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MINOR POLITICAL PARTIES

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This is the fifth in a series of six lectures on the British party system, and this lecture is on the minor parties in British politics. They are a disparate lot. There are, first, new parties which have broken away from existing ones, such as the Liberal Unionists in the 19th Century, a breakaway from the Liberal Party, and the SDP in the 20th Century, a breakaway from the Labour Party. These parties sought to realign the party system, either by replacing one of the existing parties or, alternatively, by establishing a new multi-party system in place of the two-party system. There are, secondly, extremist parties, such as the Communist and Fascist Parties, which sought not to realign the system but to abolish it and replace it with a one-party system. There is, thirdly, UKIP, which is a phenomenon of its own because UKIP was not seeking to realign or abolish the party system but to realign British politics. Its aim was not necessarily to form a government or to be in a government but to ensure that Britain left the European Union. It was, therefore, a single-issue party, even though it does have, did have, policies on other matters as well. It now seems very probably that we shall in fact leave the European Union, and perhaps that is the reason why UKIP now has so many problems - perhaps its essential task has been achieved. But whether so or not, UKIP can claim to be the most successful minor party in British party, perhaps, indeed, the only successful minor party, because it can claim much of the credit, or debit, depending on your own political view, for Brexit. I want to discuss, first, the extremist parties, then UKIP, and then, finally, the breakaway parties, and conclude by asking whether there is scope today for a new breakaway party from the Labour Party, a new SDP as it were, and whether there are any lessons from the past which such a new party ought to be bear in mind.

First then, the extremist parties, the Communists and the Fascists. Now, much more has been written on them than any of the other parties that I shall be discussing, but in a sense, that is odd because these parties have been almost completely irrelevant in British politics. They never succeeded in attracting mass support and had very little influence on the course of events. They are interesting, in my view, primarily as studies in political pathology, and no doubt social psychologists can explain why people join or support such extremist parties which lie so far from the mainstream of British politics.

The British Communist Party, or the Communist Party of Great Britain, to give it its proper title, was founded in 1920. Its chairman said this at the founding: "We believe that a social revolution is absolutely essential, and it is our duty to get it, however much we may be soiled in the process. Even if there arises a necessity for bloodshed, we can always remember that the lesson of history is that it is never the revolutionary who is responsible for the shedding of blood, it is invariably the counter-revolutionary." Now, that may seem far from any British realities, but the period immediately after the First World War was perhaps the only time during the 20th Century in which it might have seemed there was a real prospect of revolutionary change in Britain.

In the first week of January 1919, there was an Army mutiny and 10,000 British soldiers stationed in Folkestone refused to obey orders to return to France. The mutiny spread. A group of sailors hoisted the Red Flag onto their masthead, with a declaration, "Half the Navy are on strike, and the other half soon will be". The War Office sent a memorandum to commanding officers to ask whether their men could be relied on to remain loyal, and the head of the Army wrote, in November 1918: "Our real danger now is not the Bosh but Bolshevism". In addition, Glasgow, the centre of what was then called Red Clydeside, was paralysed by a general strike, and the Red Flag was flown above municipal offices. There was a threat of a nationwide general strike,



involving the miners, the railwaymen, and the transport workers. In August 1918, even the London Police had gone on strike, a unique event.

All this, of course, had taken place against a background of revolution in Central and Eastern Europe. There had been a successful revolution in Russia, and attempts at revolution in Germany and Hungary. Lenin said, in March 1919 at the foundation congress of the Communist International in Moscow: “Revolution is gaining strength in all countries. The Soviet system has won, not merely in backward Russia but even in Germany, the most developed country in Europe, and also in England.”

But of course, conditions in Britain were at great contrast with conditions on the Continent, and the Communist Party of Great Britain was, from the start, different in one major respect from the communist parties in other European countries because, on the Continent, communist parties were generally formed following a schism in the labour movement, a schism which divided both the socialist parties and the trade union movement into a reformist wing and a revolutionary wing. In most countries, the reformist wing was larger, but in France, the major part of the labour movement became communist, and the French socialist movement was actually the smaller of the two socialist parties. Now, Britain was a great contrast to all this because, in Britain, the Labour Party and the well-established trade union movement did not split. Instead, the Communist Party was formed through the amalgamation of very small pre-existing revolutionary groups, such as the British Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party, and there was, in addition, a small communist group led by Sylvia Pankhurst, the famous Suffragette, though Sylvia’s mother, Emmeline Pankhurst, founder of the Women’s Social and Political Union, once women’s suffrage had been achieved in 1918, she moved to the right and joined the Conservatives in 1926, while Sylvia’s sister, Christabel Pankhurst, expressed admiration for Mussolini in the 1920s, though she never in fact joined the Fascist Party. Sylvia herself did not remain a communist for long, and perhaps the Pankhursts were too individualistic to be contained in any political party for very long.

There is another major difference between the communists in Britain and the communist parties on the Continent. It is this: that the British communists came into existence not because of the spontaneous demand for it in Britain but because the Russians thought that such a party was needed in Britain. It is now known the Communist Party was founded with the aid of Russian money. The Russians smuggled in £50,000, the equivalent to over a million pounds today, to help found the party, and in the first two years of its existence, paid a subsidy of £5,000 a month to the party. Now, during these early years, the Communists had only around 5,000 members, most of them of very limited means. Unlike the Labour Party, it did not have access to affiliation fees from trade unions, and unlike the Conservatives, it had no access to wealthy donors. The Party simply could not have survived without the subsidies from the Russians at its founding, and these subsidies continued for much of the 20th Century. The consequence was that, although the British Communist Party emerged from native socialist traditions, if minority ones, it was bound to be subservient to the Russians.

