

# Impacts of reunification?

## The electoral prospects of a reunited Liberal Party in the 1940s

Ian Hunter's article on the attempts to reunite the Liberal and Liberal National<sup>1</sup> parties in the mid-1940s prompts the question: what electoral assets did the Liberal Nationals have to offer a reunited party? Could reunion have sparked the revival in the party's electoral fortunes that in fact came a decade later? What wider political impact might it have had?

As the Liberal Nationals never tested their independent electoral strength against the Liberal and Conservative parties,<sup>2</sup> it is impossible to gauge with much accuracy how many votes they might have been able to swing across to a reunited party. Nevertheless we can get some measure of the range of electoral potential of a merged party: the minimum and maximum impact that adherence of the Liberal Nationals might have had.

Table 1 shows the Liberal Nationals performance at the elections of the period. However, these figures greatly overstate the number of committed Liberal National voters since they include many Conservative-inclined voters in constituencies where a Liberal National was the standard-bearer for the National coalition. In 1950 the bald figures are even more misleading, as the totals include numerous essentially Conservative candidates running under various joint labels.

There were also some Liberal National supporters in constituencies with no Liberal National candidate, who are thus not included in these figures. However, it is safe to assume that their numbers were negligible by the mid-1940s. The Conservatives made great efforts in 1950 to tap Liberal votes, and no doubt they would have run more candidates under the Liberal National label if there had been significant concentrations of such voters elsewhere to target.

The number of additional MPs a united Liberal Party might have won in 1945 and 1950 would have depended on two factors:

- The **local impact** in constituencies where the Liberal Nationals were organised and ran candidates

- The **national impact**: that is the general 'boost' that might have been given to the Liberal Party in other areas as a result of reunification.

### Local impact

In the seats they fought, a percentage of the actual vote given to Liberal National candidates would have gone to a united Liberal candidate if the parties had merged. Assuming that the votes for the Liberal candidate, where there was one, would have gone *en bloc* to a united candidate, we can calculate the proportion of Liberal National votes that had to transfer in order for the united Liberal to win the seat.

We can exclude all seats where even a 100% transfer of the Liberal National vote to the Liberal would have been insufficient to defeat the winning candidate. In 1945 there were thirty-six such seats (thirty-five Labour and one Communist). In 1950 there were thirty-two (all Labour). That leaves thirteen seats in 1945 and twenty-three in 1950 where at least potentially a merged Liberal Party might have gathered up enough votes to win.

If the transfer of Liberal National votes had been below 25%, only one seat would have been vulnerable to Liberal attack: Denbigh, which was a unique two-horse race between Liberal National and Liberal at each election between 1935 and 1959. Denbigh would have gone to a united Liberal on a 15% shift in 1945 and a shift of only 4% in 1950.

If 50% of Liberal National votes had transferred, four more seats would have been won in 1945 (St Ives – 23%, Huntingdonshire – 31%, Dumfriesshire – 32% and Eddisbury – 38%). Two other seats, South Molton and Fife East, both requiring a 50% transfer, would have been in the balance. The next most vulnerable seat, Montrose Burghs, would have required a massive transfer of more than 70%.

In 1950, a 50% transfer would have secured a maximum of seven more seats. However in only four of these was the 1950 candidate clearly a Liberal National (Torrington – 25%, Fife East – 42%,

**Table 1: Liberal National performance**

Election	Lib Nat vote	% vote	Candidates	Seats won
1931	809,302	3.7	41	35
1935	866,354	3.7	44	33
1945	737,732	2.9	49	11
1950 <sup>14</sup>	985,343	3.4	55	16

Source: F.W.S. Craig, *British Electoral Facts 1832–1987 (1989)* and *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918–49 (1977)* and *1950–70 (1971)*.

Huntingdonshire – 47% and Harwich – 49%). In the other three, the Conservative was the dominant partner (St Ives – 25%, Angus North and Mearns – 30% and Angus South – 31%).<sup>3</sup> A transfer of over 60% would have been required in order to win any further seats.

