

Whereas Joyce outlines the problems with the Liberal campaign in 1945, Baines sets out to describe four ways in which the election could be described as a watershed for the Liberal Party. First, and most importantly, the Liberal Parliamentary Party was reduced to a rump of mainly Welsh and south western MPs, with no representation in urban areas; and this shift away from the party's urban remnants was more or less repeated in the 1945 local elections. However, this retreat was simply the culmination of a process begun in 1924. After that election the Liberal Party could no longer claim to be one of the major parties of government in Britain and could no longer hold on to any urban seats, except in exceptional circumstances. In 1924 only seven Liberals won three-cornered fights, and only six were elected in Britain's eleven largest cities, with only Percy Harris defeating a Conservative. In 1935, only two of the Liberal Party's nine urban seats were won in three-cornered contests against the two other major parties. With the Conservative and Labour Parties both fighting more seats than ever before in 1945, those exceptional circumstances diminished still further, although seats in Bolton and Huddersfield were later won by the Liberal Party after arrangements were reached with the Tories.

Secondly, the 1945 election brought Labour to power with an outright majority for the first time; this was followed by a degree of speculation about the possibility of Liberal-Conservative pacts. This speculation was encouraged by Churchill and by Liberal opposition to aspects of Labour's nationalisation plans. However, the resurgence of anti-socialism within the party, as opposed to the radicalism of the war years, did not occur until 1947, after Horabin defected to Labour, and only replicated the party's stance during the mid-1920s, another period when the Liberal Party defined itself primarily in terms of its opposition to other parties rather than in terms of its own policy aims.

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Thirdly, the defeat of Sinclair and all of the Liberal members of the wartime coalition left a vacuum in the party leadership which the Parliamentary Party was not well equipped to fill. The job of leader was offered to Gwilym Lloyd George, who very soon joined the Conservative ranks. This was a serious problem for the party, especially as Clement Davies proved to be an ineffectual leader who did little to reinvigorate the party. However, it is debatable how effective Sinclair would have been as leader of the Liberals after 1945. His opposition to Liberal contestants in wartime byelections, and his aristocratic connections with the Churchills did not endear him to many party activists; his leadership would probably only have survived because of the paucity of challengers for his position.

Finally, in the aftermath of the 1945 election the Liberal Party threw itself into organisational improvements, stipulated in the report into defeat, *Coats Off For The Future!* This led in 1950 to the fielding of 475 candidates, enough to allow a Liberal government to be elected for the first time since 1929. However, if the 1924 election was a watershed in terms of

signalling the end the pre-1918 electoral base of the Liberal Party, the 1950 election was a watershed for the aims and attitudes of party activists. As Baines rightly points out, the aim of party activists after 1945 was to ensure that enough candidates would stand next time to permit the election of enough Liberal members to form a government; and it was argued that this would persuade 'Liberal-butts' to swing behind the party. After 1950 this illusion was shattered and it took a quarter of a century for that number of Liberal candidates to stand again. After 1950 activists realised that Parliamentary contests were almost all hopeless, and activities had to be refocused elsewhere if the party was to survive.

Although the party remained committed to working for the election of Liberal Members of Parliament, ideas such as the targeting of resources, in operation by the 1964 election, and a realisation of the usefulness of byelections - a Liberal byelection team was in operation by the mid-1950s - became apparent. More importantly, activists began to switch their attention to local elections and the party's local strength began to pick up after 1953. It took a comprehensive electoral disaster for which no ameliorating circumstances could be blamed for the Liberal Party to reformulate its aims and its policies; 1945 was a grim defeat for the party, but it was the 1950 debacle which inspired the changes which led to later revival.

Both articles offer a significant contribution to our understanding of the 1945 general election - one of the most startling of modern times - and the Liberal Party's fortunes in it. Baines highlights the factors which, he argues, make the election a watershed for the party, especially the loss of many prominent Liberal MPs, defeated at the polls. He also emphasises the traditional nature of local Liberal campaigns and concludes that Labour, not the Liberals, was best placed to gain from the increased acceptance of social egalitarianism amongst the electorate. Joyce's analysis is different, concentrating on the tactical mistakes the party made. The decision by the party to fight the election as an independent entity was not matched by a clear redefinition of the party's identity, reflecting ideological splits within the organisation. Furthermore, the party could not possibly have formed a government after the election - and yet fought to achieve that aim. Both articles make depressing reading for Liberals, but they explore the factors and problems with which the Liberal Party has had to cope since 1945, and which still influence our party today.

