

## Liberal Nationals

Since the Liberal Nationals first divided from the official Liberals and eventually merged with the Conservatives, they have often been regarded as Tory cuckoos in the Liberal nest. **Nick Cott** re-evaluates their role.

# Tory cuckoos in the Liberal nest?

## The case of the Liberal Nationals: a re-evaluation

The Liberal Nationals under Sir John Simon broke away from the Liberal Party led by Herbert Samuel in October 1931. This followed fifteen years of intra-party feuding within the Liberal Party dating back to the fall of H.H. Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, and the subsequent rivalry between Asquithians and supporters of Lloyd George which left many Liberals feeling disaffected. More immediately, there were concerns over the future of Liberalism, with many aspects of the Liberal creed having been assailed, and the desire for a National Government in the wake of the troubled domestic and international scene of the early 1930s. The position taken by the Liberal Party in giving Labour its general support (in return for possible concessions such as electoral reform) was also being questioned, due to the Labour Government's inadequacy in dealing with the crisis. Liberal dissatisfaction was expressed in the 1930–31 session, which saw Liberal divisions over governmental legislation, most notably the Kings' Speech, when a small group of rebels under Sir John Simon and Sir Robert Hutchison voted for a Tory amendment. The divisive nature of Lloyd George's policy towards the Government came to a head in June 1931, when Simon resigned the whip. It was clear that this position commanded much support amongst the Liberal ranks and this provided Simon with the confidence to go it alone in October.

Founded to support a coalition, the Liberal Nationals were a significant part of the National Governments, 1931–40, under Ramsay MacDonald (1931–35), Stanley Baldwin (1935–37) and Neville Chamberlain (1937–40), fighting two elections in conjunction with Conservative and National Labour allies.

This significance was enhanced after the departure from the Government of the independent Liberals under the leadership of Herbert Samuel in 1932. Support for Neville Chamberlain and appeasement cost the Liberal Nationals influence during the period of Churchill's premiership (1940–45), and after the Second World War, they became even more reliant on the Conservative Party for their electoral prospects. In 1947, the organisations of the two parties were fused together under the Woolton–Teviot agreement (the Liberal National party being renamed the National Liberal party), permanently ending their independence, and making them appear indistinguishable from the Conservative Party. Joint associations were not formally wound up until 1968, although by then most of them had disappeared anyway.

### I

The Liberal National party is perhaps the most inaccurately and unfairly treated of all forces in twentieth century British political history. Until recently, the party was dismissed as a mere adjunct of the Conservatives.<sup>1</sup> This view rests on the facts that the party at its conception started its own organisation and individual members seemed prepared to compromise on essential aspects of Liberal identity, and in the post-war era, the party's ever closer relations with the Conservatives. However, such views now have to be re-evaluated since recent investigations have reached very different conclusions, outlining an essentially Liberal basis for Liberal National politics.<sup>2</sup> From my own research, I have detected a similarly Liberal element within the party, and in this article I will hope to add to work already done in exploring some new angles. Discussion will focus on the origins of the party,

where I hope to show that the Liberal Nationals can be slotted within a 'Liberal centrist'<sup>3</sup> tradition, which was essentially pragmatic, consensual and coalitionist in attitude. This suggestion will be seen to remove from the Liberal Nationals the charge of defection and puts their actions on a much more honourable footing. This article will examine other reasons for the split in 1931, which will be seen to lie in intra-party conflicts stretching back at least as far as the First World War.

## II

The origins of the Liberal National party can be traced back to a centrist strand of thinking in Liberal high politics, dating from the later nineteenth century, which was pragmatic, consensual and coalitionist in orientation. Whilst Liberal centrists may have displayed different attitudes over time as political contexts changed, what remained consistent was the desire for a 'nationalised' politics to meet particular crises facing the country which party politics could not address, since it was by nature adversarial and self-interested. Such sentiments were not consistently applied by individual Liberals, since National politics was often only seen to be necessary in times of national uncertainty, such as wartime, periods of economic decline or where there was a perceived threat to Britain's parliamentary traditions or to its Empire. The theory was that during such times a series of reforms to avert danger could be speedily enacted, restoring confidence and stability, since decisions could be made on a consensual basis. It follows then, that co-operation meant departures from orthodox viewpoints, and this can be detected, particularly regarding the issue of trade. In theory, Liberals were free traders, but even on this issue a certain centrist flexibility can be detected, although this has not really been characterised as a continuous element by historians. Liberal centrists can also be seen to have schismatic tendencies. Coalition and coalition intrigues drew politicians away from party doctrines and the party tribe and towards those in other parties, particularly the Conservatives, who shared similar anxieties.

Liberal centrism seems to have been born in the later nineteenth century, when high politics was dominated by a fear of Britain's relative economic and physical decline as seen through the poor physical health of its citizens. These fears culminated in the desire for National Efficiency, a movement of social imperialists who advocated more government intervention in the economy and in social welfare provision. All this impacted on the Liberal Party, with challenges to its social, economic and imperial policies.