Even in a seat with a strong Liberal tradition and a good candidate, a transfer of 50% of the votes would have been a considerable achievement. For example, Edgar Granville, elected as a Liberal National for the Eye Division of Suffolk in 1931 and 1935 stood as a Liberal, with Conservative and Labour opponents, in 1945. Granville retained 52% of his 1935 vote and was re-elected. This probably represents the best-case scenario: Granville was a popular and hard-working constituency MP with a significant personal vote.<sup>4</sup> In more average constituencies, the level of transfer might well have been much less. What little evidence there is does not suggest much inclination by Liberal and Liberal National voters to join hands.<sup>5</sup>

## National impact

A reunited Liberal Party would also have expected to make a stronger national impact and thus gain further seats outside the Liberal National strongholds. What general ‘boost’ to a united Liberal Party might adherence of the Liberal Nationals given?

It seems safe to assume that reunion would have given some boost to the credibility of the Liberals at both general elections. The size of the Parliamentary party would have trebled in the run-up to the 1945 election, and doubled before the 1950 election. Reunification would also have marked

a reversal of the years of decline and disunity. For the Tories it would have been much more difficult to lay claim to the Liberal inheritance.

On the other hand, the Liberal Nationals were not an impressive force. They included few ‘big-hitters’ by 1945. Lord Simon was seventy-three and increasingly detached from the party. Only Ernest Brown, their leader, was of senior ministerial rank. The careers of the few other well-known figures such as Leslie Burgin and Leslie Hore-Belisha, were clearly past their peak or had a new focus, as in the case of Clement Davies who had already joined the Liberals.<sup>6</sup> The party was ageing: almost half of its MPs in 1945 were in their sixties or seventies. The Liberal Nationals were also tainted by their long association with an unpopular Tory party and the appeasement policies of the 1930s. Their adherence to the Liberal Party might even have weakened its appeal to the radical mood of 1945. By 1950 the Liberal Nationals had even less to offer in terms of front-rank politicians.<sup>7</sup>

Even if one assumes a substantial, positive and uniform national swing to the Liberals of, say, 2.5% the gains this would have produced would have

been modest because there were few seats where Liberals were close behind the winning party. In 1945 a 2.5% swing – if extended into the Celtic fringe – would have enabled the Liberals to hold Caithness & Sutherland (C majority 0.4%) and Caernarvonshire Boroughs (C majority 0.9%) and gain Orkney & Shetland (C majority 1.8%), Leominster (C majority 2.2%), Aberdeenshire West & Kincardine (C majority 3.0%) and Roxburgh & Selkirk (C majority 4.7%). In 1950 they would have won only two extra seats: Dorset North (C majority 0.2%) and Caithness & Sutherland (C majority 1.3%).<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

Table 2 summarises the likely range of electoral impacts of reunion. It is unlikely that the direct electoral dividend for the Liberals of merger would have been any greater than this. Only if reunion had had a mould-breaking impact would they have been able to escape the electoral constraints in which they found themselves by 1945–50. There were simply not enough Liberal near-misses to deliver major gains. At best the merged party might have returned about the same number of independent Liberals as in 1935. An improbably large swing would have been needed to start regaining the ground lost by the split.<sup>9</sup> For the Liberal Nationals the prospects were decidedly unfavourable. Without their Conservative lifeline most faced almost certain defeat. The electoral arithmetic was thus heavily loaded against the reunion project.

However, the political impact of re-

**Table 2: Potential impacts of reunion**

	Actual Lib seats won		Potential gains from reunion	
	1945	1950	1945	1950
<b>Limited impact</b> (<25% local transfer of Lib Nat votes, 1% national swing to Libs)	12 <sup>15</sup>	9	4	3
<b>Significant impact</b> (50% local transfer of Lib Nat votes, 2.5% national swing to Libs)			10–12	6–9

union – or indeed any factor increasing the Liberal vote slightly – would have been considerable in 1945, and potentially huge in 1950. It would have allowed Sir Archibald Sinclair to hold the seat in Caithness & Sutherland that he lost very narrowly in 1945 and 1950, and Jo Grimond would have entered the Commons in 1945 instead of 1950. Frank Byers would have held his seat in 1950. This would have strengthened the Liberal parliamentary party significantly and opened the possibility of more effective leadership under Sinclair and Grimond in the period 1945–56 than Clement Davies was able to provide.<sup>10</sup>

The 1950 election was so evenly balanced that a few more Liberal votes could have altered the result and potentially the course of politics in the 1950s. Labour won the election with a majority of only five seats and called a new election in 1951. The Conservatives won (despite winning fewer votes), beginning a sequence of governments that lasted until 1964, benefiting from the world economic boom which took off in the early 1950s. The Liberal band of nine MPs was caught in the intense Labour–Tory struggle in the 1950–51 parliament that cruelly exposed its political divisions and weak leadership. The Liberals were unable to contest the election of 1951 effectively so soon after the great effort they had made in 1950, and lost three more seats as their share of the vote slumped to 2.5%. The party was brought to the brink of extinction and only began to recover in earnest in the late 1950s after Jo Grimond became leader.

