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LABOUR LEADERS AND THE LIBERALS, 1906-24

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The decline of the British Liberal party remains a matter for serious historical enquiry. This is not surprising, given its scale and speed. Some of the heat has gone from the controversy. For example, historians no longer come to blows (metaphorically at least) over the question of whether Stockport is part of Lancashire or Cheshire.[1] Attempts to outflank the arguments of the 'other side' have resulted in a series of local studies. These outflanking actions have produced some fine work and some that is perhaps less remarkable, but none has produced the knockout blow their authors have desired: they have tended to cancel each other out in a kind of historiographical trench warfare.[2] Analyses of particular political issues have attempted to illustrate wider truths, although with somewhat conflicting conclusions as to the sustainability or otherwise of the Liberal party.[3] Various categories have been employed as explanatory tools. None has entirely explained. At one time the decline of the Liberals and rise of Labour was thought to be due to the rise of class politics.[4] It was then identified more closely with the decline of religious politics [WALD 1983].

Now, the politics of language is thought by many to hold an explanatory key, while others—equally refreshingly—look to questions of the respective parties' organisational cultures and opportunities [LAWRENCE 1998; DAWSON 1992]. My own view is that the change in the political agenda between 1910 and 1920, and particularly the dramatic change in the role of, and ideas about, the State, was hugely important. But this has to be seen especially in the context of a Liberal party severely disabled from a rapid response to the changing situation by the pressures of wartime government [THORPE 2008 : chap. 2 : 36-58]. Recent work on the politics of memory and the emotions might also help us to understand the change better: was 'mood' a

[1] This became a key point at issue at one stage: see CLARKE 1977 : 584 and MATTHEW *et al.* 1977 : 589.

[2] See e.g. THOMPSON 1967; CLARKE 1971; LAYBOURN & REYNOLDS 1984; WYNCOLL 1985; MORGAN 1991; LANCASTER 1987; SAVAGE 1987; THORPE 1990; BINFIELD *et al.* 1993; LYNCH 2003; HILSON 2006.

[3] See e.g. PACKER 2001 and TRENTMANN 2008.

[4] CLARKE 1975; MATTHEW *et al.* 1976; TANNER 1983. There are useful summaries from very different pens in BENTLEY 1987 : 138-152 and LAYBOURN 1995.

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factor in disabling British Liberalism?[5] Then again, there remains something tempting about a pretty basic 'political generations' approach. When old Liberal voters, who had been politicised in the halcyon days of Gladstonian Liberalism, died, were they in effect 'replaced' on the register by young people for whom the Liberal party was divided, equivocal and compromised—apparently something from the past? This view might be erroneous, but it is pretty remarkable that in all these years there has been very little quantitative work around the changing electoral register.[6]

The role of individuals in all this has not been neglected. Some of the earliest interpretations placed huge store by the actions of politicians—in particular, David Lloyd George and H.H. Asquith. By their division in 1916, and subsequent failure to reunite until 1923—by which time Labour had grown too strong to resist—they could be seen as jointly or individually responsible.[7] For some historians, indeed, it appeared to be simply a question which of the two was more to blame, and occasionally they appeared unable to decide: as A.J.P. Taylor wrote in criticising one of the earliest academic works on the subject, its author 'seems to have started with the view that it was all the fault of Lloyd George and to have changed course midway' [TAYLOR 1965 : 627]. Still, there clearly was room for the individual, and it has been one of the strengths of the work of historians as diverse as Jon Lawrence, Ian Packer, and Duncan Tanner that they have allowed significant room for human agency in their analyses of Liberal politics in the period [LAWRENCE 1998; PACKER 2001; TANNER 1990].

