

Beyond Westminster:
Grass-roots Liberalism in
England,
1910-1929

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Abstract

The reasons for the changing political fortunes of the Liberal Party have caused considerable debate amongst historians; however, the historiography to date has lacked sufficient examination of this process at its grass-roots. Melding two sets of under-utilised primary sources - the minute books of Liberal Associations and local newspapers - this thesis examines the grass-roots of the Liberal Party in case-study constituencies across three distinctive regions in England (the Home Counties, the Midlands and the north-west).

The Liberal Party had adopted the New Liberalism at the grass-roots, however in a way that complemented traditional Liberalism. This was a potent political agenda and one that seemed to be equal to anything that the Conservative and Labour parties had in the late Edwardian period. The evidence at the grass-roots indicates that Liberals' were able to adapt to the First World War more easily than the conventional historiography suggests. Conscription and the formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 were not popular, yet there was recognition that they were necessary for the successful prosecution of the war. Additionally, the December crisis of 1916 created unease at the grass-roots, with overwhelming support for Asquith to remain leader of the Liberal Party. However, the evidence is that this unease did not automatically translate into a split at the grass-roots, and the successful conclusion of the war overtook party considerations during the conflict.

The prime cause of decline for the Liberal Party began as a result of the dynamics and consequences of the Coupon election in 1918. During 1919 and 1920 the grass-roots of the Liberal Party were unsure of their role and consequently the party vacated political space that the Labour Party filled. This was a period of missed opportunities for the Liberal Party. Re-union, when it came in 1923, was welcomed readily by the rank and file, who were dissatisfied with the elite dragging their heels on this matter. There is also evidence for a revival at the grass-roots during Lloyd George's leadership. However, by 1929, the vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system entrenched the Liberals diminished stature in such a way that from that point on they were considered the third party of British politics.

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List of Abbreviations

Note on Nomenclature: The abbreviation LA has been used for all Liberal Associations, even if its full name would otherwise have been Liberal and Radical Association. The Darwen Women's Liberal Association referred to its AGM as the Annual Business Meeting, but in the text it has referenced as AGM. These changes are to provide greater clarity for the reader. The Annual Executive Meeting was a separate and smaller gathering held immediately before the AGM so has merited a distinctive cataloguing.

AGM	Annual General Meeting
CM	Committee Meeting
Exec.	Executive Committees, Executive Meetings etc.
FGP	Finance and General Purposes Committee
FC	Finance Committee
GM	General Meeting
LA	Liberal Association
LC	Liberal Council
LCNWLF	Lancashire, Cheshire and North-Western Liberal Federation
LF	Liberal Federation
MLF	Midland Liberal Federation

Short Title Format of Newspapers

Full Title

Short Title

Beckenham and Penge Advertiser and West and East Surrey Reporter

Beckenham Advertiser

Beckenham Journal, Penge and Sydenham Advertiser

Beckenham Journal

Blackpool Times, Fleetwood Express and St. Annes Visitor

Blackpool Times

Cheshire Chronicle and Cheshire and North West Advertiser

Cheshire Chronicle

Gazette News for Blackpool, Fleetwood, Lytham, St. Annes, and Fylde District

Gazette News for Blackpool

Leicester Journal and Midland Counties General Advertiser

Leicester Journal

Southend Standard and Essex Weekly Advertiser

Southend Standard

Walsall Observer and South Staffordshire Chronicle

Walsall Observer

Walsall Times and South Staffordshire Advertiser

Walsall Times

Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian

Walthamstow Guardian

Introduction

This thesis explores the Liberal Party at its grass-roots between 1910 and 1929, the period when the Party went from being in power to being in the political wilderness, unlikely to form a government on its own again and relegated to the third-party trap of the British electoral system. This is an important study because it is the first rigorous and systematic investigation of the Liberals at their grass-roots during the key period of their decline. In the 1990s, Ball described the local and regional archives of the Liberal, Labour and Conservative Parties as the ‘untrodden field of modern British political history’.¹ Although some researchers have ventured down this path since then, it still remains an under-investigated field of research. The value of local and regional studies has been apparent to historians, as there has been a growing trend in this direction in the historiography during recent decades, which has been particularly focused on the Labour Party.² Unlike previous considerations of Liberal problems, this thesis uses Liberal association minute books, together with the local press, in a sample of selected case-studies to assess a neglected aspect of British history.

Ball, Thorpe and Worley have pointed out that the Liberals remain the most under-examined party at the grass-roots. They have suggested that this neglect has masked ‘the importance of organisational and financial factors in Liberal decline’.³ As Berger has observed Tanner’s ground-breaking *Political Change and the Labour Party* demonstrated how useful a regional approach to politics can be.⁴ It is also pertinent to consider regions and localities in a study such as this because scholars, such as Dawson, have recognised that to some extent elections were still localised affairs, but with a growing trend to be fought on

¹ S. Ball, ‘National politics and local history: the regional and local archives of the Conservative Party, 1867-1945’, *Archives*, 22, no. 94 (1996), p. 27.

² For example: P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London, 1885-1914* (London, 1967); P. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971); B. Lancaster, *Radicalism, Cooperation and Socialism: Leicester Working-Class Politics, 1860-1906* (Leicester, 1987); M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880-1940* (Cambridge, 1987); D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990); M. Dawson, ‘Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall, 1910-1931: “The Old-Time Religion”’, *Historical Journal*, 38, no. 2 (1995), pp. 425-437; S. Davies, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900-1939* (Keele, 1996); C. Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society, 1885-1951* (Cardiff, 1996); G. Tregida, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain Since 1918: Political Decline, Dormancy and Rebirth* (Exeter, 2000); M. Worley (ed.), *Labour’s Grass Roots* (Aldershot, 2005).

³ S. Ball, A. Thorpe & M. Worley, ‘Researching the grass roots: the records of constituency level political parties in five British counties, 1918-1940’, *Archives*, 29, no. 110 (2004), p. 75.

⁴ S. Berger, ‘The decline of Liberalism and the rise of Labour – the regional approach’, *Parliamentary History*, 12, no. 1 (1993), p. 85.

more national lines, particularly after 1918.⁵ It is important to recognise the similarities and differences in the Liberal experience during these years, as the different contexts, experiences and electoral strategies reveal the intensity and the difficulties which Liberalism faced in these years. A regional study utilising both local and regional records will give a new understanding of the Liberal Party at its grass-roots.

Douglas has argued that it was ‘a series of largely accidental factors which arose both during and after the war’ that ‘shattered the Liberal Party’.⁶ These incidents are extensively documented in the historiography from the elite perspective, but remain largely neglected at the grass-roots. Primary research is needed to see the vantage point of the Liberal rank and file in the constituencies. Therefore, the oyster that killed Percy Illingworth, Liberal Chief Whip 1912-1915, will not receive attention, but rank and file Liberal reactions to the formation of the Asquith and Lloyd George Coalition will.⁷ In the rest of this introduction, firstly the historiography of this topic will be assessed and the gaps and points of contention will be highlighted, leading to the research questions of this study. Secondly, the research methodology of this thesis will be outlined. Finally, the social, economic and electoral contexts of the three-case study regions will be outlined.

I) The Historiography and the gaps the thesis aims to fill

There are four main historical debates about the reasons why the Labour Party superseded the Liberal Party as one of the two dominant parties in the British electoral system. These are firstly, works which give primacy to the Liberal decline before the First World War; secondly, works which give primacy to the consequences of the First World War; thirdly, works which stress the importance of the changes in the franchise in 1918, and finally, works which focus upon the post-war problems of the Liberal Party.

⁵ A. M. Dawson, ‘Politics in Devon and Cornwall, 1900-1931’, London School of Economics, PhD thesis (1991) pp. 297-301.

⁶ R. Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party, 1895-1970* (London, 1971), p. 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97 for the suggestion that if Illingworth had still been alive, he might have prevented the Asquith-Lloyd George split.

a) The Liberal decline before the First World War

A dominant branch of the historiography on the decline of the Liberal Party locates the fundamental causes of its terminal problems in the Edwardian Era. The first major work to advocate this was Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* published in 1935.⁸ He claimed that even in 1906 the Liberal Party 'was already doomed'. He explained that 'with the election of 53 Labour representatives, the death of Liberalism was already pronounced; it was no longer the left'.⁹ Dangerfield's work is now regarded as a product of its time, and as equally historical as the period which it describes, but it has profoundly influenced the historiography of this subject. Although overstating the importance of the first election of Labour members as the death knell of Liberalism, Dangerfield was right to suggest that the creation of a separate Labour Party represented a failure of the Liberal Party with regard to satisfying working-class grievances.

However, later historians who agreed with Dangerfield that the Liberal Party was in decline before the First World War adopted a less deterministic interpretation. Pelling's essay on 'Labour and the Downfall of Liberalism' in his collection *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* argues that the decline of Liberalism 'was the result of long-term social and economic changes which were simultaneously uniting Britain geographically and dividing her inhabitants in terms of class'.¹⁰ In the era when Pelling published his work, it was assumed that class was the main determinant of voting choice. Therefore, with the rise of class voting, the Liberal Party inevitably lost ground to the Labour Party. Undoubtedly, a fair proportion of the newly-enfranchised did vote Labour, but it is also evident that many voted Liberal or Conservative. McKibbin has argued that class politics, and effective adaption and exploitation by the Labour Party, was a crucial factor in the problems of the Liberal Party.¹¹ His view is that 'as political allegiance became more and more determined by class self-awareness, the Liberal Party found it could make no claim on the loyalties of any class.' McKibbin cites the widening of the franchise as hastening this change, but not beginning it.¹²

⁸ G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 2008 [1935]).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰ H. Pelling, 'Labour and the downfall of Liberalism' in H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (Second Edition, Basingstoke, 1979 [1968]), pp. 119-120.

¹¹ R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1974).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 244.

Numerous other works on the rise of the Labour Party have come to the similar conclusion that before the First World War the Labour Party was advancing, at the expense of the Liberal Party. An article based on M. G. Sheppard's MA at Warwick in 1975, and edited by J. L. Halstead, considered municipal election results in order to help evaluate the position of the Liberal and Labour Parties before the Great War.¹³ The work is complementary to McKibbin's in that it refutes the conclusions of those who suggest the Liberal position was relatively secure before 1914 by showing that Labour's municipal strength was improving before the outbreak of hostilities. The work of Keith Laybourn is also of the school that stresses that the Labour Party was gaining ground before the war.¹⁴ Laybourn's article 'The Rise of Labour and the decline of Liberalism: the state of the debate' argues that the Liberal Party's prospects were undermined before the First World War because Labour had captured the trade union vote.¹⁵ What is more, Laybourn's work with Reynolds on West Yorkshire in the period 1890-1918 argues that 'Liberalism was no longer garnering the working-class support which it once commanded and the real drift of that support to Labour appears in the enormous surge of Labour's municipal and local victories, especially after 1910.'¹⁶ Laybourn's studies are useful in the historiography of this field, and his municipal data for Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield and Leeds shows Labour making steady progress in winning seats. His arguments are sound but a limitation of his work is that it is based exclusively on West Yorkshire – a heavily industrialised and trade unionised region in which Labour made clear progress. However, in one of his later publications, Laybourn (again with Reynolds and again examining West Yorkshire), modified this view and argued that 'the Labour Party came of age as a political force in the 1920s. Though growing in strength and popularity it was never more than an increasingly effective pressure group within the pre-1914 two-party system.'¹⁷ This seems to be a more sustainable position, acknowledging that the Labour Party was established before 1914 but only as a minor party and with little chance, in the then foreseeable future, of office or power.

Bernstein has argued that if politics was becoming more class based then the decline of the Liberal Party was beginning before the First World War, 'not imminently, perhaps, but

¹³ M. G. Sheppard and J. L. Halstead, 'Labour's municipal election performance in provincial England and Wales, 1901-1913', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 39 (1979), pp. 39-62.

¹⁴ For example, K. Laybourn, 'The rise of Labour and the decline of Liberalism: the state of the debate', *History*, 80, no. 259 (1995), pp. 207-226., K. Laybourn and J. Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour 1890-1918* (London, 1984).

¹⁵ Laybourn, 'The rise of Labour and the decline of Liberalism', p. 207.

¹⁶ Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 142.

¹⁷ J. Reynolds and K. Laybourn, *Labour Heartland: The History of the Labour Party in West Yorkshire during the Inter-War Years, 1918-1939* (Leeds, 1987).

eventually and inevitably.¹⁸ His study of Edwardian Liberalism argues that the Liberals were unable to adapt to a class-based politics, citing Liberal disunity over the New Liberal agenda and dismissing the Progressive Alliance as offering no salvation. Finally, an example of the works that have analysed identity and interest in political discourse is Jon Lawrence's article 'Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880-1914.'¹⁹ He cites 'Tory publicans in Wolverhampton' as portraying themselves as "working men's candidates" defending historic *male* liberties'.²⁰ The synchronisation of interest through language in order to achieve electoral success was successful for the Conservatives before 1906 and after 1918. This 'new political history' uses discourse as evidence of class alignment, which is an advance in sophistication on the earlier work that argued class voting was natural and inevitable, whilst not providing conclusive evidence of this.

b) The consequences of the First World War for the Liberal decline

The original advocate of the view that the consequences of the First World War were primarily responsible for the decline of the Liberal Party is Trevor Wilson.²¹ His seminal work, widely hailed following its publication in the mid-1960s, offered what has now become a well-used metaphor: that the Liberal Party was an ailing man (due to the stresses of government 1910-1914 regarding the House of Lords, women's suffrage and labour unrest), but

before a thorough diagnosis could be made, he was involved in an encounter with a rampant omnibus (the First World War), which mounted the pavement and ran him over. After lingering painfully, he expired.²²

Wilson also argued that there was no evidence of Labour replacing the Liberals before the Great War.²³ Instead, it was the lack of Liberal leadership during the war which was the prime cause of decline, because the party was divided and rudderless when it faced the post-

¹⁸ G. L. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (London, 1986), p. 201.

¹⁹ J. Lawrence, 'Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880-1914', *English Historical Review*, 108, no. 428 (1993), pp. 629-652.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 643.

²¹ T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935* (London, 1966).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

war world. He focuses on the role of Asquith and Lloyd George, and particularly the period after the latter had attained the position of Prime Minister at the former's expense.

Michael Bentley's exploration of *The Liberal Mind* discusses a parallel effect of the War, in undermining the conceptions of Liberalism.²⁴ It was these differing conceptions of Liberalism which meant that the Party was not united and able to adapt to the new political environment after the end of the First World War. However, like Wilson, he primarily focuses on the Liberal elite, although extending beyond the parliamentarians to include what he defines as the Liberal intelligentsia. Peter Clarke's seminal work *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* is also concerned with adaptation, because he argues that Liberal decline must have occurred after 1914, because the New Liberalism had ensured that they adapted to the changing nature of politics from religion to class that occurred in the Edwardian period.²⁵ Importantly, Clarke claims that the divisions in the Liberal Party at Westminster were important and that the Lloyd George coalition harmed the party. Clarke's monograph focused on the Edwardian period, and so did not cite any original evidence for these points; the crux of his argument rested on the healthy state of the Liberal Party before August 1914. Perhaps the most valid criticism of his work is that it only discusses Liberal adaption in Lancashire, and, as Laybourn argues, Lancashire had a different political culture (and Liberal elite) than in his region of focus, West Yorkshire.²⁶ Additionally, the local and regional minute books were not available for study in Lancashire in the late 1960s, and so one level of Liberal activity was unavoidably neglected. Therefore, the question still remains: what was the condition of Liberalism in the constituencies? Clarke, in another work, and Michael Freedon argue that New Liberalism had the potential to be a popular and radical force, but they only discuss it from the point of high politics and political theory.²⁷

In contrast, Douglas in his essay 'Labour in decline, 1910-14' argues that in some respects it was Labour, and not the Liberal Party, that was in difficulty before the Great War, in particular citing that Labour lost the four seats they defended in by-elections.²⁸ Clarke's analysis of the by-elections of 1910-1914 concluded that the Liberal's by-election results may have been evidence of temporary unpopularity as most governments face.²⁹ The implication

²⁴ M. Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1914-1929* (Cambridge, 1977).

²⁵ Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*.

²⁶ Laybourn and Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour*, p. 4 and *passim*.

²⁷ P. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978); M. Freedon, *The New Liberalism* (Oxford, 1978).

²⁸ R. Douglas, 'Labour in decline 1910-14' in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (Basingstoke, 1974), p. 125.

²⁹ P. Clarke, 'The electoral position of the Liberal and Labour parties, 1910-1914', *English Historical Review*, 90, no. 357 (1975), pp. 828-836.

of these works is that it was the First World War, Wilson's rampant omnibus, which changed the political landscape. With so much emphasis on the sustainability of the Liberal Party as a party of government in 1914, it necessitates a detailed examination of the Liberal Party in the constituencies during the First World War.

Tanner's seminal work *Political Change and the Labour Party* should also be categorised under this heading, even though he felt it belonged to neither school of thought.³⁰ However, his conclusions that the Progressive Alliance was still viable in 1914 (for both the Labour and Liberal Parties) and that 'the Labour Party was not on the verge of replacing the Liberals in 1914' places the decline of the Liberals after this date.³¹ Moreover, Tanner argues Labour increased its prospects during the War as it improved its credibility as a reforming party, whilst the Liberals were divided and failed to maintain the radical domestic political agenda which before 1914 had ensured that they were regarded as the foremost party of the left in most parts of the country. Tanner's extensively researched work, based on his PhD thesis, utilises national and local party and press sources meticulously. However, since Tanner's work was published 23 years ago, several local Liberal Party records have been deposited, in many cases for localities where the local press has not been examined, resulting in an opportunity for new research.

E. H. H. Green's important work on the Conservative Party before the Great War fits into this historiography as it is relatively pessimistic of the Unionists' prospects immediately prior to 1914.³² Green cogently argues that the Labour Party was a great threat to working-class Conservatism, that the Conservatives faced a united and effective political opposition (both the Liberal Party on its own and the Progressive Alliance), and that it was not until after the Great War when the landscape of British politics changed that the Conservative Party was to escape its nadir. Also, Peter Rowland in his work on the Liberal Government of 1911-1914 saw the Liberal prospects in 1914 as encouraging and indeed even better than in 1910.³³ He argues that their replacement by the Labour Party was not a foregone conclusion. In many ways, this is the crux of the argument for this school of thought: that as there were no conclusive signs that the Labour Party was replacing the Liberals before the War, the cause must be found in subsequent events, hence the primacy of the political and social consequences of the First World War.

³⁰ Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

³² E. H. H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880-1914* (London, 1995).

³³ P. Rowland, *The Last Liberal Governments: Unfinished Business, 1911-1914* (London, 1971).

A recent contribution that has not yet found its way into debates in this field is Matthew Johnson's 2008 article.³⁴ He argues that Liberalism was more flexible in wartime than scholars have hitherto recognised. David's article 'The Liberal Party divided' is relevant for how the Parliamentary Liberal Party was split in 1916-1918, and the stress it places on the division of the Liberal Party in its future fortunes.³⁵ There are also other articles worth consulting for narrative and analysis of Liberal politics during the war.³⁶ Wilson and Douglas have also made important contributions to our understanding in respect of the coupon and the 1918 general election. Douglas's work is useful for a narrative on the origins and distribution of the 'coupon',³⁷ whilst Wilson focuses upon Lloyd George and his use of the 'coupon' in the election of 1918.³⁸ Wrigley has argued that in trying to understand Labour's advance after 1918 it is important to remember Liberal divisions and the multiple alliances with the Conservatives, whether that be the Lloyd George coalition or local municipal pacts.³⁹ Similarly, Turner's work *British Politics and the Great War* is useful as it points to the Liberals bringing about their own divisions during the war and the imperative point that with the continuation of the Coalition, the alignment of the Liberals and Conservatives against Labour undercut historic Liberalism.⁴⁰ Moreover, it has an extensive analysis of the 1918 general election which is without equal in the historiography. Bernstein states that the coupon election of 1918 (rather than the political crisis of December 1916) was the crucial incident that destroyed 'the political viability of the Liberal Party' because 'it divided the majority from the rank and file in the constituencies, thus undermining the foundations of the party.'⁴¹

One useful set of sources are the biographies produced of the two leading Liberal figures in this period: Herbert Asquith and David Lloyd George.⁴² Given that a biography is

³⁴ M. Johnson, 'The Liberal War Committee and the Liberal advocacy of conscription in Britain, 1914-1916', *Historical Journal*, 51, no. 2 (2008), pp. 399-420.

³⁵ E. David, 'The Liberal Party divided, 1916-1918', *Historical Journal*, 13, no. 3 (1970), pp. 509-532.

³⁶ S. E. Koss, 'The destruction of Britain's last Liberal government', *Journal of Modern History*, 40, no. 2 (1968), pp. 257-277. Also, see B. McGill, 'Asquith's predicament, 1914-1918', *Journal of Modern History*, 39, no. 3 (1967), pp. 283-303.

³⁷ R. Douglas, 'The background to the "Coupon" election arrangements', *English Historical Review*, 86, no. 339 (1971), pp. 318-336.

³⁸ T. Wilson, 'The Coupon and the British general election of 1918', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1964), pp. 28-42.

³⁹ C. Wrigley, 'Liberals and the desire for working-class representatives in Battersea, 1886-1922' in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (Basingstoke, 1974).

⁴⁰ J. Turner, *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict, 1915-1918* (New Haven, 1992).

⁴¹ G. L. Bernstein, 'Yorkshire Liberalism during the First World War', *Historical Journal*, 32, no. 1 (1989), p. 129.

⁴² S. Bates, *Asquith* (London, 2006); S. Constantine, *Lloyd George* (London, 1992); J. Grigg's three volume biography *Lloyd George: The Peoples Champion, 1902-1911* (London, 1978), *Lloyd George: From Peace to War, 1912-1916* (London, 1985), *Lloyd George: War Leader, 1916-1818* (London, 2002); R. Jenkins, *Asquith* (Rev Edn., London, 1978); T. Jones, *Lloyd George* (London, 1951); S. Koss, *Asquith* (London, 1985 [1976]); I.

focused around one person, it is not surprising that they tend to support the proposal that it was the leadership split which resulted in the demise of the Liberal Party as a governing body not any social or economic change. They tend to argue that because of the protagonist (whether that be Asquith or Lloyd George) causing the split between the two principal forces of Liberalism during the war that the Liberal Party was wrecked.

c) The 'Franchise Factor' in the Liberal decline

The 'franchise factor' is an important part of the historiographical debate on this subject. It was originally given prominence by Matthew, McKibbin and Kay in a seminal article which argued that the changes in the franchise in 1918 were at least as significant as the effects of the First World War.⁴³ They repeatedly stressed that 'it was the 1918 Representation of the People Act ... that was of first importance in Labour's replacing the Liberal Party as the principal party of progress.'⁴⁴ They gave such credence to their hypothesis because they felt that the arguments stressing the importance of the Great War on the decline of the Liberals had not been convincing. The essence of their theory was that the pre-war franchise excluded a significant number of the population who, if they could have voted, would have been more likely to vote for the Labour Party. Also, they argue the trebling of the electorate in 1918 transformed the character of the electorate 'by significantly lowering its political awareness.'⁴⁵ The authors clearly infer that it was the Liberals who suffered due to this as the electorate 'was less likely to respond to policies that demanded a comparatively high level of political intelligence'.⁴⁵ However, given the Liberals' policy vacuum in the post-war period this assertion cannot be verified.

Tanner disagreed with the conclusions of Matthew, McKibbin and Kay, stating that the political system was not necessarily biased against Labour and the working class and he points out that many well-to-do single men were excluded if they still lived at the parental home.⁴⁶ If the franchise cannot be entirely responsible for the Labour Party's occasionally

Packer, *Lloyd George* (Basingstoke, 1998); H. Purcell, *Lloyd George* (London, 2006); C. Wrigley, *Lloyd George* (Oxford, 1992).

⁴³ H. C. G. Matthew, R. I. McKibbin and J. A. Kay., 'The franchise factor in the rise of the Labour Party', *English Historical Review*, 91, no. 361 (1976), pp. 723-752.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 736.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 749.

⁴⁶ D. M. Tanner., 'The parliamentary electoral system, the "Fourth" Reform Act and the rise of Labour in England and Wales', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 56 (1983), pp. 205-219.

poor electoral results 1910-1914, this suggests that perhaps it was the consequences of the First World War (including Labour's own internal reforms due to the war) that enabled them to replace the Liberal Party as the dominant force on the left of British politics. What is more, Michael Hart has argued the Liberals were unable to benefit from the new increased franchise because 'the war caused the Liberal Party to break up intellectually, in the constituencies (especially after the [1918] election), and in Parliament.'⁴⁷ The franchise factor therefore links to the crucial debate in the historiography: was the decline of the Liberals and the rise of Labour occurring before the First World War, or was it a consequence of the War?

d) The Debate on the post-war Liberal decline

Cook has argued that it was between 1922 and 1924 that the three-party political system reverted back to a two-party system, with the Liberals pushed into third place and no longer a genuine contender for government office.⁴⁸ His research pointed out that there was no single date when the Liberal Party declined as it had varied performances across the United Kingdom. However, given the nature of Cook's work, which is essentially based on a Nuffield-style study of the general elections of 1923 and 1924, the local sources were not exhausted and there was no long-term analysis of decline. Morgan's monograph *Consensus and Disunity* is an invaluable study of the Lloyd George Coalition government and its opposition, but was not directly concerned with the Liberal decline.⁴⁹ One biographical monograph of particular importance is John Campbell's *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness, 1922-1931*.⁵⁰ This is a judicious account not only of Lloyd George but also the political world in which he operated, and is an invaluable source for the period 1922 to 1929. Cowling's study of high politics from 1920 to 1924 is concerned with the actions of the most important politicians, and their reactions to the rise of Labour.⁵¹ The time-span of the book highlights the fact that the actions and events of these years had tremendous consequences for the Liberal decline.

⁴⁷ M. Hart., 'The Liberals, the war, and the franchise', *English Historical Review*, 97, 385 (1982), pp.820-832.

⁴⁸ C. Cook, *The Age of Electoral Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain, 1922-1929* (Basingstoke, 1975).

⁴⁹ K. O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918-1922* (Oxford, 1979).

⁵⁰ J. Campbell, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness, 1922-1931* (London, 1977).

⁵¹ M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920-1924* (Cambridge, 1971).

Summary

For many years, there have been two opposed historical views of this topic: there are those who argue that the Liberals were in terminal decline before the First World War, and those who argue that the Liberal Party's fatal problems occurred as a result of the war. The most convincing arguments tend to be those which place the causes of Liberal decline after 1914. It is the period from the end of the war in November 1918 to the fall of the Lloyd George Coalition in October 1922 that seems to be the critical phase in the downfall of the Liberal Party. However, no previous study has primarily argued this. Moreover, there has been no monograph in this area since the early 1990s, and no work which has ever examined a wide selection of local Liberal Party records across the full period of 1910 to 1929. Recent political history has appreciated the role of the agency of political parties and that political language would be interpreted 'in different ways, by different people, in different contexts'.⁵²

Historians of the political grass-roots agree that they were of fundamental importance to their respective parties. In the inter-war period it is known that 'membership campaigns, canvassing and social events designed to galvanise existing members and attract new ones became a constant part of many a local party or association's calendar'.⁵³ However, the experience of the Liberal grass-roots is largely missing from the historiography. As Worley has put it for the Labour Party 'ultimately, the constituency parties' importance lay in their providing Labour with the mechanism to effectively contest elections and thereby acquire the power to legislate in the interests of the wider community.'⁵⁴ An effective constituency machine allowed the Labour Party to challenge the Liberals and Conservatives in parliamentary elections on a national level and in many areas in municipal elections, and this provided Labour with 'a nationwide apparatus to forge a sustainable electoral challenge'.⁵⁵ This context is also important from the Liberal Party's perspective, and has led Bernstein to suggest that 'in the long-run viability of the Liberal Party may have depended more on what happened in the constituencies' than at the national level.⁵⁶ However, Dawson has suggested

⁵² M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars* (London, 2005), p. 6

⁵³ S. Ball & A. Thorpe & M. Worley, 'Elections, leaflets and whist drives: constituency party members in Britain between the Wars' in M. Worley (ed.), *Labour's Grass Roots* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 7.

⁵⁴ M. Worley., 'The fruits of the tree: Labour's constituency parties between the wars', in M. Worley, *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-39* (Farnham, 2009), p. 207.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁵⁶ G. L. Bernstein., 'Yorkshire Liberalism', p. 107.

that the Representation of the People Act 1918 reduced the importance of organisation as elections became cheaper and the reach of national newspapers decreased the need for expenditure on propaganda.⁵⁷ He has also argued ‘that Liberal organisational disarray after 1918 was very much more a symptom, rather than a cause, of the party’s decline ... the Liberal malaise was far more deep-seated than an organisational question.’⁵⁸ It is clear that at the local level, as much as the national level, the factors in Liberal decline remain open to diametrically opposite interpretations.

II) Research questions

This thesis will seek to establish the Liberal Party’s health on the eve of the First World War, by investigating its condition in the selected case-study constituencies. These will be assessed for evidence of the levels of activity and enthusiasm, and for the extent to which the Liberals were able to make successful appeals to the electorate. A specific concern is whether the New Liberalism, as a vehicle for making class-based appeals, was adopted by the grass-roots, and whether any tensions resulted. The extent to which the traditional Liberal issues (such as Home Rule, peace, retrenchment and reform) remained on the Liberal agenda will be considered, and also whether there was a mutual exclusivity between the use of either New Liberal or traditional Liberal appeals. Connected to evaluating the position of the Liberal Party on the eve of the First World War will be an examination of the municipal election results in the case-study constituencies. Another aspect of the Liberal mind to be explored in the late Edwardian period is rank and file divisions regarding the women’s suffrage question and its consequences. Once all the evidence has been brought together, the question of whether the Liberals could have won a hypothetical general election in 1915 if the First World War had not intervened can be debated. The answer to this question will highlight the Liberal Party’s potential and indicate whether the prime causes of its terminal decline should be located in this period.

The next group of research questions focus upon the wartime years, and seek to explore the impact of Liberal divisions at Westminster, and the extent to which they permeated down into the rank and file. Did the war-time measures, particularly the coming of conscription, cause consternation at the grass-roots, or was Liberalism more adaptable to

⁵⁷ M. Dawson., ‘Money and the real impact of the Fourth Reform Act’, *Historical Journal*, 35, no. 2 (1992), pp. 377-380.

⁵⁸ Dawson, ‘Politics in Devon and Cornwall’, p. 121.

wartime demands than has conventionally been argued? Particular themes here are the examination of Liberal reactions to the formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 and the establishment of the Lloyd George Coalition in December 1916, which will provide evidence of the extent to which the parliamentary split filtered down. The level of grass-roots activity during the First World War will be assessed, in order to establish any connection between the consequences of the war and the Liberal decline. Historians have argued for the significance of parliamentary-level events, such as the Maurice debate and the Lansdowne Letter, on the course of Liberal fortunes, but their effects have been neglected from the perspective of the rank and file. Therefore, it will be asked whether there is any evidence of their importance at that level. The role of the 'Coupon' in the general election of 1918 will be analysed to see what impact it had at the grass-roots of the party, and to assess its consequences for the party's health in the immediate post-war environment.

The questions to be examined in the period after 1918 concern when and how the Liberals ended up in the third-party trap. The pattern which occurred in the constituencies will be analysed in order to assess the significance of the 1918, 1922, 1923 and 1924 general elections in this process. A major theme of the 1918-1924 period is the failure of the Liberal Party to develop a new, distinctive and popular programme of policies, and the effects of this missed opportunity on the party in the constituencies. Further issues to be analysed are local opinion on the Liberal leadership during the Lloyd George Coalition, the tardy reunion after the fall of the Coalition in 1922, the formation of the first Labour Government in 1924, and the final Lloyd George-Asquith split of 1926. To what extent did the Lloyd George Coalition's policy of reprisals in Ireland put Lloyd George beyond the pale for the Liberal rank and file? Historians have seen the formation of the first Labour government as a missed opportunity for the Liberal Party, but it needs to be asked whether the grass-roots saw it this way at the time. The Liberals' self-identity will be assessed, based on the policies that they advocated in public meetings and in private. Finally, the thesis will also analyse the attempt to revive the Liberal Party under Lloyd George, and will conclude with the failure to make an impact in the general election of 1929.

III) Research methods

In order to examine Liberalism at its grass-roots, this research has utilised the constituency minute books of Liberal Associations. However, in order to make this study both manageable and representative, a select number of case studies had to be chosen. All of the surviving constituency minute books that contained entries between 1910 and 1929 were identified by using the National Register of Archives online.⁵⁹ All of the associations and regional bodies were categorised based on their geographic area. The results identified that the Home Counties, Midlands and the north-west had the most extensive primary source material that covered the majority of the 1910-1929 period. These three regions also represent three distinct socio-economic areas, and have the advantage of being areas of contrasting Liberal strength (see tables 0.2, 0.4 and 0.6). This provides a sample large enough that broad conclusions can be drawn about grass-roots Liberalism in England, whilst also being a sample that is manageable for a doctoral thesis. Throughout this work, the term ‘grass-roots’ will refer to the case-study constituencies. For the Home Counties, these are: Bromley (with material for the urban districts of Beckenham and Penge), Faversham (with material for Sittingbourne), Southend, and Walthamstow East and Walthamstow West.⁶⁰ The case-study constituencies for the Midlands are: Chesterfield, Coventry, Harborough, Leicester (which was divided into Leicester East, South and West in 1918), and Walsall. The case-study constituencies for the north-west are Blackpool, Chester, Darwen, Westmorland (with pre-war material for the Kendal constituency), and the city of Manchester.⁶¹ These provide a broadly representative sample, as not all of these seats had Liberal MPs. Some could be considered core Liberal territory, such as Harborough and (Liberal/Labour) Chesterfield; others were marginal constituencies, such as Manchester South and Walsall; some were unlikely wins, such as Chester, and some were nigh unwinnable, such as Blackpool and Faversham (except in the latter case in 1906). The research on these three regions is aided by other pertinent surviving material: the minutes of the regional bodies for both the Midlands

⁵⁹ Found at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/.

⁶⁰ Before 1918 Beckenham and Penge were part of the Sevenoaks constituency, Southend was in South-Eastern Essex and Walthamstow West and East were one constituency named Walthamstow.

⁶¹ The use of Manchester LF minutes is why it is claimed the 10 post-1918 Manchester seats are case-study constituencies. Examining the ten post-1918 Manchester seats in microscopic depth would be a thesis in its own right, as B. Jones, ‘Manchester Liberalism 1918-1929: The electoral, ideological and organisational experience of the Liberal Party in Manchester with particular reference to the career of Ernest Simon.’, University of Manchester, PhD thesis (1997) demonstrated.

and the north-west still exist and the Annual Reports for the Home Counties for certain years are deposited at the University of Bristol Special Collections.

The added value of party minute books is to some extent influenced by when the meetings were held, if at all. For example, as the Harborough LA had a meeting less than a week after Asquith was prevented from speaking in the House of Commons by Conservative heckling, the association saw fit to comment.⁶² If a Liberal Association does not hold (or record) a meeting than one can only infer why no meeting was held based on the political context of the time. Unfortunately, the source base for the material for this thesis cannot be complemented by oral interviews as almost every party worker who would have been active during this period will be deceased.⁶³

Sometimes the minutes of Liberal meetings are of more use to historians than just for political events. Often local associations were concerned about things specific to their locality, which are worthy of investigation in their own right but are not directly relevant in this thesis. For example, the Penge LA informed the Prime Minister in 1911 that they felt it was 'a great injustice' that 'no local Liberal' had been appointed to the Magisterial Bench for the hamlet of Penge 'within the last ten or twelve years.'⁶⁴ Given the need for brevity due to the word limit, these kind of local concerns are omitted.

In addition to using constituency party minute books, this study has also investigated the local press to provide further source material on Liberalism at the grass-roots. This method of research can highlight Liberal social events and can provide an important perspective on the general elections and by-elections that the Liberals fought, and in particular the issues which they focused on. Due to the volume of the local press for these constituencies, the newspaper research was orientated around important dates, such as the formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915, and was supplemented by searches around the time of AGMs and known social events to provide an in depth analysis of grass-roots Liberalism.

Additionally, the private papers of Herbert Asquith, Donald Maclean and David Lloyd George have been used for several reasons. Firstly, as Leaders of the Party during the period of study (Maclean was sessional Chairman of the Liberal Party in 1919-1920) they had

⁶² Harborough LA, Exec., 29 July 1911. Asquith rose to address the House of Commons on the 24 July 1911 but was shouted down. See Koss, *Asquith*, pp. 127-128.

⁶³ This means a study similar to that of D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism: Recollections of Life in the Labour Party* (Stroud, 1997) is not possible. The earliest Weinbren's study was able to focus is the 1930s although there are some recollections of the General Strike.