The Russians had founded, in 1919, a Communist International, the third International, generally known as the Comintern, to which all communist parties belonged. Now, in theory, all these parties were equal members of Comintern, and decisions were reached by discussion, but in practice, the Russians, by far the largest of the communist parties and of course the only one that had been successful, the Russians dominated Comintern and they decided on tactics and strategy for the other parties. The Russian communist leaders knew little, and understood less, of British conditions. Karl Marx had lived in England for a long time, and he did know a great deal about Britain, but Lenin had lived in Britain only for a very short period, around a year, and he understood very little.

In 1920, a group of socialists visited Lenin, and Lenin told them that Britain had to conform to the Russian revolutionary model. The British asked whether there was really a need for the dictatorship of the proletariat given the strong development of parliamentary democracy in Britain, where conditions of course contrasted so markedly with those in Russia, but Lenin replied: “In no country can the dictatorship of the proletariat be applied better or more directly than in Great Britain”. Parliamentary action would be a diversion, and the working class should prepare not for an easy parliamentary victory but for victory by a heavy civil war, though Lenin later said the Communists should support the Labour Party “as a rope supports the hanged”, and in 1922, one of the British leaders said, “I would take them, Labour, by the hand, as a preliminary to taking them by the



throat”. Now, Lenin insisted that communism was the only possible form of socialism, anything else was, in his words, “either wilful deception by lackeys of the bourgeoisie or weakness by those who could not make up their minds between life and death struggle and the role of assistant to the expiring bourgeoisie”. The Russians they could tell British socialists what to do, even though their own success had been in a backward and underdeveloped country, a country with hardly any similarities to Britain. So, the failure of communism in Britain was, in a sense, inherent in the Party’s foundation.

The founding of the Party was greeted with hilarity by many. In P.G. Wodehouse’s book, ‘The Inimitable Jeeves’, published in 1923, one of the characters is Bingo Little, a rich idler who is always falling in love with unsuitable women. His latest squeeze was a communist, Charlotte Rowbotham, who calls him Comrade Bingo, and Charlotte’s father is also a communist, and Bingo Little explains to Bertie Wooster what communism is about. He says: “There was a movement called Heralds of the Red Dawn, led by old Rowbotham, a delightful chap, wants to massacre the bourgeoisie, sack Park Lane and disembowel the hereditary aristocracy. Well, nothing could be fairer than that, what?!”

Another view was given by a writer of children’s book, Richmal Crompton, whom I have already quoted in my lecture on the Conservatives. She wrote a book about a young scamp called William, and in 1924, there was a story called ‘The Weak Spot’ in a book entitled ‘William, the Fourth’. Now, William’s much older brother, Robert, joins the Society of Reformed Bolsheviks. He buys a red tie and says that he supports the redistribution of wealth, the equalisation of incomes, and the freedom of the working classes. But William and his friends then form a junior branch of the Society, and they take Robert’s watch, purse and bicycle. Robert then abandons communism. He explains to his father: ‘It’s alright when you get your share of other people’s things, but when other people try to get your things, then that’s different.’ “Ah,” observes his wise father, “that’s the weak spot – I’m glad you’ve found it out.”

In 1930, there was a book of stories called ‘William, the Bad’, and one of the stories in that book is called ‘William, the Prime Minister’. In this story, William and three of his friends decide to hold a mock election in their school. William explains the differences between the parties. He says there are four sorts of people trying to get to be rulers. They all want to make things better, but they want to make them better in different ways. “There’s Conservatives, and they want to make things better by keeping them just like what they are now; and there’s Liberals, and they want to make things better by altering them just a bit but not so as anyone would notice; and there’s Socialists, and they want to make things better by taking everyone’s money off them; and there’s Communists, and they want to make things better by killing everyone but themselves.” William, the Conservative, wins the mock election at his school unanimously.

The small Communist Party was a member of Comintern, a British party, part of what was, in theory, a single international party, in practice, a party dominated by the Russians, and the basis of Comintern was agreement on the truths of Marxism and on an organisational principle known as democratic centralism. What this meant was that, once a decision had been made, it had to be accepted by all members. Those who disagreed could, if they wished, argue privately against it, but what they could not do was seek the support of others to overturn the decision – that would be factionalism, a mortal sin for all communists, and would lead to expulsion from the party. In theory, the decisions were made by members of the Communist Party of Britain; in practice, they were imposed from Russia.

From 1928 to 1934, the communists adopted a policy known as “class against class”. This meant no cooperation with the Labour Party, which was seen as a lackey of the capitalist system, and during this period, Social Democrats were known as Social Fascists. Then, in 1934, following the rise of Hitler to power in Germany, the line changed to support of a so-called Popular Front, a coalition of all anti-fascist parties, including not only Labour but also the Liberals. Then, in 1939, after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the line changed again. The Communists denounced the war as an imperialist war. While the illegal German Communist Party supported the war against capitalist Poland, the British Party denounced it and declared that the enemy was not Hitler but the capitalist system at home. In 1940, the Party blamed Britain for the German invasion of Denmark and Norway. Then, in 1941, when the Soviet Union was attacked by Germany, the line changed again, and the Communist Party came out in support of the Churchill Government. Indeed, in 1945, the Communists supported continuation of the



Wartime Churchill Coalition, at a time when the Labour Party was coming out against it and was about to win a landslide majority in the 1945 General Election. In 1956, the Party supported the Russian invasion of Hungary to suppress the Hungarian Revolution, losing a number of members in the process.