Perhaps the most significant challenge came from the imperialist and social reformer, Joseph Chamberlain, whose casual approach to Liberal doctrine and clashes with the Gladstonian leadership led him and others to leave the party in 1886 to form the Liberal Unionists and cooperate with the Conservatives. This deprived the Liberal Party of one of its greatest reformers, with many shattered Liberals contemplating their future in the party. Some of those dissatisfied elements did stay and grouped together as the Liberal Imperialists in the 1890s under the leadership of Lord Rosebery. The group included H. H. Asquith, Sir Edward Grey, R. B. Haldane and the later Liberal National Walter Runciman amongst its ranks, and there were non-committed sympathisers such as David Lloyd George. Whilst this group certainly had an imperialist agenda,<sup>4</sup> it expressed its centrist tendencies in the desire for greater cooperation, calling for an 'unbroken front'.<sup>5</sup> Also, there may have been some flexibility towards free trade. Chamberlain's growing acceptance of protection as a means to finance measures of social reform could have been influential since evidence exists that the issue was tentatively explored.<sup>6</sup> However, the boldness of Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign of 1903 was beyond the acceptance of most Liberal Imperialists. Other ways of meeting desires for social reform were being considered by Liberals which seemed just as adequate and less controversial, leaving only Rosebery to argue for an all-party conference on the issue.<sup>7</sup>

The period of Liberal government from 1905–14, despite being riddled with party controversies, also saw Liberal centrism at work. A number of protec-

tionist-leaning measures were enacted by Lloyd George during his time at the Board of Trade, where his flexibility towards party dogma was displayed through his patents legislation.<sup>8</sup> Cooperation with the Conservatives was sought after 1910, when new conditions made it almost essential both for the national interest and the Liberal programme. The constitutional crisis of 1909–10, precipitated by the House of Lords' rejection of the 1909 Budget, led to fears of the possible imminent collapse of the constitution and more personally speaking for Lloyd George, the collapse of his National Insurance proposals, which depended on the extra revenue outlined in the Budget. Frustrated by the inability to reach a compromise, Lloyd George engaged in secret coalition talks with the Conservatives. In a memorandum he circulated to Arthur Balfour and other Opposition chiefs, he expressed his feeling that 'some of the most urgent problems awaiting settlement, problems which concern intimately the happiness and the efficiency of the inhabitants of these Islands, their strength and influence can only be successfully coped with by active co-operation of both the great parties in the State.'<sup>9</sup> He was also willing to consider the fiscal question, taking the Roseberyite view that an inquiry should be conducted to examine the case.<sup>10</sup>

The period 1915–22 could possibly be seen as a period of triumph for Liberal centrism, since during this time Liberals cooperated with Conservatives in government to win the First World War and then the peace. In so doing they were prepared to implement protectionist measures such as the McKenna Duties of 1915, the Paris Resolutions of 1916, and the Safeguarding of Industries Act 1921, despite the fact they were alien to orthodox Liberalism.<sup>11</sup> Through pursuing a pragmatic agenda, Liberals had now set aside one important tenet of Liberalism, although it is unclear whether such Liberals wanted the free trade system swept away forever, or whether this situation was envisaged as a temporary one. Certainly, Liberals in the 1920s presented themselves again as free traders, although this may have been due to opportunistic electoral considerations, since free trade was one of the few issues

to separate them from the Conservatives after the war. They were also unable to separate themselves from a romantic attachment to the Gladstonian era, which prevented even pragmatists exercising more forethought about policy.

In the early twenties, many Liberals viewed National politics as the best way of securing Liberal goals in domestic and imperial legislation, as they lost faith in Liberalism's ability to succeed independently after the war. This led to the desire for even greater integration of Liberal and Conservative forces, with Lloyd George and higher ranking Coalition

Liberals in particular being keen on the idea of creating a single centre party — an objective known as 'fusion'. Winston Churchill's view is typical in his assertion that 'a united appeal under your (Lloyd George's) leader-

ship ... would secure a Parliament capable of maintaining the Empire & restoring Prosperity ...' <sup>12</sup> Frederick Guest called for the 'formation of the Central Party and for the establishment of the great triumvirate.'<sup>13</sup> These views are those of later defectors, whose own uncertainties about their position within the party might have led them to see the creation of new party as a means to abandon Liberalism without losing face. However, similar sentiments were expressed amongst those who remained within the Liberal Party and this suggests that the idea was close to Liberal pragmatic instincts.<sup>14</sup> This position was paralleled, although to a lesser degree, in the Asquithian wing of Liberalism. Michael Bentley has drawn attention to this in his claim that moves were afoot to mould a party under the leadership of Lord Grey, the former Liberal Foreign Secretary, bringing in a progressive Tory element under Sir Robert Cecil.<sup>15</sup> Not all of the 'conspirators' intended that there should be a new party created, but this does seem to have been the intention of some, particularly Gilbert Murray, Cecil and Runciman. As Murray put it, the combination 'would give a united Liberal Party plus the RC group and I think

would carry the country.'<sup>16</sup> His ultimate aim seems to be the eventual leadership of Cecil himself.<sup>17</sup>

With so many attempts to bring together opposing forces in the interests of national unity, it seems hard to understand why the Liberal Nationals have received such a bad press for essentially adopting the same pragmatic course. These moves seem quite consistent with the view of Walter Runciman that: 'the problems with which we are now faced are not whether it shall be Conservatives or Liberals who occupy the Treasury Bench ... and dominate the policy of

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Whitehall, it is rather whether British democracy and the British constitution shall survive the fate which has overpowered democracies of other European countries'.<sup>18</sup> The desire for cooperation was mild compared to that of the early 1920s, since there were no calls for fusion, and cooperation was originally intended as short term<sup>19</sup> (although circumstances altered the position later). Important to Liberal Nationals was the desire to retain their Liberal identity, but they felt that Liberal measures were only achievable through compromise.<sup>20</sup> Important Liberal Nationals such as Runciman had previously participated in the wartime coalition and so it also seems strange that he, as the author of the Paris Resolutions, has not been chastised by historians for his illiberal intentions in 1915–16.