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election

by Peter Joyce (Liberal Democrat History Group, Sept 1995)

Comments by Tony Greaves

My first comment is one of congratulation on organising the production of this paper, together with some disappointment at the ephemeral nature of its format. Nor do I like the stilted academic prose style that Peter Joyce uses; surely if a paper is worth wider publication it is also worth the effort to make it more easily readable (I am arguing for elegance rather than tabloidese!).

My second observation is that Joyce does us a real service in

showing how the unavoidable dilemmas of a third party campaign which Liberals have all come to accept as part of the political scene (and so far failed to crack) are older than most of us had really understood. Joyce's arguments about party strategy in 1945 don't seem to have changed much in fifty years. Whether to go for government, balance of power, influence in a parliament; whether to emphasise the national or local campaign in winnable seats; how to achieve a clear third campaign message - what has changed?

Of course, we all have the advantage now of understanding the nature of these problems only too well, if not the solutions to them. It is therefore easy enough, perhaps, for Joyce to project them on to an older campaign in which the participants perhaps understood them less well or not at all. But he does enough in his paper to prove that he is right.

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My disappointments with the paper lies in other areas. His central thesis seems to be that the campaign failed as a result of an activist-imposed decision to 'go for government'. He states this at the beginning and restates it at the end, but I find no hard evidence in between that this particular decision had any effect on the result. It is not clear what other strategy was available that would have held the campaign together. Joyce argues that strictly limited resources should have been tightly targeted to winnable seats, but how that could have been done in the circumstances of 1945 is not clear. Liberal Democrats find it difficult enough to target even now, with modern communications and personal resources! What we do know, however, is that local targeting has to take place within the context of a strong national campaign.

Joyce provides no evidence that a strategy based on getting the balance of power would have won more seats in 1945 (any more than at any election since then). His real insight however is that in 1945 the Liberal Party was still fighting the election that would have taken place in 1939 or 1940 if there had been no war. There is little doubt that the Liberal failure owed much to the party (like everyone else) not realising that there would be a Labour landslide; whether spending more time attacking Labour would have made any difference can only be guessed at. How often political parties (like armies) try to fight the last battle, because that is the one they understand! How like the Labour Party now!

Joyce is also correct in laying much of the problem at the constituency door; there is little doubt that in 1945 Liberal Party organisation in most constituencies did not exist in any serious campaigning way - and indeed in spite of the national efforts to promote a broad front in 1950, this did not change greatly until the start of the sixties. I think he is wrong in putting this problem down to the war; after all, the other parties had been through the same war. The fact is that the Liberal Party on the ground had started to disintegrate much earlier - soon after the formation of the Lloyd George Coalition. There were many reasons for this - the Lloyd George split; defections of working class members to Labour; the failure of the party to recruit

many younger people in the 1920s; the Simonite (Nat-Lib) split; further defections both ways in the 1930s as power receded further and further from the party

It is true that with Sinclair as Leader and with a growing unhappiness with the Conservative dictatorship of the 1930s, there was a revival of Liberal morale and campaigning towards the end of that decade; but the party was organisationally already at a very low base. By the declaration of war in 1939, the grass-roots organisation of the Liberal Party had already collapsed; other than in parts of the rural Celtic fringe, what remained were relict islands of activity. Delaying the election a few months into the summer of 1945 might have saved a very few seats for sitting MPs (had they spent the time campaigning in them). It may have got more candidates in the field on the 1950 basis of giving them a one-way railway ticket from a London terminus and their deposit. But it would have had no real effect at all on the result.

There is one other observation in Joyce's paper which merits further discussion. He suggests the party was split in that many Liberal candidates had not accepted the full Beveridge programme of state intervention to secure freedom from want, ignorance, idleness, squalor and disease. Yet his anecdotal evidence comes only from one Independent Liberal candidate! Experience of the Liberal Party fifteen or twenty years later leads me to guess that in both 1945 and 1950 (and even more so at earlier elections) there were legions of old-style free-traders going to the polls under a Keynes/Lloyd George/Beveridge policy banner that they neither understood nor really supported. Is this true? It seems to me to merit a lot more investigation, for if it is true it might give more than a clue to the underlying rot which resulted in the debilitation of militant Liberalism for more than a generation.

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis - or if you know anyone who can - please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information.

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922-88. Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945-64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Ph.D thesis. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.

If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.