The point is that all these changes of line were the result not of changes in conditions in Britain, but changes in the Soviet view of what was right for Russia. The policy imposed on the British Party might have been right for Russian conditions, it had no relevance to British conditions, so a member of the Party was, as George Orwell put it, “in effect, a Russian publicity agent posing as an international socialist”, and this doomed the Party to irrelevance in British conditions. It never won more than two seats in a General Election. In 1931, in the depths of the slump, it was able to put up just 26 candidates in 615 seats. These candidates won just under 70,000 votes, an average of 7.5% of the vote per opposed candidate, and a share of the total vote of just 0.3%. The largest number of candidates the Party ever put forwards was in 1950, when it put forward 100 to secure an average of 918 votes.

The membership of the Party was 5,000 when it was founded. It rose to 12,000 after the General Strike in 1926, and then fell back. In the late-1930s, the Party began to attract intellectuals concerned at the rise of Fascism and the failure of the other parties to resist it effectively, as they thought. But what the Party expected from the intellectuals was perhaps rather unusual. The General Secretary of the Party told the poet, Stephen Spender, that the best contribution he could make was not to write but to take part in the Spanish Civil War – “Go and get killed, Comrade,” he said. “We need a Byron in the movement.” Party membership rose to 18,000 and then to its peak of 55,000 in 1943, a reaction largely to Russian bravery during the War. In the post-War period, its membership remained higher than it had been during the years of depression, and it soon stabilised at around 30,000. But despite its small membership, during the post-War years, it did gain some influence in the trade unions and, through the trade union bloc vote at the Labour Party Conference, some influence also on Labour Party Conference decisions, but that influence was generally much exaggerated, both by supporters and opponents of the Party.

In 1951, the Communists had finally accepted that revolution was not the right path for Britain, and it issued, with Stalin’s agreement, a policy document entitled ‘The British Road to Socialism’, accepting the principle of a parliamentary transition to socialism. By 1968, the Party was prepared to reach decisions independently of the Russians and declared itself opposed to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. But it was too late. The Party was generally ignored during the period of student radicalism in 1968, and the Miners’ Strike of 1984/5 was led by Arthur Scargill, a former member of the Young Communist League, the junior branch of the Party, who had left because he could not accept its iron discipline.

Between the Wars, one Comintern leader had said, “Our British movement is a pain. It will not grow; neither will it die”, but it did eventually die. In 1979, Russian subsidies ended and the Party was finally wound up in 1991, the inevitable failure of a revolutionary party trying to operate in a profoundly non-revolutionary society.

The British Union of Fascists, later called the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists, was founded in 1932 by Sir Oswald Mosley, a wealthy baronet with a distinguished war record, who had been, successively, a Conservative, Independent, and then a Labour Member of Parliament. A junior minister in Ramsay MacDonald’s second Labour Government, he had resigned in 1930 in protest of his failure to do more to resolve the problem of unemployment. He too was satirised by P.G. Woodhouse. In Woodhouse’s book, ‘The Code of the Woosters’, published in 1938, Bertie Wooster describes the Fascist leader, Roderick Spode, a figure based on Mosley. “About seven feet high and swathed in an ulster which made him look about six feet across, he caught the eye and arrested it. It was as if Nature had intended to make a gorilla and had changed its mind at the last moment.” Spode’s moustache, he said, was like “the faint discoloured smear left by a squashed black beetle on the side of a kitchen sink”, while the way he ate asparagus “alters one’s whole conception of Man as Nature’s last word”.

Mosley had been impressed by the success of Mussolini and Hitler and had come to believe that Fascism was the wave of the future. He thought the depression would deepen and this would encourage, as it had in Germany, extremism of the left, perhaps led by the Communist Party, and that in these circumstances, it would



be seen that the orthodox parties were too weak to resist them and there would be a call for the Fascists to take over, but of course, nothing like that happened. During the 1930s, conditions gradually improved. Unemployment was halved between 1932 and 1937, and industrial output increased by 46%. Those in secure employment saw a rise in their standard of living and greater access to consumer goods and particularly home ownership, with real wages rising by 17% between 1924 and 1937. By 1938, 25% of the population owned their own houses, including many of the better-off members of the working-class, while a further 10% lived in local authority housing. Of course, there remained pockets of severe deprivation, particularly in the areas of the old export trades, but in the South and in the Midlands, conditions gradually improved. There was no revolutionary situation. Fascism relied, as on the Continent, on a sense of national crisis. In Britain, that crisis had occurred in 1931, before the British Union of Fascists was founded. It had been met by the formation of a Coalition Government, the National Government, dominated by the Conservatives, and this Government had won a landslide victory in the 1931 General Election and created an atmosphere of solidity and stability in the country. Nor were the other conditions conducive to a Fascist movement in Britain. There was no sense of frustrated patriotism, as there was in Germany, which had lost the War, or in Italy, which claimed that it had been denied territorial gains that it had been promised. Britain, by contrast, had been victorious in the War. There was a strong sense of patriotism and pride in the country and no obvious threats to national cohesion or solidarity.