Whilst Liberals had largely returned to their free trade traditions in the 1920s, the protectionist argument had gained weight by the end of the decade, as other nations started to impose greater tariffs on British goods. Also, social insurance expenditure was putting pressure on the Treasury and practical measures were needed to address the deficit. Liberals again started to voice concerns about free trade in response. As Sir John Simon, the future leader of the Liberal National party put it: 'Free traders will have to face the possibility of filling up the gap in the revenue of this year and the next by some form of taxation which is not in

accordance with their traditional fiscal principles. I do not see how direct taxation can be increased ...'<sup>21</sup> However, it was not just future Liberal Nationals expressing such views. Malcolm Baines has drawn attention to the fact that there was little to separate the future Liberal Nationals from the independent Liberal Party.<sup>22</sup> Lord Lothian, in his pamphlet *Liberalism in the Modern World*, suggested 'the possibility of a world system of complete free trade has gone and will probably never return.'<sup>23</sup> Herbert Samuel and his colleagues were playing the role of campaigners for 'freer' trade, a modified definition of free trade, which reluctantly accepted the need for tariffs in a hostile climate, but this was exactly the same position as the Liberal Nationals. Runciman summed up his party's feeling fairly well in 1932 when he said: 'I do not love subsidies, and I think that the subsidy system has always been a bad element in foreign competition. The only reason we have for using subsidies now is to fight subsidy with subsidy, and by these means hope, ultimately, to induce all subsidising countries to stop their subsidising simultaneously.'<sup>24</sup>

In acknowledging the similar views regarding protection between the two Liberal wings, the actions of the Liberal Nationals can be seen as essentially Liberal, since the majority of high-ranking Liberals agreed with the modification of free trade. As a result of these similarities in 1931, both sides were prepared to come to electoral arrangements with Tory protectionists and to work with them in government. This can be seen in fiscal enactments such as the 1932 Import Duties Act, which provided for a 10% revenue tax with imperial preferences to be put in place. However, the Samuelites were never quite so publicly committed to such measures as their Liberal National colleagues and this eventually led to their departure from the government in September 1932,<sup>25</sup> although it should be pointed out it took over a year for them to actually 'cross the floor'. Their publicly lukewarm attitude had been accommodated through an 'agreement to differ' policy which let them avoid the convention of collective responsibility and to campaign against this position if necessary. This agreement was vital to

the Samuelites for pragmatic reasons rather than principle. Whilst they were offering general support to the government, and were privately sympathetic to changes to the fiscal system, they had to appease their rank and file, whose views were much less accommodating to even short-term protectionist measures. Liberal Nationals could afford to be more bold since they could guarantee Conservative support in the event of haemorrhaging Liberal support.

### III

It is not only in the approach to politics where there are similarities between the two sides in 1931. Individual Liberal Nationals shared an outlook with other Liberals who did not later join. The first of these is a sense of imperialism, which links individual Liberal Nationals with the imperialist section of the Liberal Party. This sentiment was in a sense illiberal in the desire to promote British power interests, often by force and in its paternalistic view that colonial subjects were unfit to govern their own affairs. Feeling of this sort developed in the atmosphere of the late nineteenth century when Liberals felt uncertain about Britain's future global strength, but did not really find expression as part of a governmental programme until the establishment of Lloyd George's Coalition.<sup>26</sup> This era set a precedent, since it was the first government in which Liberals made an active imperialism the centre of foreign and imperial policies. They were thus drawn away from traditional Liberal sentiments which stressed the ruler's role in educating and devolving responsibilities to colonial subjects, as Edwin Montagu found during his time as India Secretary, 1916–17, when he was derided for condemnation of the Amritsar Massacre.<sup>27</sup>

Sir John Simon's view of Britain's role in India was an issue which contributed to his departure from the Liberal Party,<sup>28</sup> since in the months before his resignation, it supported a Labour Government which wanted to give India the self-government which he and Liberals before him had opposed. Simon's particular interest in the India Question had arisen from the 1927 Statutory Commission on India, which he had chaired. By 1929, it was anticipated that the Commission's findings would be much in line with im-

perialist sentiments, so the new Labour Government, which wanted India to have self-government, bypassed it by announcing that India should make constitutional progress towards Dominion status. After this snub, Simon's anger towards Labour never subsided.<sup>29</sup> Imperialists like Simon saw India as the crown jewel of the Empire and saw any attempt to alter its status as a threat to the entire Empire. This view may certainly have been in the minds of other Liberals, including Lloyd George, who rejected the government's conclusions regarding India, although unlike Simon, for them it was not a resignation issue. Simon's stance is, however, evidence of the emotional pull of the India Question for Liberals. Some imperialist former Coalition Liberals also departed with Simon. It would be interesting to discover whether, like Simon, they too were disaffected by their party's position on the issue.

