

# REPORT

## Decline and Fall: The Liberal Party and the elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924

Evening meeting, National Liberal Club, 10 February 2014, with Michael Steed and Professor Pat Thane; chair: Dr Julie Smith.

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

**F**OR THE LIBERAL Party, the three general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924 represented a terrible and rapid journey from post-war disunity to reunion and near return to government and then to prolonged decline. Arguably this was the key period which relegated the Liberals to the third-party status from which they have never escaped, and such was the proposition debated by psephologist Michael Steed, honorary lecturer in politics at the University of Kent, and Pat Thane, Professor of Contemporary History at King's College, London. The meeting was chaired by Dr Julie Smith, Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Politics at Robinson College, Cambridge University.

Julie Smith introduced the meeting by quoting the description by Lady Violet Bonham Carter (under whose portrait she was sitting) of the 1922 general election as a contest between two men, one with Saint Vitus' dance and one with sleeping sickness. As Michael Steed explained, these characters were of course Lloyd George and Bonar Law – both key figures in British electoral history of the time. However, as Steed pointed out, when he was first researching elections it was not the easy task it is today to find electoral results and facts. And of all the general election results, those for 1922 and 1923 were the most difficult to obtain. So from his schoolboy pocket money he purchased a copy of *The Times* election supplement for 1923, which had the complete results for every constituency for that year and the year before, with the contemporary party labels.

The key question arising from the elections of this period, according to Steed, was what it was,

during these short years, that caused the decline of the once great Liberal Party into the rump it became? Was it accident, the First World War? Was it murder, and if so who was the murderer – Ramsay Macdonald, Stanley Baldwin? Was it suicide arising from the split between Asquith and Lloyd George? Or was it death by natural causes? Looking at the question as a political scientist, Steed believes the case is strongest for death by natural causes. In almost all developed European countries, there existed by the end of the nineteenth century some kind of two-party system. Amongst a lot of diversity, a simple dichotomy of a middle-class liberal party, fighting around a progressive or radical agenda, faced by a conservative or clerical opponent, could be found almost everywhere. By the early twentieth century, in Europe, Australia and New Zealand (although not in North America), that political left–right contest was being replaced by a socio-economic left–right divide. It would have extraordinary, therefore, given Britain's place in mainstream European culture and political development, for this country to have remained exempt from those forces – immune to the mobilisation of the working classes around a different political agenda from that embodied in the increasingly irrelevant, nineteenth-century Liberal approach. However, something else becomes apparent from this comparative analysis: in most comparable countries the process took decades; in Britain it happened within a very limited time frame, 1922–1924.

This highlights the specificity of the British case. But what happened to advance the death by natural causes of the British Liberal Party?

**What was it that caused the decline of the once great Liberal Party into the rump it became? Was it accident, the First World War? Was it murder, and if so who was the murderer – Ramsay Macdonald, Stanley Baldwin? Was it suicide arising from the split between Asquith and Lloyd George? Or was it death by natural causes?**

One explanation put forward by Duverger was the electoral system. While there is truth in this, it is not the whole truth because it does not explain how it happened so quickly and in the precise way it did. Nor can it explain how a remnant of the once great party came to be left behind, surviving in a particular form, rather than being eliminated totally. And do the events of the 1920s have something to tell us about the nature and fate of British politics in general in the rest of the twentieth century? Looking at British politics within a comparative framework, if the decline of the Liberal Party was the result of the mobilisation of the industrial and rural working classes around a socio-economic programme, then Britain should have had a socialist or social democratic Labour majority for most of the period from the 1920s until the end of the twentieth century, along with comparable European polities. That this did not occur in some Catholic countries can be put down to religion. In Britain, however, one reason for this not happening is perhaps the nature of the British Conservative Party as compared to other European conservative movements. But to try and get a better understanding of exactly what happened, Steed referred in detail to the three general elections in question, what came immediately before and what came after.