⁶⁴ Penge LA, Exec., 8 May 1911.

access to important information concerning the party machinery. Secondly, local and regional matters were occasionally reported to them; the Annual Coalition Liberal Reports in the Lloyd George papers are particularly valuable in this regard. A detailed search was undertaken for the surviving papers of Liberal MPs who represented the case-study constituencies, using volumes three and four of Cook's *Sources in British Political History*.⁶⁵ As these were published in 1977 this search was supplemented by using the National Register of Archives online.⁶⁶ However, given the fluctuating Liberal success in these years, almost no private papers remain for the comparatively few MPs that there were during these years, and they do not contain useful material about constituency Liberalism. However, another aspect of grass-roots Liberalism has been more productive. It has been suggested that the foundation of Conservative success in winning elections rested on their 'strength and durability at the local level.'⁶⁷ Davies and Morley have argued that county borough elections 'provide the only systematic insight available into how local electors reacted to political events over time'.⁶⁸ To reflect this important dimension, this thesis will analyse the municipal election results of the Liberal Party during 1910-1929, to see what evidence this provides of the party's strength or weakness at the grass-roots.

Stedman Jones has argued that 'Political discourses are addressed to particular constituencies, indeed at certain formative turning points are able to constitute or reconstitute such constituencies ... in fact, the primary motivation [of political discourse] is to create and then to orchestrate such a demand, to change the self-identification and behaviour of those addressed.'⁶⁹ Throughout the thesis, the Liberal attempts to construct a political discourse during elections as well as the demands and interests of the Liberals at the grass-roots will be assessed. The discourse of the Liberals' opponents in relation to the way they presented the Liberal party will also be examined. It was not predetermined that the Labour Party would (generally) be more successful in articulating a working-class discourse, or that the Conservative Party would (generally) do so for the middle-class. This is especially the case when the Liberals attempted to put forward the language of 'the interests of all the classes',

⁶⁵ C. Cook, *Sources in British Political History: Volume 3, A Guide to the Private Papers of Members of Parliament, A-K* (London, 1977) and C. Cook, *Sources in British Political History: Volume 4, A Guide to the Private Papers of Members of Parliament, L-Z* (London, 1977).

⁶⁶ Found at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/.

⁶⁷ S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism and the evolution of the party organization' in A. Anthony and S. Ball (eds.), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford, 1994), p. 261.

⁶⁸ S. Davies and B. Morley, 'The reactions of municipal voters in Yorkshire to the Second Labour Government, 1929-32' in M. Worley (ed.), *Labour's Grass Roots* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 124.

⁶⁹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 23-24.

particularly after 1918. However, the Liberal Party’s organisational problems together with the lacklustre contribution of the Parliamentary leadership ensured that no detailed or credible policies were put forward that could represent the Liberals’ claim to govern in the interests of no one class.

An analysis of general elections and the electoral system is essential when examining the fortunes of a political party whose reason for existing is to contest national elections. This thesis takes the electoral system to be ‘the means by which votes are translated into seats in the process of electing politicians into office’.⁷⁰ The British electoral system is a single member plurality system, as for a candidate to win they need to obtain at least one more vote than any of the other candidates do and this is why it is known colloquially as the ‘first past the post’ system.⁷¹ Strictly speaking, the single member plurality system encompasses single-member constituencies (and in this period a few double-member boroughs) and the election is between candidates and not parties, although in this period party affiliation had become the main determinant for voters. The first past the post system is disproportional and is effective at producing ‘manufactured majorities’; that is, a majority in seats that was not necessarily reflected by the pattern of voting.⁷²

Table 0.1: British MPs elected with less than 50 per cent of the vote

Year	MPs elected with a minority of the vote	Minority MPs as % of all MPs
1918	97	14.5
1922	173	30.0
1923	203	35.2
1924	124	21.5
1929	310	53.8

Source: Farrell, *Electoral Systems*, p. 26

The structure of the thesis is intended to address the arguments advanced by historians as to why the Liberal Party’s fortunes declined. Chapter One will analyse the arguments regarding

⁷⁰ D. M. Farrell, *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction* (Basingstoke, 2001). p. 4

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷² D. W. Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws* (London, 1967), p. 76.

the long-term viability of the Liberals as a party of government before the First World War, based on the evidence from the grass-roots. Chapter Two explores the Liberal Party's response to war-time issues such as the formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 conscription in 1915-16, and considers the nature of grass-roots activity in 1914-1916. Chapter Three examines grass-roots' responses to Lloyd George's replacement of Asquith and the formation of a new coalition, while Asquith (who remained leader of the Liberal Party) remained outside the government. The role of the Coupon Election in the decline of the Liberal Party is also examined here. Chapter Four examines the long-lasting consequences of the Coupon Election on the Liberal grass-roots and argues that the years immediately after the Coupon Election were critical to the political fortunes of the Liberal Party. Chapter Five examines the period from the grass-roots demand for reunion after the 1922 general election to the announcement of the results of the 1924 general election. It was during this period that the Liberals were recognised to have become the third party of British politics. Chapter Six examines grass-root activity during Asquith's last two years as leader and the responses to the final split between Asquith and Lloyd George in 1926. The attempted Liberal revival under Lloyd George forms the second half of this chapter, which concludes with an examination of the organisation, policies and the 1929 general election.

1910 is an appropriate starting point for this study as in the January and December 1910 general elections the Liberals were the 'winners' under the electoral system. In December 1910, the Liberals won 274 seats to the Unionists 273 and could generally rely on the support of the Labour and Irish Nationalist Parties, who had 40 MPs and 71 MPs respectively.⁷³ As Moore has argued, if the 1886 general election and the Home Rule split marked the fall of Liberalism, then the revivals in 1892 and 1906 are hard to explain.⁷⁴ It is therefore not necessary to look further back than 1910 to commence an analysis of the downfall of the Liberal Party. Similarly, 1929 is an appropriate end date for the research. By this time, despite the attempted revival under Lloyd George, the Liberals were unable to make a breakthrough under the electoral system. The Liberal Party was caught in the third party trap, and has subsequently remained stuck in that position. Lloyd George's failure in 1929 marked the end of Liberal Party's belief and attempt to be anything other than the third party of British politics.⁷⁵

⁷³ N. Blewett, *The Peers, The Parties and The People: The British General Elections of 1910* (Basingstoke, 1972), p. 381.

⁷⁴ J. R. Moore, *The Transformation of Urban Liberalism: Party Politics and Urban Governance in Late Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

IV) The social, economic and electoral background of the three case-study regions

The Home Counties is defined as encompassing Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, Surrey and Sussex. The figures do not include any of the London Boroughs. As can be in Table 0.2, the Home Counties were a region where the Liberals had been historically weak. Even in the Liberal landslide of 1906, there were still more Conservatives than Liberals elected in this region.

Table 0.2: Home Counties general election results, 1868-December 1910:

	Liberal	Conservative	Labour	Other
1868	37	36	0	0
1874	17	56	0	0
1880	23	50	0	0
1885	7	51	0	2
1886	1	56	0	2
1892	4	53	0	2
1895	2	56	0	1
1900	5	53	0	1
1906	26	29	1	3
1910 January	5	53	0	1
1910 December	8	49	0	2

As can be seen in Table 0.3, this trend continued after 1918 but was exacerbated as the representation in the region increased under the Representation of the People Act 1918. The Conservatives clearly were in the ascendancy in the region, and it can be seen that the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the alternative to the Liberals as early as 1918.

Table 0.3: Home Counties general election results, 1918-1929

Year	Liberal	Coalition Liberal/National Liberal	Conservative	Labour	Other
1918	0	5	75	11	4

1922	1	1	73	7	3
1923	11	n/a	55	18	1
1924	1	n/a	75	7	2
1929	2	n/a	62	21	0

Pelling has described Walthamstow as ‘a definitely working-class suburb’ that was ‘made possible by the Great Eastern Railway’s enterprise’.⁷⁶ Sevenoaks was described as ‘a predominantly upper-middle-class constituency’, whilst Southend was been labelled as ‘a dormitory town for London businessmen’.⁷⁷ Faversham contained some industry: ‘brickmaking and paper-mills at Milton and Sittingbourne’ and ship construction at the naval dockyard at Sheerness. Sittingbourne, for which the minutes of the Liberal Club there have survived, was described by the local press a ‘Radical stronghold’.⁷⁸

The Midlands is defined as encompassing Derbyshire, Herefordshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Rutland, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Within this, the East Midlands is defined as the counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland, and the remainder is defined as the West Midlands. As can be seen in Table 0.4, usually if the Liberal Party were to form a government, they needed to win the majority of the seats in the Midlands.

Table 0.4: Midlands general election results, 1868-December 1910:

	Liberal	Conservative	Labour	Other
1868	53	57	0	0
1874	46	64	0	0
1880	70	40	0	0
1885	68	23	0	19
1886	29	41	0	4
1892	40	34	0	18
1895	24	47	0	21
1900	27	42	1	20
1906	62	17	2	11

⁷⁶ H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910* (Aldershot, 1994 [1967]), p. 65.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67 and 69.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

1910 January	31	40	8	13
1910 December	31	39	8	14

As can be seen in Table 0.5, the Liberal position had drastically declined between December 1910 and 1918. Clearly, the Midlands was an area of Conservative success, except in 1929 when Labour had clearly replaced the Liberals as the alternative government to the Conservatives.

Table 0.5: Midlands general election results, 1918-1929

	Liberal	Coalition Liberal/National Liberal	Conservative	Labour	Other ⁷⁹
1918	7	11	54	13	5
1922	13	6	54	17	0
1923	18	n/a	47	25	0
1924	2	n/a	66	21	1
1929	5	n/a	38	47	0

At the start of the twentieth century, more than a quarter of the employed males in Leicester were in the boot and shoe trade.⁸⁰ A two-member borough until 1918, Leicester was part of the national agreement between the Liberal and Labour parties not to stand against each other in certain seats. Harborough was a more diverse constituency, containing a fair portion of the Leicester suburbs, an agricultural market town in Market Harborough, and a railway and hosiery centre at Wigston Magna.⁸¹ Chesterfield had a high proportion of miners in the constituency, as well as other industrial workers such as ironworkers. However, Pelling has noted that the town of Chesterfield had ‘a fairly strong-middle-class element’, so it was a mixed constituency.⁸² Coventry was a centre of bicycle manufacturing, and this evolved into it becoming a centre of car manufacturing in the inter-war period.⁸³ Walsall was a

⁷⁹ Other includes coalition labour and Coalition NDP as well as the National Party and Constitutionalists.

⁸⁰ Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, p. 210.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.189-190.

predominantly working-class constituency which included coal-miners and iron-workers, as well as those in the speciality leather trades.⁸⁴

The north-west of England is defined as encompassing Cheshire, Cumberland, Lancashire and Westmorland. As can be seen from Table 0.6, the north-west was becoming electorally more important for the Liberals; in 1868, 1885 and 1892 the Liberals did not need to win a majority of seats in this region to form a national government. By 1910 when the Tories and Liberals were neck and neck nationally, the slight Liberal advantage in January 1910 would be welcome. The potential of the Progressive alliance for the Liberals in the north-west is clear; in December 1910, the Liberals and Labour combined had a majority of five, over the Unionist Party.

Table 0.6: North-west general election results, 1868-December 1910:

	Liberal	Conservative	Labour	Other
1868	20	37	0	0
1874	17	40	0	0
1880	33	24	0	0
1885	27	50	0	1
1886	15	57	0	6
1892	30	46	0	2
1895	12	61	0	5
1900	15	58	0	5
1906	48	16	13	1
1910 January	35	28	13	2
1910 December	30	36	11	1

As with the Home Counties and the Midlands, the Liberal position in the north-west had changed by the 1918 general election. Even counting the Coalition and Independent Liberals together, within the space of a single Parliament the Liberals went from a close second to a clear third place. This trend will be examined in the Coupon Election sub-section of Chapter Three. The Liberal performance in the Free Trade election of 1923 was particularly impressive in terms of seats won in the north-west, but still they were in third place behind

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 185.

the Labour and Conservative parties. It is also noteworthy that by 1929 in the north-west, as in the Midlands, Labour had overtaken the Conservative Party.

Table 0.7: North-west general election results, 1918-1929

	Liberal	Coalition Liberal/National Liberal	Conservative	Labour	Other
1918	1	10	57	16	2
1922	4	7	51	22	2
1923	26	n/a	31	27	2
1924	2	n/a	60	19	5
1929	7	n/a	31	46	2

The constituency of Darwen contained some agriculture, but the majority of the population lived in the cotton towns of Darwen, Great Harwood, Walton-le-Dale and Longridge.⁸⁵ Pelling noted that the town of Darwen itself was Nonconformist but other parts of the division were Roman Catholic, and he suggested that this was why Darwen did not fall to the Liberals in the landslide of 1906 (but it was close, the Conservative majority was 25). As might be expected, a city as large as Manchester contained a variety of constituencies. On the pre-1918 boundaries, Manchester North-West and Manchester South could be described as the middle-class constituencies and the other four as ‘predominantly working-class in composition’.⁸⁶ The constituency of Blackpool contained the famous seaside resort town that it was named after, but also included ‘the more exclusive satellite resorts of Lytham and St. Annes’.⁸⁷ Chester was a cathedral city with a residential population but also contained the industrial suburb of Saltney.⁸⁸ Westmorland was an agricultural constituency, although the urban vote of Kendal should not be dismissed as insignificant.⁸⁹

This thesis challenges the conventional wisdom about the nature and timing of the Liberal decline. In order to assess the arguments that the party’s problems were located

⁸⁵ Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, p. 264.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244. For more on the social and economic characteristics of Manchester see D. McHugh, *Labour in the City: The Development of the Labour Party in Manchester, 1918-31* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 19-31.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.

before 1914, it is important to analyse the grass-roots in the late-Edwardian period, to which we now turn.

Chapter 1

The pre-war health of the Liberal Party, 1910-1914

The health of the Liberal Party, regarding both its immediate prospects and its long-term viability, has caused much debate amongst historians of modern British politics. This chapter develops a broadly positive view of the survival of the Liberal Party, based on evidence from constituencies in the Home Counties, the Midlands and the North-West of England. The evidence suggests that the Liberal experience was not significantly different whether in Manchester or Walthamstow, and so instead of examining Liberalism by region, a parallel and chronological approach has been adopted.

I) Social Reform and the New Liberalism

The historiography of this period has been dominated by P. Clarke's *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*.⁹⁰ Using Lancashire as a case study, he argued that whilst politics in the late Edwardian period had become class-based, the Liberal Party had adapted to the new economic and social issues by the means of the New Liberalism. However, although his work revolutionised the debate on the relative fortunes of the Liberal and Labour parties, the minutes of Liberal organisations were not available for examination when the work was written. This section can thus add to both the empirical and interpretive basis of Clarke's seminal study.

Taking the National Insurance Act as one benchmark of the New Liberalism, there is evidence that this was welcomed at the grass-roots of the Liberal Party. The Darwen LA welcomed 'the steady development by the government of its policy of social and political reforms as witnessed by the passage of the Insurance Act into law'.⁹¹ By May 1912, 442 meetings had been held on National Insurance in the Midlands.⁹² Numerous Liberal Associations passed resolutions in favour of the legislation and actively campaigned on the

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*.

⁹¹ Darwen LA, AGM, 23 April 1912.

⁹² MLF, Exec., 16 May 1912.

issue.⁹³ Harborough Liberals justified the National Insurance Act by stating it was for ‘the benefit of the wage-earners’ whereas ‘the Agricultural Rating Act (A Tory Act) [was] for the benefit of landlords.’ The Secretary added ‘that explains the difference in attitude of the Conservative Party towards the measures.’⁹⁴ For the Liberals, having a clear political enemy provided a focal point of strength. What is more, it suggests that the influence of New Liberalism was present. Clarke has argued that ‘the effect of the new Liberalism (actual or intended) was to change the class image of the Liberal party by giving it a clear identity as a poor man’s party and crudely branding the Conservatives’ as a rich man’s party.’⁹⁵ In private meetings, such rhetoric was being employed by Liberals. The New Liberalism was not just skin deep, it was broadly embraced by the Liberals at the grass-roots.

However, it seems that, initially at least, the rank and file were not overly keen on the National Insurance Act and did not uncritically embrace it. It was noted by the MLF ‘that partly owing to the November elections and to a certain reluctance on the part of Associations to discuss the Bill that not very much could be done in the Midlands.’⁹⁶ Some specific measures of the original Bill were not enthusiastically welcomed, but the concept behind the Bill was. The Executive of the Coventry LA noted that they ‘cordially’ approved ‘the principle of the National Insurance Bill’ and ‘gladly recognises the readiness of this government to consider suggestions and meet objections’ whilst trusting that ‘after full discussion in Parliament’ the Bill would pass into law.⁹⁷ Similarly, Liberals were not uncritical of the Act, and after ‘considerable discussion’, the Darwen LA committee ‘strongly’ urged ‘the proposed Bill for amending the Insurance Act [to be] as thorough and comprehensive as possible with a view to meeting the objections which were so extensively taken to its provisions at the Altrincham Election’.⁹⁸ This suggests that the Liberals were active in utilising the New Liberalism to the utmost of its electoral advantages by negating as many deficiencies as they could in the legislation.

Moreover, the National Insurance Act is a useful example of showing the advantages of being in government. The Secretary of the MLF reported that since they had last met he had received a pressing communication from the Chief Whip asking for ‘a report on the

⁹³ Alexandra Kent House and Lawrie Park Wards, GM, 18 April 1912; Leicester LA, Exec., 27 June 1911; Harborough LA, Exec., 30 March 1912; Southend LA, Exec., 6 May 1912.

⁹⁴ Harborough LA, Exec., 30 March 1912.

⁹⁵ P. F. Clarke, J. A. Kay, R. I. McKibbin and H. C. G. Matthew, ‘Liberals, Labour and the franchise’, *English Historical Review*, 92, no. 364 (1977), p. 583.

⁹⁶ MLF, Exec., 21 September 1911.

⁹⁷ Coventry LA, Exec., 6 July 1911.

⁹⁸ LCNWLF, Exec., 10 June 1913.

workings of the Insurance Act in the Midlands with suggestions for its amendment.⁹⁹ The Liberals in government held more sway over the political agenda and could modify and improve legislation to their advantage.

However, the National Insurance Act was not universally popular with all Liberals. It was recorded that a letter was read from a member called Tom Shaw ‘intimating that if Mr Lloyd George’s Bill [almost certainly referring to the National Insurance Act] becomes law he will be obliged to withdraw from the Party.’¹⁰⁰ However, after an interview with the Secretary, a further letter was received from Shaw stating that ‘it was not his intention to desert the party on this one measure.’¹⁰¹ This case highlights how generally accepted the New Liberalism was at the grass-roots of the Liberal Party. His protest can be seen as the exception that proves the rule of how content Liberals were with New Liberalism as his dissatisfaction with the Bill did not cause him to leave the Party – suggesting that there was more to the Liberal Party than just New Liberalism – a point taken further in the next two subsections. Shaw was a member of the Manchester LF and Manchester Liberals held at least 43 meetings in connection with the Insurance Act by January 1912, so from an organisational point of view it can be seen that it was part of the Liberals’ electoral strategy.¹⁰²

As well as suggesting an electoral strategy for the Party, the National Insurance Act also provides an insight into how political parties can influence their own supporters. The role of Party organisations in moulding their own supporters’ views comes across from one entry in the minutes of the LCNWLF, where it was suggested that ‘classes on the lines of those promoted by the Liberal Insurance Committee are an important and invaluable mode of educating Liberal opinion (in the first case) on matters of so great importance.’¹⁰³ Whilst this might suggest that the New Liberalism had to be encouraged, one should consider the advantages that the Liberal Party would have had if they had educated Liberal opinion on the advantages of Home Rule in 1886 before Gladstone introduced his Government of Ireland Bill; in 1913 and 1914 it seems that the Liberal Party had successfully carried the Liberal grass-roots with them, not only in devoting attention to the traditional Liberal issues but also to campaigning for the New Liberalism as well.

⁹⁹ MLF, Exec., 3 July 1913.

¹⁰⁰ Manchester LF, Exec., 29 June 1911.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 13 July 1911.

¹⁰² Ibid., 25 January 1912.

¹⁰³ LCNWLF, Exec., 14 October 1913.

II) The Land Campaign

It is important to examine the Land Campaign of the late Edwardian period in a thesis because it has been used by historians to assess the vitality of the Liberal Party on the outbreak of the Great War.¹⁰⁴ From the autumn of 1913 until August 1914, the Liberal Party promoted a Land Campaign. This has been primarily examined from the national perspective in the historiography thus far.¹⁰⁵ It deserves examination at constituency level, as the Land Campaign could indicate the immediate possibilities and potential of Liberalism on the outbreak of the Great War. Older studies have suggested that ‘the land campaign was dogged by both ministerial and public unpopularity’,¹⁰⁶ and that the ‘working class could see nothing central to its interests’ in it.¹⁰⁷ However, Packer suggests that land reform ‘offered Liberalism its best chance of successfully combining social reform with traditional radicalism’.¹⁰⁸ If there is evidence of this in the constituencies, it could suggest that the Liberal Party had a viable future, by combining its middle-class electoral base with a fair proportion of the working class vote - a combination that the Labour Party would find difficult to achieve, on the pre- or post- 1918 franchise, and one that the Conservatives were unable to achieve until 1918. Focusing on Devon and Cornwall, Dawson has stressed that the Liberal Land Campaign had ‘serious consequences for the Unionists’,¹⁰⁹ and that nationally 22 Unionist seats in rural and mixed (part urban, part rural) constituencies could be lost on a two per cent swing and a total of 40 on a five per cent swing.¹¹⁰ Given the narrow margins necessary for victory, it is important that the views of the Liberal grass-roots in the Home Counties,

¹⁰⁴ I. Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: The Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906-1914* (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 194.

¹⁰⁵ R. Douglas, “‘God gave the land to the people’”, in A. J. A. Morris (ed.), *Edwardian Radicalism, 1900-1914: Some Aspects of British Radicalism* (London, 1974), pp. 148-61; R. Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom, 1878-1952* (London, 1976); H. V. Emy, ‘The Land Campaign: Lloyd George as a social reformer, 1909-14’, in A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (London, 1971), pp. 35-68, and Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land*.

¹⁰⁶ B. B. Gilbert., ‘David Lloyd George: the reform of British landholding and the Budget of 1914’, *Historical Journal*, 21, 1 (1978), p. 121.

¹⁰⁷ Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁸ Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land*, p. 195; Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 286; Emy claims that the ‘scale of the reforms confirmed the arrival of the “New Liberalism”’, Emy, ‘Land Campaign’, p. 66. Readman considers the Unionists had the basis for an alternative, see P. Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914* (London, 2008), pp. 173-76.

¹⁰⁹ Dawson, ‘Politics in Devon and Cornwall’, p. 211. Also see Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*, p. 290, and A. Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics, 1903-1913* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 266-84, for arguments that nationally the Unionists were concerned about the Liberal Land Campaign.

¹¹⁰ Dawson, ‘Politics in Devon and Cornwall’, p. 213. Just as significantly, 37 of the 50 Liberal MPs in rural and mixed seats were vulnerable to a swing to the Unionists of five per cent and 16 were vulnerable to a swing of two per cent. Taking into consideration the Liberals had won 272 seats compared to the Unionists 271, 16 seats held or lost would be significant.

Midlands and North-West are added to the historiography, to establish the pre-war health of the Liberal Party. Moreover, if the Land Campaign connected with the urban electorate, then the potential advantages and disadvantages to both parties becomes more obvious, and hence the importance of this debate.

In the constituencies, the Liberal land policy seems to have been responded to positively.¹¹¹ On 14 November 1913, the Chief Whip asked the Secretary of the MLF to call an emergency committee meeting of its executive for the purpose of organising active support for the Land Policy of the government. In consequence, a Land Council was set up to meet on 19 November 1913.¹¹² Between the end of January and early March 1914, this had arranged 52 meetings and 66 lectures in connection with the Land Campaign.¹¹³ Moreover, before the war broke out, there were 781 meetings planned for the Midland area Land Campaign.¹¹⁴ One can appreciate the scope of the campaign, as 423,800 booklet and leaflet sets were distributed in the Midlands as well as 109,500 unbound leaflets and 391,350 handbills and posters.¹¹⁵ All this evidence runs counter to the claim by Bernstein that ‘the response of the Liberal rank and file to the land campaign was curiously uncertain’.¹¹⁶ Evidently, the Liberal government was still the most progressive force in Britain, and the party caucus in the Midlands seems to have been united and enthusiastic for a fight against the Conservative Party over Lloyd George’s land reform proposals, which explains why ‘the Conservative Party viewed the Land Campaign as a major threat’.¹¹⁷

On the other hand, it would be disingenuous to argue that the land policy was universally popular among Liberals. It was almost certainly this issue which led one member of the Beckenham LA to resign, as he was ‘not in sympathy’ with ‘one main’ Liberal policy.¹¹⁸ In a similar vein, there were three unexplained resignations at the 1914 AGM, including that of the President of the Association, although the latter agreed to continue his financial contribution.¹¹⁹ This would suggest a dislike of the policy rather than total opposition leading to leaving the Liberal Party altogether. Although it was recorded that there had been ‘unsatisfactory attendance at the three meetings upon the land question’,¹²⁰ further meetings

¹¹¹ MLF, Exec., 28 October 1913.

¹¹² Ibid., Special meeting of the Exec., 14 November 1913.

¹¹³ Ibid., Exec., 5 March 1914.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 21 May 1914.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 9 July 1914.

¹¹⁶ Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics*, p. 145.

¹¹⁷ Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*, p. 290.

¹¹⁸ Beckenham LA, CM, 17 January 1913.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., AGM, 16 January 1914.

¹²⁰ Ibid., CM, 20 March 1914.

on the same issue were planned up to the outbreak of the First World War.¹²¹ Perhaps even more telling is that Northern Ward in Walthamstow felt comfortable enough with the Liberal land policy to challenge the local Conservatives to a debate on the issue, with local speakers.¹²² Although the Land Campaign seems to have been slightly less accepted than the New Liberalism, the majority of Liberals did engage with the Land Campaign and felt comfortable enough with the issue to use it to try and defeat their old nemesis, the Conservative Party. The case-study constituencies cannot add to the empirical argument about whether the Liberal Land Campaign would have been electorally successful, but these constituencies do suggest that it provided the Liberals with another weapon in their arsenal and that it shows vitality amongst the Liberals in the constituencies.

III) The Gladstonian Legacy: Peace, Retrenchment and Reform

The evidence suggests that whilst the New Liberalism did not take over the agenda for Liberal associations it was placed firmly on it; some meetings were more concerned with the National Insurance Act, but others with the more traditional Liberal policies. It is important to reiterate that whilst the New Liberalism was resolutely on the agenda in the constituencies this did not mean that the Gladstonian legacy of peace, retrenchment and reform was ignored or in second place. Brown, in his thesis on party politics in Scotland, noted how important traditional issues were for the Liberals before the First World War.¹²³ Over the issue of expenditure on armaments, the New Liberalism and the Old could work hand in hand. In many ways, expenditure on the army and navy provided the perfect balance between the traditional and the New Liberalism, as rigorous retrenchment in naval expenditure could free up money for more state-funded social programmes.

The *Manchester Guardian* recorded that ‘it should be mentioned that no part of the speech of Mr Benton was more cheered than that in which he declared himself ‘old-fashioned enough to believe that the Liberal Party is still the party of “peace, retrenchment, and reform” and then alluded to the concern felt by Liberals at the increasing national expenditure on

¹²¹ Ibid., 26 June 1914.

¹²² Northern Ward LA, AGM, 8 January 1914.

¹²³ G. Brown, ‘The Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland, 1918-1929’, University of Edinburgh, PhD thesis (1981), p. 32.

armaments.’¹²⁴ It may be that Liberals reconciled more state expenditure on social measures as long as peace aspect of the old mantra was upheld; the LCNWLF trusted the government to ‘continue its efforts to promote international goodwill, as one beneficial result, the enormous expenditure on armaments may be so lessened as to provide for the reduction of taxation and for further expenditure on Social Reform.’¹²⁵ Perhaps in a similar vein, the Blackpool LA passed a resolution unanimously for ‘the cultivation of friendly feeling towards Germany.’¹²⁶ Similarly, there were resolutions against the introduction of conscription in Britain.¹²⁷ Given this clear evidence of Liberal opinion before the Great War, we can appreciate the difficulties that Liberals at the grass-roots were to face during wartime as their pre-war policies ran counter to the policies pursued during the war.

Another aspect of the Liberal faith that came under threat during the war was that of free trade. Before the war, free trade was still considered to be working¹²⁸ and the Darwen LA expressed their confidence in free trade ‘which forms the basis of the prosperity of the cotton trade of Lancashire’.¹²⁹ There was still enough of the old Liberalism to ensure that older members of the Party still recognised the values that they had fought for in the nineteenth century.

The Parliament Act which effectively slayed the old enemy of the House of Lords was popular and the Southend LA even planned a Saturday night meeting to celebrate the passing of the Parliament Act.¹³⁰ There was also a clamour for the abolition of plural voting – an abolition that would aid the Liberal Party against the Conservative Party¹³¹, so much so that the Essex County Liberal Conference did not want the Party to hold a general election until a Bill was on the statute book.¹³² Similarly, there was unanimity on the education question. At the AGM of the Southend Liberals in 1913 there was a resolution ‘believing that any proposals dealing with education should provide for the removal of grievances under which Nonconformists labour at the present moment.’¹³³ However, one member of the Alexandra

¹²⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 April 1911.

¹²⁵ LCNWLF, AGM, 17 May 1912. For other examples of resolutions against further increases in expenditure on armaments see MLF, Exec., 29 January 1912; Southend LA, Exec., 12 January 1914; Walthamstow LA, Council Meeting, 23 January 1914.

¹²⁶ Blackpool LA, Exec., 29 January 1912; Manchester LF, Exec., 19 December 1912 and 14 October 1913; Southend LA, Exec., 4 November 1912.

¹²⁷ Southend LA, AGM, 17 March 1913 and Northern Ward LA, Exec., 1 February 1912.

¹²⁸ LCNWLF, AGM, 17 May 1912. For an example from the Home Counties, see Beckenham LA, CM, 4 April 1911.

¹²⁹ Darwen LA, AGM, 1 March 1913.

¹³⁰ Southend LA, Exec., 10 August 1911.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 6 January 1913 and AGM, 2 March 1914.

¹³² Walthamstow LA, Council Meeting, 22 May 1914.

¹³³ Southend LA, AGM, 17 March 1913.

Kent House and Lawrie Park Wards did express ‘disappointment’ with the Liberal Government, as he felt that they had ‘entirely neglected the education question.’¹³⁴ In response, the President ‘advised patience’, as he felt it would be dealt with in due course. If the Liberals were able to find a solution to nonconformist grievances before a 1915 general election, then they would have had a positive appeal to one important section of the Liberal electorate.

Another Liberal policy from the nineteenth century which still received attention in the late Edwardian period, was the disestablishment of the Welsh Church.¹³⁵ Yet, it must be noted that in Leicester there was a lone dissenting voice who would not vote for a resolution in favour of Welsh Disestablishment.¹³⁶ However, this was an exception and otherwise Welsh Disestablishment was a unifying policy against a clear enemy, the Unionist Party, as was the Parliament Act and the desire for a Plural Voting Bill.

Whilst there was some, minor, dissent over the Land Campaign, traditional Liberal issues seemed to have been steadfastly popular, perhaps even militantly. This was especially the case with perhaps the most Gladstonian of all issues, that of Home Rule for Ireland. There is ample evidence from each of the case-study regions that Home Rule was used as a campaigning issue with public meetings being organised.¹³⁷ It is important to note that in no way did the New Liberalism surpass the more traditional Liberal issues of Home Rule and Welsh Disestablishment. The evidence suggests that the new and old Liberalism could work in tandem together, as evidenced by the LCNWLF being pleased that the National Insurance Act had been passed into law and also equally pleased that the Home Rule and Welsh Disestablishment Bills had been passed in the House of Commons as well.¹³⁸ At an earlier meeting, it was recorded that ‘the Chairman stated that it was not desired that the Insurance Act campaign should supersede the Home Rule campaign, but it was felt that the great fight would take place after the introduction of the Bill.’¹³⁹ This suggests that if there was a partisan battle over National Insurance this would receive most of the Liberals attention and energy but if Home Rule was the most contentious political issue, then this would be at the forefront of Liberal policy. As will be seen, Home Rule was on the political agenda throughout the late Edwardian period but particularly in the seven months before the outbreak

¹³⁴ Alexandra Kent House and Lawrie Park Wards, Deferred GM, 5 December 1912.

¹³⁵ See MLF, Exec., 29 January 1912, where it was mentioned that a Conference on Welsh Disestablishment was planned, and Darwen LA, AGM, 10 February 1912 and 1 March 1913.

¹³⁶ Leicester LA, FGP, 9 January 1912.

¹³⁷ MLF, Exec., 27 November 1911.

¹³⁸ LCNWLF, AGM, 17 May 1912.

¹³⁹ Ibid., Conference of Liberal Agents, 24 January 1912.

of the First World War. On the eve of the Great War breaking out, the Manchester LF's attention was on 'the final passing' of the Home Rule, Disestablishment of the Welsh Church and Plural Voting Bills.¹⁴⁰

Home Rule, and in particular Conservative actions, stirred up Liberal feelings and as such was a unifying policy. The LCNWLF 'rejoice in their [the Liberal Government's] determination to proceed with the pacification of Ireland undeterred by the frivolous attempts of the Opposition to discredit its measures in the House of Commons.'¹⁴¹ In a similar way the Darwen LA condemned the 'threats of treason and civil war recently made use of by the leaders of the Ulster Orangemen and endorsed by the official leaders of the Conservative Party.'¹⁴² The Harborough LA viewed 'with amazement and indignation the efforts of the Conservative Party to not only provoke civil war in Ireland, but to corrupt the British army for party purposes'.¹⁴³

The Liberals were frustrated that this longstanding issue was still not settled and, even worse, was being used as a party political weapon. The Executive of the Harborough LA felt that the Conservative Party was using the issue of Home Rule as a 'valuable electioneering weapon', and urged the Government to 'waste no more time in futile efforts at conciliation', which they felt the Unionist Party saw as 'signs of weakness and hesitation.'¹⁴⁴ Around this time, other Liberal Associations passed resolutions that demanded 'no further concessions on Home Rule', so partisan had the issue become.¹⁴⁵

The politicised nature of the issue and, from the perspective of the Liberal grass-roots, the actions of the Conservatives, meant that it was, for some Associations, untenable and wrong for Ulster not to be included in Home Rule. The Manchester North-West LA did not want 'separate treatment of Ulster [as it] would lead to a disunited Ireland.'¹⁴⁶ In Southend in March 1914 there was a resolution in favour of Home Rule but 'urgently appealed that no step may be taken which would result in the exclusion of Ulster or any portion of the province as which would impair [the] unity of government in Ireland.'¹⁴⁷ In March 1914, the Penge LA stated that they had confidence in the government and did not want them to 'deflect one hair's breadth from their position respecting Home Rule.'¹⁴⁸ So, even if the

¹⁴⁰ Manchester LF, General Committee, 29 July 1914.

¹⁴¹ LCNWLF, Exec., 12 November 1912.

¹⁴² Darwen LA, AGM, 28 February 1914; LCNWLF, AGM of the Council, 27 March 1914.

¹⁴³ Harborough LA, Exec., 4 April 1914.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 21 February 1914.

¹⁴⁵ Manchester LF, Exec., 19 March 1914.

¹⁴⁶ North-West Manchester LA, Exec., 20 October 1913.

¹⁴⁷ Southend LA, Exec., 2 March 1914.

¹⁴⁸ Penge LA, AGM, 4 March 1914.

Conservative Party and their supporters in Ulster would have compromised (which is less than likely) the Liberal Government was under pressure from their own supporters not to compromise. The evidence suggests that if civil war did occur over Ireland, the Liberals, just like the Unionists on the other side, felt that justice and right were on their side – a dangerous combination.

Home Rule was clearly on the Liberal mind in the years before the First World War. Jalland asks whether the decline of the Liberal Party and the Irish Question are interlinked.¹⁴⁹ It was an issue close to the Liberal heart and the Liberal demands for no compromise against the disloyal and unpatriotic Tory Party (from the Liberal perspective) might have made uncomfortable reading for Asquith when he was trying to find a solution to the crisis over Ulster, but it did not affect the long-term fortunes of the Liberal Party, either positively or negatively.

IV) A divisive issue: Women's Suffrage

The question of if women, whether or not limited by a property qualification, should have the vote, was an important issue in British society in the late Edwardian period, but one that the Liberal government did not want to resolve one way or the other. Vellacott has written that the pre-war Liberal Party could hold a diverse range of views on a subject, and suggests that 'no issue better demonstrates this than women's suffrage.'¹⁵⁰ Jenkins suggests that Asquith's opposition to women's suffrage was in opposition to the majority of his Party, but to what extent is this true and how diverse was Liberal opinion on this issue?¹⁵¹ There has been a suggestion in the historiography that Liberal women became demoralised as a result of opposition to women's suffrage within the party, and 'that between 1912 and 1914 sixty-eight local branches of the Women's Liberal Federation folded and 18,000 members were lost'.¹⁵²

On the new issue of women's suffrage, there seems, in the constituencies to have been a lack of real interest in either championing or opposing the cause. Mabel Smith of the

¹⁴⁹ P. Jalland, *Liberals and Ireland: The Ulster Question in British Politics to 1914* (Brighton, 1980), p. 15.

