

Features

Origins of Lib-Lab division

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The formation of a Conservative-Liberal Coalition government in Britain has been seen as a remarkable development, for all kinds of reasons.

Long-forgotten Prime Ministers have been hauled in to give evidence one way or another on what its exponents have described as a remarkable experiment in politics. Disraeli's stricture that England does not love coalitions has been matched with references to wartime coalitions under Asquith, Lloyd George and Churchill. Ed Balls repeatedly invoked Ramsay MacDonald in a strong performance in a *Newsnight* discussion with Michael Gove on 5 July.

One aspect of the remarkableness of the new government has been the claim that it reflects some kind of historic turn in Liberalism – that a party which has been historically of the centre-left has now moved rightwards. (Indeed, its centrality to a government that promises to be as right-wing as any since 1945 in terms of cuts and their intended victims suggests it has moved a long way). When viewed in historical context, however, the shift is less remarkable than it might seem.

The misplaced 'progressive alliance'

The idea that there was a lost opportunity for closer Lib-Lab cooperation has been present ever since Labour emerged as a major force in British politics during the First World War. Perhaps the most significant single act in this story was Labour's adoption, in 1918, of a new party constitution which in effect declared Labour a socialist party. For its critics, this was a wilful act of political sectarianism, driven by socialist extremists and trade unions infected by what Roy Jenkins once called 'an aggressive and intolerant proletarianism' (Jenkins, 1979, 29). By these actions, it is alleged, an unnecessary division was erected that helped to ensconce the Conservatives in power for virtually the whole of the inter-war period, and to give them a flying start in the competition for votes at most elections thereafter.

But since the 1970s there has been very considerable support for the notion that the two parties were essentially two sides of a common progressive movement. It is not hard to see why this should have been the case. The revival, from the 1970s, of third-party/centre-party politics in Britain was matched by increasing interest in the opportunities for realignment of 'progressive' forces of the centre-left. There was now greater focus on the idea that the conscious erection of barriers to cooperation between Labour and the Liberals caused huge problems, not least the division of the radical forces in British politics

and, consequently, the creation, almost by default, of a long period of Conservative hegemony.

Such a view was, of course, given a huge boost by wider developments in the 1980s and 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communism in all but its most remote hideouts, the apparent removal of socialism from the political menu, and the reining in of militant trade unionism under years of Conservative government, all combined to remove sticking points between Labour and those to its immediate political right.

In the 1990s, Labour's leader, Tony Blair, repeatedly stressed his belief that his personal politics, and those of New Labour more generally, derived not just from Labour's own history, but from a broader 'progressive' tradition which included Liberals every bit as much as Labourites: as he said in 1995, Labour needed to 'value the contribution of Lloyd George, Beveridge and Keynes and not just Attlee, Bevan or Crosland'. Labour people should 'welcome the radical left-of-centre tradition outside our own party, as well as celebrating the achievements of that tradition within it' (Blair, 1995, 7). To some extent, this can be seen as a clever re-application of an old Labour tactic – flattering Liberal traditions in order to appeal to ordinary Liberals over the heads of their leaders. Nonetheless, the fact that Blair took the process to such significant lengths, including even a series of clandestine meetings with the Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, about a possible coalition, suggests that he was, in the period up to the 1997 election at least, convinced by the case for a renewed 'progressive alliance'.

At the same time, there has been renewed focus in historical writing on the earlier period of 'progressive alliance'. Since the 1980s, much of the most important work on the politics of the two or three decades before 1914 has tended to stress the continuities of progressive politics in Edwardian Britain. In the place of older, 'heroic' visions, which had represented the coming of the Labour Party as the culmination, and inevitable by-product, of the rise of the working class, this new work emphasised the contingent nature of Labour's pre-war advance; the continuing vitality of the Liberal Party and Liberalism; and the extent to which the two parties were still able to muddle along together in a largely informal, but nonetheless real, 'progressive alliance'. This was the main message of David Marquand's *The Progressive Dilemma*, for example (Marquand, 1992).

However, this article – based on extensive research conducted on all levels of both parties – suggests that the obstacles to cooperation in the period between 1918 and 1945 were even greater than has been generally recognised. They were, in fact, so significant as effectively to rule out Lib-Lab collaboration, let alone any kind of 'progressive alliance'. This, in turn, will help us to understand better how easily Liberal Democrats could get into bed with Conservatives today.