That said, however, there has been less emphasis on the part played by the leaders of the Labour party in the process. Even in the work of Maurice Cowling, which set a standard for the final part of our period that few of us will match, Labour leaders were essentially bit-part players in a drama that was mainly carried out among leading Liberals and Conservatives (not least, perhaps, because of the relative unavailability of personal papers, at least in the time when Cowling was writing) [COWLING 1971]. There has not been total neglect. Jay Winter argued forcefully that the Russian Revolution had a huge impact on Arthur Henderson's thoughts about reorganising the party in 1917-18 [WINTER 1972]. Ross McKibbin highlighted Ramsay MacDonald's position in 1914 as well as the longer-term development of the party machine in both his and Henderson's hands, and showed that the conscious decisions they made did affect the way in which matters developed [MCKIBBIN 1970]. Nonetheless, there has been less attention than there might have been to the 'statecraft' or strategy of Labour's leaders.

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[5] This is as yet a largely untrodden field in terms of the fortunes of different political parties, but for an excellent example of work on the memory of the war, see CONNELLY 2002.

[6] The exception is the challenging work of CHILDS 1995, which builds on the approach of BUTLER & STOKES 1969. It has not really been followed up with more detailed study despite the possibilities opened up by such a quantitative approach.

[7] For an Asquithian attack, see ROBERTSON 1923. A much more favourable view of Lloyd George emerged from ROCH 1920. Lord Beaverbrook was a significant critic of Asquith in his 'historical' writings—see e.g. *Politicians and the War, 1914-1916* (1928) and *Men and Power, 1917-1918* (1956).

This lack of attention stems, in part, from a tendency to see their views as having been reasonably settled from a relatively early stage. Keir Hardie, for example, started out as a Liberal in the early 1880s but by 1888 was standing as a Labour candidate against the Liberal at the Mid Lanark by-election. MacDonald's early political ambitions also focussed on the Liberal party, and he served as secretary to the Liberal MP Thomas Lough between 1888 and 1892. But his failure to win the Liberal Parliamentary nomination for Southampton in 1894 has been seen as the last straw of humiliation for a highly sensitive man, and he went on to fight the 1895 general election as an Independent Labour party (ILP) candidate before becoming secretary and driving force of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) when it was formed in 1900 [MARQUAND 1977 : 34-41]. By 1906 he was Labour MP for Leicester, and although he lost his seat in 1918, he was elected for Aberavon in 1922: in 1924 he would become the first Labour Prime Minister. 'Iconoclast', one of MacDonald's earliest biographers, summed up the process of disillusionment succinctly, saying that until the late 1880s both Hardie and MacDonald

> still believed there was a place for Labour within the Liberal party. With neither was this belief to last long. [...] As MacDonald worked out his own idea of Socialism as a scientific, organic conception of society, he revolted against Liberal *laissez-faire* ['Iconoclast' 1923 : 72; 'Iconoclast' 1925].

The same author later offered a similarly straightforward view of Henderson. Henderson, like Hardie and MacDonald, has started out as a Liberal, and later, like MacDonald, worked for a Liberal MP (in his case as an agent). But the Liberals failed to nominate him as their Parliamentary candidate in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, his home city, in 1895:

> On Henderson's mind, the lesson of this affair was not lost. [...] He had seen the cloven hoof. The sight was not forgotten. ... his mind was [now] moving steadily away from the Lib-Lab position' [Hamilton 1938 : 30].

He went on to become one of the first Labour MPs in 1903, was secretary of the party from 1912 to 1934, and led it on three separate occasions, as well as serving as a senior cabinet minister in the first two Labour governments. In short, the men who would lead the early Labour party made an early and definite move against the Liberals that propelled them to build up Labour with a view to destroying their former party.