The British Union of Fascists adopted the tactics and strategy of their Italian and German counterparts: uniforms, a private defence force, a salute, and anti-Semitism. But while the Nazis campaigned in brown shirts, the British Union campaigned in black shirts, until political uniforms were banned by the National Government in 1936 in the Public Order Act. Fascist meetings, like those of the Nazis, were characterised by violence. Those who asked inconvenient questions or heckled found that a torchlight was shone on them. Eight to 10 uniformed stewards would then drag the offender from the meeting and administer a thorough beating. And above all, the British Fascist movement was characterised by anti-Semitism. There were provocative marches of uniformed men in the areas where Jews lived, such as the East End of London, and this all made Mosley a pariah in political circles.

Mosley always denied taking money from Italy or Germany, but it is now known that, by 1940, he had received a total of nearly £250,000 from Mussolini, around £8 million in today's money, and that when Mussolini had stopped making contributions, Gerbils stepped in, paying the Party £91,000 in 1936. So, like the Communists, the Fascists, even though they stressed nationalism and patriotism, were instruments of a foreign power, and there was a great disparity between the fine ideals proclaimed by the Party, national regeneration, and economic recovery, and the sordid reality – street marches, punch-ups, and anti-Semitism. Mosley's son, the novelist, Nicholas Mosley, declared that: "While the right hand dealt with grandiose ideas and glory, the left hand let the rat out of the sewer".

Electorally, the Party performed even worse than the Conservatives. In the General Election of 1935, it was too weak to put any candidates at all and contented itself with the slogan, "Fascism Next Time". It advised its supporters not to vote. It fought a few council elections, primarily in the East End of London, but never came near to winning a seat. Its membership peaked at around 50,000, but by 1939, had fallen to around 20,000, and the Party, which opposed the War against Hitler, fought a number of by-elections in 1939 and 1940 but secured a derisory vote and was proscribed in 1940. Mosley and his associates were interned as a danger to security of the country.

Again, the significance of the Fascist movement is best summed up not by any historian, political scientist or social psychologist but by P. G. Wodehouse in "The Code of the Woosters". Bertie Wooster is told that Spode has formed a movement called the Saviours of Britain, also known as the Black Shorts. Bertie says, "By the way, when you say "shorts", you mean shirts, of course?" The reply is: "No, by the time Spode formed his association, there were no shirts left – he and his adherents wear black shorts." Bertie then says: "It is about time that some public-spirited person came along and told you where you got off. The trouble with you, Spode, is that, just because you have succeeded in inducing a handful of halfwits to disfigure the London scene by going about in black shorts, you think you're someone. You hear them shouting "Heil Spode" and you imagine it is the voice of the people. That is where you make your bloomer. What the voice of the people is saying is, "Look



at that frightful ass, Spode, swanking about in footer banks! Did you ever in your puff see such a perfect perisher?”

Future parties of the radical right, such as the National Front and the British National Party, fared little better than the British Union of Fascists, although, in the 1970s, the National Front managed to secure some support amongst those who were opposed to the admission of Asians from Uganda into Britain. But in 2009, the British National Party won two seats in the European Parliament and its leader, Nick Griffin, was invited to appear on the BBC's 'Question Time' programme. It also won a few seats in local councils, and, in Barking, became for a while the second largest party. In the 2010 Election, it won nearly 2% of the national vote, but after that, it disintegrated. So, it had done better than the British Union of Fascists had done in the slump, while, in our own times, we have seen the resurrection of anti-Semitism, not in Fascist parties but in parts of the Labour Party, and while Mosley appealed primarily to the ill-educated and inadequate, elements of the left-behind, the current wave seems to appeal more to articulate and better-educated people, some of them in the universities. Shortly before she left the Labour Party in 1980 to help form the SDP, Shirley Williams said: “There can be a fascism of the left as well as a fascism of the right”.

But, in general, extremist parties have been of little significance in British history. They never achieved electoral success and their membership figures were derisory when compared with those, for example, of the Labour Party, which, for much of the inter-War period, could boast around a quarter of a million members, and it had at least two million trade union affiliated members. The Conservatives did not keep official records of party membership, but it seemed that in 1946, they had just over 900,000 members.

It is perhaps remarkable that, at a time when living standards were of course much lower than they are today, and inequalities were so much wider, that so few people were prepared to join extremist parties. We may put that down to the British political culture. George Orwell wrote, in 1944: “Putting aside the model small states which are in an exceptional position, England is the only European country where internal politics are conducted in a more or less humane and decent manner. It is the only country where armed men do not prowl in the streets and no one is frightened of the secret police.”

Credit, it seems to me, must also be given to the moderate leadership of the two main parties during the inter-War years, leadership which refused to flirt with extremist parties. Stanley Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald, the two Prime Ministers from 1923 to 1937, have been much criticised by many historians, but perhaps they did more than anyone else to ensure that democracy proved so resilient in Britain. It was they who made democracy work.

I come now to UKIP, which was founded, curiously enough, by an academic, Dr Alan Sked, of the London School of Economics, in 1993, in response to the Maastricht Treaty, and then it was taken over by politicians. Perhaps I should begin by making clear my view, that UKIP is not a racist party. It may well have racists who belong to it, though I suspect not as many as have infiltrated the Labour Party. UKIP has nothing in common with the racist parties of the radical right on the Continent, such as the Front National in France, the Sweden Democrats in Sweden, or Jobbik in Hungary. Nigel Farage banned former members of the British National Party from UKIP and he refused to join with the Front National in a party group in the European Parliament. UKIP has distanced itself from the ideological racism of such parties, and insofar as the party does have racist members, their racism is of a different sort. In an article I wrote for a French journal after the success of UKIP in the 2014 Election to the European Parliament, I called it “golf club racism”, and it tends to co-exist with a condescending attitude towards women, but such attitudes are, I suspect, true of only a very small minority in the party.