Liberal-Labour relations 1914-45

Argument has continued, and will continue, about the extent to which the 'progressive alliance' was fracturing prior to 1914. But it is beyond doubt that it did not survive the Great War.

Liberal progressivism was becalmed, not least because its main cabinet advocate, David Lloyd George, was sucked into the war effort, first as Chancellor of the Exchequer, then as Minister of Munitions and Secretary of State for War, before he effectively broke with the Liberal Party altogether to become Prime Minister of a coalition government in December 1916. Many other progressive Liberals were marginalised

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by their criticism of the war. So the less progressive elements of the party reasserted themselves strongly.

Labour's hopes were raised by the expansion of trade union membership, and by an apparently increased appetite, and potential, for greater state power. At the same time, the fears of at least some of its leaders were stirred by the introduction of compulsory military service, and talk of industrial conscription, as well as by the development of radical, anti-democratic revolutionary movements in Russia after February Revolution of 1917. Many of Labour's leaders now expected some kind of swing to the left to take place after the war. In one sense, they welcomed this: it offered them opportunities. But they also saw that the divided and discredited Liberals were in no state even to try to exploit the expected leftwards surge. If Labour did not therefore step into the breach, then the moment might well be seized by far left revolutionaries with no interest in the kind of 'ordered progress' which characterised the thinking of Labour's leading strategists and intellectuals.

Accordingly, those strategists supported the adoption of a new party constitution in 1918. This constitution gave the trade unions, as a whole, more influence over the party than ever before. But it also declared the intention of building up the party in every part of Britain, through the introduction of Constituency Labour Parties with individual membership; and, most famously in retrospect, it committed the party to socialism through what became known as 'Clause IV'.

The adoption of a socialist commitment was notable in the context of this article because it marked, and was meant to mark, a clear dividing line with the Liberals: a line that Liberals could not cross, without becoming socialists and thereby renouncing their Liberalism. It was made clear that Liberals who did make this renunciation would be welcome. But it was equally clear that they must come in on Labour's, and not their own, terms. And, of course, many Liberals did make such a move. No undergraduate essay on the subject is complete without the requisite list of often rather grand names: Viscount Haldane, C. P. Trevelyan, E. D. Morel, Arthur Ponsonby, H. B. Lees-Smith.

However, the high hopes of 1917-18, which had led to the promulgation of the new constitution, were soon being scaled back. Economic slump from August 1920, and the subsequent – and consequent – series of severe industrial defeats suffered by the trade unions, dented the party's aspirations. The development of a bloody Communist dictatorship in Russia did little to ease the task of Labour politicians and canvassers when challenged about 'red scares'; the weakness of the British Communist Party poked fun at suggestions that a commitment to socialism had been necessary to head off a potent threat from the far left. The Conservatives' decision to jettison Lloyd George's activist and interventionist leadership and settle instead for a role as the party of resistance to the left made them formidable opponents in a country which had had enough of overseas adventures, which was busy remembering and memorialising its war dead, and where for many there was no more potent cry than the desire to return to 1913. In this context, far from being the advantage that had been hoped, it might well be that Labour's radical departure of 1918 was, in fact, an obstacle to its progress.

This, in turn, raises the question of whether there was more potential for Labour-Liberal cooperation between 1918 and 1945. It should be borne in mind, of course, that there were periods of cooperation between the two parties in this period. In January 1924, for example, they united in the House of Commons to turn out Stanley Baldwin's protectionist Conservative government following the latter's loss of its parliamentary majority at

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the general election of December 1923. The first Labour government, which followed, relied on the Liberals to remain in office, especially since the Conservatives remained the largest party in the House of Commons. However, that support was withdrawn over MacDonald's poor handling of the Campbell Case later in 1924, and the government fell. At the general election that followed, the Liberals probably suffered more than Labour from the 'red scare' atmosphere, since those voters who took such things seriously were now more likely to support the party of resistance – the Conservatives – than the Liberals who had let the 'socialists' into office in the first place.