The other main area of continuity lies in the attitude towards socialism. Fear of the rise of socialism provoked anti-socialist attitudes. The starting point is with nineteenth century social imperialists, many of whom were seeking ways to buy the support of the working classes through concessions to demands for social welfare legislation, often referred to as 'semi-socialism'. This, it was hoped, would stem the tide of socialism. Some such measures were carried out by the Liberal Government of 1905–15, but perhaps these policies were motivated more by an elitist view of the Empire than by the genuine concern for working-class issues that their New Liberal rhetoric suggested.<sup>30</sup> Behind the legislative programme of these years and the compact with Labour<sup>31</sup> there was a fear of creeping socialism. The fact that Lloyd George was willing to seek a coalition with the Tories in 1910 suggests that he feared the consequences of constitutional deadlock would come in the form of a socialist advance.

As socialism became more successful, the Liberal attack on it became more intense. This is particularly the case after the

war, when the Labour Party began to overtake the Liberals in parliamentary importance and there was a perceived threat from Bolshevism. Many Liberal defectors expressed unhappiness in the 1920s at so-called Liberal concessions to socialism in foreign affairs, by favouring Bolshevik Russia, and in Lloyd George's social policies.<sup>32</sup> However, those who defected were not unrepresentative of the rest of Liberalism. Despite accusations of his socialist intent, Lloyd George spoke of the 'very grave consequences' for the 'whole order of society'<sup>33</sup> of the socialist movement. Fellow Coalition Liberal T. J. Macnamara feared socialists wanted to bring the whole parliamentary system 'about our ears'.<sup>34</sup>

Anti-socialism was not just about the fear of a socialist government or Bolshevik revolution in the 1920s. It was also motivated by the frustration that Liberals felt in their inability to define a course separate from Toryism or socialism. Liberals often referred to the 'middle way' defined sometimes as a '... move away from ... rigid individualism ... to broader and deeper conceptions of national responsibility and of international relationships; but this is a very different thing from

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moving towards the acceptance of the not less rigid collectivism of the Socialist creed ... Between those two extremes there is, we believe, a *via media* which liberal-minded men and women who form the majority of the

electors of this country anxiously desire to pursue ...<sup>35</sup> However, this muddled thinking was not enough on which to build support. The growth of class politics in the 1920s showed the possibility of politics without a Liberal Party. Since the Liberal Party was a moderating force in society and a pillar of the British constitution, many Liberals resented the rise of class as an issue which might lead to its destruction. They derided socialists for their irresponsibility in appealing to class loyalties. As E. D. Simon put it, 'both the general strike and the coal strike have shown us ... "The Two Nations" ... If the Liberal Party disappeared, the division of

political parties would ... become a class division. This would be a long step towards the greater danger that faces this country, the danger of class war.<sup>36</sup>

Future Liberal Nationals were contributors to anti-socialist tendencies in the Liberal Party. They were amongst the most vocal critics of Lloyd George's overtures to Labour, as a socialist party, after 1929,<sup>37</sup> and although their detachment from Lloyd George was leading them to formal separation from him, there is little in substance to differentiate them from mainstream Liberal opinion. Sir John Simon's assertion that 'Socialism ... is a poisonous doctrine'<sup>38</sup> because it 'seeks to substitute for the Gladstonian principle that money is best left to fructify in the pockets of the people the wholly different principle that the State will manage money better than we shall' even identifies him with old-fashioned Liberal orthodoxy. Whilst this might suggest his likely defection from such a party, which in his view meant 'nothing more than being a mere variant of Socialism,' and a move towards the Conservatives, who were opposed to socialism in its entirety, it cannot be used to suggest that he was a Conservative since many other Liberals agreed with him and might well have taken the same course had a Lib-Lab coalition been formed in 1931.

#### IV

Party conflicts are a key factor in explaining why defections occurred in the inter-war period. Many Liberals found it difficult to remain in a party where relations between key individuals and fac-

tions were so bitter that they could be characterised as civil war. However, Liberal politics during the First World War, or even before, may also have played their part. These strains affected future Liberal Nationals, some of whom saw themselves at the centre of party feuding, so it is likely that these factors were important in the eventual decision to leave.

Many of the difficulties in the inter-war period were the result of the feuding between supporters of Asquith (some of whom were later Liberal Nationals)<sup>39</sup> and those of Lloyd George. The problem had begun during the war, with the replacement of Asquith by Lloyd George as Prime Minister in December 1916. Asquith's supporters felt that Lloyd George was responsible for his fall, accusing him of conspiring with the Conservatives. Relations were further soured by the compact Lloyd George agreed with the Conservatives for the 1918 election which signalled preference for Coalition Conservative candidates over Asquithian Liberals. For them, this signalled a lack of principle and Lloyd George's determination to remain in power at whatever price. An almost irrational loathing of Lloyd George developed, which was reinforced by the corruption scandals of the Coalition.

The two elements seemed less than happy to be reunited in 1923, when Liberal reunion brought supporters of Asquith and Lloyd George back under the same banner, and this contributed to the electoral collapse in 1924. For Lloyd George this seems to have been beneficial, since the election knocked out many of his erstwhile Asquithian

enemies and allowed him to rise to the leadership by 1926. This created a sense of discomfort and isolation for the supporters of Asquith. Many felt that Lloyd George's Political Fund, which he had gathered through the sale of honours, was allowing him to buy support. Many either went into isolation or joined like-minded individuals setting up groups to counter the Lloyd George influence. The Radical Group was formed in 1924 for this purpose and in 1927 this was superseded by the Liberal Council. The latter even developed its own set of policies, in effect making it a party within a party.