The figures for the 1922 and 1923 elections show that the vote spread between the parties is remarkably similar – although the seat share changes significantly (see table).

The dramatic change is between the essentially three-party system of 1922 and 1923 and the result in 1924 when, on the face of it, there was a massive shift from Liberal to Conservative but nothing like the same from Liberal to Labour. A more detailed look, however, reveals switching from Liberal to Labour did occur. One of the keys to understanding this is to look at the 'Candidates' column. It helps explain the changes but makes analysis extremely complicated because of the many varieties of contests, three-way, two-way Lib-Con, or Lib-Lab – as well as the fights between Lloyd George and Asquithian Liberals.

To set more of the background, Steed then talked about

the by-election and local election results of the 1918–1922 parliament. These sent out extraordinarily diverse and conflicting signals from the electorate as to the state of British politics and made it hard for the commentators to understand what might happen in forthcoming general elections. Local elections were then on a three-year cycle held in November. In 1919, Labour made sweeping gains – especially in London, winning control of a number of boroughs. In the following years local election results were all quite similar, showing small Labour gains, small Liberal losses and the Conservatives standing still. Following this sign that Labour was on the rise, however, came the dramatic by-election in Paisley in February 1920, in which Asquith was returned to parliament with a huge swing, apparently signalling that the independent Liberal Party was on its way back. Labour’s ambiguous position was reinforced by the result of the East Woolwich by-election of March 1921 in which Ramsay Macdonald was prevailed upon to stand, having lost his seat in 1918 probably because he had been on the peace-making side during the First World War. He lost narrowly to a working-class coalition Conservative, who had been a war hero. This result is indicative of the great fluidity of political opinion at this time and the contingent nature of individual contests. Then came the famous Newport by-election of October 1922, fought on the issues of drink and the coalition, in which an anti-Lloyd George, anti-coalition Conservative, financed by the brewers, mobilised the working-class vote to kick out the coalition Liberal candidate with Labour apparently losing ground. There were conflicting signals in all directions as to the mood of the electorate.

The Newport by-election led to the slightly premature dissolution of 1922 and the general election. Lloyd George was left nonplussed and adrift by the collapse of his government. There is no Lloyd George Liberal manifesto and it is quite difficult to determine exactly how many pro-Lloyd George candidates there actually were, as many Liberal candidates were hedging their bets between the resurgent Independent Liberals and the man who won the war, some looking for

Lloyd George money. The Asquithian manifesto was strongly worded, giving a flavour of the times.

The circumstances of the Coupon election were so abnormal that the events which have happened since constitute a complete justification of the warning which Liberal leaders then gave that the continuance of the coalition [in 1918] meant the abandonment of principle and the substitution of autocratic for Parliamentary government.

The whole tone and content of the Asquithian manifesto is directed not against Tory or Labour but wholly against Lloyd George and the idea of coalition now so directly associated with him, even though he is no longer Prime Minister.

The electoral timings of late 1922 are crucial. The declaration of the Newport by-election was at 2 a.m. on the morning of 19 October. The local election campaign was already under way with a number of pacts having been agreed. The local election results then came through on 2 and 3 November and nominations for parliamentary seats closed on 4 November. The local elections saw significant Labour losses, the only year of the period in question when this occurs. This was misread by commentators because of the three-year cycle. Labour were unable to hold their gains of 1919 and lost out, particularly in London. A Conservative government was returned on 15 November, less than one month after the by-election which precipitated the general election. And in this short and feverish time, there was a lot of confusion within and

between the two Liberal camps and within some Tory ranks as to who was standing where and with what support.