But it was, of course, rather more complicated than that. Retrospective views of the careers of leading Labour politicians like MacDonald and Henderson only began to appear in the 1920s. By that time Labour appeared to have overcome the Liberals. There was no reason for them or their sympathisers to recall any earlier doubts about whether or not to break with them. Far from it. The Liberals of the 1920s and 1930s—Lloyd George's *Yellow Book* notwithstanding—were often on the other side of politics from

Labour and progressivism.[8] In office down to 1914, though, the Liberals had had to play up their progressive side in order to retain Labour support, especially after the January 1910 general election, when they had no longer had a Parliamentary majority. The release from such dependency after 1914, and still more after 1916, allowed the less progressive strands of Liberalism to reassert themselves [TANNER 1990 : 426-432]. There has often been a tendency to see Liberalism as a progressive force in twentieth- and twenty-first century Britain.[9] This approach works reasonably well for certain periods, such as those between 1906 and 1914, 1927 and 1929, 1942 and 1945, or 1992 and 2003; but it is much less applicable to others. For the interwar period, for example, it omits the Liberals' decision to bring down the Labour government in 1924, their rampant opposition to the General Strike in 1926, serious tensions with Labour between 1929 and 1931, and the Liberal party's participation in the National Government in the period 1931-32.

So there was little reason, by the 1920s and 1930s, for Labour politicians or their sympathisers to play up those politicians' earlier links with the Liberals. As seen above, 'Iconoclast' was clear in the 1920s that MacDonald had seen the benefits of Labour independence very early, and had charted a straight course towards it. Even after the 'betrayal' of 1931, when MacDonald formed the National Government and trounced Labour at the polls, there was little revision of views here: among those writing about him in the 1930s, relatively little attention was paid to ancient links with the Liberals. There were bigger (Conservative) fish to fry. Macneill Weir, in the unambiguously titled *The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald* (1938), was more concerned to show MacDonald as a duchess-kissing social climber moving towards the Conservatives than as a collaborator with a Liberal party that appeared to many people, by 1938, to be dying [WEIR 1938]. Piqued by Weir's assault, Lord Elton—who had followed MacDonald into 'National Labour' in 1931—wrote what was intended as the first volume of a life of MacDonald, which took the story down to 1918, but of which the second volume was never completed. In his desire to portray MacDonald as a loyal Labour man, Elton downplayed possible links with the Liberals [ELTON 1939].

Two biographies of Henderson appeared in the 1930s. One of these, E.A. Jenkins's *From Foundry to Foreign Office*, appeared in 1933 [JENKINS 1933], while Henderson was still alive; the other, from the pen of Mary Agnes Hamilton, came out in 1938, three years after his death [HAMILTON 1938]. Each can be seen as 'official' in all but name. Jenkins, a Parliamentary journalist, claimed that it had been a 'privilege' to watch Henderson's political development since his election to Parliament in 1903, and claimed to 'enjoy his personal friendship' [JENKINS 1933 : ix]. For Jenkins, in the 1890s 'the reactionary influences of the blue-blooded capitalists in the Liberal party had slowly awakened [Henderson] to the necessity of Labour's direct representation in the House' [JENKINS 1933 : 11]. Mrs Hamilton referred to

[8] For more on this, see THORPE 2005.
[9] See especially MARQUAND 1992.

the fact that she had worked 'under Mr Henderson', thanked his family for their help, and offered such a roll call of acknowledgments to Labour worthies that no reader could be left in any doubt that her book had the profoundly approval of the party as well as the family [HAMILTON 1938 : vii-viii]. She also left no room for doubt as to her view of her subject when she stated in the preface to the book that Henderson was 'a man with whom one never met disillusionment' [HAMILTON 1938 : viii]. She knew all about disillusionment—in 1923 and 1925 she had been 'Iconoclast', writing with fulsome praise and at times wild enthusiasm about MacDonald, now the 'traitor' of 1931. In short, there was little in any of these studies to offer a complex interpretation of their view of the Liberals.

