

Ian Hunter introduces the speech made by Violet Bonham Carter on her father's return to Parliament in 1920.

# 'Hold on, hold out; we are coming'

Violet Bonham Carter was born in London on 15 April 1887, the daughter of Herbert Henry Asquith and his first wife Helen Melland. Despite a lack of formal education, she possessed a formidable intellect, and used it on behalf of the Liberal Party and her father. She was devoted to Asquith – Churchill described her as his ‘champion redoubtable’ – and to defending his reputation and beliefs. Through her efforts, she kept the standard of Asquithian Liberalism flying well into the second half of the twentieth century.

Bonham Carter was an active and effective public speaker for Liberalism, making her first political speech in 1909 at the age of twenty-two and her last in January 1969 in the House of Lords at the age of eighty-one, just a few weeks before her death. She inherited her father's gift for public speaking; articulate and forceful, she projected her strong personality through her deep melodious voice and quick pace. She could dominate any meeting with her rhetorical skills, and, especially in later life, was much in demand as a speaker on both radio and television.

In *Great Liberal Speeches*, we included one of her last speeches, against the 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act introduced by the Labour Government to stem the influx of Kenyan Asians fleeing Kenya as result of President Kenyatta's discriminatory 'Africanisation' policy.

Here we reprint a much earlier speech, given to the National Liberal Club on 10 March 1920 following her father's return to the House of Commons at the Paisley by-election the month before. Defeated along with most of the Liberal leadership at the 'coupon election' of 1918, Asquith's victory at Paisley marked a major setback for the Lloyd George Coalition. At the age of sixty-six, Asquith resumed his post of Liberal Leader in the Commons (taking over from Donald MacLean), a position he was to hold for a further five and half years. Despite a long

political career, his daughter Violet was never herself to win a seat in the Commons, but was created a life peer in 1964, entering the Lords as Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury.

## The message of Paisley

I don't know how to thank you for this wonderful reception, nor to tell you what a great honour, what a tremendous privilege I feel it is, to be the very first woman who has ever addressed a fortnightly lunch. The only shadow on my happiness is the haunting fear that I may be not only the first but, owing to the poor quality of my performance here this afternoon, the last also. But I don't mean to let these misgivings spoil what is, after all, my treat. I'm determined to enjoy myself, even at the expense of my poor hosts: in fact, I've begun already.

If anything could have added to my pride and pleasure in being your guest here to-day, it is the fact that I have been introduced to you by Sir Donald Maclean. Sir Donald Maclean has held our standard high and held it steady all through these, the darkest days that Liberalism has ever known. But for him, there could have been no Paisley, and but for him the Liberal Party, as a Party, to-day might not exist.

## Bewildering popularity

Sir Donald has said far too kind and far too generous things about me. I hope you will discount them. In fact, I want to begin by asking you to discount most of the things you have heard about me lately. I have been the victim, the happy victim, the lucky victim, at the hands of the Press, of a process which I believe is known in financial circles as 'inflation'. It's a thing which happens to the currency sometimes. But whether it is applied to money or whether it is applied to reputations, its aim

and its result are the same: that is, to make things appear to be worth a great deal more than they actually are. Well, that's what has happened to me. Don't imagine that I didn't enjoy it. Of course I did. It was a curious and bewildering experience for a child of the Old Gang to find herself honourably mentioned in the *Weekly Dispatch*; and when I read that my father was a great statesman, and even a great patriot, I felt just like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* rolled into one.

## A glorious theme

I have chosen as my subject here this afternoon 'Paisley', partly because I know that it is due to the fact that I was one of the troupers of the Paisley stage that I owe my invitation here to-day; partly because it is the only subject in the world on which I could trust myself to address you for twenty-five minutes, which, I understand, is the prescribed time, without getting hopelessly out of my depth; and partly because it is a theme so glorious that it needs no help from me – it plays itself.

I don't know where to begin – I could talk to you about it for ever. I don't know whether to tell you about its little incidents, intimate and subtle; whether to dwell on the vast issues we felt to be at stake, the immense results that we feel have been achieved for Liberalism – for this country and for the world; or whether to describe to you the drama of our own hearts – the doubt, the hope, the fear, the nightmare of uncertainty, the ecstasy of fulfillment. There's not an inch of Paisley that isn't hallowed ground to me.

First, I would like you to realise, and to put to my father's credit, the fact that it was a very gallant adventure. It was an enterprise, undertaken at the eleventh hour, in unknown territory, in a constituency which was held by a bare hundred at the last general election, undertaken in response to an invitation secured by a narrow majority of twenty-five in a divided Association – half of which were, or thought they were, Coalition Liberals. Within a week of his arrival, there wasn't a Coalition Liberal left in Paisley. Coalition Liberalism collapsed like a house of cards. It proved to have

been a mirage – a hallucination – which perished at the first contact with reality. Within a week we were standing on firm ground with the loyal, solid backing of the finest fighting force of Liberals you could find in this or any other country.