But of course, the basic objective of UKIP is a perfectly reasonable one, whether you happen to share it or not: it is to take Britain out of the European Union, an aim it seems to have achieved. It can claim some success in persuading David Cameron, in 2013, that he should hold a referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union, since Cameron feared, if he did not do so, the Conservatives would lose seats to UKIP. Already, in the 2010 General Election, UKIP had gained nearly a million votes, over 3% of the vote, the highest ever achieved by a minor party in Britain fighting a general election without the benefit of electoral pacts with



the major parties. UKIP won three times as many votes as the Greens and nearly twice as many as the Scottish Nationalist Party. Unlike those parties, it won no seats in 2010, but its intervention almost certainly cost the Conservatives an overall majority at Westminster, though the paradoxical consequence was to hand the balance of power to the Liberal Democrats, the most pro-European party in British politics. UKIP was to come first in the European Parliament Election in 2014, and in the 2015 General Election, it did even better than 2010, winning an eighth of the vote, but only one seat in Parliament.

Even so, its success did not depend on winning seats in the Commons but in its message to the country, ably delivered by its leader, Nigel Farage. The party played, for better or for worse, an important educative role in altering public opinion, and it achieved more than other minor parties have done, even more than the Liberal Democrats, who, although they had many more seats in the Commons, have proved unable to tap public opinion, as UKIP did, except perhaps for a brief period just before the 2010 Election.

But UKIP was, for a long time, greatly underestimated. David Cameron notoriously declared, in 2006, that the party was composed of “fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists”. Around the same time, a Labour Cabinet Minister told me that UKIP was “the British National Party in blazers”, while an Observer journalist, Nick Cohen, claimed that UKIP offered “a garish picture of what the British right looks like when it has had one beer too many”. To such critics, UKIP was an illegitimate intruder into the British party system, but survey evidence consistently showed that a large minority of the electorate, and, in some polls, a majority, wanted Britain to leave the European Union. Now, the three main parties, as well as the nationalist parties, all wanted Britain to remain in the European Union, and it was only natural that, in a well-ordered democracy, a viewpoint so widely held, that Britain should leave the European Union, should be expressed by a political party which took that as its main aim.

Until a serious study was made of the UKIP membership, conventional wisdom held that the typical UKIP supporter was “Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells”, an elderly former Tory, perhaps a retired army officer, spluttering over his gin and tonic as he read his Daily Mail at the 19th hole. But the work of the political scientists, Matthew Goodwin and Robert Ford, has shown that this view was a caricature. UKIP support came primarily not from the well-heeled but from the disadvantaged and insecure, the victims of social and economic change, alienated from a meritocratic political establishment, the elderly, white, semi-skilled or unskilled working-class. The typical UKIP supporter, Goodwin and Ford believed, had a white skin, a blue collar, and grey hair. Indeed, UKIP’s social base was to become more representative of the working-class than that of any of the major parties, including the Labour Party.

The rise of UKIP reflected wider changes in British society, the decline of the working-class, and the failure of the mainstream political parties to represent it. In 1964, when Harold Wilson brought Labour to power after 13 years in opposition, two-thirds of the electorate were working-class and one-third middle-class. The working-class was crucial for electoral success and the Conservatives could win an election only by detaching a large portion of it from its normal Labour allegiance. But by 2010, just three-sevenths of the electorate were working-class, while four-sevenths, a majority were middle-class. Tony Blair’s New Labour had sought to win over graduates, middle-class professionals and aspirational, those who aspired to leave the working-class. The Conservatives, under David Cameron, seeking to distance themselves from the image of the Nasty Party, had sought to win over the same social groupings. All three parties welcomed globalisation, multiculturalism, neoliberal economics, and, with their support for gay marriage, alternative lifestyles. That was not an agenda with much appeal to those left behind. David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg all belonged to what one might call the “exam-passing classes”, and that made them ill-equipped to understand those who had not passed exams. The “left behind” became, politically, as well as socially and economically, marginalised. It is they who formed the bedrock of UKIP support. So, the UKIP insurgency reflects deeper changes in British society, changes that the three major parties barely glimpsed.

Of course, having achieved its main aim, the future of UKIP is now in doubt. Deprived of the leadership of Nigel Farage, the party could disintegrate. Perhaps that depends on the progress of Brexit. If it turns out to be a soft Brexit and immigration from the European Union does not fall, UKIP may revive, for it is clear there is a definite constituency, albeit a minority one, which seeks a radical reduction in immigration and does not trust



the Conservatives to implement it. Nor does it trust the Conservatives to implement a hard Brexit, removing Britain entirely from the orbit of the European Union. That constituency could easily be mobilised again. But while UKIP's future may be highly uncertain, nothing can take away its claim to be by far the most successful minor party in British history. I say that even though I am myself opposed to Brexit.

The final category of minor parties consists of breakaway parties, parties which sought to realign the British party system. All these parties in the modern era came from the left, from the Liberals in the late-19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century, and from the Labour Party in the 1980s, with the formation of the SDP.

There have of course been serious strains and divisions in the Conservative Party but no breakaways. The last breakaway was over the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, and as I mentioned in my lecture on the Conservative Party, the most powerful figure in the modern Conservative Party is the ghost of Sir Robert Peel, the leader who presided over the repeal of the Corn Laws, so splitting the party and preventing it from forming another majority government for 28 years. Most Conservatives are determined that nothing of that sort should ever occur again.