The view thus became established that Labour's leaders had, at some point in the 1890s, realised that a break with the Liberals was needed, and that they had then worked hard to boost Labour at the Liberals' expense. But this view obscures a lot. It means that we do not see change over time; we miss nuances of position; we fail to understand variations between different leaders; and we gloss over the continuing interest of some Labour leaders in co-operation with the Liberals even after 1924. One key question needs to be asked at this stage: What did people *expect* to happen? In writing about the poet W.B. Yeats, Roy Foster reminds us of a point that historians too frequently forget—that our historical subjects did not know what was going to happen next, and that we should therefore consider their contemporary expectations of their own futures. In 1914 Yeats, like most other middle-class Irish men and women, was expecting the creation of a Home Rule Ireland within the United Kingdom, which would still have strong ties to London, and was planning accordingly [FOSTER 1997 : 531; FOSTER 2001 : 58-79, esp. 58-60, 62, 78-79]. At the same time, for their part, most Labour leaders were looking forward to a continuation of the Liberal-Labour 'progressive alliance' rather than an early declaration of full independence from the Liberals. They were no more expecting the election of a Labour government than was Yeats anticipating the creation of an effectively independent Irish State. Yet both came about within a decade. And the fact that they did so entailed some revision of stories about their earlier expectations on both their parts.

It is certainly true that the adhesion of people like MacDonald to the Labour Representation Committee when it was formed in 1900 showed their belief in the need for a more assertive approach towards the Liberals than had prevailed hitherto in mainstream Labour circles. Trade unionist moderates such as Henderson and David Shackleton could also see the point of the LRC. But both Henderson and Shackleton were reluctant to stand as LRC candidates at by-elections in 1903. They feared splitting the 'progressive' vote at a time when the Conservatives seemed to be on the attack, and especially in the context of a mounting campaign against trade unionism and free trade. Both men were eventually prevailed on to stand in the Labour interest—in Henderson's case, only following pressure from the union that employed him as an organiser, the Friendly Society of Ironfounders [WRIGLEY 1990 : 21; MARTIN 2000]. But concerns about splitting

the 'progressive' vote under such circumstances gave rise to the negotiations that culminated in the 1903 Lib-Lab electoral pact, by which MacDonald and the Liberal Chief Whip, Herbert Gladstone, agreed to a deal to stand down some of their respective candidates in certain English and Welsh constituencies in order to maximise the anti-Conservative vote behind a single candidate. The secret pact worked variably over the country as a whole, being easier to impose on double-member constituencies, of which there were more in Lancashire than Yorkshire, for example. The pact held at the 1906 general election and allowed the election of more Labour—and Liberal—MPs than would otherwise have been the case. It was renegotiated for the general elections of January and December 1910 [TANNER 1990 : 22-23; MCKIBBIN 1970 : 11-13].

Crucially, the issues of Edwardian politics were very well suited to this 'progressive alliance'. At the 1906 election, the LRC put forward a brief manifesto that covered issues mostly relating to trade unionists. High on the list of priorities was the reversal of the Taff Vale decision. This appeared to put Labour at odds with the Liberals, since the Liberal leadership had talked about new legislation that did not just restore the presumed *status quo ante* but instead offered a serious attempt at reform. But so many Liberal candidates pledged themselves during the campaign to straightforward repeal that their leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, and his colleagues had to retreat from their position [POIRIER 1958 : 246-247]. Other than that, there was are strong consonance with the Liberal platform, on issues like the defence of free trade, pensions, Chinese labour in South Africa, and unemployment. In their own campaigns, leading Labour figures like Hardie, MacDonald, Henderson, Shackleton and Philip Snowden ran campaigns that were broadly in line with a progressive approach [RUSSELL 1973 : 78-83].