## Labour reinforcements

We were fighting on two fronts. We had on our left a strong Labour candidate – strong because he was so moderate, a clean fighter, backed by a magnificent organisation, a man who knew every crease in the ground – for he had been over the course a year ago. He was helped – I'm not sure whether helped is quite the right word – by various manifestos and demonstrations from outside. There was one manifesto signed by certain members of the Club.<sup>1</sup> It didn't do us any harm; on the contrary, I think it drove some birds over our guns. There were demonstrations in the distance from Comrade Haldane and Comrade Warwick. We poor Liberals had nothing as gaudy to show as their red flags and their blue blood; but there again we noticed no ugly rush, no stampede to the standard of Revolution when their manifestos appeared. I think, perhaps, that between them they have made the barricade almost too safe for democracy. So much for our left.

## The half coupon

On our right we had a particularly crude manifestation of Coalition Toryism, armed with half a coupon and a few handfuls of mud.<sup>2</sup> Was the other half of that coupon withheld from a genuine desire for our success? Or was it withheld because the Prime Minister is no willing godfather to forlorn hopes? He is rarely to be found on

the burning deck,

Whence all but he had fled.

The part of Casabianca – that noble but ungrateful role – was left on this occasion, as it has been on others, to Mr. Bonar Law.

## The coalition case

After reading Mr. McKean's speeches there were only two courses open to

me – either to laugh, or to feel very sick. As you may have heard, at one moment there was a desperate attempt to make my father's ties the real issue of the election. This caused me great alarm, because he wore during the contest a series of ties that would easily have lost him the safest seat in Scotland; and I had to explain that he had never used this ties as vehicles of his political opinions – having (thank Heaven for it) other ways of expressing himself.

Then there was my 'German husband'. I was accused, not, I must say, by Mr. McKean himself, but by his canvassers, of having a German husband, and this put me in rather a hole as I was never throughout the contest able to produce the one and only bit of concrete evidence I possessed to the contrary. No doubt you will say all this was broad farce – but it was not intended to be. There was a very disgraceful and a very carefully organised campaign of calumny on foot. Mr. McKean accused my father of pampering German prisoners at home, whilst our prisoners abroad were tortured; of wringing with congratulatory fervour the blood-stained hands of Sinn Feiners; and a Mr. Lane Mitchell, speaking for Mr. McKean and in his presence, said in so many words that my father was a friend of Germany.

These were not only the main, but the only planks in the Coalition platform. If you examine them you will find that they are a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Government programme at the last general election. They swept the country with it then. They pay the 'freak' fine for it now. The reason I quote them, at what may seem to you such unnecessary and tiresome length, is that I was amazed to read in Mr. Bonar Law's recent speech at Glasgow that 'he had followed the contest closely, and that as far as he could see, Mr. McKean had put up a plucky fight for which he deserved the congratulations of all Conservatives'. I can only hope Mr. Bonar Law is inaccurate in saying that he followed the contest closely. If I were a Conservative I should feel undying shame that the great and historic party to which I belonged should, on a great and historic occasion like that of the Paisley by-election, have had a representative who fought with



Violet Bonham Carter in later life

such contemptible and such ridiculous weapons.

But, ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Bonar Law, who begins by saying that Mr. McKean deserves the congratulations of every Conservative, goes on to say that there is no doubt that in the end Mr. Asquith was returned by Conservative votes. So, it appears, the Conservatives who voted for my father are to congratulate Mr. McKean! All I can say is that if Paisley is in reality a Tory victory, a few more Tory victories like it would make the leader of the Tory Party look rather out of place in his present position. They might reduce him, as well as his political godchildren, to the status of a freak. And what about the Government of which he is one of the two accredited leaders? What does it now pretend to represent? Not Labour, and not Liberalism – that we know. Apparently not even Toryism – if the Tory vote has just returned to power its most avowed, its most determined, and its most formidable opponent. No, the totally unrepresentative character of the present Coalition – the fact that it expresses neither the principles of any party, nor the will of the nation, the fact that it expresses nothing but the passionate instinct for self-preservation of its own authors, is one of the plainest messages of the Paisley result.