Both Labour and the Conservatives hoped that the Liberals' heavy defeat in 1924 would lead to their imminent demise and the clarity of a two-party system. But such hopes were temporarily dashed by the Liberal revival under Lloyd George, who took over as leader in October 1926. The Liberals' advance between then and the 1929 general election was not enough to bring them to parity with Labour (which emerged as the largest party for the first time) or the Conservatives, but it was sufficient to give them the balance of power in the House of Commons once more. This time, the Liberals tried to wield the balance of power more cleverly, but the Conservatives' effective refusal to bargain with them meant that they were forced, by early 1930, into fairly steady support for the struggling Labour government. From mid-1930 onwards, there were regular meetings between Labour ministers and Liberal leaders, and rumours were flying in the spring of 1931 that a Liberal might soon join the cabinet. Although some historians have taken these signals very seriously, others have been less convinced that a Lib-Lab coalition was about to emerge: it seems more likely that the combination of a joint desire to avoid a general election and a sense of drift in the government combined to produce a fertile ground for rumours.

In any case, hopes of a renewal of some kind of progressive alliance were confounded in the summer of 1931. The decision of the Liberals to back the Conservatives in calling for heavy spending cuts to meet a projected budget deficit that August led to the creation of the National Government under Labour's erstwhile leader, Ramsay MacDonald. And that government then went on to trounce Labour at the October 1931 general election, winning 554 seats to Labour's 46. The National Government remained in office – under first MacDonald, then Baldwin, and then Neville Chamberlain – until 1940. The Liberal MPs split, more or less in half (in addition, Lloyd George – who had opposed the National Government at the election – and three members of his family formed a third group). The Liberal Nationals remained part of the government throughout, finally merging with the Conservatives in the late 1940s. The official Liberals, first under Sir Herbert Samuel (1931-35) and then Sir Archibald Sinclair (1935-45) remained in the government until 1932, and finally moved onto the opposition benches in November 1933. By the latter date, however, they were in sharp decline.

There were, arguably, some signs of a slight recovery in the later 1930s, but these came, ultimately, to very little; while fleeting hopes of progress in the Second World War were to be bitterly disappointed by the party's virtual obliteration at the 1945 general election. At that election, the Liberals won only twelve seats. Labour, on the other hand, won 393, and formed its first majority government with a parliamentary majority of 146. Although there had been some local cooperation in anti-Conservative fronts in the later 1930s, based on the popular front agitation, and although Labour and the Liberals had been partners under Churchill in the 1940-45 Coalition government, the two parties remained separate. Indeed, the results of the 1945 election seemed finally to bear out the

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promise of the formal separation that had taken place in 1918: the strategy of keeping the Liberals at arm's length had, it seemed, finally paid off.

Obstacles to cooperation

1945, then, seemed to vindicate Labour's strategy towards the Liberals. But vindication had been a long time coming, and viewed from the early 1990s there were reasons to try to imagine a counterfactual in which Labour and the Liberals collaborated to keep the Conservatives out much earlier than 1945.

In reality, however, there would have been severe obstacles to such cooperation. These operated at the levels of leadership; ideology; policy; trade unionism; relations with the Conservative party; and organisation and ethos. To demonstrate the point, each of these areas will be discussed in turn.

Leadership

Leadership attitudes were one clear hindrance to greater cooperation. Most Labour leaders of the period shared something of a distrust of the Liberals. This had not prevented cooperation before 1914, but it had tended to limit it, and its intensification after 1914 was palpable. The dominant figures of the inter-war Labour Party certainly harboured a degree of prejudice against the Liberals.

Among the key leaders during the 1920s, MacDonald and Arthur Henderson had both been disappointed by the Liberals' failure to adopt them as candidates in the 1890s. Neither had refused to work with the Liberals before the war as a result, but it seems plausible to argue that, as the Liberal Party as a whole moved away from progressivism, so the party's less palatable elements returned to the fore. Certainly, Labour's frequent criticisms of the character of those elected as Coalition Liberal MPs in 1918 would suggest that they were only comfortable with a certain type of Liberal. Henderson had respected the Liberal Prime Minister of 1908-16, H. H. Asquith, but such respect was dented by the events of the war years; MacDonald, for his part, had little respect for Asquith. The relations of both men with Lloyd George deteriorated considerably during the war, and still more during his post-war premiership (1918-22), when Labour's progress owed much to its stern critique of the Coalition's record on a variety of issues. Some other leading Liberals, like Samuel, were more palatable: he played a conciliatory role in the 1926 General Strike and was widely rumoured to be about to enter the Labour cabinet in 1930-31. Other leading Labourites of the 1920s, even if moderates, were not necessarily interested in working with the Liberals: J. H. Thomas, for example, was in many ways more like a Conservative than a Liberal.

