

campaigns, even when the prospect of such an outcome was distant. During the 1920s, however, the Liberal Party seemed to over-emphasise the power and influence it might wield if it held the balance of power in parliament and completely failed to appreciate the extent to which offering general support to a government of which it was not part would impact adversely on its credibility. The leaders of the other two parties during this period come across as far less naïve. The Tories took full advantage of the electoral

conditions of the 1920s to establish their hegemony, and the Labour Party single-mindedly set out to govern untrammelled by arrangements and understandings of the sort hankered after by the Liberal Party. Perhaps this contrast reflected the declining powers of Asquith, the deep divisions within the Liberal leadership, and the extent to which the Liberal elite failed to grasp that the arguments and attitudes of the nineteenth century did not impress the expanded electorate of the post-First World War era.

leader was Campbell-Bannerman. According to Clarke, C-B had succeeded simply because Asquith could not afford to take the job on at the time. His leadership of the party at the time of the 1906 general election had invested his time with a 'warm romantic glow' which perhaps was not entirely justified by events. His short premiership did not leave behind a compelling record, his agenda having largely been aborted: an effort had been made to settle education and he had tried to introduce a compromise measure in Ireland. He was very genial and agreeable and fondly remembered but not really compelling otherwise.

Robert Maclennan, however, chose C-B as one of his two key leaders of the century. He led the party when it enjoyed the 'plenitude of political power' but more than that, in Maclennan's view, to Campbell-Bannerman belongs the credit for creating a great reforming movement. Maclennan recalled that at the age of fourteen, whilst walking with his grandfather in Stirling, he passed a statue of C-B outside the library. He had been MP for Stirling Burghs when Maclennan's grandfather had returned with the army from the Boer War. In June 1900, Campbell-Bannerman had asked and answered his own question: 'When is a war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa.' Fifty years later the power of that indictment continued to rankle with Maclennan's Tory grandfather. Fifty years on again, that memory dispelled for Maclennan the image of C-B as a buffer.

For this speech was not an aberration. Despite his appearance of bluff amiability C-B had conceived a powerful hostility to the Unionists, one derived from moral repugnance. Indeed, we are not alone in underestimating C-B, argued Maclennan; so too did Asquith, Grey and Haldane. The Unionists, however, did not make the same mistake. To reinforce his argument, Robert Maclennan quoted from the *Manchester Guardian* on C-B's impact in the House of Commons as leader of the opposition.

Those who heard Sir Henry's first speech as leader of the opposition are

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## Leaders Good and Bad

Evening meeting, February 2000  
with Robert Maclennan MP and Professor Peter Clarke  
Report by David Cloke

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The History Group meeting in February was, in the words of one speaker, something of a party game. Each of the two main speakers, Professor Peter Clarke and Robert Maclennan MP, was asked to review the Liberal, Liberal Democrat and SDP leaders of the twentieth century with a view to determining the two key figures amongst them. Those attending the meeting also had the opportunity to participate in a ballot for the best and worst leader. The meeting was ably presided over by Lord Hooson, who wondered airily at the beginning of the meeting if he had been chosen because he had known, or at least met, every Liberal leader since David Lloyd George.

The two keynote speakers chose quite different methods for arriving at their chosen two. Professor Clarke assessed each leader against two key criteria: their success in terms of the agenda they set for themselves and the party, and their success in achieving it. The latter was judged according to the leader's ability to mobilise support within the party, parliament and the country. In Professor Clarke's view the greatest leaders were those with a clear

agenda who were successful in mobilising support behind it. Robert Maclennan began more instinctively. He had chosen his two key figures almost from the start. He then proceeded to analyse the claims of those that remained to replace them. However, for reasons of self-preservation, he excluded from consideration the five surviving leaders.

Peter Clarke began by considering Gladstone, effectively the first leader of the party (though strictly speaking outside the scope of this meeting!). In Clarke's view he had created the first truly mass party in British politics. Gladstone both commanded the Treasury bench and was a national figure in the country. He had a distinctive agenda that appealed to the moral conscience of the nation. He was not only the first but possibly the greatest Liberal leader.

Rosebery was a disappointment in comparison but then, perhaps, who wouldn't have been? Clarke argued that he had been chosen because he seemed to possess 'a certain sort of charisma'. However, it failed to come off and Rosebery 'flickered out'. Hence, for Clarke, the next effective



Jo Grimond: the best leader ...

never likely to forget the sensation it caused – the look of pained resentment that came to the faces of Mr Balfour and Mr Chamberlain as they realised that the new man was actually attacking them, even holding them up to derision.