The Liberal government began brightly in Labour eyes. The 1906 Trade Disputes Act restored immunity from legal action for damages and other privileges to the unions, and school meals and old age pensions were introduced. But the winter of 1908-1909 saw unemployment rise to very high levels. This created considerable unrest within the party and the wider Labour movement. Shackleton, MacDonald and Henderson remained committed to supporting the Liberal government, despite the fact that they came in for considerable left-wing Labour criticism for doing so [TILLETT 1908; SCHNEER 1982 : 133-136; TANNER 1990 : 51-54]. However, the decision of the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, to introduce a radical budget in 1909 made a huge difference. So too did the decision of the House of Lords to reject it. And, as he intended, Lloyd George's strong anti-aristocratic rhetoric went down well with people at all levels of the Labour party [ROWLAND 1975 : 220-223]. All this helped to re-cement the progressive alliance. So too did the 1909 Osborne Judgment, which again seemed to threaten the legal position of trade unions by declaring their payments to the Labour party illegal [PELLING 1982].

Labour's manifestos for the general elections of January and December 1910 focussed strongly on issues like democracy, Lords reform and social reform, where they could maximise their links with the Liberals [CRAIG

1975 : 19-20; 24-25]. This 'progressive alliance' remained essentially in place until 1914, not least because, whatever their misgivings about the Liberals, Labour's leaders shared a visceral dislike of the Conservatives, especially in their pre-1914 form, under the at times strident leadership of Andrew Bonar Law.[10] The strength of the alliance has been questioned, but Tanner's view, that it remained essentially intact at the outbreak of the First World War, is persuasive [TANNER 1990 : 318]. It is true that MacDonald and Henderson were talking about running many more candidates at the next general election. But this was in part a bargaining ploy, to get a better deal from the Liberals in terms of the electoral pact. And in a sense they had no alternative but to talk big, or at least bigger, once the party's financial position had been secured by the introduction of State salaries for MPs in 1911, and by the 1913 Trade Unions Act, which allowed unions to create separate political funds. But they were not envisaging an abandonment of 'progressivism'. Indeed, MacDonald seems to have been tempted by Lloyd George's periodic suggestions of a coalition government between 1911 and 1913 [MARQUAND 1977 : 143, 150, 159-162].

There were alternative views, of course. George Lansbury, elected as MP for Bow and Bromley in East London in 1910, became particularly associated with a much more anti-Liberal approach, described by Tanner as 'practical Socialist moral reformism' but derided at the time by the leading ILP moderate John Bruce Glasier as 'a mere outbreak of self-consciousness and see-what-a-good-boy-am-I-ism' [TANNER 1990 : 73; 400]. However, Lansbury's ability to do much about it was compromised. Like Hardie, he emerged as a strong supporter of women's suffrage, and in 1912 controversially resigned his seat to fight a by-election on the issue. But he lost the election, and was to remain out of Parliament until 1922; and out of Parliament he was less of a force, at least for the time being [SHEPHERD 2002 : 115-137.

The Great War redrew Labour's boundaries with the Liberals, however. On the outbreak of war in August 1914 there were divisions at the top. MacDonald opposed entry to the war, but was in a minority within the PLP and so resigned as its chairman. Henderson supported it, and took over the chairmanship [HOWARD 1977]. MacDonald's relations with the official Liberal party cooled considerably at this point. The Liberal government remained in office until May 1915, when it was replaced by a Coalition, also under Asquith; some Liberals remained in office under Lloyd George after he formed his Coalition in December 1916. Although the official Liberals moved into opposition at that point, Asquith was damaged goods in MacDonald's eyes. Yet even as his attitude towards the Liberal party deteriorated, his relations with individual Liberals critical of the war improved [MARQUAND 1977 : 183-184]. Here, his work with the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), campaigning against secret diplomacy and a punitive peace, was important. In a sense it continued his longstanding interest in pan-progressive politics, which had been seen before the war in his involvement with the Rainbow Circle [FREEDEN 1989]. Now, he worked

[10] For the Conservatives in this period, see GREEN 1995 : 267-306; SMITH 2000.

with Liberal radicals like E.D. Morel, C.P. Trevelyan and others in a stern critique of the pre-war 'secret diplomacy' of the Liberal government. He did not, however, take a pacifist line towards the war. Indeed, he argued that, once Britain was in the war, it had to win it; but he remained highly critical of aspects of the execution of that aim.[11] For their part, Hardie, Snowden and Lansbury all opposed British entry to the war in 1914, and remained critical of it. Hardie died in 1915, but Snowden remained a staunch Parliamentary critic of successive governments, and was especially outspoken in his opposition to conscription [LAYBOURN 1988 : 62-82].