The next generation of Labour leaders were even less enthusiastic. MacDonald and Henderson, born in the 1860s, had grown into middle age with the Liberal Party as a key actor in British politics. Clement Attlee, Hugh Dalton and Herbert Morrison had been born in the 1880s and for them the Liberals conjured up less resonant memories. Nor did they feel much enthusiasm for contemporary Liberal leaders – Samuel had burnt his boats with Labour by finally siding with the National Government in 1931 and remaining in it as it trounced Labour at that year's general election, while after 1935 Sinclair was generally seen as amiable but lightweight. The other notable leading Liberal of the period was Sir William Beveridge, who became a virtual co-leader with Sinclair in late 1944 following his election as MP for Berwick: but, for all Labour's apparent enthusiasm for the Beveridge

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Report of 1942, there was a good deal of personal distrust of someone who was generally regarded, in Labour circles, as a very difficult colleague. In short, there was very little room for collaboration between the leaders of the two parties during this period as a whole.

Ideology

Another major obstacle was ideology. It might be suggested that this should not have mattered: that the concerns of the here-and-now should have taken priority over somewhat theological questions regarding the ultimate fate of private property, and so on. But this is a rather misguided criticism. Labourites and Liberals were 'ideological' whether they liked it or not. Ideology is not an optional extra in politics, but is fundamental to it: even those who would proclaim themselves as un-ideological are thereby subscribing to an ideology. And, in any case, both Labour and the Liberals *did* like it: they took ideology seriously. It was valuable in itself, as offering *raison d'être* for each party. It also had strategic value, in helping to keep each party together in times of crisis. Like all ideologies, the Liberals' Liberalism and Labour's socialism were not unchanging. But they were not adaptable enough in this period to allow sufficient convergence to make a 'progressive alliance' a reality.

Liberals were not modest in their claims for their ideology. They believed that Liberalism was an honourable doctrine that had liberated people from age-old shackles, enabling them to enjoy a freer existence. The notion that this could or should be given up, or even compromised, was anathema. Indeed, reading through Liberal politicians' private correspondence and public writings, and the records of the party at all levels down to the humblest local party associations, what is clear during this period is the pride that such people still took in being Liberals. Their political world might seem to have been falling apart, but they were not, on the whole, interested in changing their views if this meant renouncing Liberalism. On the contrary, they believed that the reason that the world had become a worse place since 1914 was precisely *because* people had neglected the basic Liberal values of the former generation. Linked with this was an imperturbable optimism on the part of some Liberals: in 1939, three days before Germany attacked Poland to unleash almost six years of bloody and genocidal war, the chairman of the East Dorset Liberal Association stated that 'there was a wave of Liberalism spreading over Europe, and the Liberal creed was being adopted in other Parties and other countries' (East Dorset Liberal Association, 1939).

Even the Liberal Nationals, who remained with the Conservatives in the National Government after 1932, were keen, at least until the end of the Second World War, to sustain an image of themselves as Liberals *within* a broader National alliance. If even the Liberal Nationals continued to feel such a bond to Liberalism, then it is hard to imagine that the independent Liberals would have felt any less of a commitment; and that, in turn, calls into serious question the extent to which they might have participated willingly in any kind of 'progressive' movement. It also suggests that any idea of giving up on Liberalism would have been even weaker in the 1920s, when the party's activists and supporters could still convince themselves that the party had the chance of a future in government in the short term.

But it was not just that Liberalism mattered to Liberals. It was also that socialism mattered to Labour. Indeed, it almost certainly mattered to more Labour people in this period than it had before the Great War, which had 'proved' the merits of state control, fair shares and so on. There might have been an element of calculation in the adoption of the

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socialist commitment in 1918, but that does not mean that the socialists in the party did not believe in it, or that they would have been happy to accept its dilution in the interests of appealing to Liberals. Indeed, the 1922 party conference passed unanimously a resolution denouncing 'any alliance or electoral arrangement with any section of the Liberal or Conservative Parties', with Sidney Webb telling delegates 'very emphatically' that it would be 'a terrible mistake' for Labour to try to enter government with any other party (Labour Party, 1922, 210).

Policy

In any case, the division operated at the level of policy as well as that of ideology, again constraining the potential for cooperation.