In the short 1922–23 Parliament, with its dramatic replacement of Bonar Law by Baldwin rather than Curzon or Austen Chamberlain, there was no honeymoon for the new administration. By-elections continued to go against the government, even in places like Liverpool which was at that time pretty solidly Tory. Then, despite having a working majority and with very little warning, Baldwin announced on 13 November 1923 that he is calling a general election to seek a mandate for tariffs. It is hard today to appreciate the passion and intensity that people felt about free trade. It was thought, rather like the National Health Service today, to be part of the British identity and this was reflected in the language of the manifestoes and speeches of the day, not just in Liberal circles but in Labour’s too. The free trade issue allowed the two wings of the Liberal Party to reunite around this traditional Liberal policy. Lloyd George had the money; Asquith had most of the troops on the ground. A positive joint manifesto was written by Lloyd George, Asquith, Alfred Mond and John Simon, emphasising free trade, and such was the success of the Liberal reunion that there were only two cases where rival Liberal candidates fought each other.

The general election of 1923 was contested during a foot and mouth outbreak across the country and brought about some extraordinary, sweeping changes. Liberal representation increased (on Steed’s simple figures, ignoring the

Election	Vote (000s)	%	MPs	Candidates
1922'				
Conservative	5,502	38.5	344	482
Labour	4,237	29.7	142	414
Liberal	4,081	28.3	115	477
1923				
Conservative	5,515	38	258	536
Labour	4,439	30.7	191	427
Liberal	4,301	29.7	158	457
1924				
Conservative	7,855	46.8	412	534
Labour	5,489	33.3	151	514
Liberal	2,931	17.8	40	340

uncertainty of some of the party labels) from 115 seats to 158. Not the hugest change in itself, but one in which the churning of seats was immense. Over forty seats were lost but about eighty were gained. So within the apparent stability of vote there was, in fact, great fluidity. Liberals were losing seats in their traditional areas of strength in the mining and industrial constituencies, but gaining in rural areas south of a line from Cornwall to the Wash. Even in the Tory core of Kent, Surrey and Sussex, the Liberals gained Chichester and Sevenoaks. The Liberals did less well north of this line and actually lost some agricultural seats to the Conservatives in the north of England and Scotland. All of which illustrates how volatile the electorate was and shows up some important regional variations.

After the election there followed a four week period before parliament had to meet on 8 January 1924, giving the parties time to work out what they wanted to do. Baldwin remained the leader of the largest party in parliament but had been resoundingly defeated on the issue on which he went to the country, the election having produced a clear majority (60 per cent versus 40 per cent) for free trade and against tariffs. It is at this point that an indicator of suicide on the part of the Liberal Party might be found. On 18 December 1923 most of the 158 Liberal MPs gathered in the National Liberal Club to be addressed by Asquith. Asquith himself is in a strong position. Most of the MPs elected are new and have come from the local associations which have been mainly supportive of the Independent Liberals. The Lloyd Georgites had lost ground and Lloyd George himself, his reputation as war hero fading into the past, had lost the ascendancy to his old rival. Perhaps four-fifths of the Liberal intake of 1923 can be categorised as Asquithian and Asquith believed that it was the Liberal Party, now firmly under his leadership, which controlled the political situation. He proposed allowing Ramsay Macdonald to form a minority Labour government.

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**In the light of what happened after the 2010 general election and the experience of other countries in similar positions, Asquith's position seems to have been extraordinary. Roy Jenkins in his biography of Asquith simply states that Asquith recoiled in horror at the prospect of any coalition, without further explanation ...**

been extraordinary. Roy Jenkins in his biography of Asquith simply states that Asquith recoiled in horror at the prospect of any coalition, without further explanation, and although there were weeks in which negotiations could have taken place, none did. Perhaps it was unthinkable, given the context and result of the election fought on free trade, for Asquith to have contemplated keeping Baldwin in office. But what about talking to Labour? Asquith managed to get all but about ten of his MPs to vote to bring down Baldwin and install Britain's first Labour government. Was this the British specificity which speeded up the death of the Liberal Party? In most continental countries there would have been a coalition or some form of inter-party agreement which would have prolonged the decline into a two-party system. It was perhaps not the first-past-the-post electoral system that was responsible for the rapid decline of the Liberal Party, but the Asquithian view of what was constitutionally correct or the Liberal revulsion at the idea of coalition itself and view of the proper relationship of political parties as a result of what had happened in 1916 and 1918.