## The women's vote

May I say just one word here about the women electors of Paisley, to whom I feel we owe our victory in so large a measure. 'How did your father get the

women's vote?' is a question I am asked over and over again, and I think there is no doubt whatever that we did get it. Our opponents would be the first to admit that. I think my father got the women's vote largely by treating the women voters with intellectual respect. I was amused to see some of the London papers holding up to derision what they described as his 'Treasury Bench manner with the mill girls'. It is the greatest mistake to imagine that the best way of reaching women is by bad sentiment and worse jokes. How often have I seen them approached on these lines, poor things! It is called the 'human touch'.

## Woman's place in politics

There is another more ambitious but equally offensive line of attack. This is to relegate them entirely to what a man imagines to be 'women's subjects'. I remember once, at a Committee on which I was working, seeing written down on the agenda paper, 'Women's Subjects – Vice and Drink'. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I don't wish to appear to speak with levity or disrespect of either of these subjects – I am fully aware of their gravity and of their importance, but I can't help rather resenting the suggestion that I and my sex generally should specialise in them. Women should share with men the limitless horizon which is open to us all alike. This is the only way to sanity, to breadth of vision, to a right balance of social and political forces. I think women, once aroused, are natural Liberals. Everyone is a Tory before he wakes up. Women are certainly individualists; and they are certainly Parliamentarians, as against Direct Actionists. They believe in settlement by discussion rather than by any arbitrament of violence – whether it takes the form of war or of general strikes.

One more thing. Women are said – and this is sometimes used as an argument against them, and as a demonstration of the danger of the women's vote – women are said to be very much influenced by personality. I think this is true; but if it is true that they are very much influenced by personality, it is also true that they are very good judges of character. As one of our Paisley women said, in recommending my father to her fellow-electors, 'We

women have been at this business of sizing up men for many thousands of years; and is it likely that now we won't know the right one out of three?'

## Brightening skies

Ladies and gentlemen, do forgive me for keeping you so long. There is more ground than I can possibly cover. You don't know how wonderful it was to see my father – and all that I felt he stood for – daily gaining ground; you don't know what it was to see the little spark we had kindled in Paisley spreading far and wide like a heath-fire, till the whole country was alight, so that if we looked north or south or east or west, everywhere those skies that have been dark above us for so long were reddened by the glow of Liberalism – alive again, awake, aflame. We know we were fighting for more than Paisley. We were fighting for the soul of Liberalism itself. That soul has been saved; and with it the great message of hope which I believe Liberalism, alone of all political creeds, can bring – not to this country alone, but to Ireland, to Europe, to a distracted and suffering world.

## A great wrong righted

May I add one personal word, and that is that I feel that Paisley has righted a great wrong. I was with my father in December 1918, when he saw the party, to whose service he had given his life, shattered before his eyes, not by a frontal attack from without – that it could never have been – but by a betrayal from within. He saw himself deserted by men who owed him their political existence, by men whom he had never failed, by men whom he had led from victory to victory. He saw – and this was the hardest thing of all for him to bear – he saw those who stood by him go under. The choice of Paisley, the welcome of the whole nation – for it is nothing less – has made some amends to a heart which was too great to be broken.

## Sounds of victory

One last scene – the closing scene of the drama of Paisley. Let us remember it together, for you have shared it with me. It will always be indelibly graven on my

mind: the sight of those great cheering crowds that thronged Whitehall and Parliament Square the day that he took his seat. When I went in out of the noise, into the silence of the House – the House in which I had seen him lead great armies to great triumphs; when I saw that little gallant handful of men which is all his following now, and heard their thin cheer raised, for a moment I felt – is this all, are these all he has behind

him? But then I remembered the great voice of the crowd – it rang in my ears; and I knew that this, *this* was the voice of England – not the drilled cheers of those conscript ranks on the Coalition benches. And I knew that our small force that day was like the little gallant garrison of a beleaguered city that hears for the first time the great shout of the relieving forces – ‘Hold on, hold out; we are coming’. *And they are.*

- 1 Labour's candidate, J. M. Biggar, was endorsed by nine former Liberal MPs: A. V. Rutherford, Joseph King, R. C. Lambert, Hastings Lees-Smith, Charles Trevelyan, Charles Roden Buxton, Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, Arthur Ponsonby and R. S. Outhwaite signed a letter appearing in the *Daily Herald* on 27 January, urging ex-Liberals to vote against Asquith.
- 2 The Conservative candidate, J. A. D. MacKean, was described by Asquith as a 'foul-mouthed Tory'.

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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 letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65).** Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. *Dr A. Howe, Department of International History, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE; a.howe@lse.ac.uk.* (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, see [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/cobdenLetters/](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/cobdenLetters/))

**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.*

**Cornish Methodism and Cornish political identity, 1918–1960s.** Researching the relationship through oral history. *Kayleigh Milden, Institute of Cornish Studies, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro TR1 3ND; KMSMilden@aol.com.*

**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 Maunder (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

**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.*