¹⁵⁰ J. Vellacott, *From Liberal to Labour with Women's Suffrage: The Story of Catherine Marshall* (Montreal, 1993), p. 366. For the politics of suffrage and Liberal politics, see D. Morgan, *Suffragists and Liberals: The Politics of Woman Suffrage in England* (Oxford, 1975).

¹⁵¹ Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 248.

¹⁵² M. Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914* (Oxford, 2000), p. 143.

National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage wanted to address members of the Penge LA 'on the question of opposing women's suffrage', but the association suggested that if there was time in future they could do so – this was perhaps a delaying tactic to avoid discussion of a subject that divided the Liberals at the grass-roots.¹⁵³ There is evidence from the Leicester and Coventry associations suggesting division and some opposition to women's suffrage, and an avoidance of meeting suffrage activists.¹⁵⁴ However, the northern ward of Walthamstow LA planned to hold a debate on women's suffrage in 1912, so not all Liberals wanted to ignore the issue.¹⁵⁵

In contrast to Liberal advantages of amending the National Insurance Act whilst in office, the issue of women's suffrage shows the disadvantage of being in government when there is an issue that the party does not agree on. In Harborough, the candidate who had been chosen to replace the retiring MP was de-selected because it was felt that he was 'seriously jeopardising the seat by his persistent advocacy of women's suffrage, particularly at a time when the electors are prejudiced by the outrages perpetrated by some of the women.'¹⁵⁶ More importantly, the candidate's actions had lost him the support of the Liberals grass-roots – the activists. It was reported that there had been 'declarations of many of our best workers that they would neither work nor vote for Sir Victor Horsley.' What is more, this shows how important the grass roots were to a party in this era – without volunteers to knock on doors and to deliver leaflets, to organise and chair local meetings, and in this period to do registration work, the electioneering organisation could not be effective. Whilst trying to claim that they had not removed Horsley as candidate due to his being in favour of women's suffrage, the Harborough Executive succinctly summed up the Liberal view on the question: 'Women's Suffrage is not an article of the Liberal faith; some are in favour, some opposed to it, some Conservatives are in favour, some opposed to it'.¹⁵⁷ It was the issue of women's suffrage not being in the Franchise Bill in 1912 that caused the first overt rupture between Coventry's Liberal MP David Mason and his local association which would eventually lead to his de-selection.¹⁵⁸ Liberal disagreements over women's suffrage could be covered up by the Liberal Prime Minister's actions – 'the committee [of the MLF] declared itself in

¹⁵³ Penge LA, Exec., 21 March 1912.

¹⁵⁴ Leicester LA, FGP, 8 July 1913, AGM, 20 January 1914; Coventry LA, Exec., 18 September 1911, Subcommittee, 2 January 1913.

¹⁵⁵ Northern Ward LA, Exec., 14 March 1912.

¹⁵⁶ Harborough LA, Exec., 19 July 1913.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 22 November 1913.

¹⁵⁸ For Coventry Liberalism before the war, see R. A. Wright, 'Liberal Party Organisation and Politics in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton 1886-1914, with particular reference to the development of Independent Labour Representation', University of Birmingham, PhD thesis (1977), pp. 308-320.

agreement with the Prime Minister in leaving the matter to be decided by the House of Commons itself'.¹⁵⁹ Liberal strength between 1910 and 1914 often came from their united opposition to the Conservative Party and what they stood for, and on this occasion the Liberals took strength from the fact that the Conservatives similarly had divisions on the women's suffrage question.

The Darwen Women's LA passed a resolution calling for all Liberal MPs to support Dickinson's franchise Bill in 1913 as 'it is the only opportunity of securing votes for women during the present Parliament and many Liberal women will be unable to work for the Liberal Party at the next general election, unless their claim for the Parliamentary franchise has been conceded.' This was passed unanimously although 'the feeling' of the meeting was that 'it was a mistaken policy to attempt to turn the [Women's National] Federation into a huge suffrage society' as 'each association should be left to manage its own affairs'.¹⁶⁰ Darwen Liberal women had links with the Darwen Suffrage Society and if they spoke negatively of the Party this would not do the Liberals' local prospects any good.

Nonetheless, the Darwen Men's Association were only interested in 'one vote, one value' and 'one man, one vote'.¹⁶¹ Similarly, the LCNWLF voted against discussing a resolution from the National Society of Women's Suffrage by 44 votes to 38. Tellingly, they passed instead a resolution 'giving effect to the principle of one man one vote, securing a just redistribution of seats, and providing for a system of Voting in order of preference or Second Ballot'.¹⁶² Conversely, the Walthamstow LA passed a resolution in favour of women being included in the suffrage bill, with 91 votes in its favour and 40 against.¹⁶³ Likewise, the Blackpool LA expressed the view that 'this meeting is of the opinion that no revision of the Parliamentary franchise can be considered satisfactory that does not include some means of enfranchisement for women.' This was passed by a 'large majority', so clearly not all were in favour, but no voting figures were given.¹⁶⁴ Their support for suffrage suggests that the tactic of letting letters 'lie on the table' may not always suggest disagreement with proposals, but was a way of avoiding conflict.¹⁶⁵ In a similar way, the Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women's LA did 'not feel willing to take a share in the expenses of any meeting to forward women's suffrage: feeling that if ladies here need educating, they can go to one of the

¹⁵⁹ MLF, Exec., 27 November 1911.

¹⁶⁰ Darwen Women's LA, General Committee, 29 April 1913.

¹⁶¹ Darwen LA, AGM, 1 March 1913.

¹⁶² LCNWLF, AGM, 17 May 1912.

¹⁶³ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 14 October 1912.

¹⁶⁴ Blackpool LA, AGM, 24 February 1912.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., Exec., 10 March 1914.

numerous suffrage meetings in the city and that until the militant tactics cease we will have nothing whatever to do with the suffrage question'.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, when the Women's Liberal Federation asked them to hold meetings in support of women's suffrage, they voted unanimously to withdraw from the federation and instead affiliate with 'the National' [presumably Liberal Federation] 'whose objects were not so severe'.¹⁶⁷ In Manchester, it was recorded that they had passed a resolution in favour of women's suffrage in June 1910 and so did not want to receive either supporters or opponents of women's suffrage to their meetings.¹⁶⁸ Even so, a letter was read from a subscriber stating he would withdraw his subscription if the Federation 'took any further part for or against women's suffrage'.¹⁶⁹ This suggests that whether the Liberals supported or opposed women's suffrage some element of its electoral constituency and grass-roots activists would be dissatisfied.

Overall, it seems that the vast majority of Liberals were able to accept the Liberal programme as it stood on the outbreak of war, despite divergent views on the issue of women's suffrage. Undoubtedly, the Liberalism of some members was challenged (to variable extents) because the Liberal Party did not support women's suffrage. However, a substantial number of Liberals and Liberal Associations did not want women's suffrage. Once the local party had a position, there is no instance in these years of them converting to the opposite view. Luckily for the party, this issue was, for the majority of the electorate, not the most salient issue in politics (except to those activists in the different suffrage groups, a not inconsiderable number) and it divided the Conservative Party as well so it was not possible for a split like that over Home Rule in 1886 to occur. Similarly, it is fortunate for the Liberals that the Labour Party was not in a position to challenge them nationally, as it is likely that more Liberal activists would have joined Labour because of their support for women's suffrage. The mixture of the New Liberalism and the more traditional issues were a broad enough church to keep all but the most pro-or anti-women's suffragists within the party.¹⁷⁰ The prospective Liberal candidate in his speech included all the above traditional and New Liberal issues, including that of women's suffrage. Although no figures were given, it was recorded that 'a good percentage [of wards] were able to report that many new members were being enrolled' suggesting that the mixture of new and old Liberalism was compatible.

¹⁶⁶ Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women's LA, Special CM, 30 November 1912.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., CM, 6 February 1913.

¹⁶⁸ Manchester LF, Exec., 31 August 1911.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 4 January 1912.

¹⁷⁰ Walthamstow LA, Special Exec., 17 October 1913, Exec., 7 November 1913.

V) The Challenge from Labour

The historiography of this period is dominated by the many publications focused on the debate about whether the Liberal Party was going to be replaced by the Labour Party. Most of the historiography has suggested that the Liberal Party was in real danger of being superseded by the Labour Party before the First World War.¹⁷¹ Pelling sums up the crux of that argument as ‘it was the result of long-term social and economic changes which were simultaneously uniting Britain geographically and dividing her inhabitants in terms of class’.¹⁷² However, Clarke suggested that if the political battle did centre around class by 1910, then the Liberal Party, via the New Liberalism, was in a position to be successful ‘if not to the degree of 1906, at least at a level markedly above that of the Gladstonian party’.¹⁷³ Moreover, Clarke suggests that ‘at the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century it looked as though both Labour and Liberalism would be subsumed in progressivism’.¹⁷⁴ This thesis will assess this claim from the Liberal point of view in the selected regional case studies. Also, given the importance of municipal contests in the pre-war rise of Labour and decline of Liberalism debate,¹⁷⁵ the results of the municipal elections in the designated constituencies will be assessed in order to take a broad and deep judgment of the merits of the debates.

The by-elections which occurred in two of the selected constituency case-studies in the Midlands provide the clearest evidence that Liberalism was not inevitably destined to be superseded by Labour. The Leicester (June 1913) and Chesterfield (August 1913) by-

¹⁷¹ Dangerfield, *Strange Death of Liberal England*; Pelling, ‘Labour and the downfall of Liberalism’, pp. 101-20; McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*; See D. Powell, ‘The New Liberalism and the rise of Labour, 1886-1906’, *Historical Journal*, 29, no. 2 (1986), pp. 369-93 for a negative view of the impact of the New Liberalism. Also see M. Petter, ‘The Progressive Alliance’, *History*, 58, no. 192 (1973), pp. 45-59, and McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. 87, for the view that a Liberal/Labour Pact in 1914/15 was unlikely.

¹⁷² Pelling, ‘Labour and the downfall of Liberalism’, p. 120.

¹⁷³ Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

¹⁷⁵ G. L. Bernstein, ‘Liberalism and the Progressive Alliance in the constituencies, 1900-1914: three case-studies’, *Historical Journal*, 26 (1983), pp. 617-40. Bernstein argues that whilst at a Parliamentary level the main division was between Liberals and Unionists, at the municipal level the differences between Liberals and Unionists were less fundamental. He argues that this was important because this suggests that the working-class were dissatisfied with the Liberals and New Liberalism and without a strong working-class base the Liberal Party faced a bleak future; C. Cook, ‘Labour and the downfall of the Liberal Party, 1906-14’, in A. Sked and C. Cook, (eds.), *Crisis and Controversy: Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor* (Basingstoke, 1976). Sheppard and Halstead, ‘Labour’s municipal election performance’, pp. 39-62; D. Tanner, ‘Elections, statistics, and the rise of the Labour Party, 1906-1931’, *Historical Journal*, 34, no. 4 (1991), pp. 893-908.

elections are well known, and narratives of both can be found elsewhere.¹⁷⁶ Contrary to the suggestion by Matthew, McKibbin and Kay, the two by-elections suggest that Liberal organisation was in good working order before the First World War and that the Liberals were capable of making demagogic appeals.¹⁷⁷ The by-elections also show the importance of the New Liberalism to the electorate. Gordon Hewart, the Liberal candidate in Leicester, spoke at length in defence of the National Insurance Act, stating it was ‘an enormous and beneficial departure in social reform in this country. It was a first attempt, but nevertheless a bold and comprehensive attempt to deal with the evils of sickness and unemployment.’ Likewise, the *Leicester Daily Mercury* used the Old Age Pensions Act to attack the Unionists.¹⁷⁸ The Liberal candidate in Chesterfield, Barnet Kenyon, dealt in his election address with the Trade Disputes Act, the Compensation Act of 1906, the Trade Boards Act, the School Children’s (Free Meals) Act, the Mines (Eight Hours) Act, the Coal Mines (Minimum Wage) Act and a health insurance act (with maternity benefit and Sanatorium benefits), before he came to the more traditional Liberal issues of Home Rule, Welsh Disestablishment and a Scottish Temperance Bill. In Leicester, Hewart also made speeches in defence of Free Trade, suggesting that the more traditional Liberalism was still an important element even in industrial constituencies, and was complimented by the New Liberal social reform agenda, rather than being replaced by it.¹⁷⁹

The makeup of the Liberal appeal in these years is important because of the genuine challenge the Liberal Party faced from the Labour Party for working-class support. The Chesterfield by-election of 1913 suggests a successful new strategy which the party could have adopted in working-class localities, of having local and representative candidates represent their division. Kenyon, who was Assistant Secretary of the Derbyshire Miner’s Association, was well-known in Chesterfield and was very proud of his working-class roots.¹⁸⁰ However, Kenyon was fortunate to be selected Liberal candidate: a split was avoided, as the alternative nominee declined to stand, and ‘practically every district’ showed a great desire ‘to avoid a split in the ranks of the Progressive forces’.¹⁸¹ Kenyon’s near miss

¹⁷⁶ For Leicester, see McKibbin., *Evolution of the Labour Party*, pp. 62-8; D. Marquand., *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1977), pp. 152-58. For Chesterfield, see McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*, pp. 56-59; R. Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics, 1906-1914* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 155-160; Petter, ‘The Progressive Alliance’, pp. 54-55.

¹⁷⁷ Matthew, McKibbin and Kay, ‘The franchise factor’, pp. 723-752.

¹⁷⁸ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 25 June 1913.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 24 June 1913.

¹⁸⁰ Chesterfield LA, AGM, 12 July 1913.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Adjourned Exec., 12 July 1913.

should be placed in the context of Liberal politics and the adoption of candidates; Gregory argued that Liberal Associations ‘remained stubbornly unwilling to adopt miner’s candidates in mining seats’.¹⁸² At the selection meeting, Miss Violet Markham asked ‘what was the commonsense of the situation as between Liberalism and Labour?’ Answering her own question, she continued: ‘There were no hard and sharp dividing lines. There were wings of Liberalism and wings of Labour. In parts of the country the wings touched, and Chesterfield was one of the places where they did touch.’¹⁸³ The Leicester and Chesterfield by-elections provided the Labour Party with a motivation to stay within the progressive alliance, the retention of which was in all probability necessary if the Liberals were going to win a general election in 1915.¹⁸⁴ The official publication of the Liberal Party, the *Liberal Magazine*, was keen on ‘co-operation’ in the constituencies between the Liberal and Labour Parties.¹⁸⁵

Dean’s study of Walsall cites the prospective Liberal candidate warning about the division between ‘a working-class man who called himself a Liberal and a working-class man who called himself a Labour Man.’¹⁸⁶ If Liberal Associations in working-class areas were more receptive to working-class Liberal representation, then perhaps in future men like Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie would have been able to get selected by the Liberal caucus. If this was possible, and the danger of three-corned contests was evident at a hypothetical 1915 general election, perhaps the Liberal Party would have continued to evolve along the lines of New Liberalism and have remained the main Progressive opposition to the Unionists. However, the evidence from the constituencies does not suggest more working-class candidates were becoming Liberal candidates, seemingly because of the financial demands that the average working and lower middle-class man could not afford.

Regardless, comment on the Hanley by-election of July 1913 suggests both the potential and difficulties of maintaining the Progressive Alliance.¹⁸⁷ A resolution from the Rugby LA ‘deplores the disastrous waste of progressive effort by the continued division of Liberal and Labour forces in the constituencies.’ The MLF Executive’s reply to this was one of ‘sympathy with the terms of the resolution’, but added that ‘any difficulty in the way of the

¹⁸² Gregory, *Miners and British Politics*, p. 26. Gregory was making the point regarding Liberal politics 1885-1908 but it is also true in Chesterfield of this period.

¹⁸³ Chesterfield LA, AGM, 12 July 1913.

¹⁸⁴ Tanner suggested that the most likely situation had the war not intervened was the continuation of the progressive alliance ‘within the existing pattern of spatially distinct “spheres of influence”’. Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 318.

¹⁸⁵ Douglas, ‘Labour in decline’, p. 122.

¹⁸⁶ K. Dean, *Town and Westminster: A Political History of Walsall* (Walsall, 1972), p. 13.

¹⁸⁷ McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*, pp. 54-56; Douglas, ‘Labour in decline, 1910-14’, pp. 114-115.

desired understanding lay rather with the Labour Party than the Liberal Party.¹⁸⁸ This suggests that while undoubtedly some sections of the Liberal Party would be able to be ‘subsumed in progressivism’, the more likely situation was general acceptance of a limited pact with Labour in the Midlands.¹⁸⁹

Undoubtedly, the relationship with the Labour Party made electoral reform a pressing concern for some Liberals. The issue of electoral reform, or more specifically, the abolition of plural voting, was a pressing issue if the language and recurrence of the issue in Liberal Party records is taken as a guide.¹⁹⁰ The abolition of Plural Voting was primarily a means of reducing the Conservative advantage, as Plural Voting disproportionately benefited the Tories. However, some interest was taken in the Alternative Vote, but this was not as universal as interest in a Plural Voting Bill. The Executive of the MLF wanted the alternative vote ‘to ensure that in contests with three or more candidates the candidate seeing a real majority of the vote should be returned.’ This particularly concerned them due to the supposed ‘unreasonable attitude taken by the Labour Party in many constituencies and the increased probability, consequent on the payment of Members[,] of three-cornered and four cornered-fights’.¹⁹¹

However, judging from municipal elections, without the alternative vote or the second ballot, Liberalism at the grass-roots seemed to conclude that the most convenient way to combat Labour was to enter into anti-Socialist pacts.¹⁹² This can be seen from the municipal elections in Walsall and Leicester:

Table 1.1: Municipal election results for Walsall, 1910-1913

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1910 ¹⁹³	6	1	5	4	0	0	1	1
1911	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0
1912	1	1	4	4	5	0	0	0
1913	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	0
Total	9	4	11	10	8	1	3	1

¹⁸⁸ MLF, Exec., 15 October 1912.

¹⁸⁹ Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 406.

¹⁹⁰ MLF, Exec., 27 November 1911 and 16 May 1912; Harborough LA, Exec., 15 March 1913; Leicester LA, Exec., 27 June 1911; Coventry LA, Exec., 2 October 1911.

¹⁹¹ MLF, Exec., 27 November 1911.

¹⁹² As party labels were not used at Chesterfield and Harborough during this period, it would not be possible to assign party affiliations.

¹⁹³ There was no agreement between the Liberal and Conservative parties this year: Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 204.

Source: *Walsall Observer*, 5 November 1910, 4 November 1911, 2 November 1912, 8 November 1913.

Table 1.2: Municipal election results for Leicester, 1910-1913

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1910	3	2	2	0	2	1	1	0
1911	4	3	1	0	4	2	1	0
1912	6	3	4	1	6	4	1	0
1913 ¹⁹⁴	5	2	2	1	2	2	2	0
Total	18	9	9	2	14	9	5	0

Source: *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 2 November 1910, 2 November 1911, 2 November 1912, 3 November 1913.

The two sets of municipal results stand in contrast to each other, and demonstrate two equally valid trends. The results for Walsall highlight that in many parts of the country it was the Conservatives, and not the Labour Party, who were the main beneficiaries of Liberal unpopularity. In contrast, Leicester highlights an area of strength for Labour at the local level. Nonetheless, its best results came in November 1912 and this was not enough to persuade the Labour Party to contest both seats at the next general election (as this would probably cost MacDonald his seat when the Liberals retaliated). Yet, and in disagreement with the arguments of Tanner,¹⁹⁵ the support for Labour in Leicester was not confined to a couple of wards; between 1911 and 1913, Labour impressively won elections in eight different wards, although it did not repeat its success in the same ward twice in these years.¹⁹⁶

The north west region is also important in the historiography of the Liberal Party, as it is one of the regions that Tanner has suggested shows that the progressive alliance between the Labour and Liberal parties was viable in 1914 and the foreseeable general election.¹⁹⁷ In Chester, both the men's and women's branches of the Trinity and St. Oswald Ward Liberal Associations decided to give their active support to the Labour candidate by canvassing for him as he was a 'through democrat'.¹⁹⁸ However, in Darwen Central Ward decided to oppose the candidate nominated by the Trades Council.¹⁹⁹ Although there were advantages to an alliance between the Liberal and Labour parties, the Liberals at the grass-roots had to be concerned about their own survival. The LCNWLF stressed 'the urgent necessity of making

¹⁹⁴ There was a Liberal/Conservative Pact in Leicester 1910-1912 but not in 1913.

¹⁹⁵ Tanner, 'Elections, statistics, and the rise of the Labour Party', p. 898.

¹⁹⁶ The wards were West Humberstone and Abbey in 1911, Belgrave, Castle, Newton and Wyggeston in 1912, and Aylstone and St. Margaret's ward in 1913.

¹⁹⁷ Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 133.

¹⁹⁸ Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women's LA, Special CM, 21 June 1912.

¹⁹⁹ Darwen LA Central Ward, CM, 11 October 1911.

provision for the alternative vote in the Parliamentary elections’ as they viewed ‘with much apprehension the increasing number of contents in which the Liberal candidate is likely to be opposed by a Labour nominee and they believe that many of the growing divergences between Liberalism and Labour would be removed by the provision of the alternative vote.’²⁰⁰ Similarly, it was recorded that the Chairman of the Manchester LF spoke to the Liberal Chief Whip, Percy Illingworth, and ‘said how difficult it was to keep the Liberal organisation together’ where there was a Labour MP. He added that with either the alternative vote or the second ballot ‘local Liberals would be satisfied as they would then have the possibility of testing the strength of the Liberal Party in the division without any likelihood of the seat being’ lost. One element of future danger for the Liberals was that it was felt that after the retirement of certain MPs, such as Sir Charles Schwann in Manchester North, Labour might come forward and contest the seat.²⁰¹ However, some Liberals were also pushing to contest Labour seats, as was the case in Manchester East.²⁰²

VI) The health of the Liberal Party on the eve of the Great War

The organisation and activity of Liberalism at the grass-roots in the Home Counties during this period seems to have been steady and consistent, if not spectacular. Registration work, so important in the pre-1918 electoral system, was undertaken seriously²⁰³ - but not always enthusiastically.²⁰⁴ There were instances of the party faithful being praised for ‘quietly and unselfishly’ carrying out registration and canvassing work.²⁰⁵ In addition, it seems that in the years immediately preceding the war, some of the deficiencies in organisation in the Home Counties were being addressed.²⁰⁶ The number of subscribers in Penge went up from 66 in 1912, to 68 in 1913 and to 87 in 1914.²⁰⁷ Likewise, financial deficiencies were being

²⁰⁰ LCNWLF, Exec., 10 September 1912.

²⁰¹ Manchester LF, Exec., 25 July 1912.

²⁰² Ibid., General Committee, 6 March 1914.

²⁰³ For example see Southend LA, Exec., 8 May 1911; Beckenham LA, CM, 17 October 1911; Penge LA, Exec., 19 September 1913.

²⁰⁴ Penge LA, Exec., 17 October 1911; Southend LA, Exec., 8 May 1913.

²⁰⁵ Beckenham LA, AGM, 17 January 1913.

²⁰⁶ Southend LA, Exec., 8 January 1912. Prior to this it seems there were not Liberal committees in all eight wards.

²⁰⁷ Penge LA, AGM, 7 April 1915. For a similar increase in membership, see Alexandra Kent House and Lawrie Park Wards, AGM, 1 February 1912.

addressed: the Southend Liberals held a successful bazaar that raised £150, and this enabled them to send a cheque of £100 to the South-East Essex LA (of which the Southend Liberals were a part) to liquidate their bank overdraft.²⁰⁸

However, although it is fair to say that the Liberal position in the Home Counties did not fall back during these years, it must also be pointed out that they were not about to take the Unionist Party by surprise in this region. The Liberal Party did not contest the by-election in South-East Essex in 1912 because of ‘shortness of time’ (i.e., the organisation was not ready for an election) and the questionable excuse that ‘the fact that the coal strike was imperilling the whole of our industries, made it undesirable to put the constituency to the trouble and turmoil of a contest at the present time.’²⁰⁹ Likewise, the results from the municipal elections in the region, where they occurred in the selected case studies,²¹⁰ agree with Cook’s argument that the ‘most constant feature ... was the strength of Conservatism’²¹¹ and of the ‘nuisance value’ of Labour candidates.²¹²

Table 1.3: Municipal election results for Walthamstow, 1910-1913²¹³

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1910	9	6	6	3	4	0	4	0
1911	5	1	4	3	1	0	0	0
1913	8	2	7	7	2	0	2	0
Total	22	9	17	13	7	0	6	0

Source: *Walthamstow Guardian*, 8 April 1910, 31 March 1911 and 11 April 1913.

The municipal elections results for Walthamstow show two particularly striking features of the pre-war period. Firstly, the Conservative Party was often the most successful in local elections, with the Liberals comfortably in second place but a significant way behind the Tories. Secondly, the Labour Party did contest municipal elections, suggesting growing organisation but, in most of the country, it failed to break the Conservative-Liberal duopoly. Yet, it must be pointed out that the contests for the Liberals and Conservatives were under the banner of ‘Progressive’ and ‘Moderate’, respectively and although the results reflect a wider trend, the context of London politics being fought under those labels should be recognised.

²⁰⁸ Southend LA, Exec., 10 November 1913.

²⁰⁹ *Southend Standard*, 14 March 1912.

²¹⁰ The Bromley, Faversham and Southend municipal elections appear to have been fought on non-party lines.

²¹¹ Cook, ‘Labour and the downfall of the Liberal Party’, p. 63.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²¹³ The election results in 1912 were not recorded on party political lines.

As well as an insight into the Liberal mind, the source material allows an appreciation of the middle-class culture of Liberalism in the Home Counties at the end of the Edwardian period. The game of cricket was played by some of the Liberal Associations, such as in Beckenham and the St. James Street and Northern Wards in Walthamstow.²¹⁴ It would also be true to say that the culture was patriotic in relation to the British empire and the monarchy: the Beckenham association held a social evening which ended with the song ‘God Save the King’, and the constituency Liberal Club organised the first political Bazaar in the area on the theme of the British colonies where the ‘various stalls were named after our over-seas possessions’.²¹⁵ This shows that King and Empire were not an exclusively Conservative domain. Social events were common, and they often had musical performances.²¹⁶ In Walthamstow, the Northern Ward even had their own brass band as well as a slate club, a tennis club and a bowling club.²¹⁷ It is also noteworthy that a clergyman was asked to speak at a social gathering, suggesting that there remained a link between religion and politics in this period.²¹⁸ There is also evidence of gender division, with separate events for men and women Liberals,²¹⁹ and that the women often organised the socials as well as serving tea at the men’s AGM.²²⁰ However, along with the rest of British society, there is evidence that women’s roles were increasing even before the outbreak of war; the Walthamstow LA agreed to give the Higham Park Women’s LA the right to send delegates to the constituency executive committee.²²¹

There was certainly an important social aspect to the proceedings of some Liberal associations. The Greyfriars Ward association in Coventry ended their AGM in 1912 with a musical programme.²²² Furthermore, the ward chairman invited committee members to his house, and they ‘had a pleasant and enjoyable evening at Bowls’, after which, on the suggestion of the Chairman they ‘finished the evening off at the Hippodrome.’²²³ This sociability can be placed in a long tradition of male homosociality that McCarthy suggests

²¹⁴ *Beckenham Journal*, 21 February 1914; Northern Ward LA, Exec., 9 May 1912.

²¹⁵ Beckenham LA, Social programme in-between AGM, 12 January 1912 and CM, 9 February 1912; *Beckenham Journal*, 7 March 1914.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* Also see Walthamstow LA, Exec., 20 October 1911.

²¹⁷ *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 7 April 1911.

²¹⁸ Penge LA, Exec., 4 November 1912.

²¹⁹ Alexandra Kent House and Lawrie Park Wards, CM, 2 October 1913.

²²⁰ Penge LA, Exec., 4 November 1912.

²²¹ Walthamstow LA, AGM, 27 January 1911.

²²² Greyfriars Ward LA, AGM, 26 April 1912.

²²³ *Ibid.*, CM, 8 June 1914.

dates back as at least as far as the eighteenth century coffeehouse.²²⁴ In a similar way, meetings of the Chesterfield Women’s LA occasionally closed with ‘afternoon tea’.²²⁵ It also noteworthy that there is evidence that the Chesterfield Women’s LA gave women their first chance at public speaking.²²⁶ It seems that through the medium of women’s political associations, political parties were ahead of their contemporaries in facilitating and indeed encouraging the involvement of women in public life.²²⁷

A glimpse into the social structure of late Edwardian society comes across in the source material. In Blackpool, the female Liberals provided and dispensed the tea at the AGM.²²⁸ Similarly, women in the party were valued, not for their intellectual ability but for their ability to host picnics, whist drives and socials.²²⁹ The Darwen Women’s LA planned a ‘children’s Ball’, perhaps suggesting that the political events and socials were not always overtly political (like those of the Primrose League events), and a ‘presentation’ was given to one of the members of the Darwen LA upon her marriage.²³⁰

The parliamentary by-elections and municipal elections in the north-west provide more quantifiable evidence of Liberal Party fortunes in these years. The lack of success in the Kendal by-election in March 1913 clearly suggests that the Liberals were not about to win another landslide of the scale of 1906, but as they had only held the seat once (in 1906) since the 1884 Reform Act, it was not a constituency that the Liberals needed to win in order to remain in government.²³¹ The by-election defeat in Manchester South was a more disappointing result, but was attributed to ‘the present unpopularity of the Insurance Act’ so it might be more appropriate to classify this as an example of mid-term unpopularity for the Liberals rather than evidence of terminal decline.²³² Such an interpretation is supported from the municipal election results for Chester, Darwen and Manchester in these years:

Table 1.4: Municipal election results for Chester, 1911-1913²³³

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won

²²⁴ H. McCarthy, ‘Service clubs, citizenship and equality: gender relations and middle-class associations in Britain between the wars’, *Historical Research*, 81, no. 213 (2008), p. 535.

²²⁵ Chesterfield Women’s LA, CM, 13 November 1913.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 December 1913.

²²⁷ McCarthy., ‘Service clubs, citizenship and equality’, p. 538.

²²⁸ Blackpool LA, AGM, 25 February 1911.

²²⁹ Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women’s LA, Secretary’s Report for 1911, found 5 February 1912.

²³⁰ Darwen Women’s LA, General Committee, 16 September 1913.

²³¹ *Westmoreland Gazette*, 15 March and 22 March 1913.

²³² Manchester LF, Exec., 15 March 1912.

²³³ It seems that there were no contested municipal elections in 1910.

1911	5	4	3	3	0	0	4	1
1912	3	2	6	4	0	0	1	0
1913	1	1	4	2	1	1	0	0
Total	9	7	13	9	1	1	5	1

Source: *Manchester Guardian*, 2 November 1911, 2 November 1912; *Cheshire Observer*, 8 November 1913.

Table 1.5: Municipal election results for Darwen, 1910-1913²³⁴

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1910	1	1	3	2	2	0	0	0
1912	2	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
1913	3	2	4	2	1	0	0	0
Total	6	4	8	5	3	0	1	0

Source: *Darwen News*, 2 November 1910, 2 November 1912, 8 November 1913. For 1911, see *Manchester Guardian*, 2 November 1911.

Table 1.6: Municipal election results for Manchester, 1910-1913

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1910	16	6	19	12	10	6	7	0
1911	16	10	25	11	12	6	8	1
1912	12	2	15	14	4	2	6	0
1913	12	6	17	9	8	4	4	1
Total	56	24	76	46	34	18	25	2

Source: *Manchester Guardian*, 2 November 1910, 2 November 1911, 2 November 1912, 3 November 1913.

Overall, these municipal election results show that the Liberal Party was still an active and relatively successful force at the municipal level. However, there are warning signs. Taking the Liberal and Labour Parties as separate entities, only in one locality in one year (Darwen in 1912) did the Liberal Party contest more seats than the Conservatives. Cook has argued that ‘a major contributing factor to the eventual fall of the Liberal Party was its failure to produce a constructive municipal policy’, adding that ‘in local politics, the Liberal Party had no *raison d’etre*’.²³⁵ Liberals failing to put forward the same number of candidates as both of its rivals could support this view. After poor results in 1912, the President of the Blackpool LA felt that ‘as a party, we should have a distinct policy to place before the

²³⁴ There were no contests in 1911, but the Secretary of the Weaver’s Union was returned unopposed by the Liberals who had previously held Central Ward.

²³⁵ Cook, ‘Labour and the downfall of the Liberal Party’, p. 62.

Ratepayers'. Others lamented 'a wave of anti-Liberalism throughout the town', 'lavish expenditure of money [by the Conservatives]', the 'lack of support from the local Liberal paper,' and the suggestion that one Liberal candidate 'was an avowed Socialist'.²³⁶

As can be seen, the municipal election results for Blackpool also provide evidence for Cook's argument that Liberal decline was not the primary feature of local elections, but rather it was the consistent strength of Conservatism.²³⁷

Table 1.7 Municipal election results for Blackpool, 1910-1913

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1910	2	0	4	4	0	0	0	0
1911	8	6	7	4	0	0	4	0
1912	5	2	10	8	0	0	5	2
1913	3	1	7	7	0	0	3	0
Total	18	9	28	23	0	0	12	2

Source: *Manchester Guardian*, 2 November 1910, 2 November 1911, 2 November 1912, 3 November 1913.

It was noted by the Blackpool LA in 1913 that 'in future Liberals [should] contest seats as Liberals not as "Independents" or "Progressives"', suggesting that previously there was a lack of faith in the Liberal label in this traditionally Tory area (the constituency, created in 1885, had never elected a Liberal).²³⁸ However, in Blackpool the Liberal Party was clearly able to get councillors elected and across the North West they were a prime player in municipal elections. Whilst these may suggest that the Liberal Party was not headed for an overwhelming and guaranteed victory in the next general election, they certainly do not foreshadow that the Labour Party would form a government after 10 years. Contrary to the above evidence about the potential of the new and old Liberalism working in tandem, if the Liberal and Labour Parties did not work in harness at the constituency level, the municipal election results suggest that the Conservative Party would have won a working majority in a hypothetical 1915 general election.

When one asks what was the health at the Liberal Party on the outbreak of war in 1914, in many ways the question is how robust was the Liberal mind? In the last analysis,

²³⁶ Blackpool LA, Exec., 18 November 1912.

²³⁷ Cook, 'Labour and the downfall of the Liberal Party', p. 63.

²³⁸ Blackpool LA, Exec., 18 November 1913.

Liberalism was an evolving body of thought that had successfully encapsulated social and economic issues alongside issues of Home Rule and Welsh Disestablishment from Blackpool and Southend to Darwen and Harborough. In no way did the New Liberalism replace the old, nor would it have been able to as long as those issues were still unresolved. Yet, they were complimentary and any Liberal dissent to specific measures proves the general rule that the Liberals in the constituencies accepted the way Liberalism was evolving. The Land Campaign was generally well received by the Liberals at the grass-roots and it seems likely that, as part of a Progressive Alliance, the Land Campaign would provide the narrow margins of victory against the traditional enemy, the Unionist Party. The lack of comment on the Budget of 1914 at the grass-roots of the Liberal Party suggests that they were, on the whole, accepting of financial policy under Lloyd George.²³⁹

The evidence from the Home Counties, the Midlands and the North West clearly shows that the party was divided over the issue of women's suffrage. Undoubtedly, the Liberalism of some members was challenged (to variable extents) because the Liberal Party did not support women's suffrage. However, a substantial number of Liberals and Liberal Associations did not want women's suffrage. Once the local party had a position, there is no instance in these years of them converting to the opposite view. Luckily for the party, this issue was, for the majority of the electorate, not the most salient issue in politics (except to those activists in the different suffrage groups, a not inconsiderable number) and it divided the Conservative Party as well so it was not possible for a split like that over Home Rule in 1886 to occur. Similarly, it is fortunate for the Liberals that the Labour Party was not in a position to challenge them nationally, as it is likely that more Liberal activists would have joined Labour because of their support for women's suffrage.

As mentioned previously, Home Rule was on the Liberal mind in the years before the First World War. It was clearly an issue that the Liberals cared about at the grass-roots based on the resolutions passed and meetings held. The actions of the Conservative Party angered the Liberals and the grass-roots were increasingly against compromise over Home Rule. Home Rule is the most obvious example of how nineteenth century Liberalism was still an important component of Liberalism at the grass-roots in the late Edwardian period. Home Rule remains evidence for the vitality of the Liberal Party on the outbreak of war.