Before 1914 there had been considerable policy overlaps: the defence of free trade against protectionism, advocacy of Irish Home Rule, support for 'the people' against 'the peers', commitment to a degree of social reform, desire for the clarification of trade unions' legal position, and an inclination towards temperance, among others, had provided a raft of areas on which there was the potential for broad – though never unanimous – agreement. To be sure, within each of these areas there were differences of emphasis, but it was possible for these to be overcome, most of the time.

After 1918, though, the policy landscape was more divisive. The extension of the role and powers of the state during the war soon led to new fissures, or deepened old ones, between Liberals and Labour. Most – though not all – Labour people welcomed the state's expansion, but many Liberals were a good deal less sanguine. In some ways this might seem surprising, given the development of Liberal policy at various stages – towards the Keynesian 'Yellow Book' under Lloyd George in 1927-29, or the fulsome acceptance of Beveridge in the latter part of the Second World War. But appearances here were a little deceptive. During Lloyd George's period as leader (1926-31) there remained considerable – if at times subterranean – hostility towards the party's apparent conversion to statism.

Much of the party's progress at the 1929 election was due less to Keynes than to forces like memories of Gladstone and religious nonconformity. The party's eager adoption of Beveridge smacked of desperation, and it was this desperation which led Liberals largely to ignore, or fail to see, the extent to which Beveridge himself had moved towards a socialist perspective at this time. For all the noise that surrounded Beveridge – much of it, it must be said, made by Beveridge himself – there remained within the party a significant, though at this stage rather muted and cowed, opposition from those – like the banker Sir Andrew MacFadyean, or the editor of the *Huddersfield Examiner*, Elliott Dodds – who would have preferred greater emphasis on free enterprise, free trade, individual liberty, and the small trader.

Trade unionism

Emphasis on free enterprise also calls into question the issue of trade unionism. Here, the Liberals' often unfavourable attitudes were crucial in determining Labour hostility.

It was true that, by and large, the Liberals had been more sympathetic than the Conservatives towards trade unions since the mid-nineteenth century. It was, after all, Conservative-appointed judges who were making the running against the unions in the 1890s and 1900s, and the Liberal government under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman that restored trade union legal immunities by means of the 1906 Trade Disputes Act. However,

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it is worth reiterating that the case that challenged the whole basis of Labour Party funding through the trade unions was brought by a working-class Liberal, in the person of railwayman W. V. Osborne. The 1913 Trade Unions Act did resolve the problem of the Osborne judgement, but its failure simply to overturn Osborne was taken by some trade unionists as a clear sign of Liberal hostility, even though its long-term effects probably helped the Labour Party more than anyone had expected.

After the war, the Lloyd George coalition backed employers in industrial disputes, doing much to fuel union hostility. In 1926, ironically, it was Lloyd George among the Liberal leaders who attempted to take a conciliatory line in the General Strike; but the bulk of the Liberal leadership came out strongly on the side of the government and against the unions. Liberal arguments against the strike by Liberals like Sir John Simon were then used to help justify the 1927 Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act, which was seen by the unions as a vindictive piece of class legislation, enacted in revenge for the General Strike. Any attempt at a Labour-Liberal coalition in 1929-31 would have aroused strong union resistance, especially since the Liberals were lukewarm at best towards any repeal or amendment of the 1927 Act. And trade unionists did not become aware of any change in Liberal attitudes towards unions thereafter.

This division, on an issue of fundamental importance for the Labour Party, could not, and cannot, be wished away. Of course, it would be simplistic to say that Labour in this period was simply 'union-dominated'. But, at the same time, if enough unions felt sufficiently animated on a particular issue, they were usually able to block the party from taking a particular path. And this was always likely to be the case where any pact with the Liberals was concerned. It is certainly no coincidence that those Labour people who enjoyed the best relations with the Liberals in this period tended to be the ones, like Philip Snowden, who were least enamoured of the unions.

The Conservatives

Such difficulties were also marked when it came to the Liberals' relationship with the Conservative Party.

At the national level, their cooperation with the Conservatives in 1931 can be seen as something of an aberration for an otherwise progressive party. The official Liberal Party, after all, had opposed the Lloyd George Coalition, and supported the first two Labour governments in parliament, at least up to a point. Samuel suggested to King George V the replacement of the National Government with an alternative Liberal-Labour coalition under MacDonald shortly before the calling of the 1931 election. (The King, even less of a progressive than some Liberal Democrat ministers in Cameron's Coalition, was not impressed). Radical policy alternatives emanated from the party from time to time, never more so than in the late 1920s. Sinclair eventually led the Liberals to come out against Chamberlain's appeasement policy, and his party was far less hostile than Labour in 1938-39 towards the idea of a broad alliance against the National Government.

