

The First World War and the Liberal Party

Alun Wyburn-Powell analyses the impact of the Great War on defections from the party

Liberal Defectors and

THE LIBERAL PARTY declined from 400 MPs in 1906 to just 40 in 1924. The extent to which the First World War was the main cause of the party's decline is still a source of historical controversy. Some, mainly earlier, commentators believed that the reasons for the decline predated the First World War. Many others cite the war itself as the major cause, while some consider that the party received most of its near-fatal damage after the war. In my work I have analysed all the individual defections of sitting and former Liberal MPs in the hundred years from 1910 to discover when each made their decision to abandon the party and what motivated their defection. This analysis sheds light on the state of the Liberal Party as seen by its elected representatives before, during and after the First World War and tends to focus the search for the causes of the party's decline onto the period after the war.

Analysing patterns of defections between parties can reveal much about the state of health of each party at a particular point in time. Parties are affected by defections of donors, peers, councillors and other supporters, but the most visible and quantifiable of defections are those by MPs. They are well informed and have much at stake in terms of their careers and reputations. Virtually all leave written records and other evidence of their motivation. Defection is not a decision taken lightly. It is usually an emotional event, played out in public. Each defection by an MP is therefore an expert judgment on the state of a party and its leader at a specific point in time. A planned defection could have been aborted at any time, had the circumstances changed. With a few prominent exceptions, most notably Winston Churchill, defections usually tend to be permanent. Studying the timing and reasons for defections to and from the Liberal Party therefore focuses attention on times of crucial strains within the party.

In 1886 the Liberal Unionists split from the Liberal Party over the issue of Irish home rule.

This was a serious blow to the Liberal Party, which subsequently only held power for three years out of the following twenty. However, the party remained relatively cohesive during this time. This was despite Gladstone's retirement in 1894 and the attendant problems thrown up when a long-serving leader departs, leaving a party dominated by their appointments, policies and image. In the period leading up to the First World War the Liberal Party was the beneficiary of a net inward migration of defecting MPs – the most prominent among them being Winston Churchill, Jack Seely and the Guest brothers in 1904 from the Conservatives. This supports the assertion of the party being in good health at this stage and argues against theories of a pre-war decline, which have been proposed by commentators such as George Dangerfield,¹ Ross McKibbin² and Henry Pelling.³

From 1903 until the First World War the Liberals worked in alliance with the nascent Labour Party, under the Gladstone–MacDonald pact, involving informal electoral cooperation. By 1906 the Liberal Party had recovered sufficiently to win a landslide general election victory with 400 seats, and further support from Labour's thirty MPs. A Liberal government was re-elected in the January 1910 general election, albeit without an overall majority. In the December 1910 election, the last before the war, the result was almost identical, although the Liberal share of the vote actually increased marginally from 43.2 per cent of the vote to 43.9 per cent. The Liberal Party still had over 270 MPs. This total compares favourably with the Conservatives' pre-war nadir of only 157 MPs.

Yet by 1924 the Liberal Party was reduced to only one-tenth of its 1906 figure, with the Labour Party firmly installed as the second party to the Conservatives, and with many former Liberals having defected to Labour. The single biggest event in the intervening period was the First World War and it is tempting to assume that this

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was the reason for the party's decline, as did commentators Trevor Wilson,⁴ Duncan Tanner⁵ and Michael Bentley,⁶ with more recent support from other historians, including David Dutton, who argued that 'the more evidence that has been accumulated to show that the Liberal Party was in no imminent danger of collapse in 1914, the more significance must be attached to the war as the key explanation of what subsequently occurred'.⁷ However, analysis of the scale and timing of defections associated with the war suggests that, with few exceptions, Liberal MPs did not give up their confidence in the party until after the war.

The outbreak of the First World War on 3 August 1914 caused instinctive patriotic unity among Conservatives, a split from top to bottom in the Labour Party and a divergence of views among Liberals – soon to be demonstrated by the gulf between those who joined the anti-war Union of Democratic Control (UDC) and the fervently pro-war Liberal War Committee (LWC). However, it also heralded an electoral truce and a delay in the next general election, depriving historians of the evidence on the health of the parties usually shown up in election results.