Moving on to the 1924 general election, the election which relegated the Liberal Party to third-party status with representation falling to forty seats in the House of Commons, Steed reminded the meeting that this was the first in which radio broadcasts were offered to the party leaders. Ramsay MacDonald, in the tradition of the great stage orator, moved his microphone around with him and his broadcast was a total disaster. Asquith, more dignified, the last of the Romans, spoke directly to the microphone from a platform in Paisley and this came over well enough. Stanley Baldwin, however, accepted Sir John Reith's offer of advice on how best to use this new technology, where the others had declined. Reith advised Baldwin to remember he was talking to people in their own homes and suggested doing the broadcast from a studio. Baldwin got his wife to sit in the studio with him, doing her knitting, and did the broadcast as if he was speaking to her. Not only was this a great success, but it can be viewed as a metaphor for the way in which

the Conservatives were coming to terms with the new political circumstances more effectively than the other parties. So perhaps, Steed concluded, the British specificity around the decline of the Liberal Party was not the actions of the Liberals themselves, but rather the way in which the Conservatives adapted to the changes in British society better than its rivals.

Professor Pat Thane began her look at the parliamentary background to these elections by referring to the coalition government of 1916–1922, led by Lloyd George but dominated by Conservative MPs, increasingly so during its course. This position of dominance was reinforced by the Liberal split following the wartime replacement of Asquith as Prime Minister by Lloyd George. Labour withdrew from the coalition before the Coupon election, although ten Labour MPs agreed to support the new government after 1918. The election was held just one month after the armistice and the turnout, at 59 per cent, was low.

Until mid-1920 the British economy was in reasonable shape, although there was a high level of strikes. Trade union activity had risen during the war and continued to increase. But there was tension in the Coalition, both within the Conservative ranks and between the Tories and the Liberals, around the desire to reduce the level of state regulation of the economy, which had been brought in during the war, and to raise tariffs and cut public expenditure. On Lloyd George's side, however, it was seen as desirable to hold on to some state regulation so as to promote further social reform through a programme of building much-needed affordable homes, improving state education, maternity and child welfare and the unemployment benefits system. Consequently, tension existed domestically between the Conservative and Liberal elements of the coalition even before the international economic crisis of mid-1920 began causing unemployment to start to rise in Britain.

By 1921 there were 1.8 million jobless. The majority Conservative response to the economic crisis was to press for expenditure cuts and tariffs. They were cheered on in this by a vociferous anti-waste campaign, attacking what was

described as government ‘squad-dermania’, in the pages of Lord Rothermere’s *Times* and *Daily Mail*, whose readership and influence had grown greatly during the war. Anti-waste candidates contested and won by-elections at this time, defeating coalition Conservatives in Westminster St George’s at Hertford. The government responded in the next budget by cutting income tax and also cutting the recently introduced subsidies for Lloyd George’s ‘homes for heroes’, upsetting Liberal reformers. Addressing the Conservative pressure on the economy, Lloyd George agreed to the setting up of a committee to recommend further cuts to the public sector, chaired by Sir Eric Geddes, a Conservative MP and businessman. It reported in 1922, recommending severe cuts to public sector services and salaries which came to be known as ‘the Geddes axe’. Lloyd George was thus appearing ever weaker in relation to his coalition partners, and many Conservatives had come to hate the coalition and the Liberals almost as much as they hated Labour. Then came the sale of honours scandal, again promoted by the Rothermere press and, following the Newport by-election, the meeting of Conservative MPs at the Carlton Club which resulted in their withdrawing from the coalition and resolving to fight the next election as an independent force. Lloyd George resigned as Prime Minister.