Since there were a number of former Asquithian elements represented in the Liberal National party in 1931, it seems likely that the decision to leave was influenced by the wartime division which had left a legacy of distrust which could only be resolved through ultimate dissociation from the Liberal Party. This conclusion can be drawn from the earlier careers of Liberal Nationals, particularly Sir John Simon. His problems with the Liberal Party and, in particular with Lloyd George, began even before the 1916-18 Liberal split, over the naval estimates for 1913-14. Simon saw dangers in the naval race with Germany and in Cabinet advocated a reduction in naval expenditure.<sup>40</sup> In theory, Lloyd George was on the same side, since he originally opposed increases in line with the public image he chose to present as a Liberal radical. Privately he was more in tune with Churchill's desire for increases in expenditure and sought to broker a compromise. This is likely to have annoyed Simon since he was supposedly the greatest radical heavyweight capable of convincing Asquith of the radical case, and it is imaginable that this soured his feelings towards Lloyd George. However, it was during the war that Simon's bitterness really came to the surface. Lloyd George's early advocacy of conscription defied all Liberal principles as far as Simon was concerned. He sought to expose what he saw as Lloyd George's insincere radicalism, bringing the two into conflict. Simon's resistance to conscription eventually led to his exit from Asquith's coalition in December 1915, for which

Grey addressing a meeting of the Liberal Council.



he blamed Lloyd George, since his opinion seemed to have the greatest influence on the direction of policy.

This personal bitterness coloured the relationship between Lloyd George and Sir John Simon in the 1920s. Simon was amongst Lloyd George's most high-profile critics and Lloyd George did everything possible to obstruct his career. During the Spen Valley by-election in February 1920, Lloyd George put up a Coalition Liberal to obstruct Simon's chances of election. The Coalition tried to smear Simon with the claim that he was unpatriotic and had tried to mount a legal challenge to the war in 1914.<sup>41</sup> In the later 1920s, Simon did not involve himself much with Asquithian co-ordinated efforts to counter Lloyd George, but he was very critical of Liberal policy under him.<sup>42</sup>

The earlier career of Walter Runciman is also of interest since his position in the party had often been far from harmonious. As a Liberal Imperialist in the 1890s he came into conflict with the leadership under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, affecting his chances of being selected for the Dewsbury by-election in 1901.<sup>43</sup> His views also brought him into conflict with nonconformist elements later at the Board of Education, 1908–11, where his attempts to impose public control over state-funded schools were not appreciated. Nevertheless, Runciman's relationship with Lloyd George was probably more significant in causing disaffection, since these other problems were ones of the moment rather than longer-term antagonism.

As was the case with Simon, the origins of poor relations with Lloyd George dated back before the war, during the time he spent at the Board of Education. His troubles there were compounded by lack of extra financial support from the Treasury. This provides the background to poor relations during the war, since this decision angered Runciman<sup>44</sup> who may have suspected that the supposed Welsh radical had sneaking sympathy with his nonconformist critics and therefore tried to make his period at Education deliberately difficult.

During the war the relationship between Runciman and Lloyd George

was damaged by a number of factors. Amongst these was the South Wales coal dispute in the summer of 1915.<sup>45</sup> Whilst at the Board of Trade, Runciman attempted to broker a compromise between the miners, who wanted permanent wage increases and the employers, who were prepared only to concede war bonuses. The failure to reach a settlement led to Lloyd George stepping in and finding a solution which granted the miners virtually all their demands. This infuriated Runciman, who must have felt his position undermined. Another factor was the divergence over war strategy. Like Simon, Runciman battled with Lloyd George over conscription, but his pragmatism meant it was never a resignation issue. Nevertheless, he strongly opposed the total mobilisation of resources

for the war effort by the state, and this put him under constant pressure from Lloyd George and other compulsionists in the cabinet, who looked to ways of circumventing the Board of Trade. His horror at the level of national debt led to his resignation in 1916. Bitter at the strategy compulsionists were forcing on the Cabinet, Runciman went into opposition to attack them and to campaign for a negotiated peace. Much of this attack was to be directed against the Lloyd George Government, whose irresponsibility he wanted to expose. Like Simon, he blamed Lloyd George for forcing him out, and for putting undue pressure on Asquith to accept compulsionist policies.

The circumstances of Asquith's fall and the 1918 election were important in adding to Runciman's hatred of Lloyd George, and set the tone for his relationship with him in the 1920s and early 1930s. Runciman was arguably the leader of the Asquithian element after 1926, chairing the Radical Group and later the Liberal Council. Runciman used the Liberal Council to campaign against Lloyd George's policies as well as his influence. Lloyd George's renewed progressivism did

not impress. He saw within the radical proposals the wasteful expenditure of the Coalition years and the state compulsion of land and industry he had disliked during the war. However, since he and other Liberal Council members were able to go into the 1929 election supporting the Lloyd George programme (at least in public), it is unclear how seriously the criticisms should be taken. Sheer spite, rather than real policy disagreements, may have had more to do with it, particularly since before the war Runciman had been broadly progressive and in favour of state intervention in the economy.