This image of him was reinforced by his successor, Asquith, who, in his tribute to C-B in the House of Commons, declared that: 'we have not seen in our time a man of greater courage'. C-B was also a 'great picker of men' and presided over a brilliant cabinet. In MacLennan's view, it is to C-B, rather than to Asquith, that the credit lies for fashioning the great reforming government which followed the 1906 landslide.

In turning to Asquith, Clarke noted that the esteem in which he was held had declined in the latter part of the twentieth century. In his view Asquith was one of the most effective prime ministers of the century and he was well overdue for revival. In terms of mobilisation, Clarke argued that he successfully presided over a form of coalition politics, with Labour acting more like a pressure group than a political party. He managed to keep the Irish Nationalists on board despite never delivering Home Rule. Asquith energised politics and dominated his cabinet. At least up to the First World War, Clarke argued that he was an effective leader and his authority was never challenged. He also had a clear agenda of social reform, encapsulated in the establishment of old age pensions and the National Insurance Act,

which laid the foundations of the welfare state.

MacLennan was less convinced that Asquith's failings as a wartime leader should be so overlooked. Revisionist historians were increasingly calling him to account for the 'massive blunder of the First World War'. In his published letters of the time, MacLennan noted, there were details of the minutiae of the Irish Question but little on the events in continental Europe. MacLennan also questioned whether Asquith did enough with his huge majority in the House of Commons. He did acknowledge, however, that, unlike Tony Blair, he faced a powerful House of Lords – 'a lion blocking the road way'. That Asquith faced it down and drew its teeth, MacLennan agreed, was highly creditable; nonetheless, the debit side of his peacetime leadership should not be overlooked. The massive parliamentary majority he inherited melted away in two years. His consequent reliance on the Irish Nationalists and the increasingly intractable nature of the Irish question drew ever more of Asquith's attention across St George's Channel when, in MacLennan's view, he should have been concentrating on events across the English Channel. In summary, MacLennan argued that on the simple test of whether or not he left the party stronger than he had found it, Asquith must be deemed a failure.

Asquith's eventual successor as leader was Lloyd George. Clarke felt that his contribution was hard to access. It was difficult for him to decide whether to take into account Lloyd George's undoubted skills as a war leader and his success in the immediate post-war period in mobilising the centre ground, both of which predated his succession to the leadership of the party. As party leader, Clarke argued that Lloyd George developed a distinctive agenda, building on the ideas he had expressed in Asquith's Government and as Prime Minister after the war. Clarke also noted that in the 1920s, with *We Can Conquer Unemployment*, he established a macroeconomic agenda for the first time in Britain – although he was never given the chance to implement it.

For MacLennan, Lloyd George could only be assessed from the time of his assumption of the party leadership in 1926 – by which time his best efforts were behind him. His recognition of the policy vacuum in the party was obviously important; indeed there is something noteworthy in producing policy pamphlets that are still worth reading seventy years on. Nonetheless, MacLennan believed that, despite his success as a wartime leader, he lacked the 'finer arts of peace-time politics'.

Lloyd George's successor, Sir Herbert Samuel, was in Clarke's opinion a largely passive figure. He was clever, even wise, and a great conciliator (which one would have thought was a rather useful asset in the party at the time). But the ability to mobilise support seemed to be too much for him. This may not have been so surprising given the state of disintegration that the Party then faced. MacLennan passed over Samuel even more quickly. Whilst he acknowledged Samuel's intellectual contribution to turn-of-the-century Liberalism, MacLennan felt that he lacked the qualities needed 'to handle the fissile elements which constituted the inter-war party'.

MacLennan, however, was more sympathetic to Samuel's successor and his own predecessor as MP for Caithness and Sutherland, Sir Archibald Sinclair. He took over a divided party, lacking in direction, which appeared

... and David Owen: the worst?



almost irrelevant to the rest of politics. Despite this, Sinclair took an honourable stand against appeasement and worked with self-punishing commitment in the wartime coalition government, narrowly losing his seat in the 1945 election in consequence. Maclennan noted that when he was first elected in 1966, Sinclair's former constituents told him that he had forgotten about them. Maclennan believed this to be almost certainly untrue; Sinclair had simply assumed that the people of Caithness and Sutherland would see winning the war as the all-encompassing duty of their MP.