And yet there were always other Liberalisms, even at national level. These Liberalisms were often disparate, and they had little in common with each other; some were pro-Lloyd George, some anti, and so on. But even when they stood outside the Liberal Party, such Liberalisms could never be ignored by the leadership of that party. And the one thing they did share was a strong, almost visceral hostility towards Labour and practically everything it stood for. Such Liberalisms included the Liberalisms of the Lloyd George Coalition in the early 1920s, of the anti-Lloyd George Liberal Council from 1926 onwards, of the Liberal

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Nationals in the 1930s and 1940s, and of the anti-statist defenders of 'the independent man' and small trader during the Second World War. This is a tradition which fits less easily with prevalent modern-day views of the Liberals as a 'progressive' party, and so has tended to be neglected by modern historians with Liberal sympathies: but it was no less strong for that.

Industrial West Yorkshire provides some very good illustrations of the kaleidoscopic nature of local Liberalisms. Take Huddersfield. At the 1945 general election, the MP defending the seat was a Liberal National, Sir William Mabane, who had the support of the local Conservatives, but who was also the nominee of the official Huddersfield Liberal Association. He faced opposition from an official Sinclair Liberal candidate in the person of Roy Harrod, who was a fervent admirer of John Maynard Keynes, the progressive Liberal economist. Yet the chairman of the independent Borough Liberal Association, which was supporting Harrod, was Elliott Dodds, who although a local figure was also, at national level, arguably the Liberal Party's chief advocate of the interests of small independent traders against the all-embracing claims of the state. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Labour won the seat.

This reminder that the national scene was not the only forum for Liberal-Labour relations is apposite. While the Liberals might flirt with Labour at national level, they often tended to cleave pretty firmly in the opposite direction at the local level. Of course, there were exceptions, but it was usually the case that, where Liberals responded to their increasing weakness in local councils by entering into inter-party pacts, it was not with Labour, but with the Conservatives. In the council chamber, the Liberals were, in many cases, every bit as much a 'party of resistance' as the Conservatives: resistance to high rates, to direct labour, to municipal trading, to council housing, and to all the other manifestations of municipal socialism. Anti-Labour pacts were formed in many towns and cities, such as Bristol and Sheffield. To Labourites in such places, the idea of a national-level pact of any kind between Labour and the Liberals would have made no sense at all, and would, indeed, have aroused considerable criticism and hostility.

Organisation and ethos

Issues of organisation and ethos formed another barrier between the parties. It might well be that the Edwardian period represented a unique concatenation of characteristics of the two parties' machines, in which there was, for once, the potential for close cooperation. On the one hand, the powerful, but broadly tolerant, Liberal machine was able to offer a nascent Labour Party – which was not yet strongly centralised on the model of continental social democratic parties – the opportunity of collaboration as a junior partner.

Many Liberals have regretted this. In 1971, the historian Roy Douglas attacked 'the Liberal Whips' squeamish refusal to strangle the Labour Party in its cradle' which resulted in 'the division and confusion of radicals throughout the interwar years, and the eventual establishment of "Labour" administrations which had remarkably little in common with the wishes and needs of the workers themselves', while the party's then leader, Jeremy Thorpe, attacked the pact as 'unforgivable' (Douglas, 1971, 90, xii). But in the context of 1903 it made sense: the Liberals had been struggling in opposition for eight years, and had been trounced at the 1900 general election. At least a pact would help ensure the Conservatives were not given an undue advantage at the next election. As stated above, this was feasible because there was such a degree of overlap in terms of policy between Labour and the Liberals.

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As Labour's organisation grew, however, so its ethos began to harden in a way less favourable to these kind of inter-party deals. To be sure, a key development here was self-willed: namely, the adoption, in 1918, of the new party constitution, which ensconced the trade unions more firmly in control of the party than ever before (much to the chagrin of people like Snowden). But the second, which came two years later, was something about which Labour could have done very little: the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain. These two events had a significant impact upon the way the Labour Party was organised and the way in which it saw cooperation with other organisations. They meant that the party after 1918 had an ethos which was strongly influenced by trade union ideas of solidarity and loyalty to majority decisions, which sat ill with the views of many Liberals, and even some Liberal recruits to Labour like Josiah Wedgwood or Charles Trevelyan, both of whom would end up on the wrong side of it.