In the very early days of the UDC, its founders believed that they were representative of a large body of Liberal opinion and that they were seeking Labour support merely to strengthen their argument. However, Ramsay MacDonald, who had resigned the Labour Party leadership on the outbreak of war, emerged as a leading figure in the UDC. He confided to his diary that his leadership had been futile and that the Labour Party was 'no party in reality'.⁸ By collaborating with MacDonald, the dissenting Liberals were certainly not motivated by any future career prospects within the Labour Party. Until mid-September 1914, the founders of the UDC had reason to believe that Lloyd George might have joined them and carried with him a substantial number of left-wing Liberals. Lloyd George claimed that he had resigned from the cabinet on

1 August over Foreign Secretary Grey's pledges to France, but that Asquith had persuaded him to remain. Lloyd George had described his position as that of 'an unattached member of the Cabinet' who sat 'very lightly'.⁹

The key issue during the war, which has been blamed in large measure for the Liberal Party's problems, was the controversy over conscription, which had never before been enforced in Britain and which was regarded by many as the antithesis of liberalism.

The Conservative Party, the majority of Liberals and most of the Labour movement decided to back the war effort and support the voluntary recruiting drive which operated at the beginning of the First World War. The dissenters who opposed the war, and did not support the voluntary recruitment drive, were a small proportion of the House of Commons. They became labelled as 'pacifists', even though they represented a wide range of views, all opposed to the war, but from many different standpoints. Membership of the UDC did not necessarily imply pacifism. Liberal MPs who were Quakers, such as Arnold Rowntree and Edmund Harvey, objected to war on religious grounds, and were genuinely pacifist. Many others, such as Richard Denman, were opposed on political, economic or diplomatic grounds, but were not pacifists. However, their isolation from mainstream political opinion and, increasingly, their shared vilification in the press and in the street, brought them together for mutual support with members of the Labour Party and in particular, Ramsay MacDonald.

A majority of Liberal MPs supported all the moves towards military recruitment – the key legislation being the Registration Bill of July 1915, the Bachelors' Bill of January 1916 and full conscription in May 1916. Within this supportive majority, there was a group wholeheartedly advocating conscription, including Freddie Guest, Henry Cowan and Alfred Mond, all of whom later defected to the Conservatives. Other

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prominent pro-conscriptionists included Cathcart Wason, Ivor Herbert, Frederick Cawley and Edwin Cornwall, who remained within the Liberal Party. But also included among the pro-conscriptionists were Josiah Wedgwood, Leo Chiozza Money and Alexander MacCallum Scott, who all eventually defected to Labour. It was hard to imagine a group of Liberals more diverse in their wider political opinions than those who came to embrace conscription. The Liberal conscriptionists included a number of very wealthy industrialists, but their ranks also contained a significant number of MPs who had been enthusiastic social reformers before the war.¹⁰

The existence of a group of Liberal MPs strongly supporting conscription added to the tensions within the party and further alienated some of the most ardent anti-conscriptionists. Freddie Guest, founder of the Liberal War Committee in 1916, was among the most outspoken of the pro-conscriptionists. *The Nation* reported that Guest's 'extreme' stance on the question of compulsion divided the conscriptionists, 'the more moderate openly dissociating themselves' from him.¹¹ This was an early example of Guest's ability to alienate like-minded colleagues: He was to become one of the most divisive figures in the party after the war. At the outbreak of war, Guest had enthusiastically re-joined the army, setting an example which he encouraged others to follow. Many other Liberal MPs did join the forces and six were killed in action.¹²

Whilst the UDC members always opposed conscription, they were not alone in the Commons in the first month of the war. At this stage, the Liberal cabinet on balance was opposed to conscription, as was the Conservative leader, Bonar Law. However, by November 1914 Bonar Law began to accept that conscription would become necessary, if sufficient volunteers were not forthcoming.¹³ Lloyd George was also coming to the conclusion that compulsion could become necessary, but the lack of munitions delayed his demand for its introduction, as the shell shortage was more acute than the lack of troops.