In the general election campaign which followed, the Conservatives were clearly worried about Labour, given their recent electoral successes. Labour had won fourteen seats in by-elections since 1918 and had lost just one. The one which was lost, Woolwich East, was important, however, because the candidate was Ramsay Macdonald. Macdonald was trying to get back into parliament for the first time since losing his seat in 1918, which he lost mainly because of his opposition to the war. But by 1921 he was already prospective Labour candidate for Aberavon, a seat with an anti-war tradition and he agreed to stand in Woolwich reluctantly. The sitting MP, Will Crooks, had resigned because of ill health and Arthur Henderson, effectively leading the Labour Party, put pressure on Macdonald to step in. Macdonald agreed on the understanding that whatever the outcome

he would go to Aberavon at the next general election. Inviting Macdonald to stand in these circumstances was not one of Henderson’s wisest decisions. Woolwich had a Labour tradition but was home to a barracks and to the Woolwich Arsenal, a huge munitions manufacturer during the war and still the biggest local employer. Macdonald’s anti-war record was unhelpful and the Tories played it up to the full, as his opponent, Robert Gee, was a former captain in the Royal Fusiliers who had been awarded the Victoria Cross in the war. It is also unlikely that local voters were much impressed that Macdonald was only going to stay until the next election. It was a nasty campaign with Macdonald under personal attack from the Tories, although he lost by only 683 votes. Macdonald then moved to Aberavon where he won in 1922 and returned to the Labour leadership.

In the general election, the Conservatives were worried enough about Labour to play up the ‘red scare’ in quite a big way. Bonar Law had no clear policy agenda to deal with the economic crisis. He disowned tariffs during the campaign, aware they were unpopular with voters concerned about rising food prices. Although the Tories were not sure of winning they emerged with a clear majority and Labour did well, increasing their share of the vote from 23.7 per cent in 1918 to 29.7 per cent and their total seats from 73<sup>2</sup> to 142. The Liberals were still divided and although they increased the share of the total vote of their two wings, their overall seat numbers were down with Labour taking Liberal seats in mining and industrial areas and the cities. On this showing the Liberals had more to fear from Labour’s advance than the Conservatives.

Bonar Law resigned in May 1923 due to serious ill health, having done not very much as Prime Minister. He was replaced by the relatively inexperienced Stanley Baldwin who was chosen because he was not tainted by association with the previous coalition government and because he was not Lord Curzon, who was unpopular with many influential Conservative MPs. However Baldwin had no coherent policy programme and gave in to party pressure to revert to supporting tariffs which, at least on the surface, led to the

reconciliation of Lloyd George and Asquith and the reunion of Liberalism around the banner of free trade, an issue also favoured by Labour and one which really mattered to people. One policy the government did pursue with Neville Chamberlain as Minister of Health was to restore some of the unpopular Geddes cut to the housing budget to help address the serious housing shortage. Emphasis was however shifted towards private building for owner-occupation and away from local authority building for rent. The Conservatives were learning that encouraging owner-occupation was a good way to buy votes. In 1918 only 10 per cent of UK housing was owner-occupied but the proportion steadily went up between the wars to over 25 per cent by 1939.

Baldwin was worried about differences of opinion in the Conservative Party over tariffs and wanted a clear mandate on this approach to the economy, and in November 1923 decided to call a general election on the issue, perhaps underestimating the strength of opposition to tariffs in the electorate. Swayed by the emollient, ‘father of the people’ image that he was assiduously cultivating, Baldwin seriously misjudged the mood of the electorate. The Conservatives had done very little to win over undecided voters and had run a remarkably ineffective administration. Despite their overall vote share staying about the same they lost seats but remained the largest single party. Labour gained in the conurbations and benefited from the drift of reforming Liberals into the party, including people like J. A. Hobson, Charles Trevelyan and Josiah Wedgwood. Liberal representation also went up, and when Baldwin tried to remain in power, Labour and Liberals combined to vote him out. Asquith was very strongly opposed to the idea of joining another Conservative-dominated coalition and did have hopes of some kind of progressive alliance with Labour. He assured his parliamentary party that if a Labour government was to be tried out, it could hardly be tried under safer conditions. It would be forming a minority government, dependent on Liberal support which would easily restrain the more socialist tendencies lurking inside the Labour Party while encouraging