²³⁹ This would contest the argument made by Murray, 'Lloyd George and the 1914 Budget fiasco', p. 487, that the Liberal government was tired and losing control of the Party, and supports Packer's refutation: Packer, 'The Liberal Cave and the 1914 Budget', pp. 620-635.

Tanner's statement that at the municipal level before 1914 the Labour Party struggled to expand outside of strongholds and that 'statistical fallacies have helped to perpetuate the historical myth of an inevitable onward march of Labour' has been a striking feature of the examination of municipal election results 1910-1913 from the three regions.²⁴⁰ In comparison, the Liberals results fluctuated by locality and year by year. The most noticeable feature of the municipal election results across all three regions is further empirical evidence for Cook's argument that Conservatism 'had rarely been stronger in the councils of the land, or indeed more poised for success in a forthcoming general election.'²⁴¹

However, the general consensus of the historiography is that a hypothetical 1915 general election would have most likely been fought by the Liberal and Labour parties working in tandem, and this 'progressive alliance' would have been enough to prevent a Conservative victory. From the Liberal perspective in the three regions, how likely was it that the grass-roots of the Liberal Party would accept giving up (or continually leaving) certain seats to Labour? The actions of Trinity and St. Oswald ward LA supporting a Labour candidate at the municipal level (in the North West), and the resolution of the Rugby LA deploring the division of Liberal and Labour (in the Midlands), shows that some Liberal opinion was in favour of co-operation with the Labour Party. It is likely co-operation with the Labour Party would have had more widespread support from the grass-roots if it was pursued nationally by the Liberal leadership and along Liberal lines (meaning under the direction of a predominately Liberal government). The Liberal enthusiasm for the alternative vote or the second ballot, clamoured for in all three regions, would have aided the party, whether it was in an alliance with Labour in the constituencies or with the Conservatives at the municipal level (or, indeed, with Labour at the local level).

Yet, and crucially, the alternative vote or the second ballot would also help the Liberal Party if it had to face three or four-corned contests with no pacts. Electoral reform was not merely a method of ensuring that the progressive alliance would work, it could also be used as the mechanism to ensure that the Liberal Party not only survived but remained a party of government. The alliance of the old and New Liberalism would be likely to capture more voters than Conservatism or Socialism in these years. Of course, a 1915 general election cannot be computed to prove this one way or the other. However, an examination of each

²⁴⁰ Tanner, 'Elections, statistics, and the rise of the Labour Party, 1906-1931', p. 904. The only exception to this in the case studies was in Leicester, where Labour won a variety of wards but was unable to repeat their success in those wards.

²⁴¹ Cook, 'Labour and the downfall of the Liberal Party', p. 63.

political party can lead to educated suggestions about the likely course of events. Judging from the Liberal Party, the combination of the new and old Liberalism was complementary and it worked. Clarke goes too far if he suggests that it was New Liberalism alone that would win the north-west to the Liberals, for there, as in the Home Counties and the Midlands, the issues of Free Trade, Welsh Disestablishment and especially Home Rule were important to Liberals at the grass-roots, judging by how often resolutions were passed and how many meetings they held on those issues. To a fair extent, politics in the Home Counties, the Midlands and the north-west had developed along class lines before 1914 partly because the Liberal Party campaigned enthusiastically on social and economic issues. However, without electoral reform and lacking a progressive alliance with the Labour Party, the Liberals might have lost the general election. Even so, and in the worst case scenario, a defeated Liberal Party would still easily have been the second largest political party in Great Britain, with only a rump of Labour MPs left in Parliament. If Labour and the Liberals remained apart after a defeat, the third party trap would eventually lead some Labour voters to vote Liberal as the only way to remove the Unionists from power.²⁴² The evidence from the three regions under examination is that in 1914 the Liberal Party's position was no worse than in January and December 1910, that Liberalism was evolving along New Liberal lines whilst retaining key old Liberal appeals, and that there is no real evidence that the Liberal Party was either to be replaced by the Labour Party or to implode whilst in government (as had the Unionists as a result of Tariff Reform in 1903). This inevitably raises another question: how important was the First World War in shaping the political fortunes of the Liberal Party?

²⁴² Labour's Arthur Henderson feared anti-Tory voters might plump for the Liberals: Wrigley, *Henderson*, p. 60.

Chapter 2

The impact of the Great War and the coming of conscription, 1914-1916

The stronger the argument for the Liberal Party being in a reasonably healthy condition before the First World War, the more responsibility must be placed on the war and its consequences for the subsequent problems that the party encountered.²⁴³ The original interpretation that put most emphasis on the war was Wilson's *The Downfall of the Liberal Party*, which took into account the pre-war challenges the Liberal Party had faced:

The Liberal Party can be compared to an individual who, after a period of robust health and great exertion, experienced symptoms of illness (Ireland, Labour unrest, the suffragettes). Before a thorough diagnosis could be made, he was involved in an encounter with a rampant omnibus (the First World War), which mounted the pavement and ran him over. After lingering painfully, he expired.²⁴⁴

This school of thought views the war as an externality that acted as a driver for political, social and economic change. Wilson focuses on the war creating a new context where the leadership of the Liberal Party was divided by Lloyd George seizing the Premiership in December 1916, and Asquith and other significant Liberals leaving the Cabinet. The political changes arising from the war are cited as providing the Labour Party with the opportunity to establish its credibility as a reforming party.²⁴⁵ This chapter will examine the local level before the December 1916 crisis to see whether there is any evidence that the First World War changed the nature of the activities undertaken by Liberal Associations. The formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 will also be examined to determine whether the rank and file were perturbed by the increased possibility of illiberal measures being enacted with the inclusion of Conservatives in the government.

²⁴³Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 394.

²⁴⁴Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, p. 20.

²⁴⁵Tanner, *Political Change*, pp. 351, 365-372.

D) The political truce: reducing differences between Liberals and Conservatives?

White has suggested that it was not the war, but ‘the *political response to the war* that was decisive’ for the Liberal Party’s problems.²⁴⁶ Consequently, the thesis will explore Liberal reactions to the outbreak of war and other significant events during the First World War. Ball has argued that the First World War ‘transformed the fortunes of all four parties’,²⁴⁷ and Scally’s point that ‘the traditional political alignment was breaking down during the war’ helps to explain the context in which a transformation could come about.²⁴⁸ What is missing from the historiography is a detailed examination of this process at the base level of the Liberal Party.

It seems that, on the whole, grass-roots Liberalism supported the Liberal government’s decision to go to war in August 1914. This support was secured as it was generally considered ‘imperative Belgian neutrality be maintained’, and this made it undoubtedly easier for associations to provide their ‘unqualified and wholehearted support.’²⁴⁹ This agreement with the Cabinet’s decision to declare war was ostensibly secured because it was a moral issue, not an issue of *realpolitik*.²⁵⁰ Whether the balance of power in Europe and the promise of British support for France swayed the grass-roots was not recorded.

On the outbreak of war, the LCNWLF agreed with a circular from the National Liberal Federation that all party propaganda for the present should cease. As ‘active operations had commenced’, the Land and Housing Council meetings had to be abandoned.²⁵¹ Similarly, the South Westmorland’s Women’s LA decided to suspend political meetings for the duration of the war.²⁵² At national level, the Women’s Liberal Federation advised that ‘on account of the grave national emergency’ that Women’s Associations ‘discontinue for the present all party political work and hold themselves ready to help

²⁴⁶J. White, ‘Review article: a panegyric on Edwardian progressivism’, *Journal of British Studies*, 16, no. 2 (1977), p. 151. Italics in the original.

²⁴⁷ S. Ball, ‘1916-1929’ in A. Seldon (ed.), *How Tory Governments Fall: The Tory Party in Power since 1783* (London, 1996), p. 231.

²⁴⁸ R. J. Scally, *The Origins of the Lloyd George Coalition: The Politics of Social-Imperialism, 1900-1918* (Princeton, 1975), p. 291.

²⁴⁹ Leicester LA, Special Exec., 26 October 1914.

²⁵⁰ D. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 57. Dutton suggests this was the case for most Liberal MPs, but the evidence suggests it was similar for the Liberals in the constituencies also.

²⁵¹ LCNWLF, Exec., 11 August 1914.

²⁵² South Westmorland Women’s LA, General Committee, 24 August 1914.

whatever is being done in their districts to alleviate distress and to minimise the effects of the war.’ It was noted that ‘one or two’ of the women were already on the local committee that was being set up, and ‘all of the others expressed their willingness to help when occasion should arise.’²⁵³ These actions by the Women’s Liberal Federation and the local Associations were independent initiatives, and were not the consequence of an agreement with the Conservatives.²⁵⁴

There is compelling evidence to show that grass-roots Liberalism was involved in the national war effort. The Trinity and St. Oswald Women’s Liberal ward association planned to meet every Thursday in the Liberal Club to ‘knit comforts for the soldiers’.²⁵⁵ There was no mention how long this continued but in November 1916 six Liberal women promised to knit socks for the soldiers at the front.²⁵⁶ It has been suggested that knitting by women in Britain during the early stage of the war was ‘a mark of women’s solidarity with their nation and their willingness to participate in the war effort’ and it is clear that Liberal women showed their unity with the realm too.²⁵⁷ Ward also interprets that it was ‘a social as well as a national activity’ and that it never stepped outside what was ‘normally expected or socially acceptable’.²⁵⁸ The Tebay LA held a whist drive with all profit to go to the men from Tebay who were serving ‘with the colours’.²⁵⁹ They also suggested another whist drive and a ‘gents and ladies’ dance in 1916.²⁶⁰ However, after the AGM in February 1916 there is no recorded meeting in this minute book until December 1928, which raises the question of whether the war encouraged ward organisation to fall into disrepair, if there were not regular meetings and a partisan Liberal purpose.²⁶¹

There is evidence that Liberal Associations actively helped the recruitment of soldiers. Within the first month of the War, the Walthamstow LA received ‘a circular letter from the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee’ notifying them that recruiting meetings had been set up by the agents of Liberal and Conservative Parties.²⁶² This suggests that grass-roots organisations may not have initially organised such meetings. At the next meeting of

²⁵³ Darwen Women’s LA, General Committee, 20 August 1914.

²⁵⁴ The Conservatives also independently made similar resolutions for similar reasons.

²⁵⁵ Trinity and St. Oswald’s Ward Women’s LA, CM, 28 September 1914.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7 November 1914.

²⁵⁷ P. Ward, ‘“Women of Britain Say Go” women’s patriotism in the First World War’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 12, no. 1 (2001), p. 31.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

²⁵⁹ Tebay LA, CM, 18 December 1914.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1916.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, AGM, 19 February 1916, CM, 19 December 1928.

²⁶² Walthamstow LA, Exec., 4 September 1914.

the Executive, they were asked by an individual (presumably on behalf of the agents) to provide speakers for the recruiting meetings.²⁶³ Liberals also arranged for recruitment posters and literature.²⁶⁴ Co-operation between the Liberals and Conservatives was discussed in Beckenham at around the same time and for the same ends. Recruiting meetings up to the end of January 1915 had cost the Manchester LF £25, and they hoped this cost would be paid for by subscriptions.²⁶⁵ However, by March 1915 it seems that the expenditure was met by transferring £500 from the 'special fund' and classifying this income under 'special donations.'²⁶⁶

In Walthamstow, the composition of the Parliamentary recruiting committee was recorded, consisting of the candidates, chairmen, and the Secretaries and agents of the Liberal and Unionist organisations, and a similar pattern was repeated all over the country.²⁶⁷ Based on Douglas's research on the organisation of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee at Westminster this is what one would expect to find.²⁶⁸ What is more, Liberals were certainly not passive in the recruitment process, one member suggesting that 'a better way of procuring recruits in Walthamstow Division would be regular marches through the district with military bands by one or two battalions of Kitcheners [sic] new army.'²⁶⁹ Douglas's research cites how the military pageant of the Lord Mayor's show seemed to have simulated recruitment and it appears that the member of the Walthamstow Liberal recognised the same tool to encourage recruitment.²⁷⁰ Liberals were also involved in Lord Derby's recruitment campaign which will be discussed later.²⁷¹ The all-party co-operation in recruitment undoubtedly made it easier for the Walthamstow LA to 'not see any reason for interfering with local elections'.²⁷² In Lancashire and Cheshire, five Liberal agents were serving in the Army by July 1916, demonstrating that Liberal agents not only sought recruits but in some instances joined the army themselves.²⁷³ This support can be seen in the patriotism of Liberals in the

²⁶³ Ibid., 2 October 1914; Manchester LF, Exec., 9 September 1914; LCNWLF, Exec., 9 October 1914.

²⁶⁴ MLF, Exec., 14 December 1914.

²⁶⁵ Manchester LF, Exec., 27 January 1915.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 10 March 1915.

²⁶⁷ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 2 October 1914. For the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, see J. M. Osborne, *The Voluntary Recruitment Movement in Britain, 1914-1916* (New York, 1982), pp. 34-41.

²⁶⁸ R. Douglas, 'Voluntary enlistment in the First World War and the work of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee', *Journal of Modern History*, 42, no. 4 (1970), pp. 564-585.

²⁶⁹ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 4 December 1914.

²⁷⁰ Douglas, 'Voluntary enlistment', p. 570.

²⁷¹ Beckenham LA, AGM, 4 February 1916; LCNWLF, Exec., 14 December 1915.

²⁷² Walthamstow LA, Exec., 7 May 1915.

²⁷³ *The Liberal Agent*, Vol. 19, no. 85, July 1916.

Midlands in these war years, where two members of the Executive of the MLF volunteered for service in the opening months of the War, and another member had joined the Navy.²⁷⁴

The Liberal regional bodies were also involved in organising ‘Munitions meetings’ at places of work under the auspices of the Munitions Parliamentary Committee.²⁷⁵ By December 1915, it was recorded that ‘nearly one hundred’ munitions meetings had been held in the North-West area and surrounding districts.²⁷⁶ The Manchester LF agreed to circulate copies of a summary of Lord Bryce’s report on the conduct of the German military authorities in Belgium and pamphlets dealing with the causes that had led to the war.²⁷⁷ The evidence from the Liberal Party in the constituencies supports the argument made by Simkins in his study of the recruitment of the New Armies that in the first two years of the war British society was remarkably unified.²⁷⁸

A study of the Conservative auxiliary voluntary organisation, the Primrose League, has pointed out that like other voluntary organisations, the League focused on charitable efforts related to the war effort, namely the Red Cross, the Prince of Wales Fund, the Belgian Relief Fund, Queen Mary’s Needlework Fund, and the appeals for warm clothing for men in the army and navy.²⁷⁹ Pugh also argued that the Primrose League and its freedom of ‘patriotic speech’ could keep alive political ideals central to the Conservatives and that Labour could defend the condition of the working classes, but ‘significantly, the Liberals alone had no such outlet, morally or organizationally ... and hence the steady disintegration of their party’.²⁸⁰ No study to date has seriously challenged Pugh’s claim, and the examination here of Liberal Party’s organisational records in the constituencies provides the appropriate starting point to examine this significant argument. In a similar way, Pugh made the claim that the agents of the three parties had cynical political and financial motives for being involved in the parliamentary recruitment campaign and war effort. He argued that it was an ‘amply authenticated fact’ that during the first few months of the war ‘each party continued to work on the assumption that a dissolution of Parliament was more or less imminent, even though to say so openly was bad form’.²⁸¹ Any evidence of the ‘amply authenticated fact’ is appropriate as Liberal constituency minute books were not cited in his work.

²⁷⁴ MLF, Exec., 8 October 1914.

²⁷⁵ LCNWLF, Exec., 5 October 1915.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 14 December 1915.

²⁷⁷ Manchester LF, Exec., 7 July 1915.

²⁷⁸ P. Simkins, *Kitchener’s Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16* (Manchester, 1988), pp. xv-xvi and Part I of his study.

²⁷⁹ M. Pugh, *The Tories and the People: 1880-1935* (Oxford, 1985), p. 175.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 176.

²⁸¹ Martin Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace, 1906-18* (London, 1978), p. 49.

The evidence shows that the Liberals realised the importance of being associated with the war effort in other ways. The Executive of the MLF wanted to put the Liberal agent ‘at the disposal of the various committees for public work’. At a meeting of the Executive, reports were given on recruiting in their respective districts ‘and the importance of seeing that Liberals were adequately represented on the various relief committees was specially emphasised’.²⁸² These non-partisan activities would have been conducted alongside and often with the Unionist and, to a lesser extent, Labour parties. However, there is no evidence to suggest that this would have had any noticeable long-lasting effect on the fortunes of the Liberals.

Charity work, such as raising money for the Belgian Relief Fund, was also undertaken, particularly by Liberal women.²⁸³ The Trinity and St. Oswald’s Women’s Liberal Ward Association held whist drives and sales of work to raise money for war charities as well.²⁸⁴ The South Westmoreland Women’s LA sent £10 to help the ‘relief of the Belgians still living in their own country.’²⁸⁵ In February 1915, the South Westmorland Women’s LA collected numerous items, including towels, boot laces, Vaseline, cocoa and 500 cigarettes to donate to the *Daily News and Leader*, for distribution to the troops at the front.²⁸⁶ Another, smaller, shipment was dispatched in April, and a further large shipment was sent after September 1915.²⁸⁷ The Darwen Women’s LA donated money to the Women’s Liberal Federation’s motor ambulance, which had been sent to the front.²⁸⁸ After hearing a presentation on the National War Savings Scheme, the Darwen Women’s LA decided to form a War Savings Association.²⁸⁹

The fact that grass-roots Liberalism, like grass-roots Conservatism, was involved in charity work during the war also provides evidence for the intensity of in-group feelings (patriotism) during the First World War. In Walthamstow, it was recorded that ‘the cessation of party politics’ had ‘set our members free to render assistance to the various societies for the Belgian refugees, Red Cross work, Prince of Wales’s Relief Fund, Soldiers and Sailors

²⁸² MLF, Exec., 8 October 1914.

²⁸³ Darwen Women’s LA, General Committee, 16 February 1915.

²⁸⁴ Trinity and St. Oswald’s Women’s Ward LA, CM, 6 February 1915, 24 November 1916.

²⁸⁵ South Westmorland Women’s LA, General Committee, 14 December 1914.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, entry found after 14 December 1914. Sent to the newspaper 11 February 1915.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* and another entry found after 22 September 1915. No date was given for when it was sent to the newspaper but it was after September 1915 and before the next meeting which was recorded as being 24 July 1916.

²⁸⁸ Darwen Women’s LA, General Committee, 18 December 1914.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, AGM, 27 September 1916.

Families Association, etc. etc. which they have done in an unstinted way'.²⁹⁰ The Sittingbourne Liberal Club was used by the Territorials, with 'the usual billeting allowance to be paid.'²⁹¹ They also documented that members who had enlisted would be exempt from paying their subscriptions.²⁹² Additionally, the fact that the Liberal Club stayed open during the war and still obtained new members provides an insight into the Home Front during the First World War.²⁹³

The Walthamstow Liberal and Radical Association discussed how to best keep ward organisation functional during the war; they recommended unanimously that all political propaganda and meetings cease and that they 'render all possible assistance and funds in aid of the Guardian Committees and Red Cross society in the district'.²⁹⁴ A month later, one member suggested that ward organisations should undertake non-political 'lectures and socials to prevent any falling off of membership whilst the war lasted'.²⁹⁵ As Pugh has argued in relation to the Primrose League, patriotic activity during the war also helped to keep the party machinery together.²⁹⁶ For the Liberals, the National Liberal Federation sent out circulars 'urging affiliated associations to be kept intact and ready'.²⁹⁷ The grass-roots involvement with war charities and the recruitment campaign undoubtedly, as with the Conservative Party, kept associations active in a non-partisan outlet during the war.

National feelings did not automatically override party identification; many of those associated with the Liberal Party remained proud to do so. The Walthamstow LA was very defensive about the record of the Liberals before the war. They felt 'deep satisfaction at the course of diplomatic negotiation preceding the war; the prepared state of the Army and Navy; the conduct of the war and control of the financial arrangements of the country under a Liberal Government have deserved and obtained the approval of true patriots of all parties.'²⁹⁸

There is also further evidence of co-operation with Conservatives: such as the Darwen Women's LA's agreement to work with the Primrose League to arrange a concert for the

²⁹⁰ Walthamstow LA, Annual Report 1914-1915.

²⁹¹ Sittingbourne Liberal Club, CM, 1 September 1914.

²⁹² Ibid., 1 November 1915.

²⁹³ Ibid., 31 May 1915.

²⁹⁴ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 4 September 1914.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 6 November 1914.

²⁹⁶ Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, p. 176. In the Conservative case he also suggests that the difference between party political propaganda and patriotic work could be hard to discern.

²⁹⁷ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 7 April 1916. The General Committee of the Primrose League urged their habitations to do likewise, Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, p. 175.

²⁹⁸ Walthamstow LA, Annual Report 1914-1915.

Hospital Fund,²⁹⁹ which raised over £43.³⁰⁰ The South Westmorland Women's LA organised soldiers' concerts with the Westmorland Conservative Association.³⁰¹ A social was held with the Westmorland Unionist Association and the profits split between St. Johns Ambulance and the Young Men's Christian Association.³⁰² Liberals held sales of work to raise money for war charities as well.³⁰³ With such co-operation between Liberals and Conservatives in the constituencies, it was easy for the Darwen LA to pay tribute to the Conservative Party for their support of the Liberal Government during the first stage of the war.³⁰⁴

Notwithstanding such co-operation, some party feelings remained and, more rarely, there were instances of partisan action. At Westminster, there was an agreement between the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties to observe a political truce in parliamentary by-elections. This meant that when a seat was vacated, the two parties who did not hold that seat agreed not to contest the position. The grass-roots of all three parties usually responded by extending the parliamentary truce to municipal elections as well. However, in Blackpool, the Conservatives did not follow the spirit of the political truce and one Liberal councillor lost his seat.³⁰⁵ In this instance, the Conservatives were responsible for breaking the party truce as the Blackpool LA did not want any contests in November 1914 as they felt the political truce was appropriate.³⁰⁶ However, in Chester, it was the Liberals who were initially swayed by Party feeling. The Chester LA was contacted by the Liberal Chief Whip because his Conservative counterpart had inquired if the suppression of political work would include the Conservative MP standing down and being replaced by another Conservative nominee. It was recorded that the Chairman of the Chester LA had no objection to this 'but after the matter had been generally discussed' it was felt that the Conservative MP should resign at the next general election.³⁰⁷ However, after receiving an assertive letter from the Liberal Chief Whip saying that arrangements had been made with the Conservatives to allow for 'an equal number of constituencies to be represented by their own men without a contest' and that the Conservative MP for the city of Chester was in ill-health, the Chester Liberals agreed to allow a change of MP uncontested.³⁰⁸ However, these were isolated incidents, and the action

²⁹⁹ Darwen Women's LA, General Committee, 31 March 1915.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 4 May 1915.

³⁰¹ South Westmorland Women's LA, General Committee, 14 December 1914.

³⁰² Ibid., 9 April 1915.

³⁰³ Trinity and St. Oswald's Women's Ward LA, CM, 24 November 1916.

³⁰⁴ Darwen LA, AGM, 11 May 1915.

³⁰⁵ Blackpool LA, AGM, 27 February 1915.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., Exec., 6 October 1914.

³⁰⁷ Chester LA, Exec., 13 May 1915.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 22 February 1916.

of the Manchester Municipal Progressive Association, who agreed a political truce with both the Conservative and Labour Parties, was more representative of both the North-West and the country as a whole.³⁰⁹

Liberals also served the war effort by giving their own lives, or by losing sons or husbands as a result of the war.³¹⁰ By September 1915, the Chairman of the MLF's youngest son had died in the trenches.³¹¹ In Darwen, eleven subscribers had died since the AGM of 1914, although whether this was through natural causes or the war was not stated.³¹² Similarly, ten men perished during the next 12 months in Darwen, and it is likely that a proportion of those deaths were a consequence of the Great War.³¹³ The President of the Chester LA was killed whilst serving in the army, and the Liberal MP for Heywood died whilst fighting in the Dardanelles.³¹⁴ The loss of local Liberals as a result of the war clearly occurred in Sittingbourne, as a Roll of Honour was placed in the Liberal Club.³¹⁵

The source material for this thesis sheds light on one aspect of British society at home during the First World War which has fascinated historians. Marwick suggested that society can be changed by war, as war can be seen 'as cataclysmic psychological experience'. He argued that 'the waging of war ... tends to intensify "in-group" feelings, and to intensify hostility to an "out-group"', normally the military enemy. Marwick's conclusion was that such a 'general sense of national solidarity can encourage the promulgation of social welfare policies', and that solidarity amongst certain groups can 'make them more determined to fight for their rights'.³¹⁶ An example of national solidarity can be seen when the Beckenham LA sent a resolution of sympathy when the Conservative MP for Sevenoaks lost his son during the war.³¹⁷ The sympathy for the Conservative MP on his bereavement would have stemmed from similar losses that Liberals had suffered, as well as their joint campaigning regarding recruitment. The unifying effect of the war has been seen throughout this section in agreeing to political truces, holding whist drives for non partisan war charities, and in joining the British army to fight for their country.

³⁰⁹ Manchester Municipal Progressive Association, General Committee, 11 September 1914.

³¹⁰ Darwen Women's LA, General Committee, 18 August 1916; Walthamstow LA, Exec., 3 September 1915.

³¹¹ MLF, Exec., 20 September 1915.

³¹² Darwen LA, AGM, 6 March 1915.

³¹³ Ibid., AGM, 19 February 1916.

³¹⁴ Chester LA, Exec., 13 May 1915; LCNWLF, Exec., 5 October 1915.

³¹⁵ Sittingbourne Liberal Club, CM, 12 September 1916.

³¹⁶ A. Marwick, *The Deluge* (Basingstoke, Second edition, 1991), p. 20.

³¹⁷ Beckenham LA, CM, 25 September 1914.

II) A reduction in Liberal activity, 1914-1916

Unsurprisingly, there was a great deal of disruption to Liberal Party activity in the war years. As has already been mentioned, some activists joined in with the war effort, and one individual felt that he had to resign from the Executive of the MLF due to his inability to attend meetings.³¹⁸ Similarly, the candidate for Coventry, J. E. Wollacott, had to withdraw owing to his work for the government in India.³¹⁹ Constituencies such as East Worcester, where the Liberal Agent enlisted in early 1916, were certainly less effectively organised if the agent was absent.³²⁰ The minutes from a meeting of the Executive of the Coventry LA sum up succinctly the political truce and the consequent lack of activity: ‘from the moment war was declared the active propaganda of the Association was suspended, and is at the present moment still in abeyance’ adding that ‘while war is being waged the voice of party should be silenced’.³²¹ There were no meetings of the Coventry LA from 15 July 1914 to 1 October 1914, or again from 13 October 1914 to 20 April 1915, and then no further meeting until 10 April 1916. By the same token, there is no evidence of activity from the Chesterfield Women’s LA at all.³²² There are numerous examples of Liberal Associations reducing the level of staffing they had during the war. In Walsall, the assistant agent was dismissed by October 1914, suggesting that the machinery of the Party was not as active during the war.³²³ The Darwen LA sacked one member of staff, while another was reduced to working for three days a week on half salary.³²⁴ However, both men objected and instead were given reduced wages, with the second man working for five days. They also decided that the Agent should subscribe 5/- a week of his salary to the Association.³²⁵ More drastically, the South Westmorland Women’s LA gave ‘its entire office staff notice to quit’.³²⁶ After the outbreak of war, the Manchester LF called a special meeting of its finance committee to discuss ‘the position caused by the War.’ It was noted that the hours and payment of auxiliary staff who were usually employed at that time of year in connection with registration had been reduced,

³¹⁸ MLF, Exec., 22 April 1915.

³¹⁹ Ibid., Exec., 29 June 1916.

³²⁰ Ibid., Exec., 10 February 1916.

³²¹ Coventry LA, Exec., 20 April 1915.

³²² Chesterfield Women’s LA, no recorded meeting between Easter 1914 and a minute signed 12 November 1918.

³²³ Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 16.

³²⁴ Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 3 August 1915.

³²⁵ Ibid., Officers Meeting, 3 September 1915.

³²⁶ South Westmorland Women’s LA, General Committee, 24 August 1914.

as an agreement with the Conservative Party regarding objections ‘would considerably lessen the work of making enquiries, [therefore] further saving would be effected’.³²⁷ It was agreed to reduce the salaries of the staff, ‘with the exception of the office boy’, with the decrease set at twenty-five percent.³²⁸ It was expected that £200 less would be spent on expenditure.³²⁹ The deficit after 1913 had been £879; after 1914 it was £822, after 1915 it was £615 and after 1916 it was £359.³³⁰ In consequence of the Elections and Registration Act 1915, it was noted that ‘the work of the office staff would be greatly reduced’. The officers of the Association agreed to try and ‘obtain temporary employment for some members of staff.’³³¹

The Chester LA held their first meeting since the outbreak of war on 29 January 1915, in order to send letters to local Liberals asking them to subscribe to the Association.³³² The debt in Chester was £219, but one member of the association gave a donation of £100 in funds. Even so, the registration agent still had to be let go.³³³ As noted by the dates of the previous footnotes, when the Chief Whip sent circulars around to Associations ‘urging them to keep on their staffs’ he was already too late in many cases.³³⁴ The Chair of Darwen Women’s LA recognised that ‘it was very necessary that women’s organisations should be kept in good working order because of the many problems which would have to be solved when once the war was over’, but this was in stark contrast to the dormancy of the South Westmorland Women’s LA.³³⁵

In Penge, a meeting was called to find a way to pay for the debt. A call asking those present to subscribe 2s. 6d. did not ‘find favour’, as several of them were already ‘large contributors to the funds’ and felt that it would not be ‘scarcely fair to ask them to bear the whole of the burden.’³³⁶ Nonetheless, by the AGM there was a balance in hand of £1. 18s. 7d. This was due to some members of the Association having doubled their subscriptions, because some others were not subscribing at all during the war.³³⁷ Thus, whilst the political commitment of some lapsed during the war, there was still a core of Liberals willing to support the party. However, the position of the Association got worse; in late 1916, they were

³²⁷ Manchester LF, Special FC, 11 August 1914.

³²⁸ Ibid., FC, 4 September 1914.

³²⁹ Ibid., Special FC, 11 August 1914.

³³⁰ Ibid., Revenue Account, entries for 1913, 1914, 1915 and 1916.

³³¹ Manchester LF, Exec., 4 August 1915.

³³² Chester LA, GM, 29 January 1915.

³³³ Ibid., Exec., 24 June 1915.

³³⁴ LCNWLF, Exec., 5 October 1915.

³³⁵ Darwen Women’s LA, AGM, 27 September 1916.

³³⁶ Penge LA, Executive Council, 29 October 1914.

³³⁷ Ibid., AGM, 7 April 1915.

loaning furniture to the Y.M.C.A. because of the state of the Penge LA and the Association was being wound up, as the tenancy was expiring.³³⁸

It was the poor financial position that led to the dismissal of staff, and Liberal Clubs, as in the case of the Cheetham Liberal Club, were also struggling financially.³³⁹ In 1916, the Manager of the London County and Westminster Bank asked for the repayment of a loan of £500 that the bank had given to the Southend Liberal Club in February 1912. This made it necessary to raise the money by mortgaging the Club to two individuals.³⁴⁰ It is also noteworthy that earlier in the War the Directors insured the premises with a policy of £1080 to cover the destruction of the premises and the loss of rent in case of aircraft attack.³⁴¹ The activity of the Directors of the Southend-on-Sea Liberal Club is contrasted with the inactivity of the town's LA; there are no recorded meetings of the Southend LA from 6 July 1914 until 1 November 1918, and from the tone of the latter the Association had been moribund during the war.³⁴² The Beckenham LA still met but there was no real activity – in October 1915 only four members including the chairman and secretary attended, so the meeting was postponed.³⁴³ There is also a gap in the minutes of the Northern Ward branch in Walthamstow from 21 July 1914 to 28 January 1915, so no singular experience of grass-roots Liberalism during the war can be discerned.³⁴⁴

However, the fact that some associations were moribund could be overplayed, as Liberal Party activity did continue during the war. As noted above, during the first two years of the war, when there was voluntary enlistment, they played a part in the recruitment process. The Secretary of the MLF was somewhat active in 1916 in visiting London and several Midland constituencies.³⁴⁵ Moreover, the Coventry LA made 'a further appeal to members' to loyally continue 'their financial support in order that the machinery of the Party may be effectively maintained', so that when the war was over they would be in a position to resume its active propaganda immediately.³⁴⁶ A significant role for a regional body such as the MLF was that they forwarded the concerns which they had received at provincial meetings regarding government administration to the munitions committee.³⁴⁷ This would

³³⁸ Ibid., Special GM, 24 November 1916.

³³⁹ Manchester LF, Exec., 7 July 1915.

³⁴⁰ Southend-on-Sea Liberal Club, Directors Meeting, 26 April 1916.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 12 March 1915.

³⁴² Southend LA, Exec., 6 July 1914 and GM, 1 November 1918.

³⁴³ Beckenham LA, CM, 1 October 1915.

³⁴⁴ Northern Ward LA, AGM, 28 January 1915.

³⁴⁵ MLF, Exec., 29 June 1916.

³⁴⁶ *Midland Daily Telegraph*, 4 May 1915.

³⁴⁷ MLF, Exec., 4 May 1916.

allow the government to identify and then to address these concerns and this would help the Liberals remain in tune with their own and the wider electorate. In place of the radical pre-war agenda could be a Liberal agenda responsive to war-time issues. Nevertheless, Liberal activity in the war did lessen; as the Executive of the MLF agreed not to call meetings just for formal business, it is evident that there were fewer meetings of Liberal associations during the War.³⁴⁸ However, it is crucial to put this into perspective as the Unionist and Labour Parties were also less active as a result of the war.

Although the spirit of the party truce was adhered to loyally, Liberal activity in the constituencies often continued, as this was not against the truce and there were no overtly partisan political meetings. Registration grants were still issued by the regional body.³⁴⁹ To take one example, the Wigan LA asked for a renewal of its registration grant, and the LCNWLF agreed to £30 being given.³⁵⁰ In 1915, the staff of the Manchester LF was given sanction to begin a street survey for registration purposes, suggesting that they were attempting to be prepared for the next electoral battle whenever it would come.³⁵¹ It was recorded that several local associations asked the regional organisation for the north-west whether it was appropriate that they held their AGMs during war time; the Federation replied that 'where local circumstances permitted', meetings could be held.³⁵² Other activity besides the AGMs occurred; in Blackpool, it was noted that the Secretary should form ward committees in the new wards created under a scheme by the Town Council and approved by the local government board.³⁵³ By March 1915, it was recorded that these were being set up.³⁵⁴

The most immediate concern for Liberals on the outbreak of war was pensions for the wives and dependents of injured or deceased servicemen. A resolution was forwarded to the government in order to 'urge them to give sympathetic attentions to the claims of those women losing husbands as a result of the war' as well as in those cases where the husband was 'completely incapacitated' from the War.³⁵⁵ By December 1914, the Executive of the MLF was dissatisfied with the provision of pensions for the widows of soldiers and sailors.³⁵⁶ Likewise, the Harborough Liberals were also concerned with 'adequate allowance' for

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 11 June 1915.

³⁴⁹ LCNWLF, Exec., 8 September 1914.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 10 November 1914.

³⁵¹ Manchester LF, Exec., 29 April 1915.

³⁵² LCNWLF, Exec., 8 December 1914.

³⁵³ Blackpool LA, Exec., 1 February 1915.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 11 March 1915.

³⁵⁵ MLF, Exec., 8 October 1914.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 14 December 1914.

‘dependents’.³⁵⁷ This issue was not at odds with Liberalism and it suggests that in the early days of the war the Liberals were still responsive in dealing with the most salient issues on the political agenda. Similarly, the Conservative Party was also discussing similar issues, particularly social reform. Keohane suggests that this was to appease the soldiers and prevent social revolution, but in the Liberal case there were resolutions in favour of pensions for the soldiers and their dependents before the Russian Revolution in 1917, suggesting that the Liberals’ motives were as altruistic as any action from a political party can be.³⁵⁸ More importantly, the Conservatives’ appeal and actions also catered for those who wanted a more complete prosecution of the war and Keohane argues that through the two wartime coalitions the Tories were established as ‘the party of patriotism’, and this was a helpful tool for dealing with and being seen to deal with political issues both during and equally importantly, after the war when the Conservatives established electoral hegemony.³⁵⁹

The resolutions passed by the Walthamstow LA can provide an insight into the mind of Liberalism in urban areas in these years. In January 1915, the Walthamstow Association viewed ‘with alarm the rising prices in the necessities of life, particularly coal – and strongly urges the government to do all in its power’ to remedy this.³⁶⁰ By December 1916, they had resolved ‘that the government should take financial control of all businesses connected with the production, transport, and distribution of food and coal, should fix maximum retail prices of same, and take over and develop any land not now utilised for the purchase of food production, and further that the food controller [sic] should be appointed without any further delay with full power to act.’³⁶¹ This suggests that Marwick’s thesis that war can be a transformative psychological experience and can lead to a greater sense of national togetherness which leads to more social welfare policies is relevant to the grass-roots of Liberalism during the First World War.