Lloyd George's former Coalition Liberal supporters were also present in the ranks of the Liberals Nationals,<sup>46</sup> so they cannot altogether be seen as the resting place of disaffected Asquithians. These

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### Since the Liberal Party was a moderating force in society, many Liberals resented the rise of class as an issue which might lead to its destruction

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Coalition Liberals, however, had reasons to resent Lloyd George also. In 1929, for example, Lloyd George had asked Clement Davies<sup>47</sup> to draft amendments to Labour's Coal Bill, but in the end, he U-turned and supported the Labour Government, in what was seen as a cynical ploy to win concessions. Davies resented Lloyd George for his opportunism and became disillusioned with Liberal politics.<sup>48</sup>

Lloyd George's character and methods were generally unpopular. Sir Henry Morris-Jones, for example, later spoke of his qualified support for him, even during the Coalition years.<sup>49</sup> This shows that distaste for Lloyd George was not a sectional issue, but something which affected the entire Liberal Party and may have later contributed to a move towards the Liberal Nationals on both sides of the party.

## V

This article has argued that, far from the Liberal Nationals being an adjunct of the Conservative Party in the 1930s, the party was part of a tradition within the Liberal Party stretching back fifty years. The reasons for leaving the Liberal Party appear in many cases to have been

personal difficulties with individuals more than policy, particularly poor relations with Lloyd George, who had alienated up to half the party's MPs by 1929. This would not, however, be an appropriate place for ending the discussion. After all, in 1947 the National Liberals were effectively swallowed up by the Conservative Party, although the name National Liberal was preserved until 1968. What was it, then, which led to an essentially Liberal party being subsumed by Conservatism after the war, when this did not occur in the arguably more uncertain situation of the 1930s? This is difficult to ascertain without more detailed investigation. The only substantive study in existence is that by David Dutton, and even this can only be seen as a preliminary analysis,<sup>50</sup> but this study and other sources I have examined can be used to suggest probable answers to the question.

It seems that the long period of cooperation between the parties in government, of fourteen years, had shown the two forces that they could cooperate in a changed post-war world from 1945, since the old battles seemed irrelevant. However, the Liberal Nationals had not accepted Conservatism, just as the Conservatives had not accepted Liberalism. The two forces had gradually moved closer together so that by 1945, it seemed to those Liberals and Conservatives cooperating with each other that there was little to separate them. They could perhaps be said to have met half-way, forming a liberal-conservatism. Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain had hoped for the fusion of sympathetic liberal elements with Conservatism, but it was not under their leadership that this fusion actually occurred. The unification of Liberal and Conservative elements happened under Churchill, the former Liberal free trader, an advocate of fusion in the 1920s. Taking this factor into consideration, the ultimate victory can be seen to be that of Liberal centrists rather than Conservatives, although such claims must be tempered by evidence of an uneasy relationship between Churchill with Simon.<sup>51</sup> Simon had opposed Churchill during the First World War in his desire for total war, and he had supported appeasement during the 1930s. From a personal point of view, it seems

that Churchill disliked Simon's ambition and tried to keep him at arms' length, so it is unclear whether Churchill himself really wanted fusion.

The National Liberal party can be seen to be a party which took Liberal centrism to its logical conclusion, in fusing itself with another force (even if this was not a fusion of equals and the Conservative element was bound to predominate). Attempts by Liberals to undertake similar tasks in the 1920s had failed, partly because there were significant differences, more in tradition than actuality, between the Liberals and Conservatives. Cooperation with the Conservatives over a number of years had shown Liberal Nationals that these differences were not of much substance. However, this form of fusion was not inevitable. Had the Liberal Nationals not been so enthusiastic in the desire to pursue National politics, they might have detected a swing of the pendulum back to party politics, which started in 1935 and resulted in a Labour landslide in 1945. The recognition of these changes led to some Liberal Nationals returning to the Liberal Party.<sup>52</sup> However, most did not recognise the electoral shift and remained where they were, still seeing themselves as being good Liberals, although some later regretted the course they took.<sup>53</sup> The logic of fusion was to leave Liberalism behind, but the party still tried to assert a Liberalism of its own into the 1950s, even if this amounted to little other than the defence of civil liberties and anti-socialism — something which the Conservative Party was capable of doing without its cooperation. Fusion can be seen to have been accomplished reluctantly and many felt it had contributed to Liberal decline after 1945.

National politics had been essentially pragmatic before 1931. The actions of the Liberal Nationals in October of that year converted it into a principled stance. In doing so, they cut out an escape route for themselves. Whilst they continued to be a liberalising force when in government, out of power this principle amounted to little. The Liberal National party's brand of National politics could not support a socialist government, nor was that support sought. Principled

National politics can only work inside government; out of government it is meaningless.