A shift of Liberal National votes to the Liberals in 1950 would have enabled Labour to win a few Conservative seats.<sup>11</sup> In addition, an increase in the Liberal vote nationally would have helped Labour because Liberal votes were drawn more heavily from the Tories than Labour. Table 3 illustrates the probable effect.<sup>12</sup> This would have given Labour a working majority in the Commons at least equal to that enjoyed by the Conservatives between 1951–55. It is possible that the developing divisions between the leader-

**Table 3: Potential impact in 1950**

Lib vote	Swing Con to Lab	Con seats lost	Labour Commons majority	
			From swing	Adding effect of 20% Lib Nat shift to Lib
+1.0%	0.10%	6 to Lab, 1 to Lib <sup>16</sup>	17	25
+2.5%	0.25%	5 to Lab <sup>17</sup>	27	35

ship and the Bevanite Left would anyway have engulfed the Labour government and prevented it from surviving a full term. But even another year or two in office would have brought it the benefit of the economic upturn and the possibility of prolonging Labour rule.

For the Liberals this scenario would have given them vital time to recover from the 1950 election with a considerably strengthened leadership and parliamentary party including Sinclair, Byers and Megan Lloyd George (who lost her seat in 1951). It is unlikely that they would have suffered the near-collapse of 1951–56 and they would have had less lost ground to recover when their fortunes improved. They were tantalisingly close to this prospect.<sup>13</sup>

The Liberal Nationals chose the slow death of maintaining their alliance with the Tories instead of the suicide most of them would have faced by joining the Liberals. But in doing so they may have played an important part in securing their principal goal: to ensure that Britain in the 1950s was not governed by the Labour Party.

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1 Strictly speaking the label 'Liberal National' was used only until 1948, after which the label 'National Liberal' was adopted. For the sake of clarity, and for consistency with other articles, 'Liberal National' is used throughout.  
 2 A few Liberal Nationals were opposed by Conservative candidates in 1931, but none by Liberals. After 1931 Liberal Nationals sometimes faced Liberal opponents, but never Conservatives, with the one exception of a by-election in 1946 in the wholly untypical constituency of Combined Scottish Universities.  
 3 Sheffield Hallam has been excluded although

technically it would have fallen on a 44% transfer. In fact the sitting MP was a Tory standing under a 'Conservative and Liberal' label in a seat with a weak Liberal tradition.

4 He had been MP since 1929. As Labour candidate for Eye in 1955 and 1959, he secured much of the previous Liberal vote.  
 5 For example in the double-member constituency of Southampton in 1945 single Conservative, Liberal National and Liberal candidates stood for the two seats. Only 7% of Liberal National voters shared their votes with the Liberal and under 2% voted only for the Liberal National, whereas 88% also voted for the Conservative. Amongst Liberal voters, 44% voted only for the Liberal, 19% cast Liberal/Liberal National votes, 20% joint votes with the Conservative and 17% with Labour. This suggests that the great bulk of the Liberal National vote was Conservative-inclined, and that many Liberal voters were disinclined to vote for a Liberal National who in this case had strong Liberal credentials.  
 6 Burgin retired in 1945, and Hore-Belisha, who had left the Liberal Nationals in 1942 to sit as an Independent, was defeated.  
 7 In the long years of Tory government that followed, among the Liberal Nationals only J.S. Maclay made the cabinet as Secretary of State for Scotland in 1957–62. Sir David Renton and Niall Macpherson became Ministers of State.  
 8 Denbigh is excluded from these figures.  
 9 A swing of 5% would have produced six more gains in 1945 (Bodmin, Camborne, Barnstaple, Mid-Bedfordshire, Gainsborough and Berwick-on-Tweed), and one in 1950 (North Cornwall). This excludes Middlesbrough West in 1945 and Western Isles in 1950, where Liberals had straight fights with Labour and so presumably already had the full anti-Labour vote.  
 10 Sinclair suffered a serious stroke in 1951. Jo Grimond was then aged thirty-eight and might have been judged too young to assume the leadership. If Grimond had been elected in 1945, however, he would already have had the same length of parliamentary experience as he had when he was actually elected leader in 1956. Megan Lloyd George might have been a contender for the leadership as well as Clement Davies.  
 11 A shift of 20% of Liberal National votes to Liberal in 1950 would have given Labour four more seats, enough to increase its Commons majority from five to thirteen. The vulnerable seats were Luton, Bradford North, Renfrew West and Norfolk Central.  
 12 D.E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (1952), pp. 270–71, concludes that generally ex-Liberal voters from 1950 split in favour of the Conservatives in at least the proportion 60:40 in