Serious cracks within the Liberal Party were demonstrated in the parliamentary votes on conscription, but their scale was limited. Twenty-five Liberal MPs voted against the Registration Bill, six weeks after the formation of the Asquith coalition in 1915. When compulsion became inevitable after the limited achievements of the Derby Scheme, Asquith introduced the Bachelors' Bill on 5 January 1916. It was presented not as conscription, but as redemption of his pledge to married men, that single men would be called up ahead of them. Over thirty Liberals this time voted against the bill. John Simon resigned as home secretary. Reginald McKenna was opposed on practical and financial grounds, believing that the economy could not support a larger army, but he was persuaded to stay. The mounting military

losses meant that, on 3 May 1916, Asquith had to introduce the Military Services Bill. It provided for all men, regardless of marital status, between 18 and 41 to be conscripted. Twenty-eight Liberals voted against this measure.

Asquith had continued as prime minister after the Liberal Party was forced into coalition with the other parties in May 1915, but his abilities as a peacetime leader did not, in the view of many, translate him into an effective and decisive wartime prime minister. He had some loyal adherents, whose faith in him was unshakable, such as Reginald McKenna and William Wedgwood Benn, but others who looked for a more decisive new leader. Lloyd George emerged as that figure. Almost inevitably, there was antagonism between the supporters of the two figures and almost all of the Asquith supporters who were offered positions in Lloyd George's coalition in December 1916 turned down the posts.

The formation of the Lloyd George coalition heralded a period of turmoil for party politics. Most European socialist parties split over the war, and in Britain, adherence to the existing party system was challenged on several fronts. Arthur Henderson told Ramsay MacDonald that some Labour ministers 'do not mean to return to the Party', believing that Lloyd George wanted to form new party and that 'some Labour men will join him.'¹⁴

In total, thirty-five Liberal MPs dissented to the extent that they voted against at least two of the three conscription measures, or abstained on two and voted against the third. Historian Michael Hart claimed that constituency Liberal associations would not tolerate the continuation of wartime objectors in parliament and that this was a major cause of the decline of the Liberal Party.¹⁵ However, this was rarely the case, as is shown in Table 1, which charts the electoral fate of all thirty-five of the Liberal dissenters.

For twenty-eight of the thirty-five Liberal MPs (80 per cent) who were wartime dissenters, their wartime stance was not a barrier to their future careers in the Liberal Party. In many cases their careers suffered setbacks, but this was the case with virtually all Liberals, due to the overall state of the party.

Just seven MPs defected from the Liberal Party entirely or partly because of the war: Richard Lambert, Joseph King, Arthur Ponsonby, Charles Trevelyan and Robert Outhwaite left the party entirely because of the war; while Bertie Lees-Smith and E. T. John defected partly due to the war.

Richard Lambert defected to the Labour Party in December 1918. He complained that after 'four years' experience of broken faith and broken pledges' the Liberal Party 'has neither policy nor leaders nor even principles'.¹⁶ His constituency of Cricklade was abolished for the 1918 election. He did not seek another seat, nor stand again for another party.

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Table 1. Electoral fate of the 35 Liberal MP who dissented over conscription

MP/Constituency	Registration Bill vote 05/07/1915	Bachelors' Bill vote 06/01/1916	Conscription Bill vote 04/05/1916	Fate at 1918 election	Date of any defection
Arnold/Holmfirth	no vote	opposed	opposed	won – Lib	1922
Glanville/Bermondsey	supported	opposed	opposed	won – Lib	none
Hogge/Edinburgh E	opposed	opposed	opposed	won – Lib	none
Wilson JW/Worcs N	no vote	no vote	opposed	won – Lib	none
Alden/Tottenham	no vote	opposed	no vote	lost – Lib	1919
Barlow/Frome	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Chancellor/Haggerston	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Holt/Hexham	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Jones LS/Rushcliffe	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Lees-Smith/Nhampton	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib*	1919
Lough/Islington West	opposed	opposed	no vote	lost – Lib	none
Molteno/Dumfriesshire	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Pringle/Lanarks NW	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Rowntree/York	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	none
Simon J/Walthamstow	no vote	opposed	opposed	lost – Lib	1931
Outhwaite/Hanley	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Lib	1918
Mason D/Coventry	supported	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Lib	1939
Whitehouse/Lanarks M	opposed	opposed	no vote	lost – Ind Lib	1914
Ponsonby/Stirling	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Dem	1918
Trevelyan/Elland	opposed	opposed	opposed	lost – Ind Lab	1918
John ET/Denbighshire E	opposed	opposed	no vote	lost – Lab	1918
Burns/Battersea	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Clough/Skipton	opposed	opposed	no vote	not candidate	none
Denman/Carlisle	opposed	opposed	no vote	not candidate	1924
Harvey A/Rochdale	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Harvey T/Leeds West	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	1937
King J/Somerset North	opposed	opposed	opposed	not candidate	1919
Lamb/Rochester	no vote	no vote	opposed	not candidate	1924
Lambert/Cricklade	opposed	opposed	opposed	not candidate	1918
Runciman/Hartlepoons	opposed	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Sherwell/Huddersfield	opposed	opposed	no vote	not candidate	none
Williams/Carmarthen	no vote	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Morrell/Burnley	supported	opposed	opposed	not candidate	none
Baker J/Finsbury East	opposed	opposed	opposed	dead	none
Byles/Salford North	supported	opposed	opposed	dead	none