This being said, not all traditional Liberal issues disappeared. Indeed, the war gave more salience to the issue of temperance, and in Walthamstow they wanted the prohibition of liquor traffic during the war. The Walthamstow LA also felt that the country would now accept nothing less than ‘adult suffrage on a three month qualification’ period, and wanted it to be voted on in the House of Commons.³⁶² They also wanted Sir John Simon to vote for the

³⁵⁷ Harborough LA, Exec., 7 November 1914.

³⁵⁸ N. Keohane, *The Party of Patriotism: The Conservative Party and the First World War* (Farnham, 2010), pp. 189-190.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

³⁶⁰ Walthamstow LA, Council Meeting, 29 January 1915.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1916.

³⁶² Walthamstow LA, Exec., 8 November 1916.

Daylight Saving Bill.³⁶³ There are a variety of concerns that came up with only a couple of constituency Liberal Associations. The South Westmorland Women's LA decided not to send delegates to the Women's Liberal Federation meeting in London, but instead sent a resolution showing sympathy with the motions on 'maternity and infant welfare', 'temperance' and 'women police'.³⁶⁴ The issue of profiteering was raised in Leicester, although one might have expected this to be a more recurring issue.³⁶⁵ It is also important to note that issues such as the education and Welsh Disestablishment were not commented upon. This reinforces Turner's argument that Nonconformity as a political concern was reduced in importance during the war as the party which had historically championed these issues remained quiet in the constituencies.³⁶⁶

Even during the War, a sense of the dynamic of the social activity behind Liberal Associations is apparent. After a well-attended meeting of the MLF Executive committee, the 126 delegates had tea served afterwards.³⁶⁷ When Miss Markham of the Chesterfield LA married Major Carruthers in 1915, the Association presented her with a clock and a pair of vases and her husband with a cigarette case.³⁶⁸ This is of course in the context that she was quite an important local personality, from a socially prominent family. There was still opportunity even during the war to hold a dinner in Manchester to celebrate Sir Charles Swann being an MP in North Manchester for 30 years.³⁶⁹ Also, the Blackpool Women's LA had a winter session of fortnightly teas in 1916 at the Liberal Club, with an attendance of 'about a hundred persons'.³⁷⁰ Similarly, the Darwen Women's LA had refreshments and a musical programme at the AGM.³⁷¹ In Penge, as elsewhere, 'controversial' political work ceased during the war, but it was noted that they continued 'the social side' of their work, which suggests that other Liberal Associations in the Home Counties, and the rest of the country, may have as well.³⁷² One reason for this is revealed; it was recorded that Whist Parties were 'necessary for the financial upkeep of our Headquarters', and they were held weekly during the first two years of the War.³⁷³ It was stated that 'political opinions do not

³⁶³ Ibid., 7 July 1916.

³⁶⁴ South Westmorland Women's LA, General Committee, 9 April 1915.

³⁶⁵ Leicester LA, FGP, 11 July 1916.

³⁶⁶ Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*, p. 106.

³⁶⁷ MLF, Exec., 29 June 1916.

³⁶⁸ Chesterfield LA, AGM, 10 July 1915.

³⁶⁹ Manchester LF, Exec., 15 March 1916.

³⁷⁰ *Blackpool Times*, 6 December 1916.

³⁷¹ Darwen Women's LA, AGM, 27 October 1915.

³⁷² Penge LA, AGM, 7 April 1915.

³⁷³ Ibid. However, they were discontinued in September 1916; Penge LA, Executive Council and Management Committee, 28 September 1916.

intrude – often the prizes are won by our Unionist friends’, suggesting the greater interaction of Liberals and Unionists during the course of the war. It was felt necessary to state this because some on the Management Committee had not attended – the inference being that they did not want to break or seem to break the Party truce.³⁷⁴

As a result of the political truce, for the duration of the war the Liberal Party outwardly lost its pre-war radical agenda. This negated the comparative advantage that the Liberals enjoyed over the Conservative and Labour parties in the late Edwardian period. Yet, it could be argued that the Liberal Party was still relevant as it raised non-partisan grievances, particularly pensions for disabled soldiers and sailors. It could be reasoned that that the political truce also reduced the high-stakes partisan rivalry between the Conservative and Liberal Party that had been particularly evident between 1910 and 1914 at the constituency level. However, the Liberal reaction to the formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 refutes any argument that the Liberals had lost their sense of identity at an early stage in the war.

III) The formation of the Asquith Coalition, May 1915

In the historiography, the formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 is often regarded as a step on the path to Liberal disintegration, but not as crucial in itself.³⁷⁵ However, there has been little research regarding grass-roots responses to the formation of the Asquith Coalition.³⁷⁶ One of the reasons why the formation of the Coalition in May 1915 is cited as being important is because adding Conservatives to the government made Conscription (a Liberal bugbear) more likely, which indeed occurred, but it is important to examine the consequences of this in the localities and not just at Westminster.

What was the political impact of the Asquith Coalition on Liberals in the country? The formation of the coalition government in May 1915 received substantial comment in the constituencies in comparison to other events during the war, as it was so important to the war

³⁷⁴ Ibid., AGM, 7 April 1915.

³⁷⁵ Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, pp. 56-96; C. Hazlehurst, *Politicians At War: July 1914 to May 1915: A Prologue to the Triumph of Lloyd George* (London, 1971); Koss., ‘Destruction of Britain’s last Liberal government’, pp. 257-277; P. Fraser, ‘British war policy and the crisis of Liberalism in May 1915’, *Journal of Modern History*, 54, no. 1 (1982), pp. 1-26; Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*, pp. 55-151; Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, pp. 16-24; David., ‘Liberal Party divided’, pp. 509-32; For the reception of the Asquith Coalition in the Press consult S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain: Volume Two: The Twentieth Century* (London, 1984), pp. 274-282.

³⁷⁶ The important exception to this is Bernstein, ‘Yorkshire Liberalism’, pp. 107-129.

effort and the Liberal Party. The general feeling was expressed by the MLF: ‘while postponing the consideration of all questions that divide parties [they] cannot separate without expressing to the Prime Minister and to the government their admiration for the great services they have rendered to the country and to the cause of freedom in Europe under the unexampled difficulties created by the War.’ They added that ‘they also recognise with appreciation the general attitude of the responsible leaders of the opposition in Parliament’ and hoped that with the support of a united nation they could bring the war to a triumphant close. They also expressed their confidence and ‘unabated loyalty’ to Asquith as head of the new coalition government.³⁷⁷ This is the most formal resolution, and other resolutions and statements, while supporting Asquith’s decisions, reveal a keener sense of loss in the Liberal government and stress the hope that the coalition is for the war alone. The individual reply of the President of Coventry LA’s letter to the Liberal Chief Whip highlights that Liberals loyally accepted the new coalition government as necessary, but also looked ‘anxiously forward to the time when, in the Prime Minister’s words, we shall again take up the unfinished tasks to which the Liberal Party has set its hand’.³⁷⁸

There is a similar tone in the resolution moved by Kenyon (the MP for Chesterfield) at the association’s AGM, which ‘regrets that the Liberal government has come to an end, but accepts the assurance of Mr Asquith that it has become necessary to reconstitute the government on a broader personal and non-party basis’. The meeting also noted ‘the strenuous work done by the Liberal government during the past nine and a half years, and is grateful for the Liberal legislative and administrative reforms which have been secured’. Moreover, some element of Liberal concern is apparent in the resolution: they are ‘confident that the Liberal members of the new government will see that nothing is done to prejudice the position of the legislation and administrative reforms which have been secured by the Parliament Act prior to the outbreak of war, and that while resolutely prosecuting the war by every legitimate method will command the support of the whole nation, the government will not take any course of action that will divide the Nation and destroy the National unity which is essential during the present state of affairs’. Kenyon added that he did not want anyone ‘to condemn Mr Asquith’ for coming to the conclusion he did and that they were all ‘Englishmen first and members of a political party afterwards’. Kenyon also spoke of the need for ‘a new citizenship’ after the War where there must not be ‘bloated wealth on the one hand and

³⁷⁷ MLF, Exec., 11 June 1915.

³⁷⁸ *Midland Daily Telegraph*, 31 May 1915.

miserable poverty on the other'.³⁷⁹ None of this suggests that it was the formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 which damaged or destroyed the credibility and viability of the Liberal Party as a contender for national government.

The evidence from the north-west similarly suggests that grass-roots Liberalism regretted that the Liberals were no longer exclusively in office but understood the need for a coalition during the war. It was recorded by the LCNWLF that they 'express their unfaltering confidence in the patriotism, sagacity and devotion of the Prime Minister and in his fidelity to the enduring principles and noble traditions of Liberalism. They desire also to put on record their loyalty to the new National government and their readiness to support its united efforts to bring the war to a speedy and glorious conclusion.'³⁸⁰ The *Darwen News* recorded that 'the new Cabinet is a strong one, but, no stronger than the old one, if as strong; but it is no doubt what the country had a right to demand – a more representative one.' The editorial added 'A National Government may not be a workable proposition in times of peace, but at this supreme crisis we need above all things a united government.'³⁸¹

Nonetheless, the *Derbyshire Courier* lamented the fall of the Liberal government. Primarily, they were concerned that this might mean the coming of conscription (discussed in section four). They were also concerned that they would lose 'the great intellect of Lord Haldane' in order to 'bring into government some of the men who muddled through the South African war'. Haldane had been Lord Chancellor since 1912, but during the war the press attacked him for allegedly having pro-German sympathies, and in the cabinet changes resulting from the formation of the Asquith Coalition, he was removed and not given another post. The *Derbyshire Courier* again laments the loss of Haldane: 'In homely language a quart of talent has been poured into a pint pot; and so much has been lost. We hold that in losing Lord Haldane more power has passed out of the Government than is represented by any three men, apart from Mr Asquith, Sir Edward Grey, and Mr. Lloyd George, who have come into it.'³⁸² Likewise, the Executive of the MLF expressed 'deep regret at the severance of Lord Haldane's connection with His Majesty's Government'.³⁸³ Their loyalty to Lord Haldane, whilst it could be personal to him could primarily reflect Liberal concerns over the way that the press attacked Liberal ministers with vitriol during this period. Whilst this does reveal an

³⁷⁹ Chesterfield LA, AGM, 10 July 1915.

³⁸⁰ LCNWLF, Exec., 1 June 1915.

³⁸¹ *Darwen News*, 29 May 1915.

³⁸² *Derbyshire Courier*, 22 May 1915.

³⁸³ MLF, Exec., 11 June 1915.

important element of Liberal thinking during the war, it does not suggest the long-term future of the Liberal Party was in jeopardy.

Connected to Liberal unease about Haldane being replaced by a Conservative, was wider resentment with the Tory Press, particularly the Northcliffe Press, for attacks on Liberal Ministers.³⁸⁴ The Executive of the MLF noted their ‘conviction that in regard to a certain section of the Press the so-called freedom of the Press has degenerated into dangerous licence, and is doing great harm in various ways to national efficiency ... discouraging workers at home, and by their publication abroad are giving encouragement to the enemy.’³⁸⁵ During the by-election in Harborough in March 1916, Percy Harris, the Liberal candidate, castigated ‘gutter press’.³⁸⁶ The ‘Yellow Press’ was also attacked by the *Darwen News* ‘there must be ... no malevolent criticism in the Press of those to whom are entrusted the prosecution of the war’ – undoubtedly a reference to the attacks on Haldane and Asquith.³⁸⁷

However, even though the Liberals may have been unhappy with the Tory Press they remained loyal to the coalition government. In June 1916 the Executive of the MLF passed a resolution of its ‘unabated confidence in the Prime Minister and the Coalition government’ and assured them of its loyal support.³⁸⁸ The Coventry LA were ‘indignant’ at the ‘disloyal conduct and speeches’ of the MP, Mason, against the Coalition government, claiming that it could be seen from German press reports to have encouraged the enemy and called on him to resign his seat in Parliament.³⁸⁹ As has been seen, there is no evidence to support Fraser’s proposition that the grass-roots suffered a schism which resulted from an estrangement between Asquith and Lloyd George after the formation of the Asquith Coalition.³⁹⁰ Undoubtedly, the Liberals would have preferred to have remained solely in power but recognised the genuine calls for a national government during the unprecedented crisis. It is fair to say that whatever effects the Press attacks had on the electorate or the Germans, they had a unifying effect upon Liberals and strengthened rather than weakened Asquith’s leadership of the party.

³⁸⁴ *Derbyshire Courier*, 22 May 1915.

³⁸⁵ MLF, Exec., 11 June 1915.

³⁸⁶ *Leicester Daily Post*, 17 March 1916.

³⁸⁷ *Darwen News*, 29 May 1915.

³⁸⁸ MLF, Exec., 29 June 1916.

³⁸⁹ Coventry LA, Exec., 10 April 1916.

³⁹⁰ Fraser, ‘British War policy’, p. 24.

IV) Conscription and other Liberal concerns, May 1915-December 1916

Historians have described conscription as ‘the most important question in British politics in the year which followed the formation of the Asquith Coalition’.³⁹¹ Bentley in his seminal work *The Liberal Mind* explores the importance of conscription at Westminster and stated that it influenced the Liberals’ confidence in their leaders, themselves and Liberalism itself.³⁹² Understandably, Bentley was not able to explore this at a constituency level and this thesis will seek to explore if the grass-roots suffered over conscription as the Parliamentary Liberal Party did. Bernstein in his study of grass-roots Liberalism in Yorkshire argues that both the May 1915 Coalition and the introduction of conscription in 1916 were accepted as being necessary to win the war, but were accepted ‘with reluctance and bitterness’.³⁹³ Johnson has argued that Liberalism and conscription were not incompatible and cites the Liberal War Committee and the diversity of pre-war Liberalism to downplay suggestions that conscription helped to end the Liberal Party as a party of government.³⁹⁴ The related struggle of liberty against other coercive measures has been explored by Freedon in *Liberalism Divided*, where he convincingly argued that there was ‘widespread concern and resentment’ regarding the Defence of the Realm Act amongst Liberal intellectuals, so this thesis will explore if the foot soldiers of the Party were equally affected.³⁹⁵

The formation of the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 meant that compromises had to be made and this led to conscription and some Liberal dissent. However, conscription did not automatically follow the formation of the Asquith Coalition. Instead, a compromise was reached and ‘one final effort was made, in the form of the Derby Scheme, to galvanise the voluntary system into renewed vigour’.³⁹⁶ Lloyd George, in his memoirs, added that ‘[i]t was generally recognised, both in the Cabinet and in the country, that if this failed, conscription would be inevitable’.³⁹⁷ An editorial in the *Beckenham Advertiser* in May 1915 arguably summarised Liberal opinion as it maintained that the country had not yet ‘got to the end of the voluntary principle’, although they noted that the system was ‘distinctly on its trial’ and would accept conscription (but specifically said that they hoped there would be no need to)

³⁹¹ R. J. Q. Adams and P. P. Poirier, *The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain, 1900-18* (Basingstoke, 1987), p. 84; J. M. McEwen, ‘Northcliffe and Lloyd George at war, 1914-1918’, *Historical Journal*, 24, no. 3 (1981), p. 654.

³⁹² Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, pp. 26-37.

³⁹³ Bernstein, ‘Yorkshire Liberalism’, p. 108.

³⁹⁴ Johnson, ‘Liberal War Committee’, pp. 399-420.

³⁹⁵ M. Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914-1939* (Oxford, 1986).

³⁹⁶ D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George: Volume One* (London, 1938), p. 434.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

just as the country ‘is prepared to accept without undue cavil great Cabinet changes and a Coalition Ministry for the sake of the efficient prosecution of the war’.³⁹⁸ This suggests that Johnson’s argument that Liberalism was compatible with conscription has merit at the grass-roots of the Party as well.³⁹⁹

Given that Liberals wanted to avoid conscription it is unsurprising that they tried to make the Derby Scheme work. The Derby Scheme was primarily the canvassing of every man aged between 18 and 41, on the basis of the National Register, asking them to attest whether or not they would be willing to join the army. The Secretary of the Executive of the MLF noted

that speaking generally, the scheme worked very well indeed by the agents and committees, men of different parties all working together with the utmost cordiality to make the scheme a success. This was equally noticeable amongst Liberals, to whom canvassing for the army was exceedingly distasteful.⁴⁰⁰

Douglas in his work in the Parliamentary Recruitment Committee (PRC) noted that a clerk to the [national] committee observed that ‘the deliberations of the PRC and its successors were conducted in an atmosphere of great harmony, in which the party divisions which had been so important before the war had no place’.⁴⁰¹ The above evidence suggested this accord extended to the constituencies as well.

Even though canvassing for the army may have been distasteful for some, the Liberal Party machine was involved in attesting men in the Derby Scheme and the MLF proudly cites enlistment figures and attestation figures for the relevant counties.⁴⁰² As mentioned above, the *Derbyshire Courier* lamented the fall of the Liberal government as they feared that this would make conscription far more likely. They state that this is because ‘Members of a Liberal Cabinet have more things in common than otherwise.’ The editorial attacked those in favour of conscription stating that the facts already showed the British Army was substantial.⁴⁰³ This aversion to conscription fits in with what Bernstein found in Yorkshire.⁴⁰⁴ As seen in chapter one, the antipathy towards conscription was present at the Liberal grass-

³⁹⁸ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 15 May 1915.

³⁹⁹ Johnson, ‘Liberal War Committee’, pp. 399-420.

⁴⁰⁰ MLF, Exec., 10 February 1916.

⁴⁰¹ Douglas, ‘Parliamentary Recruiting Committee’, p. 585.

⁴⁰² MLF, Exec., 10 February 1916.

⁴⁰³ *Derbyshire Courier*, 22 May 1915.

⁴⁰⁴ Bernstein, ‘Yorkshire Liberalism’, pp. 107-129.

roots in the late Edwardian period as compulsion by the state took away an individual's liberty.

The issue of conscription was perhaps the most contentious issue for Liberals during these years, and it seems that the official organs of the Party in the Midlands were against conscription. The Executive of the MLF noted that it strongly protested

against the agitation to force the hands of the government in favour of conscription. It records its admiration of the magnificent response hitherto made by the nation to the appeals for service, and is confident that the Prime Minister and His Majesty's Government may rely on the voluntary system to enable them to bring the war to a successful conclusion.⁴⁰⁵

The Executive of the Harborough Liberals were against the conscription of married men at least, saying it would be 'unfair to ask married men with families to give up their situation and join the army.'⁴⁰⁶ Even in March 1916, the Liberal (although he was officially the Coalition) candidate for the Harborough by-election was leaning away from conscription, whereas at Westminster a prominent Liberal Minister, Lloyd George, was moving towards it. When Harris was asked whether he favoured conscription for all married men he answered 'no', adding that 'the proposal was un-English, and would deprive them of the sense of glory in volunteering.'⁴⁰⁷

As there were those who were prepared to compromise on conscription for the prosecution of the war and as there were those who wanted to avoid it on principle, there were clearly divisions within the Party. Some signs of division over conscription can be seen when the Manchester LF Executive Committee voting six for and two against the following resolution:

whilst we regret the position which makes the introduction of a measure of compulsory military service necessary for the duration of the war, we feel that the success of the "Derby" scheme of deferred enlistment is attributable in a large degree to the confidence engendered by the pledge of the Prime Minister in whom we hereby reiterate our expression of confidence in his judgement and ability in the present time of national crisis.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ MLF, Exec., 20 September 1915.

⁴⁰⁶ Harborough LA, Exec., 7 November 1914.

⁴⁰⁷ *Leicester Daily Post*, 17 March 1916.

⁴⁰⁸ Manchester LF, Exec., 12 January 1916.

As a consequence of the Coalition's policy of conscription, 'the Secretary requested the committee to allow him to join the army under a recent War Office order.'⁴⁰⁹ The committee agreed to do so. Bentley's argument that the Liberals suffered over the issue of conscription has an empirical basis in the constituencies. However, the divisions do not seem to be critical as the rank and file retained, for the most part, their confidence in Liberalism and the party leadership at Westminster.

Ireland and the Easter Rising in 1916 was another issue during the war that raised questions over the actions of a British government that was headed and dominated by Liberals. McEwen has written that back-bench Liberal MPs had mixed feelings about the Dublin rebellion.⁴¹⁰ When Augustine Birrell resigned as Irish Secretary after the Easter Rising of 1916, the Executive of the MLF passed a sympathetic resolution.⁴¹¹ This reference to Birrell and Ireland could reflect a sense of what other Liberals were feeling: not long after, the Liberal MP Richard Holt wrote in his diary 'all the old principles of the Liberal party have been virtually abandoned by its leader. Even Free Trade and the Home Rule settlement of Ireland ... was torn up at the last minute by the English Tories.'⁴¹²

Free Trade was compromised because the Liberal successor to Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna, introduced a levy on luxury imports and these were known as the McKenna Duties. The Manchester LF viewed 'with regret the proposed adoption of a system of import duties which will be "protective", in their effect' showing that the concerns of grass-roots Liberalism and that of the parliamentary party could be one and the same.⁴¹³ As a consequence of the McKenna Duties, the MLF received a letter from J. M. Robertson (Liberal MP for Tyneside) discussing the upcoming Paris conference on free trade and he was worried about the rise of tariff propaganda. A memorandum was drawn up but it was agreed not to do anything with it until the Prime Minister had time to react to the Conference's proposals. The Memorandum is a fierce defence of free trade and the crux of its argument is that it was free trade that allowed Britain to cope with the war financially better than Protectionist Countries while still being able to support Allies as well.⁴¹⁴ Most Liberals remained committed to the ideals of Free Trade, and were alarmed by

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 10 April 1916.

⁴¹⁰ J. M. McEwen, 'The Liberal Party and the Irish Question during the First World War', *Journal of British Studies*, 12, no. 1 (1972), p. 114.

⁴¹¹ MLF, Exec., 4 May 1916.

⁴¹² Holt Diary, 6 August 1916, Holt MSS, quoted in Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, p. 41.

⁴¹³ Manchester LF, Exec., 29 September 1915.

⁴¹⁴ MLF, Exec., 29 June 1916.

the increased relevance of protectionist arguments, especially considering a Liberal had already brought in some form of Tariff Reform for the necessity of financing the War.

Two other Liberal shibboleths were under attack during the war: liberty (broadly defined) and free trade are often referred to in the historiography without any specific examples.⁴¹⁵ Liberty was under threat from the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) and the following example highlights how some Liberals perceived their conception of freedom to be under threat. An incident in Birmingham which was brought to the attention of the Executive of the MLF concerned four members of the Liberal Party were asked to show the police their cheque books and bank passes so that the authorities could find out what societies they had contributed money to. The Secretary commented that he was 'aghast' and that he began to 'wonder whether we know where we were going'.⁴¹⁶

So, over three issues important to the Liberals (four including the Liberal government itself) Liberals were generally united and knew what their preferred policy position would be in peace time. Over all the issues (Conscription, Free Trade and Liberty) they knew what legislative measures would be necessary to correct these deviations away from their treasured Liberal government and precisely who was to blame for these deviations: firstly, the German war machine and secondly, in a party political context, the British Conservative Party. The evidence from the constituencies suggests that however uncomfortable were some of the decisions taken by the Liberal parliamentary elite, the party at its grass-roots was essentially united before the December crisis of 1916.

⁴¹⁵ For example see McEwen, 'Liberal Party and the Irish Question', p. 113.

⁴¹⁶ MLF, Exec., 24 November 1916.

Chapter 3

Impact of the fall of Asquith, 1916-1918

The Liberal Party after December 1916 remained formally united under Asquith's leadership, but at Westminster the party was effectively split into two.⁴¹⁷ The following study of grass-roots Liberalism will examine how important the division amongst the Liberal leaders was amongst the rank and file. David has suggested that as Asquith promised to support the Coalition from the opposition benches, this meant 'that the mass of the Liberal party which supported Asquith seemed doomed to political impotence'.⁴¹⁸ Bernstein's study of Yorkshire Liberalism during the war reveals several concerns, namely the perceived indifference of the Lloyd George government to democracy and a lack of interest in social reform. The Yorkshire Liberals were more concerned with the restoration of liberty from wartime measures, were critical of the government's man-power policies, and were attracted to the idea of the League of Nations as a worthy ideal from which some good could come out of the war.⁴¹⁹ He also noted that 'Asquith-worship became a part of the political rhetoric of Yorkshire Liberal journalism'.⁴²⁰ An examination of the grass-roots in the case-study constituencies provides an examination into the Liberal mind and finds less emphasis on parliamentary manoeuvres such as the Maurice debate and the Lansdowne letter, and more emphasis on traditional Liberal issues.

The historiography of the rise of the Labour Party suggests that Labour was able 'to exploit many of the opportunities offered by the war'.⁴²¹ On the one hand, the political, social and economic basis of British society changed at an increased rate in ways that have been widely regarded as favourable to that Party: Labour's membership of the government, the breaking down of deference, increased trade union membership and more state intervention.

⁴¹⁷ Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*, pp. 152-389; Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, pp. 531-540, 660-670.

⁴¹⁸ David, 'Liberal Party divided', p. 513. See B. McGill, 'Asquith's Predicament', pp. 283-303 for Asquith's reasoning and the national context.

⁴¹⁹ Bernstein, 'Yorkshire Liberalism', pp. 107-129.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

⁴²¹ A. Thorpe., *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke, 3rd edn., 2008), p. 40.

⁴²² The split in the Liberal Party provided yet another opportunity for Labour to advance. This chapter will explore the question of whether the split in the parliamentary party was also present at the grass-roots of the Liberal Party, and whether there is evidence from the Liberal perspective of a changing of the guard from Liberal to Labour, or whether there is new evidence which questions previous claims. This chapter will also assess whether the Liberal grass-roots were moribund during the last two years of the war. The findings challenge the conventional wisdom that the Liberal Party was in a much weaker position in the constituencies than the Conservative Party.

I) The fall of Asquith

Hart argues that ‘the War precipitated a series of events affecting the Liberal Party which made it unable to meet Labour’s challenge in the medium term’, and that because of this it was ‘the most important single cause of the Liberal decline.’⁴²³ One of the most commonly cited of these events is the crisis of December 1916, which led to Asquith resigning as Prime Minister and being replaced by Lloyd George, with Unionist and some Liberal and Labour support.⁴²⁴ As with the Asquith Coalition of May 1915, the Liberal grass-roots’ reaction to the formation of the Lloyd George Coalition will provide empirical evidence for a crucial question: did the formation of the Lloyd George Coalition of itself create divisions in the Liberal Party at large, or did such divisions occur during the rest of the wartime Parliament or afterwards?

The most telling evidence for the origins of a split in the Liberal Party, consequently leading to more immediate factors for the Liberal Party’s downfall as a party of government, is during the fall of Asquith in December 1916. The fact that the Walthamstow LA met on 4 December during the crisis and chose to pass a resolution is fortunate as it provides an insight into grass-roots Liberalism during this period of great political interest. They unanimously expressed their ‘satisfaction at the retention of the Premiership by Mr Asquith, believing that there is the best guarantee for a successful prosecution of the war in his balanced and sagacious statesmanship’.⁴²⁵

⁴²² J. Stevenson, *British Society, 1914-45* (London, 1984), chapters 2-3.

⁴²³ Hart, ‘The Liberals, the war, and the franchise’, pp. 821-822.

⁴²⁴ Edward, ‘Liberal Party divided’, p. 513; A. J. P. Taylor, ‘Politics in the First World War’, in A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Politics in Wartime and other Essays* (London, 1964), p. 32; Jones, ‘Manchester Liberalism’, p. 54.

⁴²⁵ Walthamstow LA, Council Meeting, 4 December 1916.

After the December 1916 crisis had reached its conclusion (and not in the way that the Walthamstow Liberals anticipated), the Liberal Chief Whip asked for the position of the Executive Committee of the MLF in relation to what had transpired. Their response deeply regretted Asquith's retirement from office and welcomed 'with great satisfaction his declared intention of his continued leadership of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons'. More significantly, they added that 'Rallying to his call', they agreed to support the new government to bring the war to a successful conclusion. This implies that if Asquith's speech of 8 December at the Liberal Club had urged another line of action, the grass-roots might have endorsed it. Most tellingly of all, 'considerable indignation was felt with the conduct of the Press and some of his, Asquith's, old colleagues, but it was felt to be wisest under the circumstances to express no opinion on this matter in conjunction with the resolution of confidence in his, Asquith's, leadership.'⁴²⁶ It is fortunate that this was recorded by the Secretary of the MLF, as other secretaries were more discreet. However, evidence of this censure of Lloyd George in the MLF minutes suggests that a reading of the formalised language in relation to the new Lloyd George government and the lavish praise of Asquith in the other sources indicates antipathy for the former and genuine support for the latter.

The Executive of the Harborough LA were typical in assuring Asquith that 'he remained the honoured leader of the Liberal Party'.⁴²⁷ They added their 'most hearty thanks for his splendid and untiring services to the Nation'.⁴²⁸ By the same token, the executive of the Leicester LA recorded their 'unabated and affectionate confidence in him as Leader of the Liberal Party'.⁴²⁹ The LCNWLF convened the day after the meeting of the Parliamentary Liberal Party at the Reform Club. They resolved 'that this meeting expresses its profound regret at the retirement of the Rt. Hon. H. H. Asquith, M.P. from the Premiership. It places on record its gratitude for the notable services rendered by him to the Nation and its admiration of his splendid gifts of intellect and character. The Federation again renews its allegiance to him as their leader and chief.'⁴³⁰ At a meeting of the Darwen LA, Asquith was described as having been 'a tower of strength in difficult times instancing the House of Lords and Home Rule'.⁴³¹ It is evident that after Asquith's services to the Liberal Party and the nation during

⁴²⁶ MLF, Special Exec., 9 December 1916.

⁴²⁷ Harborough LA, Exec., 16 December 1916; Manchester LF, Special Exec., 12 December 1916.

⁴²⁸ Harborough LA, Exec., 16 December 1916; Penge LA, Special Exec., 15 December 1916.

⁴²⁹ Leicester LA, FGP, 12 December 1916.

⁴³⁰ LCNWLF, Special Exec., 9 December 1916.

⁴³¹ Darwen LA, Exec., 15 January 1917.

the previous ten years, there was genuine gratitude for the battles he had fought under the Liberal banner.

At the same time, it seems that the Liberal grass-roots did not want to burn their bridges with Lloyd George, in that they did not formally disapprove of his actions, but neither did they approve them. The LCNWLF resolved

That this meeting recognising the necessity of national unity in the prosecution of the war resolves that in its judgement the Government of the day should receive the cordial support of all citizens in its efforts to prosecute the war to a successful conclusion; it pledges the members of the Lancashire, Cheshire and North Western Liberal Federation to co-operate loyally and whole-heartedly in the struggle to maintain the freedom of Europe against the arrogant claims of Prussian militarism.⁴³²

Similarly, the Executive of the Leicester LA expressed their ‘firm determination to support His Majesty’s Government in prosecuting the War to a successful issue’⁴³³, and the Manchester LF passed a resolution supporting ‘the King’s government in every possible way ... to prosecute the war to a successful conclusion.’⁴³⁴ As Lloyd George had been a successful Liberal minister before the war, it is likely they would have mentioned their confidence in him to lead the war effort to a successful conclusion if they had retained a favourable impression of him. However, the Harborough Liberals more positively gave ‘the present government their unstinted support’.⁴³⁵ It was the sense that the downfall of Asquith had been ‘manufactured by Lloyd George’ which created the antipathy towards him, and the feeling which Bentley found amongst Liberal MPs at Westminster was also evident at the grass-roots.⁴³⁶

A further viewpoint can be found in the Liberal-leaning *Derbyshire Courier*. Whilst admitting that Lloyd George had not been motivated ‘wholly’ by political motives and conceding that ‘he has done much’ good work, they attacked him for desiring ‘to be the Dictator’. Their anti-Toryism was evident in the comments that ‘The irony of the game which has culminated in the loss to the State of its greatest man, lies in the fact that Mr. Lloyd George has been used by and he has made use of all the elements which voted him fit for the position of first lieutenant to the devil three years ago.’ The editorial also provided a fair assessment of possible future benefits for the Conservatives: ‘If there is any credit accruing

⁴³² LCNWLF, Special Exec., 9 December 1916.

⁴³³ Leicester LA, FGP, 12 December 1916.

⁴³⁴ Manchester LF, Special Exec., 12 December 1916; Penge LA, Special Exec., 15 December 1916; Darwen LA, Exec., 15 January 1917.

⁴³⁵ Harborough LA, Exec., 16 December 1916.

⁴³⁶ Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, p. 43

there-from they will share it; if blame he will carry it. Mr. Bonar Law is not a Canadian Scotsman for naught!’ Their loyalty to Asquith remained strong and they suggested a course of action for the Liberals in opposition to take: ‘A great man said: Wait and see. Let us do so. Mean-time let us be on the watch.’⁴³⁷ It is evident that the ‘Asquith-worship’ that Bernstein identified was present not just in Yorkshire.⁴³⁸

II) Liberal activity during the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916-1918

After the fall of Asquith, it seems that Liberal Associations generally became more active and geared towards electoral concerns than they had been in the first two years of the war. This could have been in direct response to Asquith’s removal from office, but it is more likely that it was due to the passage of Representation of the People Bill. After the redistribution of seats was formalised, the Secretary of the MLF organised a series of local conferences with constituencies in the Midlands, in all probability to prepare them for the changes.⁴³⁹ The LCNWLF also discussed the boundary changes. Unsurprisingly, they realised that their workload would now increase and came to the conclusion that, with the franchise changes, that it might be prudent to employ a woman organiser.⁴⁴⁰ In consequence, a female organiser was engaged by March 1918, and a couple of months later they also decided to employ an assistant-secretary on £275 per annum.⁴⁴¹

Across the country, Liberal Associations met to discuss the proposed boundary changes and the new franchise, which suggests a healthy interest in future electoral competition.⁴⁴² The Leicester LA quite naturally realised that they needed to re-organise after the two-member borough was split into three single-member constituencies.⁴⁴³ The Walthamstow Liberals were faced with the prospect of their one seat becoming two and had to discuss the boundary changes.⁴⁴⁴ It is noteworthy that the Chief Liberal Whip also encouraged reorganisation; after this, the Chester LA discussed re-organisation, which in

⁴³⁷ *Derbyshire Courier*, 9 December 1916.

⁴³⁸ Bernstein, ‘Yorkshire Liberalism’, pp. 118-119.

⁴³⁹ MLF, AGM, 6 July 1917.

⁴⁴⁰ LCNWLF, Exec., 20 November 1917.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1918 and 4 June 1918.

⁴⁴² Harborough LA, Exec., 18 July 1917. As did the Darwen and Chester Liberal Associations: Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 3 June 1917 and Chester LA, Special Exec., 5 June 1917.

⁴⁴³ Leicester LA, Special Exec., 17 August 1917.

⁴⁴⁴ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 29 June 1917.

their case primarily meant drafting new rules and holding a meeting of the new constituency.⁴⁴⁵ In the same way, the Coventry men's and women's Liberal Associations met to discuss new rules.⁴⁴⁶ These led to a new constitution 'which would, in effect, mean the amalgamation' of the Coventry and Coventry and District Women's Liberal Associations.⁴⁴⁷ Likewise, a special meeting of the Executive of the Coventry LA was convened in order to discuss the boundary changes. They protested the fact that Coventry was still going to be represented by only one MP on the grounds that its population officially almost met the required 120,000 population and that 'Coventry's position as a manufacturing and munitions centre entitles it to special consideration as regards Parliamentary Representation.'⁴⁴⁸ In a similar vein, there had been a 'long and important' discussion at the Executive of the Midland Federation on the Speaker's Conference proposals that led to the Representation of the People Act 1918. The Executive was 'wholly favourable' and, even though they did not agree with all of the provisions, they were happy for it to become an Act of Parliament.⁴⁴⁹ Their main reservation was that the Alternative Vote was not included in the eventual Representation of the People Act.⁴⁵⁰ Other Liberals were displeased as well: the Walthamstow LA passed a resolution condemning the House of Lords for removing the Alternative Vote Clause from the Bill, and added that Proportional Representation 'was not suitable for London constituencies'.⁴⁵¹

It is worth comparing the Liberal response to redistribution with that of the Conservatives. Keohane rightly argues that the Conservatives 'possessed a long history of successful manipulation of the reform process', and it seems that some Conservative Associations were a month quicker than their Liberal counterparts in meeting to discuss redistribution.⁴⁵² The constituency distribution was a contributory factor to Conservative success in the interwar period, but it would have required an extreme amount of gerrymandering to prevent this – even in December 1910, Kinnear has calculated that if

⁴⁴⁵ Chester LA, Special Exec., 28 January 1918. For another example of the Chief Whip encouraging reorganisation see Walthamstow LA, Exec., 7 September 1917.