A second point concerns the Communists. One of the key reasons for Labour's organisational tightening from the early 1920s onwards was a keen awareness of the threat that Communists and communism posed to an essentially social democratic party. The chief aim of Labour's key strategists was to keep the Communists out, and to do this they had to erect barriers against cooperation with *all* other parties. This made them, ultimately, as hostile towards collaboration with Liberals as they were regarding cooperation with Communists. It is worth remembering, in this connection, that Cripps, Trevelyan, Aneurin Bevan and others were expelled in early 1939 for advocating a broad front which would have included Liberals. The fear of the leadership was that, once the Liberals had breached the barrier, it would have *then* been so much harder to keep the Communists out.

Finally, the potential for cooperation had to rely on an assessment of the possible futures on offer. Once they had made the decision for independence, Labourites would have taken a lot of persuading that some kind of collaboration with the Liberals would have brought serious long-term benefits. According to the vague evolutionary beliefs which in some inchoate way helped to shape the thinking of most Labourites, Liberalism was an outdated ideology whose time – the nineteenth century – had passed; the ideology of the twentieth century was socialism. The increasingly obvious debility of the Liberal Party during the inter-war period did little to counter such prejudices. Periods like 1923, 1927-29, or 1936, when Liberal prospects looked a little brighter, were at best fleeting, and set within a much wider context of decline and failure. In a sense it was a counsel of despair for Labour people to suggest harnessing themselves to such an obviously failing, and arguably doomed, organisation. There was plenty to despair about in Labour's performance during this period, but there was also much of which the party felt it could be proud, and the failure of the Liberal Party even to arrest its decline made it an unlikely and broadly unwelcome collaborator.

Conclusion

Viewed in global terms, it is easy to see why the period between the wars should have given rise to so much counterfactual wishful thinking. In the British context, the Conservative Party's domination of government at national level led many progressives to try to discover some alternative. We should not simply dismiss the potential of their efforts: politicians were not, and are not, merely helpless puppets within structures. However, they did have to operate according to constraints about which they could often do very little.

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Conversely, there were those in both parties who actively sought to diminish, and ultimately extinguish, any prospects for cooperation between the two parties. A combination of rational calculation, sectarianism, personal ambition, and sheer prejudice severely inhibited the prospects for those who sought to renew the Edwardian 'progressive alliance' in a new form. And yet that was not the whole story. The alliance had had its opponents in the pre-1914 period, after all, but the context then had been less favourable to those opponents, and the alliance had – more or less – survived. It was the change in the context, outlined above, that made the crucial difference to the prospects for cooperation. This, in turn, meant that the advocates of progressive unity – who remained numerous, and in some cases prominent – faced a tough, and ultimately futile, battle in trying to forge wider alliances.

It is worth bearing in mind, in any case, that even if there had been a progressive alliance, it would probably not have made any difference on the key question of Conservative hegemony. Simplistic analysis which assumes that Liberal-Labour cooperation would have led to all their voters combining straightforwardly against the Conservatives is not fit to be called psephology. Such a deal would instead have led to the large-scale desertion of Liberals from 'progressivism' and into the Conservative camp. There may have been an anti-Conservative majority among voters, but there was an even more marked anti-*Labour* majority.

In a sense, therefore, we should not be surprised that Labour and the Liberal Democrats were unable to form a coalition in the days after the 2010 general election, or that the Liberal Democrats ended up in coalition with the Conservatives but without Labour. Such coalitions were the stock-in-trade of many local authorities between the wars, and they became bywords, in many cases, for parsimonious administration, poor public services, and the privileging of ratepayers over efficiency and the interests of those in need. At national level, the two periods of coalition government that included Conservatives and at least a significant number of Liberals, but excluded Labour, were 1918-22 and 1931-40 – both of which came to be seen, however unfairly, as reactionary administrations acting against the interests of a large part of the population. From none of those experiences did the Liberals emerge with either political credit or electoral profit. It remains to be seen the extent to which the current arrangements will merely follow those precedents, or whether Nick Clegg's revival of anti-progressive Liberalism can bring the party benefits that his predecessors like Lloyd George were incapable of garnering.

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