1951. Assuming that an increased Liberal vote in 1950 would have drawn votes from the two other parties in the same proportion, it would have produced the swings from Conservative to Labour illustrated in the table. In addition if a revived Liberal Party had fought more seats in 1950, their intervention might have tipped the balance in favour of Labour in three more seats where the Conservatives won narrowly in straight fights: Glasgow Craigton (if the Liberal vote had been above 3%), Eastleigh (above 7%) and Burton (above 9%).

13 The Liberals would have secured 2.5% more votes if they had simply maintained their opinion poll rating (12%) at the start of the 1950 election campaign through to polling day.

14 1950 figures refer to candidates categorised by F.W.S. Craig as National Liberal and Conservative. These ran under a variety of labels: National Liberal, National Liberal and Conservative, Conservative and National Liberal, Liberal and Conservative, and Conservative and Liberal. See *Times Guide to the House of Commons, 1945, 1950*.

15 Includes Gwilym Lloyd George.

16 Spelthorne (C majority 0.0%), Stroud & Thornbury (0.1%), Pudsey (0.1%), York (0.1%), Shipley (0.1%), Dorset North (0.2%) and Woolwich West (0.2%).

17 Bexley (0.3%), Chislehurst (0.3%), Bromsgrove (0.3%), Peterborough (0.4%) and Glasgow Scotstoun (0.5%).

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## Research in Progress

*If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 2) for inclusion here.*

**The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

**Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16.** *Andrew Gardner, 22 Birdbrook House, Popham Road, Islington, London N1 8TA; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

**The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10).** Any information welcome, particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

**Edmund Lamb (Liberal MP for Leominster 1906–10).** Any information on his election and period as MP; wanted for biography of his daughter, Winfred Lamb. *Dr David Gill, d.gill@appleonline.net.*

**Joseph King (Liberal MP for North Somerset during the Great War).** Any information welcome, particularly on his links with the Union of Democratic Control and other opponents of the war (including his friend George Raffalovich). *Colin Houlding; COLGUDIN@aol.com*

**The political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP.** Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com.*

**Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

**Crouch End or Hornsey Liberal Association or Young Liberals in the 1920s and 1930s;** especially any details of James Gleeson or Patrick Moir, who are believed to have been Chairmen. *Tony Marriott, Flat A, 13 Coleridge Road, Crouch End, London N8 8EH.*

**Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s.** Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN*

**The Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45.** Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunders (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

**Clement Davies – research for the first full biography.** Of particular interest are the activities of government departments where Clement Davies worked in the First World War, including Enemy Activities in Neutral Countries, Economic Warfare and Trading with the Enemy; also the period 1939–42, after Davies left the Liberal Nationals but before he rejoined the independent Liberals, and his relationships with MacDonald, Boothby, Attlee and Churchill. *Alun Wyburn-Powell; awyburn-powell@beeb.net.*

**The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s.** *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

**The Young Liberal Movement 1959–1985;** including in particular relations with the leadership, and between NLYL and ULS. *Carrie Park, 89 Coombe Lane, Bristol BS9 2AR; clp25@hermes.cam.ac.uk.*

**The revival of the Liberal Party in the 1960s and '70s;** including the relationships between local and parliamentary electoral performance. Access to party records (constituency- and ward-level) relating to local activity in London and Birmingham, and interviews with key activists of particular interest. *Paul Lambe, University of Plymouth; paul.lambe@ntlworld.com.*

**The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.** Individual constituency papers, and contact with members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*