⁴⁴⁶ Coventry LA, Meeting of the Advisory Committee and representatives from the Coventry and District Women's Liberal Association, 24 October 1918.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., Special GM, 9 November 1918

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., Special Exec., 27 October 1917.

⁴⁴⁹ MLF, Exec., 9 February 1917.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., Exec., 15 February 1918.

⁴⁵¹ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 26 January 1918.

⁴⁵² Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, p. 147. Keohane records the Darwen Conservative Association's Executive Committee rejecting Conservative Central Office's plans for redistribution on 9 May 1917. The earliest that a Liberal Association in the sample met to discuss the boundary changes was 3 June; interestingly, this was the Darwen LA.

southern Ireland is excluded from the calculations, in the rest of Great Britain and Northern Ireland the Conservatives won 47.3 per cent of the vote and won 48.2 per cent of the seats.⁴⁵³ Clearly, the Unionists were quick off the mark to retain and extend their advantage, but the Liberals sought to prevent the Tories from obtaining everything in the Conservative interest. It can also be argued that the prime reason that the Conservatives did so well in the interwar period lay in the success of the Conservative appeal and the failure of the Labour and Liberal Parties to articulate an effective alternative, rather than simply advantageous electoral boundaries.⁴⁵⁴

At the AGM of the MLF ‘a view was expressed’ that revisions of the party organisation should be made as early as possible, in order to consider the changes the Representation of the People Act would bring, especially the admission of women to the franchise. At the same time, it was felt that a committee on post-war reconstruction should be established. However, both ideas were deferred until the officers felt it right to call a meeting.⁴⁵⁵ The LCNWLF also passed a resolution on electoral reform which welcomed the report of the Speaker’s Conference as ‘a comprehensive and practical scheme for amending Election and Registration Law’.⁴⁵⁶ The South Westmorland Women’s LA were satisfied that the Conference proposals included women’s suffrage, and additionally wanted the government to accept on the report stage of the Representation of the People Bill an amendment to extend the municipal vote to the wives of men on the local government register.⁴⁵⁷ The Chesterfield LA did not meet between 10 July 1915 and 9 March 1918, a period approaching three years. The March 1918 meeting only seems to have been called because the Hon. Secretary and Treasurer had resigned, as he felt it was ‘impossible’ for him to devote all his time to his duties as the Representation of the People Bill had introduced ‘a completely new system which will require great care and energy to secure success.’⁴⁵⁸ This could be seen as a negative for the Association as they were losing an experienced and loyal member, or a positive as he was honest enough to ask someone else to step in to make the best of the new opportunity. A week later, a subcommittee proposed Charles White of Matlock as his replacement, suggesting that no time was wasted in organising the association

⁴⁵³ Kinnear, *British Voter*, p. 70.

⁴⁵⁴ S. Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain, 1918-1945* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 82-93, 507-512.

⁴⁵⁵ MLF, AGM, 12 May 1917.

⁴⁵⁶ LCNWLF, AGM, 1 May 1917.

⁴⁵⁷ South Westmorland Women’s LA, General Committee, 18 March 1917 and 9 November 1917.

⁴⁵⁸ Chesterfield LA, Exec., 9 March 1918.

on the right footing.⁴⁵⁹ Keohane argues that the Conservative Party's organisation atrophied during the war and that any good work that had been undertaken before the war was lost.⁴⁶⁰ Based on the above evidence, the foundations of Liberal organisations did remain intact, and it was the recruitment campaigns and the changes necessary after the constituency redistribution that reawakened those which had become moribund during the war.

The enfranchisement of women over the age of 30 and the extension of the franchise to all men did not automatically mean that nineteenth-century Liberal shibboleths disappeared. At a garden party organised by the Leicester Women's LA, a speaker recognised 'a new opportunity for good' with the granting of the vote to some women at the national level for the first time in Britain. However, instead of advancing new ideas, she specifically mentioned using 'their new power in the direction of temperance'.⁴⁶¹ Other Liberals also saw the exigencies of war as providing the opportunity to bring about temperance: the South Westmorland Women's LA sent a resolution to the local MP declaring 'in view of the declared shortage of cereals, urges the government to take immediate steps to prohibit the use of all food stuffs for the manufacture of alcoholic beverages, and thus save all available grain for the essential need of the nation.'⁴⁶² The Darwen LA similarly resolved that 'Whilst assuring the government of our warmest support in the effective prosecution of the war, we urge upon them during the present shortage of food stuffs either to abolish entirely or at all events to make further restrictions on the use of grain in the manufacture of beer and spirits, so that more may be available not only for the food of the people, but also for horses, cattle, pigs, and poultry.'⁴⁶³ It seems that limited liquor control through the Central Control Board showed those in favour of temperance that the State had intervened in the alcohol industry in order to assist the war effort, and encouraged them that further intervention along lines they favoured was possible.⁴⁶⁴

The seriousness of the war situation meant that Liberal Associations remained supportive of the war effort and the political truce. The Darwen LA in March 1917 passed a resolution expressing their 'desire to co-operate with all other political parties in loyally supporting the government in vigorously prosecuting the war to a victorious conclusion.'⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., Sub-Committee, 16 March 1918.

⁴⁶⁰ Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, pp. 213-214.

⁴⁶¹ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 18 July 1917.

⁴⁶² South Westmorland Women's LA, General Committee, 18 March 1917.

⁴⁶³ Darwen LA, AGM, 23 March 1918.

⁴⁶⁴ J. Turner, 'State purchase of the liquor trade in the First World War', *Historical Journal*, 23, no. 3 (1980), pp. 589-615.

⁴⁶⁵ Darwen LA, AGM, 31 March 1917.

There was still active co-operation between Liberals and Conservatives during these years. The Secretary of the LCNWLF worked with the Secretary of the regional Conservative organisation to organise a demonstration on War Aims in Blackpool and a conference for the Local War Aims committees in Manchester.⁴⁶⁶ Keohane has described the National War Aims Committee as part of ‘the development of government-endorsed patriotism’, and also cited the Epsom and Worcestershire West Conservative Associations as working closely with Liberals on this committee locally.⁴⁶⁷ Clearly Liberal efforts in a considerable number of constituencies were engaged in work considered to be patriotic. More generally, much Liberal activity was directed towards the war effort and non-partisan ends: the Sittingbourne Liberal Club made arrangements to ‘entertain’ the wounded soldiers of Whitehall Hospital over tea and a whist drive.⁴⁶⁸ Keohane argues that the Conservatives were more adaptable to the challenges of war than the Liberals were, but in the previous chapter it was shown that the Liberals were adaptable by campaigning alongside the Conservatives at recruitment meetings.⁴⁶⁹ Even after the fall of Asquith, many Liberals at the grass-roots were willing and able to co-operate and support the government in order to win the war.

Nonetheless, even though there was co-operation with other political parties, the Liberal identity remained; this would be a beneficial thing if the party wished to continue on its pre-war basis. At a meeting of the MLF Executive Committee, ‘the present position of the party was discussed ... it was felt that the [Speaker’s] conference had cleared up a position which presented many points of difficulty and doubt.’⁴⁷⁰ There is no doubt that the fall of Asquith changed the situation that the Liberals found themselves in. Nonetheless, the Liberals still publicly and privately remained loyal to the spirit of the party truce, and thus they were concerned that if Sir John Simon came to the Midlands to discuss the Speaker’s proposals, there should be a Unionist with him and only when the Bill was before Parliament.⁴⁷¹ Indeed, it was resolved by the Walthamstow LA that ‘it was not in the best interests of the Liberal Party in the division’ that Sir John Simon should speak in his own constituency.⁴⁷²

However, beneath the surface of the party truce, tensions were now beginning to boil over. At the MLF’s AGM, a delegate from Newcastle-under-Lyme wanted ‘a strong denunciation’ of the coalition government. More importantly, his demand was greeted with

⁴⁶⁶ LCNWLF, Exec., 20 November 1917.

⁴⁶⁷ Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, p. 109.

⁴⁶⁸ Sittingbourne Liberal Club, CM, 14 January 1918.

⁴⁶⁹ Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, p. 215.

⁴⁷⁰ MLF, Exec., 9 February 1917.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4 April 1917.

⁴⁷² Walthamstow LA, Special Exec., 21 March 1917.

‘strong approval by the majority’ of the 120 members present.⁴⁷³ Of course, the delegate was no different in sentiment from the Conservative MP Basil Peto, who had ‘lambasted’ the Asquith Coalition ‘on the broadest grounds’ at the AGM of the Devizes Conservative Association in April 1916.⁴⁷⁴ At the AGM of the MLF, the Newcastle-under-Lyme delegate did not want a report from the Federation but instead a ‘political manifesto.’⁴⁷⁵ This suggests some grass-roots dissatisfaction with the Liberal leadership at Westminster and a desire to prepare for the future. With the benefit of hindsight, such activity would have been useful, but was it really feasible during the political truce? Keohane is right that patriotism could not fully stifle rank and file dissent, but in the Liberal case it certainly did an effective job.⁴⁷⁶ One member of the Walthamstow LA wrote to ask ‘how far’ Liberal Associations ‘could go without breaking the truce’.⁴⁷⁷ Unfortunately, no answer was recorded. It is clear, however, that the Liberals felt there were severe limitations on what they could undertake publicly.

There were certainly signs of activity to prepare for future electoral contests whilst still remaining faithful to the political truce. The Secretary of the MLF made 26 visits to constituencies between 21 September 1917 and 15 February 1918. There was further activity at the regional level; for the ‘organisation of women voters’, Miss Robson had been allocated from Headquarters and had started work 7 February 1918.⁴⁷⁸ When her health failed after several weeks’ work, Miss Madden of London was appointed in her place.⁴⁷⁹ Likewise, when Miss Madden’s work ceased at the end of October 1918, a Miss Harvey replaced her – frequent changes amongst female staff in political organisations, whilst not desirable, were common enough for all parties in this period.⁴⁸⁰ Furthermore, ‘a large number’ of meetings of ‘a general character’ were beginning to be held. As well as featuring G. R. Thorne, Walter Runciman and Herbert Samuel, the meetings also included Herbert Fisher, Minister of Education in the Coalition government.⁴⁸¹ Could too much be made of the split in December 1916? It seems that these Liberals had no issue with Fisher going to a Liberal meeting, which raises the question as to whether they yet saw the party as being divided. The Liberals also seemed to be aware of a threat on their left flank: the Walthamstow LA recorded receiving ‘an important letter’ from the Liberal Whips regarding Co-operative and Labour candidates,

⁴⁷³ MLF, AGM, 6 July 1917.

⁴⁷⁴ Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, p. 47.

⁴⁷⁵ MLF, AGM, 6 July 1917.

⁴⁷⁶ Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, p. 47.

⁴⁷⁷ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 18 January 1918.

⁴⁷⁸ MLF, Exec., 15 February 1918.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 26 April 1918.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 31 January 1919.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 15 February 1918.

with the advice that Liberal co-operatives should join the local organisation, attend meetings and ‘follow the proceedings throughout with vigilance’.⁴⁸² A member of the Liberal Co-operative committee toured the north-west for three days in June 1918 advising the same policy.⁴⁸³ Clearly, the Liberal machine was preparing the ground to maintain its pre-war electoral position.

The Liberals at the grass-roots also kept one eye on their old adversary the Conservative Party: the Liberals at the MLF were concerned about the activity of the Tariff Reform League in their area, as it had ‘recently opened 100 branches in two counties only.’⁴⁸⁴ Subsequently, a Free Trade Emergency Committee was formed, and Vernon Pugh of the Coventry LA became its President.⁴⁸⁵ This suggests that some Liberals (and Unionists) maintained political activity through these supposedly non-party bodies. Nevertheless, on the whole the party truce was adhered to, as seen in a resolution put forward by Kenyon in Chesterfield to place ‘on record’ their ‘whole-hearted approval of the continued action of the Liberal Party in its determined and unwavering support of the government ‘during the grave crisis of war.’⁴⁸⁶ Kenyon’s loyalty to the government is different in tone to the vigilance which the *Derbyshire Courier* had suggested at the formation of the Lloyd George government.

However, whilst the Liberal Party organisation in certain parts of the country was active during the war, in other places the associations had become moribund. The Chairman of the Walsall LA when proposing a social gathering for November 1917 said ‘it was now so long since we met, owing to the party truce, that we were beginning to forget one another’.⁴⁸⁷ The war years also depleted the ranks of Liberal activists and leaders, not only through war casualties but by natural causes. For example, the agent for Droitwich, Lieutenant Ernest Turner, died in action in France, and Brigadier General Hornby, who represented Shropshire on the Executive of the MLF, was reported as seriously wounded.⁴⁸⁸ After not meeting for three years, the Executive of the Chesterfield LA was informed of the deaths of five activists and committee members.⁴⁸⁹ Chesterfield is an important example as it one of the dilapidated constituencies that had a sitting Liberal MP. This suggests that a simple co-relation of

⁴⁸² Walthamstow LA, Exec., 18 January 1918.

⁴⁸³ LCNWLF, Exec., 2 July 1918.

⁴⁸⁴ MLF, AGM, 6 July 1917.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Exec., 21 September 1917 and 15 February 1918.

⁴⁸⁶ Chesterfield LA, AGM, 11 May 1918.

⁴⁸⁷ Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 46.

⁴⁸⁸ MLF, Exec., 21 September 1917, 26 April 1918.

⁴⁸⁹ Chesterfield LA, Exec., 9 March 1918.

constituencies without Liberal MPs as moribund whilst those with MPs were active is incorrect.

Undoubtedly, the Liberal Party was not as resourceful during the war as it had been before its outbreak. The Midland Branch of the Liberal agents society recorded not meeting much in 1917 and 1918 due to the war.⁴⁹⁰ In Walthamstow, the Secretary of the Young Liberals joined the navy, further adding to the picture that patriotic duty and the war effort led to a weaker and less organised party apparatus.⁴⁹¹ Other Liberals who remained on the home front had less time for party work due to their commitment to war work. The Hon. Secretary of the South Westmorland Women's LA became a member of the Order of the British Empire for her work with the V.A.D. Hospital, which certainly would have taken her time away from Liberal affairs.⁴⁹² When the Blackpool LA was reconstituted as a result of the Representation of the People Act, one lady stated she was unable to attend as she was 'out of town on war work'.⁴⁹³ In some instances, the effect of the war could be to loosen historic ties to the Liberal Party. In March 1917, the Blackpool LA created a separate organisation called 'the Blackpool Municipal Progressive Association', even though the Chairman disagreed with the formation of a separate body without the Liberal name.⁴⁹⁴ The attitude of the Blackpool executive had changed during the war, as in 1913 they were explicitly clear that 'in order to win elections they must be fought on strictly party lines'.⁴⁹⁵ However, the main issue for most associations would be the turnover of personnel, a problem not unique either to the Liberal Party or to wartime. At the start of January 1917, the Treasurer of the Walthamstow LA resigned, for unknown reasons. At the same meeting, the minute-taker lamented that there were only three members present besides the three officers, once again reinforcing how the war limited the appeal and time available for party work.⁴⁹⁶ The AGM was also indefinitely postponed, and it is reasonable to calculate that this was due to the difficulty of securing a satisfactory attendance.⁴⁹⁷

Some Liberal Clubs were in difficulty during the war, and the South Westmorland Women's LA were asked by the local Liberal Club to provide a grant to help with their expenses. Due to 'the difficulty of finding people with sufficient leisure to work the districts',

⁴⁹⁰ *The Liberal Agent*, Vol. 21, no. 93, July 1918.

⁴⁹¹ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 7 September 1917.

⁴⁹² South Westmorland Women's LA, General Committee, 14 January 1918.

⁴⁹³ Blackpool LA, Exec., 18 March 1918.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 March 1917.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 November 1913.

⁴⁹⁶ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 5 January 1917.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Special Exec., 21 March 1917.

it was decided that subscriptions should not be collected for that year, reiterating the difficulty of attracting enough support for routine party work during the war.⁴⁹⁸ However, one should not over-emphasise the negatives: at a women's meeting in Walthamstow, it was recorded that 52 new members had been enrolled, and the Sittingbourne Liberal Club was also recruiting new members.⁴⁹⁹ Perhaps the war work they undertook did bring political benefits: the Sittingbourne Liberal Club had made arrangements to 'entertain' the wounded soldiers of Whitehall Hospital over tea and a whist drive.⁵⁰⁰ The fact that Kenyon stated he was staying loyal to the Liberals as he 'would not under any circumstances throw over his friends' and that 'it was his intention to adhere to the political principles he had always advocated' suggests that there were positives to the Liberal position in the final year of the war, and that Liberals did not see themselves as being replaced by Labour, otherwise Kenyon would have taken the opportunity to become a Labour candidate.⁵⁰¹

Notwithstanding these losses and setbacks, the Liberals began to prepare for an election which they seem to have expected would be held in the spring or summer of 1919. The MLF organised a 'cinematic tour', which was underway by early October 1918 and due to finish on 31 March 1919, but the general election cut the tour short.⁵⁰² The Coventry LA can be seen to be preparing for a future general election as in July 1917 they secured a candidate for the division.⁵⁰³ Across the Midlands as a whole, reorganisation was being undertaken seriously by April 1918 but some constituencies presented 'a rather difficult problem.'⁵⁰⁴ By October 1918, the male and female Secretaries of the MLF had visited numerous constituencies in relation to reorganisation.⁵⁰⁵

The Chesterfield LA had a balance in hand of just over £13 in May 1918 – a not unfavourable position as at least they were not in debt before any election campaign.⁵⁰⁶ Likewise, the South Westmorland Women's LA had a balance in hand of £14.⁵⁰⁷ Several constituencies were in an even stronger financial position: in Walthamstow there was a balance in hand of £195 in April 1918 and in Darwen in March 1918 there was a balance of

⁴⁹⁸ South Westmorland Women's LA, Emergency Committee, 5 January 1917.

⁴⁹⁹ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 31 May 1918; Sittingbourne Liberal Club, CM, 5 February 1917, 14 January 1918.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 14 January 1918.

⁵⁰¹ Chesterfield LA, Exec., 6 April 1918.

⁵⁰² MLF, Exec., 31 January 1919.

⁵⁰³ Coventry LA, Special Meeting of the Association, 28 July 1917.

⁵⁰⁴ MLF, Exec., 26 April 1918.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 18 October 1918.

⁵⁰⁶ Chesterfield LA, AGM, 11 May 1918.

⁵⁰⁷ South Westmorland Women's LA, General Committee, 9 November 1917.

£225.⁵⁰⁸ Brown's research suggests that for the Labour Party in Scotland, 'finance was really the key obstacle' when trying to select and run candidates in 1918.⁵⁰⁹ However, the financial information available suggests that the Liberal Party did not particularly suffer from this issue in 1918. The strong financial position in Walthamstow, for example, allowed Sir John Simon and E. J. Horniman to be adopted as Liberal candidates for Walthamstow East and West respectively in February 1918 in plenty of time before a likely general election.⁵¹⁰

There are several issues during the period December 1916 to the end of 1918 which were only raised in one constituency or regional body. The LCNWLF passed the following resolution unanimously in May 1917:

The meeting welcomes this co-operation not only for the great material assistance which the United States of America can bring to the common cause, but even more for the moral support which it gives to the principles for which the allies are contending, the Sanctity of Treaties, the Rights of small nations and the cause of Civilisation, Freedom and Humanity.⁵¹¹

The above resolution provides further weight to the argument in chapter two that the invasion of Belgium was particularly important in securing Liberal support for the war effort – the rights of small nations and for freedom was being defended against Prussian militarism. In another way, the following resolution highlights how the conception of Liberty was important to the Liberals: the LCNWLF also resolved unanimously that they were: 'profoundly moved by the successful establishment of free institutions in Russia', and they sent their 'heartfelt congratulations to the Russian parties of progress on the triumph of their efforts'.⁵¹²

Besides the idea of Liberty, more tangible domestic issues arose in resolutions as well. The LCNWLF also resolved unanimously 'its emphatic protest' against the Indian Cotton Duties as it raised 'a controversial subject during a period of political truce', as well as harming the Lancashire cotton trade and 'millions of the poorest of our fellow subjects in India'.⁵¹³ At Westminster, the Liberal split over the Indian Cotton Duties is often cited as evidence of serious and increasing Liberal division during the war, which is then used to explain why they performed so poorly in the 1918 general election and beyond.⁵¹⁴ The recorded evidence from the north-west suggests that the regional body did disagree with the

⁵⁰⁸ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 5 April 1918.

⁵⁰⁹ Brown, 'Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland', p. 67.

⁵¹⁰ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 9 February 1918 and Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 23 March 1918.

⁵¹¹ LCNWLF, AGM, 1 May 1917.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ P. Adleman, *The Decline of the Liberal Party, 1910-1931* (Harlow, Second Edn., 1995).

government's policy but that there was no serious division amongst Liberals, as the mention of the political truce implies that the Liberals were working within the framework of unity during the war. Even if other Liberals were supporting policies that they disagreed with, the normal party framework can be seen as dormant and given such there was no need for any animosity amongst Liberals as long as their divisions stayed within the parameters of the party truce.

The Maurice debate is also taken to be an important sign of Liberal division during the war.⁵¹⁵ In a letter to *The Times* on 7 May 1918, Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice accused the government of misleading Parliament about the strength of British forces during the German Spring Offensive in the March of that year. Asquith moved for an inquiry into Maurice's statement and pressed the motion to a division after Lloyd George had taken it to be a vote of censure. It was the first occasion during the war that the opposition front bench had voted against the government on an issue of confidence. The episode is also significant because it was perceived to be the litmus test of who could be counted on as supporters of Lloyd George rather than of Asquith. Yet, in the constituencies this issue did not receive recorded comment, suggesting that although this may have been a significant issue at Westminster, at the grass-roots it was not as important in creating Liberal divisions. Instead, some of the rank and file commented on other issues. On the issue of profiteering, The Darwen LA resolved that the 'increase by any considerable amount of private capital during the war is inconsistent with the sacrifice that is being made by the soldiers and sailors, and strongly urges upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer to make by increased taxation private accumulation of wealth during the war impossible.'⁵¹⁶ In the previous chapter, it was noted that the Leicester LA had made a similar resolution at an earlier stage in the war.

More traditional Liberal issues still received some comment: the Darwen LA wanted to settle the 'Irish Question' by immediately 'giving effect to Home Rule in such a way as to satisfy the just hopes and aspirations of Irishmen not only in Ireland but in our Colonies and thus consolidate the unity and the military strength of the Empire at this great crisis in our history.'⁵¹⁷ This suggests that Wilson's argument that Irish Conscription would only be accepted by Liberal and Labour MPs if Home Rule immediately followed conscription has merit and that Irish conscription would be tolerated as wartime expediency at the grass-roots

⁵¹⁵ Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, p 120. For a longer treatment of the Maurice debate see J. Gooch, 'The Maurice Debate 1918', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 3, no. 4 (1968), pp. 211-228.

⁵¹⁶ Darwen LA, AGM, 31 March 1917.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Annual Executive Meeting, 28 March 1918.

if the historic goal of Home Rule was to be achieved.⁵¹⁸ At the Darwen Women's LA AGM in September 1917, the relevance of traditional Liberalism was put as follows: 'the old watchwords of Liberalism were still applicable even in these difficult times ... For peace we were all anxiously waiting for, Retrenchment we were all obliged to put into practice, and reform we all feel to be necessary in many directions.'⁵¹⁹ The available evidence suggests that Liberals remained loyal to Asquith as leader of the Party during the remainder of the war. In June 1918, the Walthamstow LA resolved that they had 'complete confidence' in Asquith, and agreed with him that a League of Nations 'would be the only step to guard the world against future war'. They also passed a resolution attacking the 'disgraceful attacks made upon the honour and integrity of Mr Asquith'.⁵²⁰ As will be seen in the following section and the following chapters, the Liberal support for a League of Nations was consistent and enthusiastic; one example of this was at Walthamstow, where at a very early stage a meeting on the League of Nations was organised for 27 July 1918.⁵²¹

On 29 November 1917, a letter was published from Lord Lansdowne, Leader of the Conservative Party in the House of Lords 1903-1916, which called for a negotiated peace with Germany. Turner argues that 'the Lansdowne affair polarised politics in a way which had not previously been thought possible, and prepared the ground at last for a general election which might reflect the balance of political power during the war.'⁵²² The *Leicester Daily Mercury* was sympathetic to Lord Lansdowne's letter. The editorial felt Asquith's objectives at the beginning of the war were still wholly appropriate. It also was against 'reckless' talk of 'smashing Germany', although it agreed with Asquith there must be 'reparation for wrong, and security against its reoccurrence, placing the greater emphasis upon security.'⁵²³ However, besides the *Leicester Daily Mercury's* response, there is no recorded comment about Lord Lansdowne's letter at the grass-roots of the Liberal Party. This certainly raises doubts as to whether it was the Lansdowne letter that polarised politics before the end of the war.

The historiography of the period has exaggerated the poor position of the Liberal Party during the war. In his otherwise excellent study, Keohane argues that the Conservative position 'can be contrasted with the dismemberment of the already fragile machine of the

⁵¹⁸ Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, p. 116.

⁵¹⁹ Darwen Women's LA, AGM, 26 September 1917.

⁵²⁰ Walthamstow LA, Exec., 27 June 1918.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 19 July 1918.

⁵²² Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*, p. 229.

⁵²³ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 30 November 1917.

Liberal Party by the time of redistribution'.⁵²⁴ However, whilst the war did put some Liberal Associations to sleep, much of the evidence in this and the previous chapter shows the Liberal grass-roots to be in a remarkably similar position to the Tories – reduced subscriptions, a keen eye on redistribution (for the sleeping associations, it was their wake-up call), war work and an attempt to be ready to embrace the newly enfranchised female electorate.⁵²⁵ This section of the thesis has expanded on the important research that Bernstein undertook regarding Yorkshire Liberalism. A wide array of issues and events were of significance to Liberals across the country and to varying degrees. The Representation of the People Act 1918 and the constituency redistribution that accompanied this was, unsurprisingly, the main concern of most Liberal Associations. The evidence shows that reorganisation was under way, but its effectiveness can be doubted as during wartime the immediate political efficiency of the Party machine was unimportant, and conscription had taken away the patriotic need for effective party organisations. Compared to before the war, there was a lack of concern for social reform from Liberals, but in its place were patriotic concerns for the war effort and political co-operation. More signs of discontent were evident after the fall of the Asquith coalition, but there was never any demand for the Liberals to renounce the political truce. During the war, apart from the lack of concern for social reform, there were no signs at the grass-roots of the Liberal Party to suggest a changing of the guard with respect to the positions of the Liberal and Labour Parties – the idea that the Liberals would not have been either the government or the Official Opposition after the war would have seemed absurd. Party activity had increased after the constituency redistribution but politics in early November 1918, at the local level at least, were not polarised and the party truce still had an important bearing on the activity of all three political parties. It was primarily the coupon election of 1918 that brought political partisanship back to the fore.

III) The 'Coupon' election of 1918

The election called after the Armistice had been signed for December 1918 has generated much debate in the political historiography of this period.⁵²⁶ Lloyd George's decision to seek the continuation of the Coalition into peace-time by seeking an alliance with the Conservative

⁵²⁴ Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, p. 157.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.153-160.

⁵²⁶ B. McGill, 'Lloyd George's timing of the 1918 election', *Journal of British Studies*, 14, no. 1 (1974), pp. 109-124.

Party whilst excluding half of the Liberal Party affected both the course of the 1918 general election and the unity of the Liberal Party for the next decade. Those candidates formally endorsed by Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law, the leader of the Conservative Party, were distinguished by a letter signed by the two informing the recipient that they were officially recognised as the Coalition nominee. As this device implicitly condemned all non-recipients as enemies of the Coalition, Asquith famously dubbed the letter as a ‘coupon’, after which the election is better known.⁵²⁷ The Coalition returned 523 MPs against 184 MPs for all of the other parties combined.⁵²⁸ It was clearly a landslide victory for the Coalition and a crippling result for the Independent Liberals (who were also known as Free Liberals), who were only able to obtain 36 MPs which put them behind Sinn Fein who had 73 MPs and the Labour Party which had 57. As Sinn Fein never took up their seats in Parliament this allowed the Labour Party to obtain the status of his Majesty’s Official Opposition as the largest remaining party. This leads to the prime importance of the 1918 general election in the historiography of the fortunes of the Liberal Party, as it has been argued that this election ‘was the crucial event in destroying the political viability of the Liberal Party’.⁵²⁹ The crisis of December 1916 when Lloyd George replaced Asquith as Prime Minister is cited as being important, but it is argued that it was the Coupon election which formalised the split, and hence its importance.⁵³⁰ Bogdanor sums up the importance of the Coupon: the fact that Lloyd George, a Liberal, was the head of a coalition against the Independent Liberals suggested that the Liberals were ‘irresponsible and could not be trusted with power’.⁵³¹

In the extensive literature concerning the 1918 general election, there is the argument that the Coalition victory in 1918 was primarily the personal victory of Lloyd George, as he was the ‘man who won the war’.⁵³² Evidence for this can be found in the volume of references in support of Lloyd George not only by candidates of all the coalition parties, but also by Independent Liberals as well.⁵³³ An alternative explanation for the huge Coalition victory is the argument that the 1918 election was a lurch to the right.⁵³⁴ The crucial points

⁵²⁷ Douglas, ‘Background to the “Coupon” election arrangements’, pp. 318-36.

⁵²⁸ The Coalition figure includes the 50 non-coupon Conservatives candidates who were returned.

⁵²⁹ Bernstein, ‘Yorkshire Liberalism’ p. 129.

⁵³⁰ Campbell, *Lloyd George*, p. 15; Wilson, ‘The Coupon and the British General Election of 1918’, pp. 36-37.

⁵³¹ V. Bogdanor, ‘Riding the tiger: the Liberal experience of Coalition Government’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 72 (2011), p. 6.

⁵³² Constantine, *Lloyd George*, p. 55; Dutton, *History of the Liberal Party*, pp. 79-80.

⁵³³ Turner, *British Politics and the Great War*, p. 325.

⁵³⁴ Ball, ‘1916-1929’, p. 233; M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939* (Oxford, 2nd edn., 1993), p. 193; J. Ramsden., *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902-1940* (London, 1978), p. 115; Wilson, ‘The Coupon and the British General Election of 1918’, pp. 39-42.

are that the Conservatives' pre-war stances were vindicated and that during the war public opinion moved towards issues that were Conservative strengths, manifested in anti-alien laws and the demand for the punishment of the Kaiser in the 1918 general election. However, one important argument against the lurch to the right thesis is the proposition that the Coalition manifesto was progressive and that many voters were voting for 'Homes fit for heroes', together with other policies not traditionally associated with the right.⁵³⁵ Yet, whilst this is important for consideration of Independent Liberal prospects against Coalition candidates, the point still remains valid that the 1918 election was held on grounds most favourable to the Conservative Party. Crucially, what connects the lurch to the right and the man who won the war theses is that the Conservatives were willing to win the war at whatever cost, which led to their support of Lloyd George. The question remains whether the Conservatives would have benefited from their actions during the war even without the personal prestige of Lloyd George.

In Walsall, there was no official coalition candidate. Sir Richard Cooper was the Independent (Conservative) Coalition candidate and he stated that he was a supporter of the government but that he would retain his independence if elected. Most of his desire for independence seems to have been to demand a stronger punishment for Germany than he thought the Coalition government would deliver.⁵³⁶ In Coventry, the Coalition Conservative candidate also advocated harsh terms for Germany.⁵³⁷ The Secretary of the MLF provided a telling comment regarding the newly-enfranchised women: 'it was not too much to say that whatever class they belonged to they gave in the buck an anti-German vote'. He further argued that Lloyd George's 'violent declarations against the Kaiser and Germany' appealed to mothers, wives and daughters, as they were still 'smarting under the sense of bereavement, loss, suffering and damages.'⁵³⁸ This correlates with the private report that Guest gave to Lloyd George, where it is stated 'reports agree that women showed more determination even than the men in demanding full war indemnity from Germany and punishment of the Kaiser and his fellow criminals'. Guest also felt that these appeals 'undoubtedly brought votes which would otherwise have gone to Labour'.⁵³⁹ The Independent Conservative candidate reminded the Walsall electorate that Asquith and the Liberals were responsible for the 'highly unsatisfactory' war effort before Lloyd George and the Conservatives were able to get to the

⁵³⁵ Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, p. 35.

⁵³⁶ *Walsall Observer*, 30 November 1918.

⁵³⁷ *Coventry Herald*, 13 and 14 December 1918.

⁵³⁸ MLF, Exec., 31 January 1919.

⁵³⁹ Guest to Lloyd George, Secret n.d, Lloyd George Papers, F/21/2/57.

crux of the war effort. He associated voting for the Labour Party candidate as voting for ‘Mr Henderson and his blessed fraternity, the German people, and for nearly all the traitors in this country.’⁵⁴⁰

There may be a perceived lurch to the right because the Conservative Party emerged from the war with more credit and justification for its pre-war policies than either the Liberal or Labour Parties. However, one has to be careful when suggesting how far to the right Coalition candidates went. In Bromley, the Conservative Coalition candidate explicitly stated it was important not to go ‘too far’, adding that naturalised Germans should be dealt with individually and not all expelled, as some in his audience wanted. He cited the case of a naturalised German who came to England at six years old and now had an English wife with four sons serving in the army. Of course, he still expected the ex-Kaiser ‘to be brought to justice’ and for Germany to ‘pay a full indemnity’. At the same time, the Liberal candidate in Bromley suffered from a rumour that he was a conscientious objector, which he denied.⁵⁴¹ He blamed the Tories for this ‘trick ... for the purpose of maligning a man of the people and stirring up prejudice against him.’⁵⁴² The Conservative Coalition MP for Liverpool Exchange, whilst campaigning in Chester, stated that the Liberal candidate there ‘wants to treat the Germans kindly’.⁵⁴³ The Coalition Conservative campaign was evidently successful as it was the first election in Chester that there had ‘been a case of a 50 per cent majority’.⁵⁴⁴

Wilson argues that it was not the coupon which was important but ‘the strongly nationalistic emotions engendered by the war’.⁵⁴⁵ Undoubtedly this was important in Manchester, where the Conservatives won all the seats that they contested, even though only three of the eight received coupons.⁵⁴⁶ The *Manchester Guardian* suggested that when the Coalition Conservative candidate for Rusholme called Germans ‘the brutes’ when speaking at meetings, ‘the whole psychology of the transaction is somehow transmuted into a different key’, adding that it was ‘much more enjoyable for Mr Stoker’s audience and Mr Stoker than mere justice should ever be’.⁵⁴⁷ However, it is difficult to disaggregate whether the Conservative success in Manchester and across the country was either a lurch to the right represented in seats gained by the Conservative Party, or whether their success was part of

⁵⁴⁰ *Walsall Observer*, 7 December 1918.

⁵⁴¹ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 5 December 1918.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 12 December 1918.

⁵⁴³ *Cheshire Observer*, 14 December 1918.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 January 1919.

⁵⁴⁵ Wilson, ‘The Coupon and the British General Election of 1918’, p. 41.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵⁴⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 12 December 1918.

the victory for the non-partisan Coalition government led by the man of the hour Lloyd George. Douglas notes the perceptive comment in the *Manchester Guardian* that ‘every Conservative candidate is *ex officio* a Coalition candidate’.⁵⁴⁸ Even when Conservatives never officially had the coupon, the Coalition’s gloss may have stayed with them. Just because the Conservative Party was successful at contesting elections independently in the 1920s, this does not automatically apply to the 1918 general election, where the Coalition could be taken as a non-partisan government.

The argument that there was a lurch to the right can be taken over-stated, especially given the Progressive content in the Coalition manifesto, which further encouraged the electorate to view the Coalition as non-party even if they voted Coalition Conservative. The manifesto was so progressive in character that the Liberal candidate for Walsall raised his concern over recent Conservative conversion to reform.⁵⁴⁹ After the election result had been announced in Faversham, the victorious Coalition Unionist candidate said he saw his majority ‘as a majority for Lloyd George and the government’, adding ‘that he would do his best to see the great programme of social reform, put forward by Mr Lloyd George was carried out’, as well as referring to punishment for Germany and the expulsion of ‘enemy aliens’.⁵⁵⁰ This quote highlights the difficulty historians face when analysing the 1918 general election, when a consistent use of Lloyd George’s prestige by the Conservatives and the regular promise of social reform balanced the lurch to right regarding the punishment of Germany and the removal of enemy aliens.

There is also evidence to suggest that some of the Liberal rank and file were affected by the non-partisan appeal of the Coalition. In the first recorded meeting of the Southend LA since July 1914, in early November 1918 they discussed whether they should put forward a candidate at the next election. They agreed to secure a candidate ‘by a large majority with three dissents’.⁵⁵¹ Given the co-operation with the Conservatives across the country during the war and given that Lloyd George, still ostensibly a Liberal, was in coalition with the Tories, it is not surprising that some Liberals wanted to continue this co-operation and not put up their own candidate. Although the scale of the dissent was limited, it is still evidence of active Liberal supporters not wishing to run their own candidate and therefore it is not surprising that some of the electorate would also favour a continued political truce.