Bold = UDC member

* Lees-Smith is described in some sources as a 'Liberal' candidate and in others as an 'Independent Radical'. He did have the backing of the local Liberal association and faced no Liberal opposition.

Joseph King, Liberal MP for North Somerset from January 1910, claimed that the wartime Liberal Party had proved 'without courage, and false to its principles'.¹⁷ He did not stand in the 1918 election, but supported Labour. He made the move to the Labour Party in 1919, hoping that Lloyd George would do the same. He was

disappointed in this and in his two unsuccessful campaigns as a Labour candidate in 1920 and 1923.

Arthur Ponsonby fell out with his constituency Liberal association and became the focus of hostile media attention during the war. He was physically attacked for his views and had his premises raided by the police. He fought the 1918 election

as an Independent Democrat and came last in the newly created Dunfermline Burghs constituency. He joined the Labour Party immediately after the 1918 election and served as a Labour MP from 1922 to 1930, when he went to the Lords. He eventually left the Labour Party during the Second World War.

Charles Trevelyan resigned from his ministerial post at the Board of Education on the outbreak of the First World War. His relationship with his Elland constituency association deteriorated and by the end of the conflict, he had come to believe that the war had 'taken away our reputations as well as it has done our careers'.¹⁸ In November 1918 he announced that he had joined Labour, but he left his decision so late that the Labour Party already had a candidate in place in his constituency. Trevelyan contested the seat as an Independent Labour candidate, coming fourth and last, one place behind the official Labour candidate. Trevelyan was elected as a Labour MP in 1922 and appointed back to the Board of Education in the first and second Labour governments, although he fell out with Ramsay MacDonald in 1931 and resigned again from the department – the only minister to resign from the same department in the administrations of two different parties.¹⁹

Robert Outhwaite respectfully parted company with his local Liberal association in Hanley at the beginning of the war. Although his local party accepted that Outhwaite was motivated by 'the highest motives' and their opinion of his 'character and principles had been enhanced, rather than otherwise', the association put forward another Liberal candidate in 1918.²⁰ Outhwaite stood as an Independent Liberal. He came third, but won more votes than the official Liberal contender.

The two other Liberals who defected partly because of their dissent over conscription were Hastings (Bertie) Lees-Smith and E. T. John.

Lees-Smith was described in the press as a 'pacifist', but he volunteered for military service as the only MP to serve in the ranks. He contested the seat of Don Valley in 1918. He was described in different sources as either an 'Independent Radical' or as a 'Liberal', but, despite facing no Liberal opponent and having the backing of the local Liberal association, he came a distant second. He eventually defected to the Labour Party in June 1919, saying that his 'principles have in no way changed' but that he could not 'look to any section of the Liberal Party to carry them into effect ... practically all the men who share these views ... are in the ranks of Labour'.²¹ Lees-Smith went on to serve three non-consecutive terms as Labour MP for Keighley. Lees-Smith had been brought into contact with like-minded Labour figures in the UDC during the war, but the timing of his departure from the Liberal Party demonstrated that his decision only crystallised well after the end of the war.

E. T. John defected from the Liberal Party to Labour during the war and actually stood as a Labour candidate in 1918. However, the Labour Party was not really his preferred political platform as his main preoccupation was with Welsh Nationalism. He had had misgivings about conscription, but mainly practical concerns from the point of view of an industrialist. He stood unsuccessfully under a Labour banner in three further elections, but never gave the Labour Party his full confidence.

