by-election, tempted him leftwards, while David Eccles, his foe at Chippenham, tempted him to the right.

He chose the latter course and joined the Conservative Party in 1947, arguing that 'liberal-minded people must defeat socialism' and then turn on snobbery and privilege in the Tory party.

Seeking an immediate entry to the House of Commons, Johnson was interviewed by several Conservative Associations, but failed to be selected as a prospective candidate for the 1950 and 1951 elections. He noted that 'just as it was considered a good thing to select an ex-Liberal on the short list for interview ... it was an equally satisfying operation to turn an ex-Liberal down'. He was elected to Sutton and Cheam council in 1951, but the mundane life of municipal politics was not for him and he again sought to reach the House of Commons. Conservative Central Office pushed him towards Carlisle, where it was felt that Johnson's background could help attract the sizeable Liberal vote to the Conservative cause. Johnson was selected and, in the absence of a Liberal candidate, elected, in 1955.

Johnson documented his parliamentary career in *A Doctor Returns* (1956), *A Doctor in Parliament* (1958) and *A Cassandra At Westminster* (1967). It was a restless, unhappy career. Johnson did not intend to sit quietly on the backbenches, faithfully obeying the party whip. Nor did he expect ministerial office, having entered the House at the relatively advanced age of fifty-five. He wanted to campaign, especially on the issue of mental health care, but his colleagues in government were antagonistic to what they interpreted as his disloyalty. Johnson felt that his Liberal past was held against him and that he would forever be an outsider in the inter-bred, public school dominated Parliamentary Conservative Party.

Unable to find an outlet for his campaigning zeal in Parliament, and increasingly dissatisfied with the Conservative Party, in the same way as he had been unhappy with the Liberal leadership twenty years earlier, Johnson drifted towards Edward Martell's National Fellowship movement, which combined 'common sense with a sprinkling of ... old-fashioned Liberalism'. Martell was regarded as a threat to the unity of the Conservative Party and this alliance brought Johnson into conflict

with his local association. Worse was to come, when Johnson announced at the association's 1962 annual general meeting that 'he wasn't sure whether he could go on being a Tory MP' and that he would decide his future once he had decided where the Conservative Party stood on the key issues of the day.

Johnson's political career effectively ended when he became the first Conservative MP to call for the resignation of Harold Macmillan, during the Profumo crisis, in June 1963. His statement, and subsequent outspoken opposition to Macmillan's leadership, led to the executive committee of Carlisle Conservative Association passing a motion of no confidence in him in October 1963. A special meeting of the Association in December 1963 confirmed the decision and, rather than resign from the House of Commons, Johnson resigned the Conservative Whip on 24 January 1964. In his resignation statement, Johnson said 'the Conservative Party is clearly undergoing a great sickness. In its present state of mental agony it is allowing itself to be tortured by ghosts. On all sides during the past four months I have encountered nobody but Rip Van Winkles still living in the days of Mr Harold Macmillan.'

Free from the bounds of party discipline, Johnson enjoyed his few months of independence in the House of Commons, which included presenting a Single Transferable Vote Bill under the ten-minute rule procedure. He canvassed his constituents and naively decided that there would be support for him as an independent candidate at the forthcoming general election. His campaign started well, but the last-minute nomination of a Liberal candidate, Brian Ashmore, signalled the end of Johnson's hopes. Johnson speculated that Ashmore was backed by 'Conservative money', an allegation which Ashmore strongly objected to, insisting on a late insertion to *A Cassandra at Westminster* to register the fact. Ashmore's campaign was actually funded by the Rowntree Trust, who insisted that their involvement be kept secret. Johnson polled just 1227 votes. He wrote that 'I did even worse than I could possibly have expected. At the end of all this effort, I got no more

votes than if I had been a "Flat Earth" candidate'.

Late in life, Johnson regarded himself as an old-style Liberal, or a 'Liberal Imperialist', as he styled himself. An active member of the right-wing Monday Club, but no supporter of Enoch Powell, he was mostly interested in the need to rescue the Conservative Party from the aristocratic Eden/Macmillan/Douglas-Home era, in order for socialism to be effectively combated. A bitter opponent of the Common Market, he penned *Ted Heath: A Latter Day Charlemagne* in 1970. A resident of Sutton, he did not vote for Graham Tope in the 1972 by-election, although he acknowledged residual sympathy for the Liberal cause. He would surely have become a strong supporter of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, but he died on 5 November 1978, before she swept into office in the 1979 general election.

Johnson was neither a good writer, nor a particularly successful publisher and nor, as a politician, did he make a lasting mark on history. He was not a great political innovator, although he readily picked up new ideas, boasting in his entry to *Who's Who* that he was the first MP to ask a question about the establishment of an ombudsman, in 1959. He might have acquired a reputation as an unflagging critic of the executive — a Tam Dalyell of his times — but his views did not fit with the shape imposed on British politics by the party system and he lacked the patience and political judgement necessary to manipulate that system to his own ends. He wished to be a political adventurer, but failed to establish the base camp in either the Liberal or Conservative Parties necessary for him to strike out into unexplored territory with a prospect of success. His importance, today, lies in his writing, which illuminates aspects of recent political history otherwise forgotten, and in the fact that he exemplifies a breed of Liberal which abandoned the Liberal Party in the 1940s and 1950s in order to fight socialism but which was not able to settle in the Conservative Party until the Thatcherite revolution was well under way.

Robert Ingham is a historical writer.