Henderson took a different line on the war, but ultimately this left him just as much out of sympathy with the Liberals as it did MacDonald. With the majority of the PLP and the wider party, Henderson took what became known in France as 'the choice of 1914'. This was a recognition that if the war went well, and Labour had stood out against it, then it would suffer dire electoral consequences. It also calculated that a wartime government would give Labour (and the working-class population it claimed to represent) rewards for its patriotism that might otherwise have been hard to obtain [HORNE 1991, esp. 42-83]. In addition, of course, he believed in the righteousness of the British cause, at least—being a good radical—once Germany had violated Belgian neutrality [LEVENTHAL 1989 : 50]. Henderson personally fared well from the stance he took: when the Asquith Coalition was formed in May 1915 he entered the cabinet, and he was listened to carefully on labour matters. He was publicly staunch in his support for 'the indispensable man', Asquith, in what proved to be the terminal crisis of the latter's premiership.[12] But he was irritated by Asquith's decision, in December 1916, to resign; and, when Lloyd George proved able to form a new coalition government, Henderson saw no point in following Asquith into the wilderness, not least because the issues raised by 'the choice of 1914' remained live. He therefore led Labour into the Lloyd George Coalition, and took a seat in the five-member war cabinet. This marked his break with the official Liberal party; and his forced resignation from the government eight months later, following the so-called 'doormat incident', broke him from Lloyd George, too [LEVENTHAL 1989 : 67-68]. Labour remained in the Coalition, but Henderson was out, and free to pursue the reform of the Labour party on larger and more ambitious lines than ever before. By the time of the December 1918 general election, Labour would have a new constitution, a new and comprehensive programme, and a declaration of independence from the Liberals in the form of Clause IV of the party's constitution which, in effect, pledged it formally to socialism for the first time.

The 1918 constitution symbolised a shift towards the socialists within the Labour party, and that was anathema to most Liberals. But it also represented, in much more real terms, a shift of power towards the trade unions. And it promised more of the same to follow. This was a recognition

[11] MARQUAND 1977 : 165-167, 183-184, 186-193; and, more generally, SWARTZ 1971.

[12] Henderson at Northampton, 1 December 1916, *The Times*, 2 December 1916; eight days later he was sitting in the first meeting of Lloyd George's five-member war cabinet: The National Archives, cabinet papers, CAB 23/1/1, 9 December 1916.

of the realities of power in Labour politics, especially in a context where union membership had exploded in the years since 1910 and still more since 1914. Yet it left many Labour politicians profoundly concerned. MacDonald and Snowden, in particular, disliked it, although it would be fair to say that the former managed to publicly overcome—or at least contain—his concerns, so long as the bulk of the unions were on his side [MARQUAND 1977 : 229-231]. Snowden was more worried. He had always seen himself more as an ILP-er than as a Labour man *per se*. He felt that the new structure might well prove to be an impediment to the kind of politics he favoured, and began to see Liberals as potential allies to rectify the balance [LAYBOURN 1988 : 79-80]. But even Henderson was concerned, believing that the unions would need to become less narrow and more generous in their approach if the Labour alliance was really going to replace the progressive one effectively [MCKIBBIN 1978]. He was not to be altogether satisfied in the years that followed: as I have argued elsewhere, it was only to be during the Second World War that the party and the unions would really come together fully [THORPE 2009 : 284-285].