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- 1 Particular works of this sort include: Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party* (London 1971), Robert Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump, 1929–31* (London 1967), and Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914–35* (London, 1966).
- 2 See David Dutton, 'John Simon and the post-war National Liberal Party: an historical post-script', *Historical Journal*, 32, 2 (1989), pp. 357–367, Graham Goodlad, 'Communications — The Liberal Nationals, 1931–1940: the problems of a party in 'partnership government,'', *Historical Journal*, 38, 1 (1995), pp. 133–143, and Jonathan Wallace, 'The political career of Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford (1870–1949)', *Newcastle Ph.D.*, 1993.
- 3 The idea of a Liberal centrist tradition has been applied in discussion of various Liberals particularly in the case of Lloyd George. See work by Martin Pugh, especially Martin Pugh, 'Left in the Centre? Lloyd George and the Centrist Tradition in British Politics', in Judith Loades (ed.), *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George* (Bangor, 1991), pp. 17–27. It has recently been used in discussion of the Liberal National Walter Runciman. See Jonathan Wallace, 'The political career of Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford (1870–1949)', *University of Newcastle Ph.D. thesis*, 1995, p. 20.
- 4 The Liberal Imperialists advocated imperial expansion, particularly in South Africa and domestic reforms in line with National Efficiency.
- 5 H.H. Asquith, *The Times* 12th October 1899 in H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford, 1973), p. 43.
- 6 G. Searle, *Country Before Party – Coalition and the Idea of 'National Government' in Modern Britain, 1885–1987* (London, 1995), p. 63.
- 7 H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 100–102.
- 8 Kenneth Morgan, *Lloyd George* (London, 1974), p. 59.
- 9 Lloyd George Papers C/6/5/1
- 10 Lloyd George Papers C/6/5/1.
- 11 For a justification of all these measures see *The Lloyd George Liberal Magazine* Vol. 1 June 1921 No. 9.
- 12 Churchill papers 2/121: 27th February 1922 – Churchill to Lloyd George.
- 13 Lloyd George papers F/22/3/37 16th January 1922 – Guest to Lloyd George.
- 14 See the view of H.A.L. Fisher in John Campbell, *Lloyd George – The Goat in the Wilderness* (London, 1977), pp. 25–33.
- 15 Michael Bentley, 'Liberal Politics and the Grey Conspiracy of 1921', *Historical Journal*, 20 2 (1977), pp. 461–478. Conspirators included Gilbert Murray, Walter Runciman, Sir Robert Hudson, Herbert and Henry Gladstone, Donald Maclean, Arthur Murray, J.A. Spender, H.W. Massingham and Lord Cowdray.
- 16 Runciman papers WR 185 January 31st 1920 Gilbert Murray to Walter Runciman.
- 17 Runciman papers WR 185 January 31st 1920 Gilbert Murray to Walter Runciman.

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## A failure of leadership

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many Liberals to Labour, so did their apparent leanings towards Labour in 1924 drive many Liberals to the Conservatives. Neither set of defections occurred exclusively during the critical period; each one continued for long afterwards.

The 1927–29 revival failed partly because it came too late and partly because Lloyd George – the only man could possibly inspire and lead it – was profoundly mistrusted not only by other politicians but by a large section of his own party. That mistrust, in its turn, traces back inescapably to the compromises of the Coalition period.

Defections could take place so easily either to Labour or to the Conservatives essentially because positive Liberal policy was obscure. For a large part of the period considered here, it must have been difficult for an outsider to perceive what the Liberals would do with power if they got it, or how they would differ from the other parties if they were in government. There seemed little reason why a Liberal

who was preoccupied with social reform should not slide into the Labour Party, or why a Liberal who was preoccupied with the dangers inherent in socialism should not slide into the Conservative Party. In both cases, some defectors acted for cynical reasons of personal advantage but most seem to have been motivated, at least in part, by an honest judgement of what would conduce to the public good. On balance, the main blame for the defections must lie not with the defectors but with the inept leadership provided.

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- 1 Sally Harris, *Out of Control: British Foreign Policy and the Union of Democratic Control, 1914–1918*, Hull 1996, p.27.
- 2 At the time they called themselves Unionists.
- 3 This matter is discussed by the present author in *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* London 1971, pp.113–5.
- 4 Guest to Lloyd George, 20 July 1918, LG F/21/2/28 — Lloyd George papers, Beaverbrook Library collection, House of Lords.

- 5 Elibank memorandum, 2 October 1918 — Elibank papers 8804, fos. 193–6, National Library of Scotland.
- 6 Figures are variously given. The present author has made a detailed analysis in *A Classification of the Members of Parliament elected in 1918*, Bull Inst. Hist. Res. XLVII, No.115 (1974), 74–94.
- 7 *Dictionary of National Biography: Missing Persons*. Oxford 1993, pp 475–6.
- 8 A J A Morris: *C P Trevelyan: Portrait of a Radical*. Belfast 1977, pp 139–141.
- 9 They were: C R Buxton, brother of Noel Buxton and briefly an MP in 1910; J King; R C Lambert; H B Lees-Smith; R L Outhwaite; A Ponsonby; C P Trevelyan; A V Rutherford; Col. J Wedgwood — *Liberal Magazine* 1920, p70.
- 10 David Butler and Jennie Freeman, *British Political Facts 1900–1960* (London 1963) p213 give 62 National Liberals and 54 Liberals. Michael Kinnear, *The British Voter* (London 1968) p94 gives 47 Lloyd Georgeites, 40 Asquithians and '29 'prefixless' MPs who were evenly divided between Asquith and Lloyd George'.
- 11 They were: C R Buxton, Noel Buxton, E G Hemmerde; H B Lees-Milne; A Ponsonby and J C Wedgwood. Perhaps, technically, we should add an eighth, Frank Hall, elected as a Lib-Lab in 1906.
- 12 *The Times* 18 January 1924; given in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill Vol V* companion (London 1979) pp 94–97.
- 13 Listed in *Liberal Magazine* 1924, p124.
- 14 Gilbert, op cit p113.
- 15 Benn to Asquith, 11 January 1919. Asquith papers, Bodleian Library, 18, fo 41.
- 16 *Liberal Magazine* 1929, 1–2, 76, 264, 341.