Clarke also commended Sinclair's leadership of the party. In terms of the mobilisation of support he did keep the party going and provided a strategy for survival – which could be regarded as no mean feat at the time. It was less clear to Clarke whether Sinclair provided a distinctive agenda for the party. Nonetheless, he enabled it to act within Churchill's wartime coalition and to assist in the development of the post war consensus.

The one-time Liberal National MP, Clement Davies, succeeded Sinclair as leader in 1945. For Clarke, Davies did one important thing: preserve Liberal independence. If he had taken up Churchill's offer of a cabinet post, the history of the party might have ended there. (See *Graham Jones' article in this issue.*) Maclennan agreed that his one important service was the refusal of the cabinet post. Clarke noted that whilst he succeeded, to the limited extent possible, in mobilising the party, Davies was quite unable to provide it with any clear agenda. Even amongst his MPs there were wide differences of view.

In terms of mobilisation of support, it was obvious to Clarke that Davies' successor, Jo Grimond, energised the party in a way not seen since the time of Lloyd George. He provided the party with serious hope of revival. He also had a clear agenda, in his call for the realignment of the left. Whilst he did not achieve either of these objectives he set the party on an upward trajectory that meant it had clearly turned a corner. For Maclennan, Grimond stood alongside Campbell-Bannerman as one of the two great

Liberal leaders of the century. Like C-B, courage was a distinguishing feature. As with C-B, Maclennan first drew on a personal anecdote in his assessment of Grimond. In the autumn of 1956 he had been dining with his father and Lord Weir, a fellow Conservative and chairman of a successful engineering company manufacturing marine pumps. Grimond had written to him asking him what he thought about the future of the industry in the West of Scotland, to which he replied: 'Dear Jo, do your own homework!' According to Maclennan, this was typical of the many rebuffs that Jo was to receive 'in his unending quest for fresh and relevant policy proposals'. In re-reading *The Liberal Challenge*, Maclennan had been struck by the sharpness of Grimond's observations. He spoke directly, faced the blemishes in society with frankness and understood the heterogeneous nature of the UK. It may have seemed that his project was unattainable after the 1966 general election. However, his vision inspired those who created the Alliance fifteen years later. For Maclennan, Grimond's freshness and openness to new ideas would make him a leader for any age.

Not being limited by the need for political self-preservation, Clarke continued his survey with Grimond's various successors. Jeremy Thorpe, he argued, had a great deal of charisma and was a man of wit and charm. However, there was little sign of a distinctive agenda and consequently he came over as unconvincing and inconsistent. David Steel was successful in putting the party back together after the fall of Thorpe, and was also successful in reaching out beyond the party. Clarke argued that, paradoxically, his agenda was that of a good social democrat, which may explain the importance he attached to the alliance with other social democrats. Roy Jenkins, meanwhile, had a more consistent vision of what could be created with the SDP and appealed to the 'radical centre'. In Europe he also had a clear and distinctive agenda.

Clarke suggested that Jenkins' successor, David Owen, was perhaps New Labour before his time. He was

clearly more committed to Labour rather than to Liberal traditions, and this represented a fracture line with others in the SDP. Rather than mobilising support, Owen seemed to leave many people behind him in his wake. Clarke was also unclear as to what Owen's self-professed agenda of the 'social market' actually meant. Finally, Clarke turned to Paddy Ashdown. Like many before him he received a dismal inheritance. Clarke argued that he very effectively established a strategy for recovery, though it was less clear what this was *for*: the recreation of Grimondite ideas of the realignment of the left, perhaps?

This meeting perhaps posed as many questions as it answered. Both the speakers gave very personal views of the leaders and many of the members of the audience responded in similar way during the discussion at the end. Perhaps the most enlightening aspect of the meeting was, as Robert Maclennan stated at the beginning of his address, what the choices may have revealed about those that made them. What, I wonder is revealed by the audience's overwhelming choice of Jo Grimond as the best leader and of David Owen as the worst? Is it illuminating, for example, to see that Lloyd George continues to divide the party with almost as many members of the audience voting him the best leader as

## Best and worst leaders

The result of the ballot held at the meeting was as follows:

	Best	Worst
Campbell-Bannerman	5	–
Asquith	5	1
Lloyd George	5	6
Samuel	–	8
Sinclair	–	–
Davies	–	2
Grimond	15	–
Thorpe	–	1
Steel	–	1
Ashdown	4	–
Jenkins	1	–
Owen	–	15
Maclennan	–	–
Gladstone (write-in)	1	–