By the end of the First World War, the Liberal party was in such a state of disrepair that there seemed to be little point in trying to co-operate with it—indeed, any thoughts of co-operation could have been seen as positively toxic to a Labour party determined to go its own way. All the conditions that had sustained the pre-war progressive alliance had gone. Instead, the Liberals had few MPs; a leader—Asquith—who was now a political has-been; little in the way of a coherent political programme; and no obvious future. Labour was quick, in the years after 1918, to place itself at the head of what might be called traditional Liberal cries. For example, it worked hard to publicise British atrocities in Ireland, which brought swift electoral dividends from Irish voters in Britain at the 1922 general election. It also criticised the peace treaties and attacked Coalition foreign policy, and defended free trade by demanding the removal of 'temporary' tariffs like the McKenna Duties [THORPE 2008 : 56-57]. There was no merit in working with the Liberal party; but there appeared to be considerable potential in exploiting the electorate's residual Liberalism.

The general election of December 1923 saw the Conservatives appealing for a mandate for tariffs. Unsurprisingly, this brought Labour and the Liberals closer together than at any point since 1916, perhaps since 1914. Labour claimed that it was beyond pre-war squabbles between protection and free trade, but its alternative trade policies were evanescent and, where they were perceptible, complex and difficult to explain. The result was that most Labour candidates reverted to a straightforward defence of free trade, both as trade policy and as guarantor of clean politics, democracy and all the other legendary virtues they had learnt as young men and women.[13]

By this stage, most Labour leaders—and certainly MacDonald and Henderson—were keen to see off the Liberals, and so this degree of congruence between the two parties' approaches could have been a threat.

[13] Although it is only fair to point out that some doubt is thrown onto this view by TRENTMANN 2008 : 222-226.

But the threat was soon lifted. In the aftermath of the election, Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin presented a protectionist programme to the House of Commons, and was defeated. He resigned, and was succeeded by MacDonald, who formed a Labour government even though Labour was not even the largest party in Parliament. MacDonald and his colleagues were clear that they did not want a coalition with the Liberals. And the Liberals' behaviour did much to antagonise Labour opinion—Asquith showed a rather condescending attitude, conveyed the sense that he was the arbiter of power prepared to tolerate Labour for the time being, and the Liberals made it a little too obvious that they were the ones keeping Labour in office. Labour resentment towards the Liberals grew, therefore [MARQUAND 1977 : 320]. It was significant that when Labour was ousted over the Campbell case later in 1924, the cabinet agreed to go out on the Liberal amendment calling for an inquiry rather than the substantive Conservative motion of censure: this allowed Labour to argue at the subsequent election that the Liberals had ousted a progressive government. Indeed, its election manifesto opened with the words: 'The Labour Government, defeated in the House of Commons by a partisan combination of Liberals and Tories, appeals to the People.'[14] There could have been no stronger or clearer message to progressives—only Labour was on their side. Progressives should not vote for the Liberals.

In many ways 1924 would be a neat end-point for this paper. That October's general election saw Labour roundly beaten, with the Conservatives winning a larger single-party majority than either the Liberals in 1906 or Labour in 1945. But the Liberals were humiliated, electing only 40 MPs, and so far behind in third place that they seemed to be finished.

However, this periodisation is perhaps a little too neat. Lloyd George's money sparked a revival once he succeeded Asquith as leader in October 1926. In many parts of Britain, the party continued to be relatively strong, and even where it was not, it sometimes had a residual power which meant it could not be totally ignored [See e.g. TREGIDGA 2000]. A very powerful myth also developed: that, somehow, there was much more Liberal support in the country than the election results recognised; that almost every interwar general election was somehow exceptional, and that when more 'normal' times returned the 'natural' Liberal vote would re-emerge.[15] This was very largely nonsense. But it was hard to test the proposition to destruction, given the lack of the basic tools, such as public opinion polls, upon which future generations would come to rely.