⁵⁴⁸ Douglas, ‘Background to the “Coupon” election arrangements’, p. 38.

⁵⁴⁹ *Walsall Observer*, 30 November 1918.

⁵⁵⁰ *Faversham News*, 4 January 1919.

⁵⁵¹ Southend LA, GM, 1 November 1918.

According to a minute by the LCNWLF, it seems that ‘no action [was to be] taken during the General Election by the officials of the Federation with regard to the Election in any particular constituency’.⁵⁵² It was noted that the Woman Organisers work ‘ceased at the beginning of the election’.⁵⁵³ These two occurrences may seem particularly strange as it was during an election that the work of the officials and organisers reached a fever pitch. This could be interpreted as further evidence of the power of non-party feelings, as well as the confusion over which candidates to support. In Darwen, the victorious Coalition Conservative candidate thanked those Liberals who had voted him in as ‘the real Coalition candidate’, suggesting that the Coalition Conservatives appreciated how Liberal voters favoured a continuation of the wartime coalition and not an immediate return to partisan politics.⁵⁵⁴ It was claimed in the newspaper report on nominations that the Coalition Conservative candidate for Blackpool had received nominations from ‘all parties’.⁵⁵⁵ In Westmorland, the Coalition Conservative was elected unopposed, and this could reflect a sense of non-partisanship or a weakness on the part of the Liberals.⁵⁵⁶ Blackpool provides an example of the process that some Liberal Associations would go through when selecting a candidate in 1918, demonstrating how both weakness and strength, and local circumstances, could dictate events. In early November 1918, the Blackpool LA voiced their ‘inability to secure a local man as Liberal candidate’ and therefore ‘empowered’ the committee to ‘negotiate for a suitable coalition candidate’.⁵⁵⁷ After Charles Frederick Critchley put himself forward as the Progressive Coalition candidate, the Council of the Blackpool LA agreed ‘not to nominate a Liberal’ and decided to give Critchley ‘all the support’ that they could.⁵⁵⁸ In Darwen, after repeated attempts and the announcement of the general election, Hindle agreed to once again contest the seat.⁵⁵⁹ Brown has suggested that Liberal candidates in 1918 were ‘last minute responses to Coalition tactics’.⁵⁶⁰ This may have been the case in Blackpool, where the Liberals were evidently unable to come to a satisfactory agreement with the Conservatives, but in seats like Darwen, Liberal candidates were responses to the announcement of the election rather than being late in the field in order to counter coalition strategy.

⁵⁵² LCNWLF, Exec., 8 November 1918.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 21 January 1919.

⁵⁵⁴ *Darwen News*, 4 January 1919.

⁵⁵⁵ *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 6 December 1918.

⁵⁵⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 7 December 1918.

⁵⁵⁷ Blackpool LA, Exec., 7 November 1918.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., Adjourned meeting of the Council, 19 November 1918.

⁵⁵⁹ Darwen LA, Candidate Selection Meeting, 12 October 1918, Exec., 16 November 1918.

⁵⁶⁰ Brown, ‘Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland’, p. 72.

The poor Liberal results in the selected case-study constituencies in the Home Counties reflects the disappointing results across that whole region. No Independent Liberals were elected there and only five Coalition Liberals, as against 75 Coalition Conservatives, four National and Democratic Labour and one Labour Party candidate. The varied nature of the results in the selected case-study constituencies are worth considering as they highlight various Liberal disasters, in a region where the Liberals had been previously weak, but not to this extent. In Bromley, the Coalition Conservative won in a straight fight with the Independent Liberal, achieving a staggering 79.5 per cent of the vote. On the one hand, the result at Walthamstow East could be considered a little better, as the winning Coalition Conservative only took 63.3 per cent of the poll, but on the other hand, it was Sir John Simon, a leading figure, who lost his seat. The result in Walthamstow West was arguably just as bad for the Liberals, who were pushed into third place with 19.1 per cent by the Labour candidate and the winning Coalition National Democratic and Labour candidate. It was a similar story in Southend, except this time the Liberal candidate was knocked into third place with only 15.1 per cent against an Independent Conservative and the victorious Coalition Conservative. Worst of all, in Faversham, no Liberal candidate stood and the defeated Labour candidate was the only alternative to the Coalition Conservative nominee. It is these instances in Walthamstow West and Southend where the Liberals came third and in Faversham where they did not fight that in future electoral contests provided validity to the argument that voting for the Liberals let the ‘other’ party in. The ‘coupon’ election in 1918 is important in the fact that it challenged the pre-war narrative that voting Labour let the Conservatives in; now, in many seats Labour were in the stronger position to challenge the Conservatives.

In the Midlands, there was a slightly better position, with seven Independent Liberals (8.9 per cent of the total for the Midlands) being elected against eleven Coalition Liberals, 54 Conservatives, 13 Labour and five who belonged to other parties. Out of the case-studies selected for the Midlands, only one Liberal (14.3 per cent) was returned for the seven seats under examination. However, even this can be contested. It has to be pointed out that the Tory *Derbyshire Times* recorded Kenyon’s adoption meeting and clearly stated that ‘Kenyon was adopted by the Liberal Association on Saturday as Coalition candidate.’⁵⁶¹ It suggests that they perceived him to be a Coalition candidate, and in doing so tacitly supported him. More importantly, in September 1918 the Liberals had presumed that a general election would occur in the foreseeable future, and after ‘a long discussion’ had decided ‘that as Mr

⁵⁶¹ *Derbyshire Times*, 7 December 1918.

Kenyon's principles and record were so well known it would be more expedient if he were nominated as a Coalition Liberal' rather than an Independent Liberal.⁵⁶² These facts would explain why Kenyon was re-elected unopposed.

In the north-west one independent Liberal, ten Coalition Liberals, 57 Conservatives, and sixteen Labour and two other MPs were elected. In contrast with the Home Counties, there are slightly more positive results for the Liberals in the north-west. In Blackpool, the independent candidate who had the support of the Liberal organisation came second behind the victorious Coalition Conservative, whilst the Labour candidate lost his deposit. Similarly, in the city of Chester the official Liberal candidate finished second behind the victorious Coalition Conservative, with the Labour nominee third, and this positioning was replicated in Darwen.

It is important to appreciate that to a large extent, the occurrence and results of the contests led to a realignment of the electorate. In all three constituencies in Leicester, the only alternative to voting for a Coalition candidate was to vote Labour. Likewise, it was recorded that in Northamptonshire 'an attempt was made to divide the four seats between the Liberal and Conservative Parties'.⁵⁶³ The results of the election were even more telling. In Coventry, the Coalition Conservative candidate won in a five-way contest, in which the Liberal candidate came a poor third with only 10.7 per cent of votes cast, thus losing his deposit. Walsall was won by Cooper of the National Party, while the Liberal candidate finished third. In both Walsall and Coventry, this was the first time the Labour Party had contested the seat and they pushed the Liberals into third place. In Harborough, Harris stood as the Liberal candidate and narrowly retained second place while the Coalition Conservative won.

According to the definition of the Midlands taken by the Liberal regional body there were 75 constituencies in the area with 76 seats (Derby being a two-member borough).⁵⁶⁴ 62 seats were contested whilst 14 seats went uncontested. The unopposed returns consisted of nine Coalition Unionists, one Coalition Liberal, three Liberals and one Liberal-Labour man. Even counting the latter five together, the Liberals were already at a disadvantage in the new House. The MLF's analysis of successful candidates at the 1918 general election showed 41 Coalition Unionists, one Unionist, two Coalition Labour, fourteen Labour, eight Coalition Liberals, eight 'Free Liberals' and two Independents. After the results, the Labour Party in

⁵⁶² Chesterfield LA, Special Sub-Committee of the LC, 23 September 1918.

⁵⁶³ MLF, Exec., 31 January 1919.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid. This is slightly different to the one taken in the thesis – see the Introduction for author's calculation of Midland seats.

the Midlands was almost twice as large as the Independent Liberals. The MLF recorded that the Coalition Unionist vote was 406,642, the Coalition Liberal 122,244 and Free Liberal 163,503. They made a point of noting that their total was ‘a majority of 40,000 voters over the Coalition Liberal voters’.⁵⁶⁵ Based on these figures, every seat the Coalition Unionists won required 9,918 votes, but for every seat the Coalition Liberals won it was 15,281 votes and for every seat the Free Liberals won, it was 20,438 votes. Although the outcome of the coupon election was a disaster for the Liberals, under a more representative system it would have been a better result.

The Secretary of the MLF raised his concern over the success of Labour in formerly strong Liberal areas. He stated there were ‘issues of the gravest importance to Liberals’, and continued ‘In some of the most important parts of the Midland area, notably in Nottinghamshire, South Staffordshire and Northamptonshire, which have been great centres of Liberalism, there were big majorities for Labour.’ The crux of the matter was that he had ‘ascertained without doubt, that very large numbers of ardent Liberals voted Labour.’ He suggested that the main cause of this was the congruency of the Labour and Liberal platform, compounded by the late declaration of Liberal policy: ‘The fact that the Labour manifesto as to policy commanded the general assent of Liberals, and occupied the whole field by itself, until the Manchester meetings in September.’⁵⁶⁶ In Chester, the Liberals recognised the importance of entering the contest in 1918: if they ‘did not fight now and let the Labour candidate capture the voters, especially the new voters, we should never win them back again’.⁵⁶⁷

The late arrival of a distinctive Liberal programme was also lamented: ‘The Manchester programme, great as it was, fell absolutely flat because it never had any opportunity of getting home to the minds of the people. The programme was alright when it came, but it came too late to do anything towards saving the situation.’⁵⁶⁸ As will be seen below, most Independent Liberals spent the first half of the election proclaiming their support for Lloyd George, which was not a distinctive position in 1918. The Secretary also recognised the advantages Labour had as being wholly separated from the Coalition:

The fact that large numbers of Liberals were so fiercely anti-coalition and anti-conscription that they voted for Labour as the most marked way of expressing these sentiments. While great numbers of these voters may be expected to re-ally themselves

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Chester LA, General Council, 13 November 1918.

⁵⁶⁸ MLF, Exec., 31 January 1919.

with the Liberal Party, it is to be feared that very many have been permanently lost to us and have found their home in the Labour Party.⁵⁶⁹

This point is valid when taken across the whole country. As mentioned above, in Faversham there was no Liberal candidate in 1918 and Labour took advantage of the situation. One Labour speaker at Faversham made the point that the Coalition had won the war - a coalition of Labour, Liberals and Unionists - and pointed out that Labour had left that coalition, and then turned to poking fun at the Liberals when he added ‘and most of the Liberals had left – if they had not been kicked’ out.⁵⁷⁰ The local National Union of Railwaymen chairman ‘alluded to the way in which many Liberal candidates had been “turned down” and urged radicals to show their protest of this treatment by voting for Labour.’⁵⁷¹

The Secretary of the MLF also explained more generally why the Liberal performance was so poor. He said that he had never known any election in which ‘there was such general apathy amongst Liberal workers’, and he attributed this ‘to the general bewilderment arising between the national and the party position.’⁵⁷² Crucially, he added

Men and women Liberals wished to vote Liberal but did not wish to vote against the Coalition. For nearly five years we have been urging them to observe the truce, to do no party work, and to carry on no propaganda, and the election came so suddenly on the heels of the armistice that the ordinary voter might be forgiven for thinking that this truce committed him more or less to support the coalition.⁵⁷³

This would especially be the case with some Liberals standing as Coalition candidates and the Prime Minister himself being a Liberal. The Secretary of the MLF felt that this explained ‘the great number of abstentions, largely made up of Liberals, who would not vote against their party’, and thereby the huge majorities that the Coalition candidates secured.⁵⁷⁴ What is more, F. E. Guest wrote to Lloyd George that he felt that whilst the Coalition was ‘unpopular’ with the Liberal rank and file, his impression was that ‘they were forced to admit that Coalition in the present circumstances was a political necessity’ and ‘accepted under protest’, which could explain some of the low turnout. Guest also noted that ‘it has been a real effort for thousands of Liberals to vote for a Tory for the first time in their lives’, and this

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰ *Faversham News*, 7 December 1918.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 14 December 1918.

⁵⁷² MLF, Exec., 31 January 1919.

⁵⁷³ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

reinforces the importance of the Coalition in attracting such considerable support for Conservative Coalition candidates.⁵⁷⁵

There is substantial evidence for ‘the man who won the war’ thesis being important in this election. The Coalition Conservative candidate for Coventry explained every other policy by including Lloyd George’s name.⁵⁷⁶ The Coalition Conservative candidate for Southend said that ‘under the leadership of Mr. Lloyd George - (applause) – who had the most exceptional abilities, imagination and determination, it was possible for them to fulfil the promises they were making.’⁵⁷⁷ The chairman of a meeting in favour of the Coalition Conservative candidate for Bromley stated that ‘in his opinion, Mr. Lloyd George had saved this country’, adding ‘let them put the same man to be the architect and builder of a lasting peace.’ Of course, in his view the way to do this was to re-elect the Conservative Coalition candidate who ‘had been of the very greatest assistance to the Government’.⁵⁷⁸ A Coalition Conservative advert in Blackpool declared that ‘Every vote for Parkinson is a vote for Lloyd George’.⁵⁷⁹ In Walthamstow East, a newspaper advertisement made clear that ‘if you want to back up the men who have won the war, vote for Johnson, the Coalition and Lloyd George’.⁵⁸⁰ It is fair to say that it was not just in the Home Counties, the Midlands and the north-west of England where Lloyd George was used as an invaluable asset: Hilson’s study of women voters and electoral rhetoric in 1918 argues that Major Astor’s adoption speech for Plymouth Sutton ‘amounted to a eulogy of Lloyd George’.⁵⁸¹ The evidence from below suggests that Guest’s account to Lloyd George that ‘there was no more effective platform appeal than that the man who did so much to win the war should have an opportunity of finishing the task by winning the peace’ was correct and not mere flattery.⁵⁸²

The uncoupled Liberals were unable directly to oppose Lloyd George and the Coalition. What is more, many of the Independent Liberals gave the Coalition and Lloyd George their support. The Liberals were so open to the idea of Lloyd George’s Coalition, even when they did not have the coupon they often referred to themselves as Coalition candidates: the Chester LA adopted Edward Paul ‘in the interests of the Coalition

⁵⁷⁵ Guest to Lloyd George, Secret n.d, Lloyd George Papers, F/21/2/57.

⁵⁷⁶ *Midland Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 1918; *Cheshire Observer*, 30 November 1918, 14 December 1918.

⁵⁷⁷ *Southend Standard*, 12 December 1918.

⁵⁷⁸ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 28 November 1918.

⁵⁷⁹ *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 29 November 1918.

⁵⁸⁰ *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 13 December 1918.

⁵⁸¹ M. Hilson, ‘Women Voters and the Rhetoric of Patriotism in the British General Election of 1918’, *Women’s History Review*, 10, no. 2 (2001), p. 333.

⁵⁸² F. E. Guest to Lloyd George, Secret n.d, Lloyd George Papers, F/21/2/57.

Government as a Liberal Coalitionist'.⁵⁸³ As early as 20 November 1918, the Darwen Liberals were calling their candidate a 'Liberal Coalition candidate' because 'he would go to Parliament to support Liberalism as set forth in Mr Lloyd George's speech.' The candidate himself tried to use the name of Lloyd George to his advantage 'I am anxious and ready to respond to the Premier's appeal for Liberal help.'⁵⁸⁴ E. J. Horniman, the Liberal candidate for Walthamstow West, said that he was 'fully' pledged to 'back any progressive, any democratic, or any thoroughly Liberal or Radical proposition which is put before Parliament', adding that it did not matter whether 'it be from our Coalition government, from a Liberal government, or from a Labour government'.⁵⁸⁵ Brown notes 'a hardening of Liberal opinions against the Coalition' after Asquith's speech at Huddersfield on 28 November 1918.⁵⁸⁶ In this, Asquith declared that the House of Commons should not be 'gagged and fettered', and made the first reference to distributing political 'coupons'.⁵⁸⁷ This change can also be found across England as well. Liberals still provided Lloyd George with support, but it was not unqualified support. The Chairman of the Walsall LA said that the election was unnecessary, as 'Lloyd George could rely upon the support of the great mass of Liberals throughout the country' whilst adding that they did not want to give the Coalition government a 'blank cheque'.⁵⁸⁸ The Liberal candidate for Coventry, Sir Courtney Mansel, stated that 'while they supported the Coalition government with all the power that rested in them, they were not taking orders from Downing Street or anywhere else', adding, 'they went into this election, as, he hoped, every Liberal in the city of Coventry did, as free men and not as bondsmen.'⁵⁸⁹

It is a sign of the prevailing political weather that they had to say they supported the Coalition government while also saying that they were free not to support the government if they wished. The Liberal candidate for Coventry even directly stated that he had always supported Lloyd George and then quoted his Coalition Conservative opponent from 1911 when he said 'Mr Lloyd George was not fit to hold office in a first class government'.⁵⁹⁰ The chair of the meeting in support of the Liberal candidate for Southend stated that they 'all agreed with the policy as laid down by the Coalition, but the personnel of the government did not inspire much confidence that those ideals would ever be carried out'. The Liberal

⁵⁸³ Chester LA, GM, 25 November 1918.

⁵⁸⁴ *Darwen News*, 20 November 1918.

⁵⁸⁵ *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 22 November 1918.

⁵⁸⁶ Brown, 'The Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland', p. 84.

⁵⁸⁷ Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, p. 183.

⁵⁸⁸ *Walsall Observer*, 30 November 1918.

⁵⁸⁹ *Midland Daily Telegraph*, 2 December 1918.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

candidate argued that the Liberals' past record suggested that they were the most likely to bring about reform as they were trustworthy on social legislation, attacking the Conservatives for failing to bring in Old Age Pensions.⁵⁹¹ The Liberals' difficulty in 1918 was summed up by the Liberal candidate for Chester at a private meeting of Liberals. He said that if he was elected he would support the Lloyd George government to make peace, whilst retaining his liberty to vote against the government if it brought measures forward against Liberal principles.⁵⁹² On the same day he later added that his return as a Liberal 'would in no way weaken the Prime Minister, stressing that 'he had always supported' Lloyd George and that his return would allow the Prime Minister to pass Liberal legislation.⁵⁹³ Sir John Simon, Liberal candidate for Walthamstow East, described himself as a 'Radical' and if he was re-elected 'would support any democratic, progressive proposals from whatever quarter they came' adding he would go to Parliament 'as a free man'.⁵⁹⁴ Later on in the election campaign, he returned to this theme, stressing that he would 'back Mr. Lloyd George and the Coalition in anything and everything good', but claiming his 'freedom' to only be responsible to his constituents. However, the Coalition Unionist candidate picked up on Simon's qualified support of Lloyd George, suggesting 'the independent Liberals wanted to be a hindrance and a nuisance to Mr Lloyd George; that was what these speeches meant if analysed.' Simon's vote against the Military Service Bill was also attacked from the Conservative platform.⁵⁹⁵ Simon also wanted to be associated with the name of Lloyd George by stating that in previous years he had supported him 'in his democratic policy' and was 'willing to support him again, especially if he went further yet'.⁵⁹⁶ Nonetheless, Simon was defeated comfortably by the Coalition Unionist. Searle's view that the Independent Liberals 'certainly did not operate as a normal Opposition' can be validated from the above evidence.⁵⁹⁷ Whilst not wanting to give a blank cheque to the coalition, they did want to share in the benefits to be derived from the name of Lloyd George. If Lloyd George had fought the election with a united Liberal Party, then given his popularity it would easily have been at least the second largest party.

⁵⁹¹ *Southend Standard*, 12 December 1918.

⁵⁹² Chester LA, Adjourned meeting of the General Council, 25 November 1918.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, GM, 25 November 1918.

⁵⁹⁴ *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 22 November 1918.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 December 1918.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 November 1918.

⁵⁹⁷ G. R. Searle, *Country Before Party: Coalition and the idea of "National Government" in Modern Britain, 1885-1987* (Harlow, 1995), p. 115.

Liberal division was manifest to the electorate in the 1918 general election. The Liberal candidate for Coventry asked for the voters to preserve the unity of the Liberal Party: ‘The Tories have sacrificed their principles to gain Liberal seats and to break up as far as they can the Liberal Party. It is for you, ladies and gentlemen, it is for you to preserve the unity of the Liberal Party and to prevent their scheme from succeeding.’⁵⁹⁸ A few days later, the same candidate said ‘For Liberals to recommend a Conservative candidate when there is a Liberal candidate standing is stabbing the Liberal Party and Liberal Principles in the back’, an indirect reference to Lloyd George.⁵⁹⁹ The above examples of Liberal division occurred after Asquith’s Huddersfield speech at the end of November, and supports Brown’s observation in Scotland that Liberal language against the coalition was strengthened after the lead from Asquith. All this, and the evidence in Chapter Two and this chapter, suggest Keohane’s argument that ‘for the Liberal Party, the “coupon” was merely the piece of paper that broke the camel’s back’ requires substantial revision.⁶⁰⁰ However, he is correct that it was the coalition government ‘and the confusions and non-party sentiments it inspired’ which were manifested in the coupon that was of real importance.⁶⁰¹ Lloyd George’s personal popularity at the head of the coalition of non-party sentiments was combined with the genuine appeal of the coalition, and the two cannot be statistically separated. Ward has argued that the existence of the Coalition ‘meant that the election could be seen as a non-partisan affair’, and even more importantly, ‘it enabled the Conservative Party to look national in 1918’ therefore giving it a wide appeal.⁶⁰²

There is also an aspect of the 1918 general election that historians have failed to give sufficient attention to: the weaknesses of Asquith’s appeal across the country as a whole.⁶⁰³ The Coalition Conservative candidate attacked Critchley (an Independent candidate who was often referred to as the Progressive Coalition candidate) as being an ‘out and out Asquithian’ and for being funded by Lord Ashton, ‘the greatest Free Trader that ever lived’⁶⁰⁴. Critchley denied both of these allegations and suggested Asquith’s name was used because ‘at the moment the very name of Asquith seems to be something to conjure with (A voice: it’s playing to the gallery)’.⁶⁰⁵ In Chester, the Coalition Conservative candidate stressed that he

⁵⁹⁸ *Midland Daily Telegraph*, 2 December 1918.

⁵⁹⁹ *Coventry Herald*, 6 and 7 December 1918.

⁶⁰⁰ Keohane, *Party of Patriotism*, p. 166.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶⁰² Ward, ““Women of Britain Say Go””, p. 44.

⁶⁰³ For the local context of Asquith’s defeat in, see S. R. Ball, ‘Asquith’s decline and the general election of 1918’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 61, no. 171 (1982), pp. 44-61.

⁶⁰⁴ *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 10 December, 13 December 1918.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 December 1918.

was the ‘official coalition candidate’ and had received the support of Lloyd George and Bonar Law.⁶⁰⁶ He contrasted his position with that of the Liberal candidate, who he asserted ‘prided himself on being a whig and a follower of Mr. Asquith, and not of Mr. Lloyd George.’⁶⁰⁷ The Unionist Coalition candidate for Walthamstow East was Stanley Johnson, who attacked Simon for being ‘a supporter of Mr. Asquith, who still adhered to the old party lines and shibboleths’. Asquith’s ‘weak tea’ was contrasted with Lloyd George as the ‘better man to control the forces of the nation’.⁶⁰⁸ A speaker from the Conservative platform said that there was a choice between ‘two men, Mr. Lloyd George and our brown cheery friend Mr Asquith (laughter)’.⁶⁰⁹ The Coalition National Democratic and Labour Party candidate for Walthamstow West stated that ‘the government who had carried them through this horrible war’ should then ‘carry them forward again’.⁶¹⁰ Brown argues that ‘the readiness to support the coalition arose from the threat of Labour success amongst a newly enfranchised electorate’.⁶¹¹

However, whilst this may have been true for the political elites at Westminster, the dominant narrative in the constituencies was to vote for the government that had won the war, that promised significant social reform, and that would be tough on Germany. Based on the appeals of the candidates, it is clear that the electorate voted for the Lloyd George coalition based on either his or the Coalition’s merits, rather than due to fear of the Labour Party. This is not to underestimate the genuine advances that the Labour Party had made since the start of the war, or that the political environment had changed since then.⁶¹² At the start of the 1918 campaign, the *Walthamstow Guardian* reported that ‘the most expert electioneering agents confess themselves on this occasion unable to foretell the result of the election’, in part because of the addition of women to the franchise and ‘because the events of the last four years have shaken the opinions of many of the male voters in many important matters’.⁶¹³

It is important to consider the other issues which the Liberals campaigned on in 1918. Kenyon’s adoption speech in Chesterfield is revealing about the content of Liberalism at that time. He began by praising the Representation of the People Act and the Education Act. On the latter, he stated that it ‘would have taken the best man in the educational world to have

⁶⁰⁶ *Cheshire Observer*, 30 November 1918.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 30 November 1918.

⁶⁰⁸ *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 29 November 1918.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 December 1918.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29 November 1918.

⁶¹¹ Brown, ‘The Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland’, p. 71.

⁶¹² For an overview of the Labour Party during the War, see McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*, pp. 88-111.

⁶¹³ *Walthamstow Guardian*, 22 November 1918.

got a similar Act by party agitation.’ He also spoke of reconstruction being ‘too big for any one party’, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the Independent Liberals in Parliament would have voted for radical and progressive measures in the year immediately after the war. Near the beginning of Kenyon’s speech were three Liberal shibboleths of old, with references to Home Rule for Ireland, temperance and land reform.⁶¹⁴ In Walthamstow, Captain Wedgwood Benn, speaking on behalf of Simon, asked ‘what about Home Rule?’, pointing out that it was indeed ‘an old cry, but it was an old wrong’.⁶¹⁵

However, these were the rare instances of older issues that were salient before the war being raised in the election of 1918. The war issue of profiteering was occasionally raised by Liberals; Horniman attacked profiteering during the war and pointed out that his own income ‘has been less since the war than before’.⁶¹⁶ Progressive measures, such as the repeal of restrictions imposed by DORA, better homes for the working classes, the adoption of Trade Boards in every industry including a Minimum Wage Clause, a League of Nations and a ‘satisfactory’ peace were also mentioned.⁶¹⁷ Across the country, the Liberal Party supported the establishment of the League of Nations. The Liberal candidate in Darwen, Lt. Frederick Hindle, was a soldier who had fought in France for four years and who supported the idea of a League of Nations ‘for the prevention of war’.⁶¹⁸ He also stressed ‘the importance and necessity of all soldiers and their dependents being adequately provided for’.⁶¹⁹ Additionally, he argued for the reduction of the working day to eight hours, the nationalisation of ‘key’ industries and punishment for the Kaiser.⁶²⁰ Similarly, Simon put forward a Radical programme and argued that ‘the enormous burden of the war must so far as possible be put on those who were really responsible for it’.⁶²¹ Some Liberals had a radical manifesto, but all Liberals were lacking a clear and distinctive policy, bar endorsement of the League of Nations and the less progressive suggestion of harsh punishments for Germany.

To conclude, it is worth quoting the Secretary of the MLF’s analysis of the 1918 general election. He observed that ‘it would be rash in the last degree to take the election as providing any trustworthy criterion as to the relationships of parties to the electorate’.⁶²² As the election was conducted in the context of a relatively indifferent electorate and with the

⁶¹⁴ *Derbyshire Courier*, 7 December 1918.

⁶¹⁵ *Walthamstow Guardian*, 22 November 1918.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.* He was from the tea firm PPC.

⁶¹⁷ *Derbyshire Courier*, 7 December 1918.

⁶¹⁸ *Darwen News*, 27 November 1918.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1918.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7 December 1918.

⁶²¹ *Walthamstow Guardian*, 29 November 1918, 22 November 1918.

⁶²² MLF, Exec., 31 January 1919.

soldiers and sailors still at the front, it was not the most representative of elections to determine the respective strength of the parties under the new franchise. The local press in Walsall noted apathy about the election, which it suggested could be related to ‘war-time strain’.⁶²³ Given these factors it is understandable why Liberals felt aggrieved at Lloyd George for holding an election at this point. The Secretary of the MLF summed up the election for Liberalism: ‘there was only one bad thing about the election, and that was the holding of it at all.’⁶²⁴

The outcome was that there were only 36 Independent Liberal MPs elected in the whole of the United Kingdom. This meant that although the Labour Party were only able to get 57 MPs elected (a small advance since December 1910), they received the prestige of being the Official Opposition in the House of Commons. Within the space of a single Parliament (albeit extended due to the War), the Liberals went from being in office to being the third party of British politics. However, if the 133 Coalition Liberal MPs who were elected are included, the Liberals would easily have been the official opposition. The significance of the coupon election for the Liberal Party is that it formalised the division between Coalition and Independent MPs, and reduced the Asquithian Liberals (who were leaderless in the House of Commons, as Asquith lost his seat, as did all of the recognised and obvious alternatives) to an incredibly weak position. Yet, the election was held in exceptional circumstances, and while it was a disastrous result for half of the Liberal Party in the short term, the coupon election in itself did not automatically condemn the Liberals to third place in national elections for the rest of the interwar period and beyond. To explain why that occurred, we must turn to the lost opportunities during the peacetime Lloyd George Coalition.

⁶²³ *Walsall Observer*, 7 December 1918.

⁶²⁴ MLF, Exec., 31 January 1919.

Chapter 4

Lost opportunities during the Post-War Coalition, 1919-1922

In the historiography, it is recognised that the 1918-1922 period does not always receive sufficient attention compared to the Coupon Election of 1918.⁶²⁵ This is a significant oversight as the years 1919 and 1920 have been highlighted as being ‘of critical significance’ for the formation of modern British politics.⁶²⁶ Historians of the Labour Party have appreciated that the immediate post-war years were ones of ‘considerable political flux’, and that during this period Labour moved ‘into the political “space” vacated by the still divided Liberals’.⁶²⁷ Howell has gone so far as to state that ‘the complex divisions within Liberalism facilitated Labour growth in the critical years’ that followed the war.⁶²⁸ However, Howell’s study was focused on the Labour Party and no investigation has adequately analysed why and, equally importantly, how Liberal division in the constituencies damaged their prospects. This chapter seeks to examine the depth of the Liberal divisions during 1919-1922, and what ‘space’ was consequently vacated by the Liberals at the grass-roots.

I) Drift after the ‘Coupon’ Election of 1918

After their devastating defeat in the general election in December 1918, the independent Liberal Party needed to reorganise as soon as possible in order to recover from the defeat. They can be likened to a boxer who had been knocked down, as the Liberals needed to rebuild and rise to the challenges posed by Labour and the Coalition. However, across the country there was a distinct drift; many associations did not meet for the first time until the end of 1919, and only achieved anything approaching pre-war activity in 1921 or even

⁶²⁵ For example, Wrigley, *Lloyd George*, p. 79.

⁶²⁶ Brown, ‘The Labour Party and Political Change in Scotland’, p. 1. Also see Cowling, *Impact of Labour*.

⁶²⁷ Worley, ‘Fruits of the Tree’, p. 194.

⁶²⁸ D. Howell, *MacDonald’s Party: Labour Identities and Crisis, 1922-1931* (Oxford, 2002), p. 20.

1922.⁶²⁹ Why did it take them half a year to meet after the defeat? An examination of Chester Liberalism illustrates the typical state of Liberalism in 1919-1922: the Chester Liberals appreciated that their party was drifting in the first year of peace, with one member of the association commenting that ‘it was useless to go on unless we could give the people a lead and let them know what Liberals stood for’, and he also noted that the ‘best workers were going over to Labour’. His sentiments were echoed by other members at the meeting.⁶³⁰ Searle has argued perceptively that in ‘the circumstances of 1918 and 1919 it was difficult to see what the traditional political parties stood for’.⁶³¹ A detailed investigation of the minute books of Liberal associations in 1919 does serve to support that argument. The Coalition Liberal Annual Report for 1920, when referring to 1919, recorded that there was an impression that the Labour Party was campaigning more than any other party in the Midlands.⁶³² This would encourage further activists and voters to go over to Labour, producing a snowball effect. The lack of Liberal activity in 1919 is of crucial importance in determining the future of the Liberal Party. Arthur Henderson, who became Home Secretary in the first Labour government in 1924, felt that Labour had ‘divisions’ and was worried about ‘the prospect of a revival of Asquithian Liberalism and so many of the right of our own party changing to the Coalition’, as well as feeling that Labour was ‘leaderless in the House’ of Commons.⁶³³ Fortunately for Henderson, he need not have worried about the Asquithian Liberals in 1919, as they left the door open for Labour to walk through virtually unopposed. The point which the Secretary of the MLF made at their AGM in June 1919, when he ‘called attention to the unsatisfactory state of organisation’ in the region, applied to the whole country.⁶³⁴ Further evidence for the lack of Liberal activity in 1919 is recorded in *The Liberal Agent*, which recognised that they had not contested many county council elections in the spring of 1919; it noted that Labour ‘was remarkably successful – mainly because we did nothing’, and that Labour ‘made a deep impression’ on the public.⁶³⁵ The polarisation of the electorate to the disadvantage of the Liberals, if it had not already begun in 1918, certainly commenced in the spring of 1919.

⁶²⁹ Chesterfield Young Liberals, Meeting, 13 October 1919; Chesterfield Women’s LA, CM, 23 September 1919; Southend LA, Exec., 15 July 1919; Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women’s LA, CM, 10 October 1919; Women’s Auxiliary Westmorland LA, GM, 15 September 1919.

⁶³⁰ Chester LA, Exec., 15 January 1920.

⁶³¹ Searle, *Country Before Party*, p 17.

⁶³² Lloyd George Papers, ‘Coalition Liberal Organisation Annual Report for 1920’, LG/F/168/2/16.

⁶³³ Arthur Henderson to Sidney Webb, 17 May 1919 quoted from C. Wrigley, *Arthur Henderson* (Cardiff, 1990), p. 127.

⁶³⁴ MLF, Exec., 14 October 1919.

⁶³⁵ *The Liberal Agent*, Vol. 22, no. 97, July 1919.

In Chester, the primary reason for this lack of Liberal clarity, identity and organisation was inadvertently revealed when it was suggested to ‘wait a little while’ before carrying out political propaganda, in order ‘to see how the political situation develops’. It was the existence of the coalition and the consequent split in the Liberal Party which led to the paralysis of the independent Liberals in 1919, if not in 1920 as well. Even more revealingly, the Secretary of the Chester LA wrote a note under the minutes of the meeting cited above, saying that this would probably be his last meeting in Chester as he was ‘convinced that there is no real desire to support Liberalism’ and that ‘the party will crumble from this point onwards’. He added that ‘only a drastic change in the attitude of the party leaders will save the situation’. His view was that this was still possible, as the Liberals going over to Labour were not Socialists and could be saved ‘by a forward Liberal movement’ with ‘the old ideals applied to changed conditions’, but until a time when such a movement was created ‘there can be no organisation except on paper which is useless’.⁶³⁶ In a microcosm of the decline of the Liberal grass-roots, in April 1920 he resigned his office.⁶³⁷ Even though the Chester Liberals faced problems, they had addressed envelopes to send to the municipal electors in 1920, and so some electoral activity did occur.⁶³⁸ Nonetheless, there were weaknesses within Chester Liberalism: out of the 340 notices of invitations for the 1920 AGM, only 21 persons attended, who had to form a quorum.⁶³⁹ By December 1920, the Chester LA planned to hold a whist drive and dance as well as an open air meeting, so political activity was returning and increasing.⁶⁴⁰ However, after that meeting, they did not meet again until June 1921. At that time, over 200 attended a whist drive and dance, contrasting the inactivity of the previous years with the potential of what could have been.⁶⁴¹

The rumours of an election in January 1922 led to the Chester LA resolving that ‘steps be taken to fight the seat’ if an election were called.⁶⁴² By the end of the month they had adopted a candidate.⁶⁴³ Of course, selecting a candidate does not automatically improve a party’s organisation; for example, there remained no Young LA in Chester in the immediate post-war years.⁶⁴⁴ However, by the summer of 1922, the local Liberal Party seemed to have reorganised and was preparing for the next general election, which would have to be held by

⁶³⁶ Chester LA, Exec., 15 January 1920.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 22 April 1920.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., FGP, 31 May 1920.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., AGM, 14 June 1920.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., Exec., 16 December 1920.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 2 June 1921.

⁶⁴² Ibid., 9 January 1922.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 26 January 1922.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., FGP, 9 May 1922.

December 1923. Clearly, as seen through one constituency association, the years 1919-1922 were years of neglected opportunities for the Liberal Party.

The drift and inattention evident in Chester was widespread across the country in 1919-1922. Between 9 November 1918 and 9 March 1920, there are no recorded meetings of the Coventry LA.⁶⁴⁵ Even when the Advisory Committee met in March 1920, it was only to elect a new member of the committee because a vacancy through death had occurred since they last met.⁶⁴⁶ One might ask why they not meet in 1919; did the Association remain asleep during this year? The answer can be found in the next meeting, on 28 August 1920. A letter from the Secretary of the MLF suggested 'the renewal of political activities', but after 'consideration it was decided to inform the officers of the Federation that the present moment was not opportune + that the matter be deferred until early in the next year [1921]'.⁶⁴⁷ This suggests that the presence of Liberals in the Coalition government had produced a situation where Liberals did not want to engage in political activity because the party was split. However, this policy of drift was a period of lost opportunity for the Liberal Party, during which the Labour Party made inroads into the political space which had been left vacant.