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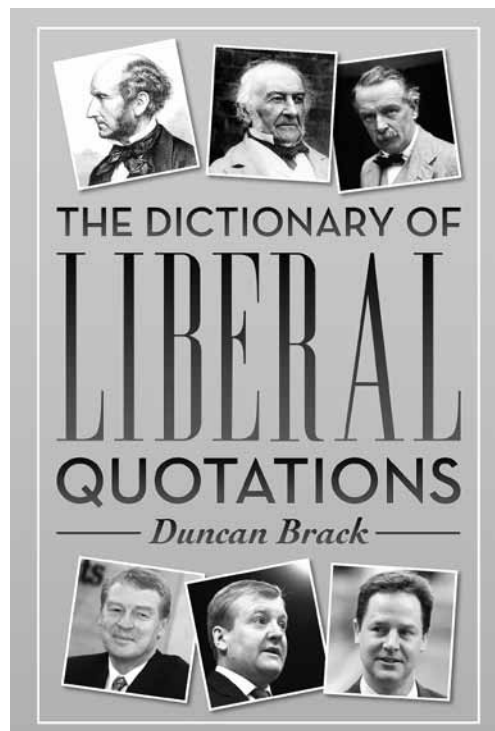
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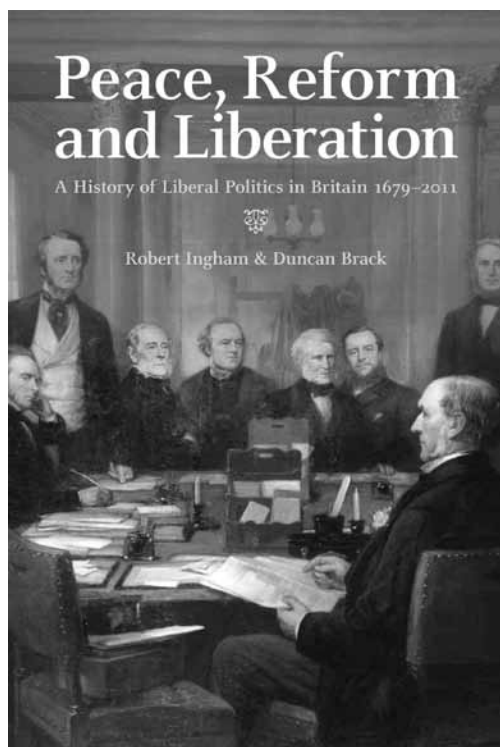
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it into the kind of reforms which were popular with many Liberals. Relations between the party leaders were not good however. Macdonald disliked both Asquith, whom he found patronising, and Lloyd George. This did not bode well for any sort of alliance, and there was no sign that Macdonald wanted any sort of coalition. He wanted to show that Labour could govern alone, if only for a short time.

So in January 1924, Macdonald became the first Labour Prime Minister. Always more interested in foreign rather than domestic affairs, he also took the position of Foreign Secretary. Philip Snowden was Chancellor of the Exchequer and Arthur Henderson became Home Secretary. This government was formed in unpropitious circumstances for Labour. It held a minority of seats. The economy was weak. Unemployment was still high. Radical measures aimed at restoring the economy would be hard to get through parliament. Asquith meanwhile faced criticism, especially from the business element in the Liberal Party, for putting in the socialists and some deserted to the Conservatives. The party never again gained the 28 per cent of the vote that they won in 1923 and throughout 1924 leaked support both to the Conservatives and to Labour. It was hard for the Liberals either to tread a distinctive path or to support either of the other parties wholeheartedly. The desire to maintain Liberal independence in these new circumstances made the party stress its differences with the government.