That meant that this generation of Labour leaders continued to keep a wary eye on the Liberals, even in decline. Between 1924 and 1929, the hegemonic view within the Labour leadership was that of MacDonald and Henderson, whose approach mirrored that of Baldwin, in appealing to Liberal voters over the heads of their leaders by moving their own party to the centre ground.[16] The result of the May 1929 general election would

[14] 'Labour's Appeal to the People' (1924), in CRAIG 1975 : 60.
[15] For more on this, see THORPE 2009 : 286-287.
[16] For Baldwin, see WILLIAMSON 1999.

suggest they were right: Labour emerged as the largest party and formed its second minority government.

Snowden appears to have taken a different view. Although he remains a rather under-researched, and hence misunderstood, figure, it does appear that he favoured a deal with the Liberals, perhaps amounting to an electoral pact (in this, ironically, he mirrored Winston Churchill on the Conservative side) [CAMPBELL 1977 : 130-131, 147-148, 165, 223]. Why? Four possible reasons stand out. First, he was a progressive who wanted to see a reforming government elected, but who was less optimistic about Labour's prospects than his colleagues were. Secondly, he disliked the strongly trade union emphasis of Labour after 1918, and regretted the way in which the 1918 reforms had first marginalised and then radicalised his party, the ILP, which remained affiliated to Labour. Bringing in the progressive Liberals would counterbalance the unions. Thirdly, he was also a moderate, concerned about the potential of the Labour left and of the radical socialists who were increasingly coming to dominate what he still saw as his own party, the ILP. Bringing in the Liberals would counter these influences too. Finally, he was concerned that Lloyd George's moves towards Keynesianism in the later 1920s were a denial of the sound finance which he believed was the essential prerequisite of any reform programme, and he may have hoped that bringing the Liberals closer to the centre of affairs would moderate their economic policy. Although he was unsuccessful, this logic would help take him into the National government in 1931, out of it with the Liberal ministers in 1932, and lead him to broadcast for the Liberals under Sir Herbert Samuel at the general election of 1935 [STANNAGE 1980 : 140-141].

On the left, Lansbury continued to be sceptical about the Liberals. In so far as he had ambitions to see Labour making cross-party alliances in the 1920s, it was with the Communists, not the Liberals [MORGAN 2006 : 95-121]. But he realised the latter's potential to help Labour when they kept the minority government in office. In March 1931 he approached Lloyd George and asked him to join the Labour party in 1931. This may well have been a ruse, a 'put up or shut up' moment; but it showed the ways in which the continuing existence of the Liberal party continued to exercise Labour minds. Needless to say, Lloyd George rejected the overture [THORPE 1991 : 56]. The events of August-October 1931 seemed to show conclusively that the Liberals were on the 'wrong' side—with Lloyd George, no longer leader, a voice in the wilderness urging Liberals to vote Labour and against the National Government. This did not stop some Labour figures advocating Lib-Lab co-operation against the National Government later in the 1930s, but by now Labour's official line was firmly set, and some of those who continued to call for collaboration, such as Sir Stafford Cripps and Aneurin Bevan, were to be expelled from the party in 1939 [BLAAZER 1992 : 147-192].

There were strong reasons why the Labour and Liberal parties were separate parties. There were strong reasons why they remained so. Those reasons were not all about the choices and actions of individuals. Many of them stemmed from the very different bases of the respective parties: from

differences of ideology, policy, organisation, culture, and ethos.[17] However, none of this should blind us to the fact that for most of the period between 1906 and 1914 Labour leaders—who would later claim to have seen through Liberalism as early as the 1880s or 1890s—were quite happy to work with the Liberal party, and were indeed prepared to countenance the continuation of such co-operation for some time into the future, albeit perhaps with a greater number of Labour as opposed to Liberal MPs making up the progressive bloc in Parliament. But the events of 1914-24 were to have a profound effect on their outlook, and ensure that they worked hard to keep the two parties apart in the period after 1918. It was a lesson that their successors would learn well.

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[17] For more on this, see THORPE 2005.

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