Apart from E. T. John, there was just one other former Liberal MP who actually stood as a Labour candidate in 1918 – Leo Chiozza Money. Money narrowly lost the 1918 contest and never returned to parliament. His views were very different from the other defectors. He was not a dissenter over conscription and had remained in post at the Ministry of Shipping and loyal to Lloyd George throughout the war. He was motivated by preserving shipping nationalisation after the war. Money's private life and increasingly extreme political views undermined his political credibility. He was twice charged with indecent behaviour. He was acquitted the first time. However, on the second occasion, which involved a woman in a railway carriage, his defence failed. He claimed in court that he had been wearing a distinctive hat on the day in question, and had he done anything improper, a signalman along the route would have noticed. Money became an increasingly convinced supporter of the Fascist dictators between the wars.

No other Liberal MPs or former MPs defected to the Labour Party during the First World War and no Liberal MPs at all defected to the Conservative Party between December 1910 and the demise of the Lloyd George coalition in October 1922.

Another seven of the MPs who objected to conscription – Percy Alden, John Simon, Sydney Arnold, David Mason, Ted Harvey, Ernest Lamb and Richard Denman – all did defect from the Liberal Party at later dates, but for reasons unconnected with the war. The First World War was therefore not a major direct cause of defections of Liberal MPs from the party.

In a longer-term context, over the hundred years from 1910, a total of 707 individuals served as a Liberal or Liberal Democrat MP and 116 of these defected from the party (about 16 per cent of the total).²² The peak years for defections were 1924 and 1931. Roughly equal numbers went to the right as to the left. In this context, the seven defections (all to Labour) driven by the First World War was not by any means a very significant proportion.

The Lloyd George coalition with the Conservatives did have indirect consequences for the future outflow of defectors from the Liberals. The split in the Liberal Party damaged its election performance and so reduced its attraction to career-minded politicians. This has been the major factor

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behind defections over the last century. Better prospects in another party accounted for 46 per cent of reasons for all defections over the hundred years. Disagreement over policy was responsible for driving another 37 per cent, while only 3 per cent were motivated purely by personality clashes. (The remaining 14 per cent had mixed motives.)²³ The Lloyd George coalition also led to the forging of working relationships between Liberals and Conservatives which led to calls for the fusion of the two parties. After this was rejected by the Liberal Party, some Liberal MPs transferred to the Conservatives – a phenomenon which has so far been absent since the 2010–15 coalition.

From the overall analysis of a century of defections, other patterns also appear. Wealthier and better-educated MPs and those with high-ranking military service were more likely to defect than their colleagues. They tended to be more self-confident and less reliant on their parliamentary salaries than their loyalist colleagues. Those who were divorced were also more likely to defect, perhaps reflecting an unwillingness to tolerate an unsatisfactory situation in any part of their life. MPs who belonged to a minority religion within their party were also more likely to defect than the majority of Nonconformists among the Liberals. Even after allowing for the vastly higher number of male than female Liberal MPs, men were proportionately more likely to defect than women.

Most of the leftward defections were motivated more by the problems of the Liberal Party, than by the attractions of Labour – they were a product of a failure of the Liberal Party, not a failure of Liberalism. For over half of the Liberal MPs and former MPs who defected to Labour, their move was not a success. Some of the dissatisfaction can be attributed to the difficulty for the former Liberals to assimilate themselves socially into Labour circles, where a culture of trades unionism, party discipline, dogged commitment in adversity, and, in many cases, poverty, predominated. In many cases the former Liberals, generally from wealthy professional backgrounds, found it difficult to make friends with, and to be trusted by, their Labour colleagues. Of the forty-five who had made the transition to Labour by 1956, twenty-four (53 per cent) either left the Labour Party or became seriously dissatisfied with their new party.²⁴

Of all the Liberal Party leaders in the years from 1910 to 2010, Lloyd George suffered the greatest annual rate of attrition by defection (after allowing for the number of potential defectors in each year). Asquith was the next worst, followed by Clement Davies. Perhaps surprisingly in view of the woes of the 2010–15 coalition, Nick Clegg ends up at the top of the league table, along with Ming Campbell and David Steel, as the leaders who performed best at avoiding defections.²⁵ This may suggest that diligent party management can

go a long way to soothe the frustrations of war or even coalition.

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