As to Labour, it could hardly fail to accept the opportunity to form a government as, particularly if they handled it well, it would give them a responsible image and useful experience of office for the future. Macdonald had no illusion that his government would last long but he intended to do nothing too radical to accelerate its fall. He signalled Labour's moderation by refusing to implement the capital levy, designed to pay off the still-substantial war debt, which had been promised during the election, although this upset the left of the party. Snowden proved an orthodox Chancellor. He opposed the levy and thought economic recovery could be promoted by tax deductions. Macdonald had

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difficulty selecting Cabinet ministers from his inexperienced party and recruited a number of former Liberals, Haldane as Lord Chancellor, Trevelyan at Education and Josiah Wedgwood as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. His aim was for Labour to replace the Liberals as the party of radical reform, having long believed this was a possibility, and this became increasingly realistic as more and more working-class Liberals and intellectuals came across. Macdonald's government did not hold back completely from progressive social reform although it stayed within uncontroversial limits. John Wheatley introduced the most far-reaching Housing Act so far, providing a larger subsidy than before for new building for rent, mostly by local authorities. At the same time he extended Chamberlain's subsidy which promoted owner-occupation and altogether these moves greatly increased house building which both provided a large number of jobs and significantly increased the affordable housing stock. Unemployment benefit was raised and the unpopular means test for benefits for the long-term unemployed was abolished but the conditions for receiving long-term benefit were toughened, requiring claimants to show they were normally in employment. Other areas were also tightened up putting the burden of proof on claimants to produce evidence of their search for work. While this upset some on the left of the party, it helped get the changes through parliament. It was also popular with Labour voters who feared generous benefits would encourage shirkers and scroungers (on whom Labour had always taken a fairly hard line in fact). Labour encouraged local authorities to use their existing powers to improve education, health care and housing and also increased old age pensions. Snowden did little to upset the Treasury; his budget reduced direct taxes and duties introduced during the war which mainly affected food imports. Snowden presented this idea as the 'free breakfast table', a return to free trade. There were also cuts to the naval budget as part of the process of disarmament which Macdonald was eager to promote internationally. Further, to confirm its moderation, Labour distanced itself from the unions.

Meanwhile Macdonald was involved in long and detailed negotiations in London with German, Allied and US representatives to bring about a final post-war peace treaty. By summer 1924 agreement was finally reached on German reparations and the ending of the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr, a major achievement. Also, one of Macdonald's first actions as Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary was to recognise the Soviet Union and he then set about trying to conclude a trade agreement with Russia. This merely confirmed in his enemies' eyes that he really was a crypto-Bolshevik (though nothing could have further from the truth). His real intentions were firstly to increase the likelihood of continuing international peace by normalising Soviet relations with other nations, secondly to reverse the decline in British exports to Russia, and thirdly to settle the claims of British bond-holders on the pre-revolutionary government which the Bolsheviks had repudiated. Negotiations were lengthy but as 1924 wore on the closer to agreement the sides came. However there was opposition from the Conservatives and increasingly from the Liberals and it became clear that if it was put before parliament and debated, the government would be defeated.

This was first of the crises that the Labour government faced in the autumn of 1924. In September the *Daily Mail* went on the rampage again because a baronetcy had been awarded to an old friend of Macdonald's who had loaned him some money and given him a car and the *Mail* particularly enjoyed reminding readers how Macdonald had criticised Lloyd George over his honours scandal. Then, more seriously, in July an article appeared in the Communist Party *Workers' Weekly*, written by its temporary editor J. R. Campbell, calling on soldiers to refuse to fire on their fellow workers during strikes. This led to a hasty decision by the inexperienced Attorney General, Sir Patrick Hastings, to order Campbell's prosecution for incitement to mutiny. Macdonald and others in the government became fearful of the tensions such legal action would arouse within and against the party. The Cabinet agreed to withdraw the prosecution and was accused by its opponents of giving in to far-left

pressure. The Conservatives tabled a censure motion against the government to which the Liberals added an amendment seeking a select committee inquiry into the matter. When it was passed in the Commons, Macdonald took it as a vote of no confidence and resigned. Macdonald had handled these crises badly, partly because he had been distracted and exhausted by his diplomatic negotiations.