The first of the breakaway parties in modern times is the Liberal Unionist Party. This was formed in 1886 from those Liberals who opposed the policy of Irish Home Rule put forward by the Liberal leader, W. E. Gladstone. 93 Liberals voted in the Commons against the Home Rule Bill, which was lost by 30 votes. Liberal dissention then offered support to the minority Conservative Government which followed, and, in 1895, joined the Conservatives in a Unionist Coalition.

The Liberal Unionists were a highly unusual breakaway party. You would expect a party defecting to the right from the Liberals, who were then the main party of the left, you would expect such a party to be a party of centrist politicians. It is certainly the case that one of the leaders of the Liberal Unionists, Lord Hartington, was a Liberal of the right, a Whig who had long believed the Liberals had moved too far to the left. Lord Hartington is now a forgotten figure, but was very prominent in his day. He is, indeed, the only man ever to have turned down the offer of the premiership not once but three times, and this spirit of self-sacrifice was perhaps characteristic of the Liberal Union leaders, many of whom, in resisting Home Rule, were sacrificing the prospect of office. But as well as Lord Hartington, the other leader of the Liberal Unionists, Joseph Chamberlain, was a radical and on the left of the Liberal Party. Lord Hartington said: "There is room within the Liberal Unionist Party for the extremist radical as well as for the most moderate wing". It was not a purely reactionary party. It embraced those from the left as well as the right. In addition, the party attracted, as well as politicians, many prominent intellectuals, people such as Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, the poet, Tennyson, the Suffragette leader, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, whose statue has today been unveiled in Parliament Square, and the constitutional lawyer, A. V. Dicey. The party perhaps had little ideological coherence, other than being opposed to Home Rule, which they feared would lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom.

The Liberal Unionists are mentioned in Oscar Wilde's celebrated play "The Importance of Being Earnest". Wilde himself, incidentally, was a Liberal and supporter of Home Rule. In the play, the fearsome Lady Bracknell, mother of the girl whom Jack Worthing hopes to marry, is interrogating her prospective son-in-law. "What are your politics?" she asks. He replies, "Well, I am afraid I really have none – I am a Liberal Unionist". Lady Bracknell finds that answer satisfactory: "Oh, they count as Tories, they dine with us, or come in the evening at any rate."

But the Liberal Unionists, although, like Jack Worthing, they may have had no politics, certainly believed they had principles, primarily civil and religious liberty, which they believed was threatened by the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland, and the rule of law, which they believed was threatened by Irish terrorism. These, they believed, were fundamental Liberal principles, the principles of the whole Liberal Party before Gladstone converted it to Home Rule. They claimed it was they who had remained true to Liberal principles, while the home-rulers had broken with them. The Liberal Unions may, as Lady Bracknell suggested, have counted as Tories, but they were not in fact Tories, and they remained for some years both politically separate from them and, with their large element of non-conformists, socially separate from them as well.



The Liberal Unionists were the longest-lived of all the breakaway parties, lasting 26 years, until, in 1912, they merged with the Conservatives, but there remained differences between the two parties. In 1911, when the Conservative leader, Arthur Balfour, resigned the leadership, the son of Joseph Chamberlain, Austen Chamberlain, was thought of as a possible successor and leader of the Unionist Coalition, but Balfour told his Private Secretary this was not possible – there were a number of reasons. “It may be said against Austen that he comes from Birmingham, that he is a Liberal Unionist, that he is not allied by family tradition or landed estates with the traditional Conservative Party.” In 1937, when Austen’s half-brother, Neville Chamberlain, did become leader of the Conservatives, he reminded his party that he had been brought up not as a Conservative but as a Liberal Unionist.

The next breakaway from the Liberals came in 1918, following the split between Asquith and Lloyd George. Asquith remained the official leader of the Liberal Party, but a large number decided to follow the new Prime Minister, Lloyd George, who had replaced Asquith, and these Liberals were known as Coalition Liberals, or Coalies for short. Like the Liberal Unionists, the Coalition Liberals were sustained by an electoral pact with the Conservatives. When the First World War ended, Lloyd George decided to call an immediate General Election and to fight it as a Liberal. He made an agreement with the Conservative leader, Andrew Bonar Law, that those Liberals agreeing to support the Coalition would not be faced with Conservative opposition. They were given what was called, after Wartime rationing, the coupon, an official declaration of support by the Coalition leaders, and that coupon was vital for Liberals seeking re-election. In the 1918 General Election, the Coalition Liberals won 133 seats, while the Liberals who followed Asquith won just 28, so the breakaway party came to be larger than the parent. Liberals who had received the coupon seemed to have been given something very much like a free ticket to Westminster. But the Election also gave the Conservatives an overall majority, so they no longer needed the Coalition Liberals, and the Coalition came to an end in 1922, when a meeting of Conservative MPs decided to fight the next election as an independent party. The Liberals were reunited by the time of the 1923 General Election, but, as we shall see, their newly-founded unity did not last long.

Lloyd George had in fact hoped to merge his Coalition Liberals with the Conservatives, and in 1920, he proposed fusion of the two parties. The Conservatives were in favour of this and many believed that it would come about. The new party was to be called, perhaps rather unpromisingly, the United Reform Party. The Conservatives, remarkably, were even willing to accept Lloyd George as Prime Minister of the fused party, but it was not to be. Remarkably, it was the Coalition Liberals who objected. They were determined to preserve their Liberal identity, so the two parties remained separate.