## Tory cuckoos in the Liberal nest?

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- 18 Runciman papers WR 215 undated 1932.
- 19 Sir Henry Morris Jones, *Doctor in the Whips' Room* (London, 1955), p. 82.
- 20 Geoffrey Shakespeare, *Let Candles Be Brought In*. (London, 1949), p. 125.
- 21 Reading Papers MSS Eur F118 38–39: 2nd March 1931 — Simon to Reading.
- 22 Malcolm Baines, 'The Survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932–1959', *Oxford D.Phil.*, (1989).
- 23 Extract from Lothian's *Liberalism in the Modern World* in Malcolm Baines, 'The Survival of the British Liberal Party, 1932–1959', *Oxford D.Phil.*, 1989, p. 16.
- 24 Runciman papers WR 360 5th July 1934 Runciman to Sir Walter Runciman, Bt.
- 25 The issue they chose to go on was the outcome of the Ottawa Conference, which recommended that a general tariff should be applied.
- 26 Robert Scally, *The Origins of the Lloyd George Coalition: The Politics of Social-Imperialism, 1900–1918* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 195–196.
- 27 Colin R. Coote, *Editorial: The Memoirs of Colin R. Coote* (London, 1965), p. 81.
- 28 David Dutton, Lloyd George, 'John Simon and the Politics of the Liberal Party, 1918–31' in Judith Loades (ed.), *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George* (Bangor, 1991), p. 86.
- 29 Viscount Simon, *Retrospect: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Viscount Simon* (London, 1952), p. 150.

- 30 Geoffrey Searle, 'The Edwardian Liberal Party and Business', *English Historical Review*, XCVIII (January 1983) 28–60 pp. 40 & 47.
- 31 Gladstone-MacDonald Pact of 1903 — an electoral arrangement between the Liberal and Labour parties lasting until 1914.
- 32 For examples see the Churchill papers 5/22 — 16th February 1920 Churchill to Sir George Ritchie; Lloyd George papers G/20/14/21 February 19th 1926, Hilton Young to Lloyd George; Lloyd George papers G/14/5/8 25th September 1924, Sir Alfred Mond to Lloyd George.
- 33 Lloyd George papers F/3/5/3 19th February 1920, Lloyd George to Balfour.
- 34 T. J. Macnamara in *The Liberal Pioneer* May 1925 No. 4 Vol. 1
- 35 *Lloyd George Liberal Magazine* Vol. 2 June 1922 No. 9.
- 36 E.D. Simon in *The Forward View* January 1927.
- 37 For an example see Robert Bernays in *The Forward View* October 1929.
- 38 Sir John Simon speaking to the *Western Morning News and Mercury* February 2nd. 1931 in Reading papers MSS Eur F11832–5.
- 39 Including eight who were Asquithian Liberal MPs, 1918–22: Sir Colin Barrie, Geoffrey Collins, A. Harbord, G. Lambert, J.D. Miller, Walter Runciman, Sir John Simon, J.S. Holmes.
- 40 29th January 1914 — Lord Beauchamp, C. Hobhouse, R. McKenna, Walter Runciman & John Simon to H.H. Asquith (John Simon's handwriting) in Randolph Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill Vol. 2: Companion*, (London), pp. 1857–1858.
- 41 *Liberal Monthly*, February 1920.
- 42 Sir John Simon speaking to the *Western Morn-*

- ing News and Mercury* February 2nd. 1931 in Reading papers MSS Eur F11832–5.
- 43 Jonathan Wallace, 'The political career of Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford (1870–1949)', *University of Newcastle Ph.D. thesis*, 1995, p. 39.
- 44 Runciman papers WR35 19th February 1910, Walter Runciman to David Lloyd George.
- 45 Jonathan Wallace, 'The political career of Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford (1870–1949)', *University of Newcastle Ph.D. thesis*, 1995, p. 201.
- 46 Five Simonite MPs were former Coalition Liberal MPs, 1918–22: Sir Henry Fildes, Sir Malcolm MacDonald, J. I. Macpherson, Geoffrey Shakespeare, E.A. Strauss.
- 47 Davies was never a Coalition Liberal MP, but had been a supporter of the Coalition.
- 48 D.M. Roberts, 'Clement Davies and the Liberal Party, 1929–56', *University of Wales MA* (1974), p. 21.
- 49 Colin R. Coote, *Editorial: The Memoirs of Colin R. Coote* (London, 1965), pp. 96–7 and p. 112.
- 50 David Dutton, 'John Simon and the post-war National Liberal Party: an historical postscript', *Historical Journal*, 32, 2 (1989).
- 51 David Dutton, 'John Simon and the post-war National Liberal Party: an historical postscript', *Historical Journal*, 32, 2 (1989), pp. 359–364.
- 52 Most notably Clement Davies.
- 53 Geoffrey Shakespeare, *Let Candles Be Brought In* (London, 1949), p. 125; Sir Henry Morris Jones, *Doctor in the Whips' Room* (London, 1955), p. 87.