In the election which followed, Baldwin offered no new policies to solve the country's economic problems but campaigned on a one-nation policy and vigorously attacked Labour's supposed Bolshevik tendencies, despite the actual moderation of their approach in government. Baldwin was helped just before the general election when the *Daily Mail* (again) produced the banner headline 'Civil War plot by socialists'. It had a copy of the letter allegedly written by Grigory Zinoviev, President of the Communist International, to the British representative on Comintern urging revolutionary action in Britain. It was alleged that Macdonald and Henderson had copies of the letter weeks before and had done nothing, implying their collusion in the supposed red plot. Macdonald was convinced the letter was a forgery, as has since been proved, but was loath to defend himself, again handling the affair badly, and this was taken as evidence of his guilt.

It is doubtful whether the Zinoviev letter decisively affected the outcome of the general election, which the Conservatives won comfortably, but it didn't help Labour. Labour did increase its overall vote share but got fewer seats on a higher turnout. The Liberals slumped; even Asquith lost his seat in Paisley. So the election was really fought as a war between Labour and Conservatives and many former Liberals chose their sides. Baldwin abandoned tariffs during the campaign, eliminating one distinctive stretch of clear water between the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Liberals were seen to have done very little during the Labour government. They had been ineffectual and divided. They seemed to have few distinctive policies and little hope of achieving much. It seemed that Labour's performance as a minority administration had

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convinced enough people that they were, after all, capable of responsible constitutional government. Its core vote turned out in strength while the larger number of people who were terrified of socialism flocked to the Conservatives abandoning the Liberals. Labour had established itself as the main opposition party to the Tories and made a better showing in 1924 than has usually been credited. So in conclusion, Pat Thane agreed with Michael Steed that the decline of the Liberal Party was essentially one of natural causes.

The one important issue which emerged during the question and answer session concerned the distribution of the women's vote and how this had affected the position of the Liberals. In answer to questions on how women voted, Steed cited Chris Cook's figures showing how middle-class constituencies swung from the Conservatives to the Liberals in 1923 much more than agricultural ones. As female electors were significantly more numerous in middle-class constituencies, Steed speculated that this was due to women voting more on the issue of free trade/cheap food. Re-examining the data afterwards, Steed reported that he had done enough preliminary work to establish that:

- Constituencies with more women voted Conservative to

a significantly greater extent in this period, and therefore it is very likely that the newly enfranchised female voters voted more Conservative and less Labour; the evidence for the Liberal Party is less clear. How far this was a matter of gender or one of social environment (age, class, occupation, etc.) is open to debate; more exhaustive work might throw some light on that.

- Women voters swung more than men to Lab/Lib in 1923, swinging more back to Conservative in 1924. There is no real doubt about this differentiation, presumably on the free trade issue, though the precise extent and how far it was a gender or social context effect again needs more work and may be difficult to establish.

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- 1 These simple party descriptions include candidates who were fighting each other as pro-Lloyd George or Asquithian Liberals or pro-Coalition Conservatives. There were hardly any Independents or others except for Northern Ireland.
- 2 Made up of 63 Labour and 10 National Democratic Party MPs.

## REVIEWS

### Elegant and concise

David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party Since 1900* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2013)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

**W**HEN MATT COLE reviewed the first edition of this book in the *Journal of Liberal History* back in 2005, he concluded that David Dutton had provided an answer to the question 'why bother with Liberal history?' that was 'as full and effective as could be expected by

his most demanding reader, or the willing non-specialist'. The History Group's own introductory reading list described the book as 'a definitive guide to the decline, fall and revival of Liberalism in the twentieth century; meticulously researched, by far the best of the short histories now available'.