The next breakaway from the Liberal Party came in 1931, shortly before the formation of the National Government, when a group of Liberals formed a separate group called the Liberal National Party, arguing for cooperation with Conservatives and not cooperation with Labour, which was then the official policy of the Liberals. The Liberal Nationals were, in particular, prepared to accept Conservative proposals for a revenue tariff to combat the slump, while the official Liberal policy was to remain loyal to free-trade. In the General Election of 1931, the Liberal Nationals won more seats than the Liberals, they won 35 seats, but in only four did they face Conservative opposition. The official Liberals were much more independent. They won 33 seats but faced opposition from Conservatives in 81 seats that they fought. After the Conservative-dominated National Government was formed, proposals were produced for a revenue tariff and for imperial preference. The Liberals then resigned from the National Government, but the Liberal Nationals remained and gradually became indistinguishable from the Conservatives. In 1947, a pact was agreed between the Conservatives and Liberal Nationals for combined constituency associations to be formed, and this pact marked the end of the independent identity of the Liberal Nationals, who now changed their name and called themselves National Liberals.

In the next few general elections, candidates appeared calling themselves Conservative and National Liberal, or National Liberal and Conservative, or Conservative and Liberal, or even Liberal and Conservative. They were all, in fact, Conservatives. The Leader of the Liberals in the House of Lords called these candidates “Liquorice Allsorts”. Naturally, the Liberals objected to the description under which these candidates stood, claiming they were confusing voters, who might believe they were genuine Liberals rather than Conservatives. The Liberal leader, Clement Davies, complained to Churchill about what he saw as misrepresentation, but the force of his



complaint was weakened because he himself had been a Liberal National in the 1930s, before reverting to the Liberal Party. Churchill capitalised on this and replied to Clement Davies, rather impertinently perhaps, that he would, and I quote, "...not presume to correct your knowledge of the moral, intellectual and legal aspects of adding a prefix or a suffix to the honoured name of Liberal. It has certainly often been done before by honourable and distinguished men." Churchill had himself of course been a Liberal and then a Coalition Liberal, supporter of Lloyd George, before returning to the Conservative Party.

In 1958, the Liberals got their won back on the National Liberals when they won their first by-election for nearly 30 years in the Devonshire constituency of Torrington against the candidate who was in fact a Conservative but called himself a National Liberal and Conservative, and the mother of the victorious Liberal candidate, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, who was the daughter of Asquith.

The last candidate to be nominated as a National Liberal was John Nott, later to become a Cabinet Minister under Margaret Thatcher. He was nominated in 1965 as a National Liberal. He was a Conservative, but when he was adopted for St Ives, he was told he was to stand as a National Liberal and Conservative. In his memoirs, he said: "I was told by the local association that St Ives could not be won by a Conservative, but that as the National Liberals had supported the Conservatives, and had done so since 1931, I should not fret about the label." Nott did not drop the "National Liberal" label until the General Election of February 1974.

But the National Liberals came to an end in 1968 when the party was wound up, and like the Liberal Unionists, they were swallowed up with the Conservatives. In his memoirs, John Nott says that the accumulated funds of the party, amounting to £50,000, were then given to the Conservatives, who, as he says, sardonically, "of course blew it in an afternoon on some futile advertising campaign".

The last of the breakaway parties to be considered is the Social Democratic Party or SDP, and this party broke away from Labour in 1981. It was led by the so-called Gang of Four, four leading figures in the party who had served in the Wilson and Callaghan Governments: Roy Jenkins, the former Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer and President of the European Commission; David Owen, a former Foreign Secretary; Shirley Williams, a former Education Secretary; and Bill Rodgers, a former Transport Secretary. What they objected to was the left-wing leadership of the Labour Party under Michael Foot, who'd been elected leader in 1980, because Foot and his supporters believed in wholesale nationalisation, unilateral nuclear disarmament, and British withdrawal from the European Community, while they believed in a mixed economy, the NATO alliance and defence by nuclear weapons, and continued membership of the European Community.

It was not the whole of the right-wing that broke away from the Labour Party but only a section of it, one reason perhaps for its ultimate failure. The majority of the right remained. They were led by Denis Healey and Roy Hattersley, and they maintained that the old coalition of left and right could still be preserved and the party could be saved.

It was clear that, under a first-past-the-post system, the SDP could not hope to prosper as a fourth party. It was difficult enough for the Liberals, fighting as a third party, to gain a foothold in the Commons. It would have been suicidal for the SDP, as a fourth party, to compete with them, so the logic of the breakaway was an electoral pact with the Liberals. David Steel, the Liberal leader, was eager to conclude such a pact, but the alliance with the Liberals made the SDP appear not like a Mark 2 Labour Party, but like a Mark 2 Liberal Party, and the SDP, like the Liberals, came to support proportional representation, which was necessary if it were to make an electoral breakthrough or, to adopt a phrase much-used at the time, "to break the mould of British politics".

At first, the Liberal SDP Alliance seemed to carry all before it. It attracted a large number of professionals and academics and many people who had not been involved in politics before, so-called political virgins. 60% of SDP members had not been members of any other party before. The people it mainly attracted were the public-sector professionals. One political commentator, rather unkindly, summed up SDP membership as follows: "The Owenites, the Jenkinsites, the Elizabeth Davidites, those who want a successor to Polaris, those who want a successor to their Volvo, militant Saabs, supporters of Tuscany for August as opposed to the Dordogne,



members of those car-pools by which middle-class families share the burden of driving the children to the local prep school, owners of exercise machines, people who have already gone over to Compact Discs, readers of Guardian Leaders, and, a much larger group, writers of Guardian Readers.”

At first, the new alliance between the Liberals and SDP seemed to carry all before it, at a time when Labour seemed to be moving to the left and the Conservatives, under Margaret Thatcher, moving to the right, and, in December, quite remarkably, one poll gave the Alliance 50% of the vote, that they were first party in British politics, far ahead of the Conservatives and Labour. But from then on, the history was one long downward movement, punctuated by short intervals of false hope.

First, there were squabbles between the Liberals and SDP over the allocation of seats, which meant them look as tired a set of politicians squabbling as their predecessors. Secondly, there was the Falkland War, which began in April 1982, which gave huge prestige to Margaret Thatcher and divided the Alliance and brought waverers back to the Conservative Party. At that time, also, inflation was gradually falling and the economy was beginning to recover.

The Alliance was cruelly punished by the electoral system. In 1983, it got the highest vote won by any minor party since 1929, 25% of the vote, a quarter of the vote, but won just 23 seats in a Parliament of 650, whereas Labour, with 27% of the vote, just 2% more, won 207 seats, and the reason for this disparity of course was that the Labour vote was heavily concentrated in working-class constituencies, while the Alliance vote was evenly spread. The Alliance was second in 311 constituencies but, under first-past-the-post, there are no prizes for coming second.

Then, in 1987, the result was even more disappointing. The Alliance got 22% of the vote and 22 seats, just one fewer than in 1983. The Liberals and the majority in the SDP believed the two parties should merge, but the leader of the party, David Owen, refused to accept this outcome and led a continuing SDP after the bulk of the party had merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats. But of course, a fourth party had even less chance of making a breakthrough than a third party, and the end was to come in May 1990, in a by-election in the safe Labour seat of Bootle, in which the SDP candidate secured just 155 votes, finishing seventh in a field of eight, and securing 263 votes less than Lord David Sutch, the candidate of the Monster Raving Loony Party, and David Owen then announced that the SDP was being wound up.

The SDP failed for four reasons. The first of course was the electoral system, which is so harsh to breakaway parties, unless their support is heavily concentrated in particular geographical areas. The second is it simply did not secure enough defectors from the two main parties: just one Conservative MP joined the party; and just 29 Labour MPs left the party for this new party. Hopes of including people like Edward Heath or other leading Conservatives came to nothing. No constituency Labour parties and no trade union leaders defected, so the SDP never really had strong roots in the constituencies. The third reason was that the public sector professionals, whom the SDP attracted, were simply not a large enough base to make a new party really a contender for power. Margaret Thatcher writes in her memoirs: “The SDP and the Liberals failed to grasp the significance of what was happening. They projected their appeal to the middle-class left, especially those who worked in the public sector, but in fact, the more numerous and dissatisfied Labour supporters were in the rising working-class and lower middle-class, the same group that, in America, Ronald Reagan was winning over and who were known as Reagan-Democrats. They were benefiting from the opportunities we had made available, especially the sale of council houses, and, more important, they shared our values, including a strong belief in family life and an intense patriotism.” Those aspirationalists looked to Margaret Thatcher and not to the Alliance. The fourth reason was sheer bad luck. In 1981, Denis Healey defeated Tony Benn for the deputy leadership of the Labour Party by a whisker, or as Denis Healey preferred to put it, “by an eyebrow”. He won 50.4% of the vote against 49.6% for Benn. Had Benn won, many more Labour MPs would have defected from a party led by Foot and Benn. And then there was the Falklands War, which succeeded in restoring Margaret Thatcher’s authority. Napoleon once asked of a particular general, “Does he have luck? Is he lucky?” The SDP was the party of no luck.



The breakaway parties did not achieve realignment, and nor did they succeed in breaking up the two-party system, though the Liberal SDP Alliance did at one time come tantalisingly close. Instead, their main effect was to weaken the parties of the left and strengthen the Conservatives, so helping them to win landslide victories in 1895, 1918, 1931 and 1983. The breakaway parties were instrumental in creating a new two-party system, more skewed towards the Conservatives than the old, a system in which the Conservatives became hegemonic and appeared as the natural party of government, and these landslide victories were assisted by the fact that the defectors were saying that their former party, whether Liberal or Labour, was unfit for government. They were helped by defecting politicians, such as Joseph Chamberlain and Lloyd George, who, however one chooses to describe their political position, were in no sense Conservatives. “The last purely Conservative Government,” declared Harold Macmillan in 1975, perhaps with tongue in cheek, “was formed by Mr Disraeli in 1874. It is the fact that we have attracted moderate people, of liberal tradition and thought, into our ranks which makes it possible to maintain a Conservative Government today. A successful party of the right must continue to recruit its strengths from the centre and even from the left of centre.”

As you know, there’s been much talk recently of the formation of a new party, perhaps a breakaway from the Corbyn-led Labour Party, a new party dedicated to making the case for remaining in the European Union. Perhaps this lecture has helped you decide whether or not such a new party has any chance of making a breakthrough or whether, like the SDP, such a breakaway party would prove to be, once again, the party of bad luck. But please remember that, as the survey analyst, Peter Kellner has said, “Precedents are not iron laws”, and perhaps, indeed, the only real lesson of these lectures is that there are no iron laws in politics.

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