There is further evidence that the split between independent and Coalition Liberals, and the hope for reunion between the two, was the primary reason for the drift evident at the grass-roots during this period. The Chairman of the Darwen LA, speaking at the Annual Executive Meeting in 1920, pointed out that if the Liberals remained 'as they were, hoping that something would turn up', then a large number of Liberals would join Labour. 'As they were' was not directly explained, but it was clearly not any of the other three options: to try and make terms with Labour, to 'adopt the Prime Minister's proposals' and have closer co-operation with the Conservatives, or to 'remain free and independent Liberals'. Based on what was said and other evidence across the country, 'as they were' was to remain inert 'hoping that something', perhaps reunion with the Coalition Liberals, 'would turn up'.⁶⁴⁸ This means that all of 1919 was wasted, and highlights why the Liberals performed poorly in the 1919 municipal elections, in turn aiding Labour's impressive results in that year. As Jones has argued about Manchester, 'the dichotomy which existed within Liberal politics did not inspire Liberalism locally', and the evidence from the constituencies illustrates that this was the case across the rest of England as well.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁵ Coventry LA, Minute book PA68/4.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., Advisory Committee, 9 March 1920.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 28 August 1920.

⁶⁴⁸ Darwen LA, Annual Executive Meeting, 1 May 1920.

⁶⁴⁹ B. Jones., 'Manchester Liberalism 1918-1929', pp. 102-103.

The Liberal split and the desire for reunion is an explanation as to why the Chesterfield LA also met infrequently; after the AGM in May 1920, there was no recorded meeting until a year and a half later, on 28 October 1922.⁶⁵⁰ The reason for this lack of activity was explained once the Coalition had fallen, when the President of the Chesterfield LA affirmed his ‘desire that nothing should be said that would hurt some friends who possibly differed from others on certain questions of personality’, and he claimed that they ‘had avoided a split’ in the Liberal Party and that ‘now that the Coalition was at an end’ they were a ‘united party’.⁶⁵¹ It is evident that one of the key reasons why the Liberals at the grass-roots did not maintain their organisation at a normal level was to avoid a serious split with the Coalition Liberals. This theme was also present in the parliamentary Liberal Party. When Sir Robert Hudson wrote to the acting leader in the House of Commons, Donald Maclean, to outline his views on the Liberal Party and reorganisation, he felt that to call the Liberal Central Association together ‘at this juncture might invite a split’, and added that ‘it had better be kept in cold storage’ until the ‘Co. Libs and Libs’ had resolved their differences.⁶⁵²

Similarly, in 1919, the Leicester LA felt that ‘under the present circumstances’ it was not the right time to hold open air meetings.⁶⁵³ The reoccurrence of this theme strongly suggests that independent Liberalism was paralysed to a great extent by the fact that Coalition Liberals were in government with another political party. The Harborough LA was more prepared to be active, although they spent the first few months after the 1918 general election trying in vain to acquire more money from their Liberal candidate and former MP, who they replaced when he would not subscribe £400 a year to the Association.⁶⁵⁴ Further explanations for a reluctant and patchy start to the reorganisation of the Liberal Party at its grass-roots were outlined by the Secretary of the MLF. He stated that Liberals were still ‘adjusting’ to the new constituency boundaries created by the Representation of the People Act 1918 and to ‘the difficulty arising from Labour’. This last point will be discussed later but, crucially, the Secretary also explained difficulty was ‘arising from Liberal hesitation in view of the present political situation’.⁶⁵⁵ The very existence of Coalition Liberalism complicated the role of the independent Liberals. Similarly, the ‘absence of some of the older Liberals’, at the very least

⁶⁵⁰ Chesterfield LA, AGM, 29 May 1920; Chesterfield LA, Special Exec., 28 October 1922.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Special Exec., 28 October 1922.

⁶⁵² Donald Maclean papers, Sir Robert Hudson to Donald Maclean, 12 January 1919, Maclean MSS C. 465/124.

⁶⁵³ Leicester LA, FGP, 8 July 1919.

⁶⁵⁴ Harborough LA, Sub-Committee, 26 February 1919, contains a letter Percy Harris sent to Mr. Coppack, no date.

⁶⁵⁵ MLF, Exec., 14 October 1919.

in part because some were now Coalition Liberals, was also a reason for the Liberal inaction which allowed the Labour Party the space within which to expand with little resistance.⁶⁵⁶

The appeal of the Labour Party was a problem that the independent Liberals also had to contend with. After seven months contemplating an offer to become the prospective Liberal candidate for Southend, Miss Garland eventually refused after she had ‘an interview’ with the Labour Party.⁶⁵⁷ With the appeal of the Labour Party on the one hand, and the hibernation of Liberalism in this period on the other, it is not surprising that Labour was able to make inroads at the expense of the Liberals. Consequently, when the Leicester East by-election occurred in March 1922, it was the Labour Party, not the independent Liberals, who secured the anti-government vote. The finances of Liberal associations suffered because of the lethargy. The Coventry LA had a deficit of £89 in May 1922.⁶⁵⁸ The deficit for the Manchester Liberals grew from £99 in 1918 to £2266 in 1921. However, by 1922 it had been reduced to £1583 thanks to special donations and surplus from the election fund.⁶⁵⁹ A bazaar held by the Southend Liberals raised £129, which highlights the Liberal Party’s ability to raise money locally.⁶⁶⁰ Jones argues that a ‘key’ weakness for the Liberals in Manchester ‘was the party’s exigent financial situation which restricted development’.⁶⁶¹ However, the available evidence suggests that finance was not in itself a key weakness of the party, but was rather the consequence of the lack of local dynamic leaders.

Only two members turned up for a meeting of the Coventry LA Finance Committee in July 1922, which was hardly evidence of an active association.⁶⁶² Meagre attendance was not confined to Coventry; only one person turned up to the Beckenham entertainment sub-committee in June 1921, and low membership encouraged them to postpone the formation of a Women’s LA.⁶⁶³ The lack of attendance went alongside the tendency not to want to commit funds; in April 1920, seven women declined to become Vice-Presidents of the Chesterfield Women’s LA.⁶⁶⁴ Of course, some activists left for non-political reasons, which was a problem not exclusive to the Liberals, but the dearth of new members compared to Labour was a concern.⁶⁶⁵ Another difficulty reported in *The Liberal Agent* was that in the Home

⁶⁵⁶ Miles Platting Ward, AGM, 6 February 1922.

⁶⁵⁷ Southend LA, Special Exec., 2 November 1920.

⁶⁵⁸ Coventry LA, FC, 15 May 1922.

⁶⁵⁹ Manchester LF, Revenue Accounts, 1918-1922.

⁶⁶⁰ Southend LA, Exec., 15 September 1922.

⁶⁶¹ Jones, ‘Manchester Liberalism, 1918-1929’, p. 13.

⁶⁶² Coventry LA, FC, 21 July 1922.

⁶⁶³ Beckenham LA, CM, 7 June 1921 and CM, 19 April 1921.

⁶⁶⁴ Chesterfield Women’s LA, CM, 27 April 1920.

⁶⁶⁵ Southend LA, Exec., 15 September 1922.

Counties ‘several members have left the profession [of being an agent] and entered commercial life’.⁶⁶⁶ In addition, ‘the loss of big subscriptions through death and by reason of the Coalition split’ had led to reduced income.⁶⁶⁷ The division of the Party was so important, as *The Liberal Agent* recognised, because ‘organisation without propaganda is useless’ and the evidence presented in this section highlights that activity was often not undertaken in case it made the split even more acute.⁶⁶⁸

Difficulties with party finance and retaining members were not confined to the Liberal Party.⁶⁶⁹ Nonetheless, there was a particular weakness for the Liberals at the grass-roots in these years. A meeting of the Miles Platting Ward in 1922 noted that ‘there is a dearth of candidates throughout Manchester’, and that the difficulty was ‘to get a man with the money to spark’.⁶⁷⁰ To highlight the point, Dr Remer also turned down the opportunity to become the Liberal candidate as he ‘could not possibly spare the time’, before the candidacy was filled by another man.⁶⁷¹ It is also pertinent to point out how these Liberals were only considering firstly a man, and secondly, a relatively wealthy professional man, such as a doctor.

However, attempts were made at the regional level to revive Liberal activity. Although few in comparison to the great activity of 1911-1914, 36 meetings were planned for the autumn of 1919 and it was recorded that women organisers had been appointed in Birmingham, Northampton and Stourbridge. In the autumn of 1920, there was another attempt to resume political work, ‘with a view to giving an impetus to work in the constituencies’.⁶⁷² Those Liberals who did remain active in 1919 could find signs of hope for Liberalism, particularly in the result of the West Leyton by-election. Sir Donald Maclean called it ‘the triumph of Independent Liberalism’ in a letter to the MLF adding that it provided ‘the highest encouragement’ to ‘every Liberal organisation and individual Liberal worker in the country.’⁶⁷³ There is evidence that the Liberals were happy for Maclean to be leading the party. The Executive of the MLF expressed their ‘admiration’ for ‘the fight put up by the Free Liberals in the House of Commons under the leadership of Sir Donald Maclean’.⁶⁷⁴ It is telling that there is no mention of Asquith.

⁶⁶⁶ *The Liberal Agent*, Vol. 24, no. 104, July 1921.

⁶⁶⁷ LCNWLF, Exec., 5 September 1922.

⁶⁶⁸ *The Liberal Agent*, Vol. 24, no. 106, January 1922.

⁶⁶⁹ Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, p. 194; Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 64.

⁶⁷⁰ Miles Platting Ward LC, GM, 4 October 1922.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12 October 1922.

⁶⁷² MLF, Exec., 24 September 1920.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*, 21 March 1919.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 May 1919.

However, some by-elections highlight the weakness of Liberalism in the year immediately after the war and are important evidence of malaise in the immediate post-war years. Liberal organisational weakness seemingly led to them not fielding a candidate at the Bromley by-election in December 1919, and the election campaign would have encouraged the polarisation of the electorate. The *Bromley and District Times* claimed that the Liberal Party could have fielded an Alderman as candidate but ‘by an arrangement with the Headquarters in London, it was only known at a late hour that the Liberal Party had agreed not to run a candidate if the Labour Party had a candidate to put forward.’ Nevertheless, the Labour Party campaigned against the ‘Coalition and its humbug’ adding that ‘they had had enough of Toryism, and they had had enough of Liberalism’.⁶⁷⁵ As the Labour Party were not prepared to accommodate the Liberals, it was a mistake to give them a free run as it gave the Labour the political space to move into.

The social side of Liberal activity can still be found in these years. Musical performances were often organised at social events held by women’s Liberal Associations.⁶⁷⁶ Refreshments were habitually provided with tea and cake.⁶⁷⁷ The gendered role of women also remains apparent. Within the political sphere, Liberal women often remained in a secondary position, where their role was primarily to raise funds and staff events - important and necessary work, but not an executive position.⁶⁷⁸ Fund-raising activities included jumble sales, bazaars and garden parties.⁶⁷⁹ Evidence of the perceived differences in ability between men and women in society more broadly is also apparent when the Darwen Women’s LA commented that ‘a good prize [should be given] to the winning lady playing gentlemen as it was felt that lady visitors to our whist-drives who have to be asked to play gentlemen are placed at a disadvantage during the games’.⁶⁸⁰ Evidence of class divisions in the inter-war period exist as well; after discussing inviting Lady Byles to address a meeting, ‘quite a few members were of opinion that an arrangement which might result in a seeming class distinction would not be wise’.⁶⁸¹ At the AGM in 1922, the name of the Darwen Women’s LA was changed from ‘Ladies Liberal League’ to the Darwen Division Women’s LA because ‘so many people would give different definitions to the word lady’. They also felt that as

⁶⁷⁵ *Bromley and District Times*, 12 December 1919.

⁶⁷⁶ Chesterfield Women’s LA, A stand alone entry that a social was held, 20 April 1921; Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women’s LA, CM, 20 February 1920; Southend LA, Report of the Subcommittee, 22 April 1921.

⁶⁷⁷ Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women’s LA, CM, 20 February 1920; Darwen LA, Annual Executive Meeting, 24 June 1922.

⁶⁷⁸ Chester LA, Exec., 2 June 1921; Darwen Women’s LA, General Committee, 7 March 1922.

⁶⁷⁹ For an example of all three planned by one association see West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 22 May 1922.

⁶⁸⁰ Darwen Women’s LA, General Committee, 21 February 1922.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, CM, 18 August 1922.

Liberalism ‘acknowledges no class distinction’ the name should be changed, which was carried unanimously.⁶⁸² In Walthamstow, sport was very important to both constituency associations with cricket being played between the Young Liberals and the Liberals, and the Young Liberals having a swimming club, cycling club and a football club.⁶⁸³ The Sittingbourne Liberal Club suggested an inter-club competition between the local Conservative Club, the working men’s club, the Discharged Soldiers Federation and Trinity Men’s Club.⁶⁸⁴ There was evidence that this occurred from 1919 until the late 1930s (and resumed after the Second World War, until at least 1950).⁶⁸⁵ Some individuals dedicated a significant proportion of their time to these activities; at the Darwen Women’s LA the Secretary thanked those present who had helped in ‘carrying out’ the socials particularly, those ‘few who were self-sacrificing enough to attend each one’.⁶⁸⁶

II) Liberal grass-roots attitudes to other political parties

Initially, in 1919, even the independent Liberal MLF was unsure what its relationship to the Coalition Liberals should be, and they postponed their AGM ‘in the hope that the political situation might be cleared’.⁶⁸⁷ As discussed in the previous section, the ambiguous relationship with the Coalition Liberals had a serious effect on Liberal organisation in most constituencies. Also, it is telling that at the beginning of 1919, Major-General Seely, who was a member of the Coalition government, remained as President of the MLF. When he resigned his government position, they agreed with his reason for resigning, which was that a Ministry of Air should be independent and not a part of the Ministry of War or the Admiralty.⁶⁸⁸ Such actions raise the question, did the independent Liberals drift in 1919 because they were hoping that Liberal union, or at the very least cordial relations, would transpire? The evidence from the constituencies suggests that this was the case.

⁶⁸² Ibid., AGM, 27 September 1922.

⁶⁸³ East Walthamstow Central LA, Exec., 2 September 1921; East Walthamstow Junior LA, First AGM, 7 September 1920; East Walthamstow Junior LA, Exec., 10 March 1921; East Walthamstow Junior LA, General Meeting, 5 July 1921.

⁶⁸⁴ Sittingbourne Liberal Club, CM, 11 November 1919.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., Loose sheets at the front of minute book 1927-1937.

⁶⁸⁶ Darwen Women’s LA, CM, 25 April 1922.

⁶⁸⁷ MLF, Exec., 21 March 1919.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 16 January 1920.

There is a noticeable shift in Liberal attitudes towards the Coalition at the grass-roots as a result of the Spen Valley by-election of December 1919. With the death of the Coalition Liberal MP for that constituency, the local LA selected Sir John Simon, a leading independent Liberal, as candidate. However, Lloyd George and the Coalition Liberals decided to bring forward a candidate of their own regardless. As a result, the Labour Party won the by-election on a minority vote and there was bad blood between the two sets of Liberals. The Manchester LF protested ‘against the interference of Liberals outside the division with the freedom of the local Liberal Association in the choice of a candidate’.⁶⁸⁹ At the Annual Executive Meeting of the Darwen LA, comments were made by the Chairman which provide a revealing insight into Liberalism immediately after the war:

Most of them had hoped that the misunderstandings which had been responsible for that defeat [1918] would soon pass away. Instead of that, however, he regretted to say the position had become more acute, so acute that they had the Prime Minister advising closer co-operation between Liberals and Conservatives, to the extent of opposing Liberal candidates in constituencies where adopted by Liberal associations, and even opposing two of his late colleagues – Sir John Simon and Mr Runciman.⁶⁹⁰

Of course, even before the Spen Valley by-election, there were signs of division within the Liberal ranks; in Walthamstow West, the Liberal candidate declared himself to be a ‘Free Liberal’ in November 1919.⁶⁹¹ However, the Spen Valley by-election seems to have encouraged Liberal Associations to become more active and accept that matters were not going to sort themselves out, and generally to have increased ‘Free’ Liberal identity. One Liberal chairman said that ‘the Coalition Liberals would regret the day they decided to co-operate with the Tories’. He advocated remaining ‘free and independent Liberals’, even though there would be ‘some difficulties’ including ‘a split’, with some members of the party probably leaving. However, in his view this would be worthwhile, as he ‘would rather be in a minority for ever than sacrifice his principles and become associated with the Tory Party (cheers)’. For good measure he added that he ‘believed in unqualified opposition to the Prime Minister and his government (hear, hear)’. At the same meeting, Lieutenant Hindle, Alderman and member of the Executive, spoke fairly about the Labour Party except when discussing its nationalisation programme, which he thought would ‘lead to ruin’. He also said that the country would be ‘all the better ... for the existence of a united Liberal Party’ without

⁶⁸⁹ Manchester LF, General Committee, 17 December 1919. The East Walthamstow LA also voiced similar disapproval, East Walthamstow LA, Inaugural meeting, 16 December 1919.

⁶⁹⁰ Darwen LA, Annual Executive Meeting, 1 May 1920.

⁶⁹¹ Walthamstow LA, Western Council, 21 November 1919.

the Conservative contamination.⁶⁹² It seems evident that the independent Liberals would have welcomed back the Coalition Liberals with open arms, and were perhaps hoping to do so in 1919, but only if the Coalition Liberals publicly broke away from the Conservatives. In his study of the Coalition Liberals, Morgan persuasively argued that they were ineffective because of ‘a fear of commitment, stemming from a rooted doubt as to whether the alliance of 1918 was merely transitional or a permanent arrangement’.⁶⁹³ In this respect, the Coalition Liberals were the mirror image of the independent Liberals, who had been impotent in the first year after the war as they were not sure whether they were with the Liberals in the Coalition or separate from them.

However, it seems that by early 1920 at the regional level, the independent Liberals had decided to regard the Coalition Liberals as an enemy. As Seely still supported the Coalition, some members of the MLF Executive did not want his name taken forward for re-election as President.⁶⁹⁴ In the event he did stand for re-election, but was defeated ‘by a large majority’ because ‘he did not represent the overwhelming feeling of the Federation at this particular time’.⁶⁹⁵ By July 1921, it was recorded that Seely was no longer paying his subscriptions to the MLF.⁶⁹⁶ The Secretary of the MLF was instructed to take all necessary steps ‘for ensuring a live Liberal Association both in constituencies represented by Labour members and in those represented by Coalition Liberal members’, and thus the latter were counted amongst the independent Liberals’ enemies.⁶⁹⁷ *The Liberal Agent* noted that Midlands Liberal Agents got ‘discouragement and considerable blame for things for which we are not responsible, but this was ever thus when professional Liberals, who were respected leaders in past days, are in active association with the Conservatives’.⁶⁹⁸ It is evident that the division between Lloyd George and the independent Liberals in the House of Commons had filtered down to the constituencies but not necessarily affected the electorate at large.

It seems clear that the Liberals were not always entirely sure who their main political enemy was. In March 1920, one member put a resolution to the MLF ‘to consider that no working alliance of Liberals with the Labour Party is possible without sacrifice of principles’.

⁶⁹² Darwen LA, Annual Executive Meeting, 1 May 1920.

⁶⁹³ K. O. Morgan, ‘Lloyd George’s stage army: The Coalition Liberals, 1918-22’ in Taylor, A. J. P., (ed.), *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (London, 1971), p. 238.

⁶⁹⁴ MLF, Exec., 14 May 1920.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 June 1920.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 July 1921.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24 February 1920.

⁶⁹⁸ *The Liberal Agent*, Vol. 24, no. 104, July 1921.

He also urged Liberal candidates not to accept the assistance of Conservative organisations. However, they adopted instead a resolution from the National Liberal Federation because it was ‘less objectionable’. Comparing both resolutions, this seems to be because the National Liberal Federation did not rule out co-operation with Labour although the resolution chosen did state that they declined ‘the invitation extended to Liberals by the Prime Minister to enter into closer co-operation with the Conservative Party’. Instead, the Executive Committee explicitly stated that ‘every effort to maintain the independence of the historic Liberal Party should be made’, and it particularly warned Liberals in constituencies with Coalition Liberals MPs ‘to be on their guard against insidious proposals to suspend or disband their party organisation, and to force them into alliance with the Conservative Party by whatever name it may be called’.⁶⁹⁹ The evidence shows that the majority of the Liberal rank and file were ‘strongly opposed to any suggestion of “fusion” with the Conservative Party’.⁷⁰⁰

However, it must be acknowledged that the Liberal Party was not the only party experiencing difficulty after the war. In the previous section, Labour’s problems immediately after the war were noted. The Conservative Party also suffered at the grass-roots due to divisions over whether or not to continue the coalition.⁷⁰¹ Ramsden notes that ‘most good intentions of 1918 and 1919 were shattered by the party difficulties of the coalition years’.⁷⁰² Additionally, another historian of Conservative politics has stressed ‘it was not obvious that the Conservative Party had reconciled itself to the implications of the 1918 enfranchisement, and the Labour and Liberal parties could present it as politically – as well as economically and socially reactionary’ – the evidence from this thesis is that the Liberal Party at the grass-roots were unable to do so because their party was divided over continued existence of the Coalition.⁷⁰³

The division within the Liberal Party became formalised, as the independent Liberal Party’s reaction after the Spen Valley by-election to the Coalition Liberals seems to have encouraged the latter to form their own organisations. To take the Midlands region as an example, both a ‘West Midland Coalition Liberal Advisory Committee’ and a South Midlands Area organisation were created.⁷⁰⁴ In the Midlands, ‘approximately 275’ Coalition

⁶⁹⁹ MLF, Exec., 24 March 1920.

⁷⁰⁰ LCNWLF, AGM, 12 May 1920; MLF, Exec., 18 June 1920; East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 9 April 1920; Miles Platting Ward LC, AGM, 6 February 1922; Manchester Exchange LA, Exec., 5 July 1920; Chester LA, Exec., 22 April 1920; Beckenham LA, CM, 5 March 1921.

⁷⁰¹ Ball, ‘1916-1929’, pp. 241-242.

⁷⁰² Ramsden, *Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, p. 244.

⁷⁰³ P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 206.

⁷⁰⁴ Lloyd George Papers, ‘The Coalition Liberal Party: Provisional List of Area, County, City and Constituency Councils and Associations, as at 1st May 1922’, LG/F/168/3/18; MLF, Exec., 10 December 1920.

Liberal meetings were held.⁷⁰⁵ Coalition committees were formed in Leicester and Northampton, and there were plans to establish ones in Hereford and Worcester. Even worse, the former Liberal agent for Rugby was working on behalf of the Coalition by July 1921.⁷⁰⁶ In Leicester, when a motion supporting the Coalition was defeated, the President, Vice-President, Chairman, Treasurer and the Hon. Secretary all resigned in protest.⁷⁰⁷ The anti-independent Liberal character of these meetings and of the Coalition Liberal press (which claimed to have 250 towns in Great Britain ‘covered’ by their press services) meant that when the two parties reunited after 1922 the Liberals started from a more contentious position due to the Coalition Liberal criticisms of the Asquithian Liberals during 1919-1922.⁷⁰⁸ Coalition Liberal organisation existed across the country, but with varying degrees of success and activity.

The Liberal division was vitally important, as politics were ‘in a fluid state’ and required ‘crystallising’ in these years.⁷⁰⁹ All the above evidence validates Kinnear’s point that ‘the quarrel over leadership distracted Liberals from the problems of their party, that is, determining future policies and alignments’.⁷¹⁰ Similarly, Bentley pointed out that the Asquithian ‘response to the socialist threat was more complicated’ than it would have been otherwise, as they were fighting three targets – the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Coalition Liberals.⁷¹¹ Undoubtedly, many Coalition Liberals shared the views of one delegate at a meeting of the Lancashire and Cheshire supporters of Lloyd George who said ‘it is sheer nonsense to say that a liberal who is sympathetic to the coalition is no longer a liberal’, and that ‘he was not in favour of forming an organisation to fight against the Manchester Liberal Federation’.⁷¹² The meeting was also attended by the Mayor of Blackpool and undoubtedly attracted some prominent local Liberals, making the division within the

⁷⁰⁵ Lloyd George Papers, ‘Coalition Liberal Organisation Annual Report for 1920’, LG/F/168/2/16. For other examples of Coalition Liberal organisation and activity see Lloyd George Papers, ‘The Coalition Liberal Party: Provisional List of Area, County, City and Constituency Councils and Associations, as at 1st May 1922’, LG/F/168/3/18. For lists of the establishment of Lloyd George Liberal constituency parties and the activity of these consult M. Kinnear, *The British Voter: An Atlas and Survey since 1885* (London, 2nd Edn., 1981), pp. 88-93.

⁷⁰⁶ MLF, Exec., 22 July 1921.

⁷⁰⁷ Leicester LA, Adjourned Annual Meeting of the Executive Committee, 6 April 1921.

⁷⁰⁸ Lloyd George Papers, ‘Coalition Liberal Organisation Annual Report for 1920’, LG/F/168/2/16.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., ‘North of England. Political Appreciation for months of August and September’ dated 24 September 1919, LG/F/21/4/12.

⁷¹⁰ M. Kinnear, *The Fall of Lloyd George: The Political Crisis of 1922* (Basingstoke, 1973), p. 48.

⁷¹¹ M. Bentley, ‘The Liberal response to Socialism, 1918-29’ in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), p. 50.

⁷¹² Lloyd George Papers, ‘Minutes of meeting of Lancashire [sic] and Cheshire Liberal supporters of the Prime Minister’, 16 November 1920, LG/F/22/2/20 (B).

party more serious.⁷¹³ The Coalition Liberals also attacked other Liberals; on 27 March 1920, the *Daily Mirror* recorded that Lloyd George suggested Asquith was ‘dull and pompous’, and as for Asquith having called him a demagogue, Lloyd George replied ‘it was the epithet always hurled ... against any man who has a greater power of appeal to the masses than they have’.⁷¹⁴ This all led to a considerable amount of wasted Liberal effort in these years.

However, all ties were not irreconcilably severed, and in the Midlands a meeting was planned between Liberal and Coalition Liberal women.⁷¹⁵ Moreover, in March 1922, the Luton LA wanted ‘the leaders to collaborate to endeavour to bring about the fusion of the two sections of the Liberal Party’. However, the Executive committee of the MLF instructed their Secretary to inform the Luton Liberals that they thought ‘no good purpose’ would come from this.⁷¹⁶ At around the same time, the Chesterfield Young Liberals at a Round Robin meeting asked ‘Is Lloyd George a Liberal?’ and ‘Should the Premier retire?’⁷¹⁷ Whether this was for the purposes of reunion or castigating Lloyd George is not documented, but the above evidence suggests that both motivations were possible. William Ramage, the Liberal parliamentary candidate for Manchester Platting, declared that both the Coalition and Labour Parties must be attacked as ‘both were enemies’, and in his view neither had ‘a steady progressive policy’.⁷¹⁸ Overall, by 1922, this seems to have been the general opinion amongst the case study constituencies.

Liberal confusion over which political direction to take can be seen in a meeting between Liberals and Labour ‘to consider the possibility of a mutual understanding’ with regard to contesting constituencies in Worcestershire, so that they both did not contest the same seats against ‘Coalition’ (and not necessarily just Conservative Coalition) candidates. However, no ‘definite’ agreement was reached. The Executive of the MLF commented that such a meeting with Labour was ‘futile’ due to the ‘fixed determination of the Labour Party’ nationally to not enter into any such pacts.⁷¹⁹ In June 1919, the Manchester LF felt the need to state: ‘it is necessary in the interests of Manchester Liberalism to contest all Divisions in the Borough’ in future. It seems that it took the Liberals in Manchester six months after the Coupon Election to realise how fully the independent Liberals were excluded from the

⁷¹³ Ibid., ‘List of prominent gentlemen present at a meeting of Lancashire and Cheshire Liberal supports of the Prime Minister’, LG/F/22/2/20 (B).

⁷¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 27 March 1920.

⁷¹⁵ MLF, Exec., 10 December 1920.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., 3 March 1922.

⁷¹⁷ Chesterfield Young Liberals, Monthly Meeting, 6 March 1922.

⁷¹⁸ Miles Platting Ward Liberal Council, GM, 27 February 1922.

⁷¹⁹ MLF, Exec., 10 December 1920.

Coalition victory – that it was not a Liberal-Conservative coalition, but a Conservative-Lloyd George Liberal coalition. The resolution to run independent Liberal candidates in Manchester came only after ‘the attempt made by the Liberal Party in Manchester to arrange for the co-operation of the Progressive forces against reaction candidates met with a refusal’.⁷²⁰

These tentative negotiations with Labour at the constituency level can be contrasted with local electoral pacts with the Conservative Party for municipal elections. The MLF stated that in 1921 ‘in many cases Liberals and Tories had united for the purpose of keeping out Labour’, but the Federation demurred from commenting on the situation as their focus was limited to national politics.⁷²¹ There is evidence of Liberal/Conservative anti-Socialist pacts in this period in Chesterfield, Coventry, Leicester (except in 1922), and Walsall.⁷²² Whilst Liberal success can be seen in the tables below, it can also clearly be seen that the Labour Party were contesting more seats than either the Conservative or Liberal parties. In Chesterfield, in 1920, 23 Labour candidates put themselves forward for election.⁷²³ To change the council, the clearest way to do this would be to vote Labour.

As can be seen below in the municipal election results, there was a swing to Labour in Coventry in 1919, as there was nationally. It is noteworthy that the Liberals were unsuccessful in the two wards they contested. However, in 1920, the Liberal Party was particularly successful in Coventry and Leicester, with a remarkable success rate of 100 per cent. However, this was due to the invaluable asset of Conservative assistance.

Table 4.1: Coventry Municipal election results, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	2	0	7	3	10	7	7	2
1920	7	7	4	2	8	3	1	0
1921	3	3	9	9	8	0	2	0
1922	4	4	7	4	11	1	5	3

Source: Compiled from S. Davies and B. Morley (eds.), *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919-1938: A Comparative Analysis. Volume 3: Chester-East Ham* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 63-135.

Table 4.2: Municipal election results for Leicester, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won

⁷²⁰ Manchester LF, General Committee, 12 June 1919.

⁷²¹ MLF, Exec., 9 December 1921.

⁷²² The anti-socialist pacts in Chesterfield and Walsall, and the non-party discourse surrounding it, means that there are no tables for those two municipalities.

⁷²³ *Derbyshire Courier*, 6 November 1920.

1919	7	4	7	4	14	6	1	1
1920	6	6	5	3	12	4	4	1
1921	1	0	4	1	4	3	1	1
1922	4	3	6	2	9	4	3	1

Source: Compiled from *Leicester Mercury*, 4 November 1919, 2 November 1920, 2 November 1921 and 2 November 1922.

What is more, it is important to recognise that in both Coventry and Leicester the Conservatives were the prime beneficiaries of such pacts. In Coventry, the Liberals contested 16 seats to the Conservatives' 27, although in Leicester the difference was not as great, with 18 Liberals standing compared to 22 Conservatives. In wards without a Liberal candidate, the electorate would get use to a polarised electoral battle, and they might also see general elections in the same light.

The results below for Manchester perhaps underestimate Liberal strength, as many Liberal candidates stood under the Municipal Progressive banner. In November 1921, the Liberals there discussed municipal politics and whether they should continue to fight alongside the Municipal Progressive Union. The Hulme division recommended to their ward committees that municipal candidates should be described as Liberal candidates. However, there was 'a strong difference of opinion' between members on whether municipal elections should be fought on party lines.⁷²⁴ In January 1922, a compromise was reached: the right to select municipal candidates was vested in the ward committee only, and 'the style of the candidate (Progressive, Liberal or Independent) shall not be determined by the Municipal Progressive Union', but settled between the candidates and their ward committees. It was also noted that 'both the Federation and the Municipal Progressive Union will extend all the assistance possible to ward committees in municipal fights', whether the candidate adopted was fighting under 'neutral or party colours'.⁷²⁵

Table 4.3: Municipal election results for Manchester, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	2	2	15	5	10	8	11	3

⁷²⁴ Manchester LF, General Committee, 16 November 1921.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1922.

1920 ⁷²⁶	12 ⁷²⁷	7	18	10	22	6	5	1
1921	4	1	31	22	17	5	21	5
1922	6	2	20	9	18	10	9	2

Source: Compiled from *Manchester Guardian*, 3 November 1919, 2 November 1920, 2 November 1921, 2 November 1922.

The Chester LA resolved that if a vacancy arose because of the election of a Unionist to the Aldermanic bench, the ‘Broughton Ward Liberal Committee, do not nominate a Liberal for the vacancy’.⁷²⁸ By December 1920, some Liberals in Chester wanted to extend this ‘coalescing’ to all of the municipal seats across the city.⁷²⁹ However, at the meeting, an alternative amendment was put and it was resolved by 9 votes to 2 that they did ‘not form a coalition with the Conservative Party at this time’.⁷³⁰ Yet, the Chester Liberals still entered into a loose alliance with the Conservatives. In September 1921, one of the councillors reported an ‘informal’ conversation where they agreed not to oppose each others’ nominees for the 1921 municipal elections, ‘to advise our supporters to vote for each others’ nominees’, and that the term ‘coalition’ was not to be used to describe the arrangement. However, in the end the Chester Liberals only resolved ‘not to nominate more than the present number of candidates’ if the Unionists would agree to the same line.⁷³¹

Table 4.4: Municipal election results for Chester, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	4	2	7	4	7	4	1	0
1920	4	2	5	5	8	3	0	0
1921	6	6	4	4	5	0	0	0
1922	2	1	2	2	2	1	0	0

Source: Compiled from *Cheshire Observer*, 8 November 1919, 6 November 1920, 5 November 1921, 4 November 1922.

The Chester example of informal discussions between the Liberals and Conservatives provides one explanation as to why so few Liberals and Conservatives fought against each

⁷²⁶ Results for three wards unavailable due to damage to the original of the *Manchester Guardian*.

⁷²⁷ This is the figure for Municipal Progressive Candidates. None stood as out and out Liberal candidates. However, two did stand as Liberal and Municipal Progressive Union candidates.

⁷²⁸ Chester LA, Meeting at Broughton Ward Liberal Committee, 22 April 1920.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, Exec., 16 December 1920.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16 December 1920.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*, 22 September 1921.

other; a loose anti-Socialist pact. This helps to explain the figures for the Blackpool and Darwen election results.

Table 4.5: Municipal election results for Blackpool, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	3	1	11	6	3	1	9	3
1920	3	1	8	7	4	0	6	1
1921	3	1	4	3	2	0	2	1
1922	2	0	5	4	1	0	8	3

Source: Compiled from *Manchester Guardian*, 3 November 1919, 2 November 1920, 2 November 1921, 2 November 1922.

Table 4.6: Municipal election results for Darwen, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	5	3	1	1	6	0	2	2
1920	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
1921	2	2	0	0	2	0	0	0
1922	2	1	2	1	0	0	2	0

Source: Compiled from *Darwen News*, 5 November 1919, 3 November 1920, 2 November 1921, 4 November 1922.

Liberals or Conservatives did not stand under party labels in Beckenham, Bromley, Penge or Walthamstow in these years. As with Chesterfield and Walsall, the non-party discourse surrounding the municipal elections makes it difficult to prove categorically that there were anti-Socialist pacts between the Liberals and Conservatives. Nonetheless, there was a clear Labour presence in municipal elections, sometimes very successful (as in Beckenham in 1919) and at other times weak (as in Southend in 1920). Regardless, the Labour Party had become a constant feature of municipal politics.

Table 4.7: Municipal election results for Beckenham, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	0	0	0	0	7	7	7	2
1922	0	0	0	0	9	1	8	8

Source: Compiled from *Beckenham Advertiser*, 10 April 1919 and 6 April 1922.

Table 4.8: Municipal election results for Bromley, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919 ⁷³²	0	0	0	0	5	2	9	4
1920	0	0	0	0	5	0	7	5
1921	0	0	0	0	3	0	5	3
1922	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Compiled from *Bromley and District Times*, 7 November 1919, 5 November 1920, 4 November 1921.

Table 4.9: Municipal election results for Penge, 1919-1922

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	0	0	0	0	2	2	5	4
1920	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1921	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1922	0	0	0	0	7	2	22	16

Source: Compiled from *Beckenham Advertiser*, 10 April 1919 and 6 April 1922.

Table 4.10: Municipal election results for Southend, 1919-1921⁷³³

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1919	0	0	0	0	4	3	6	1
1920	0	0	0	0	7	0	12	8
1921	0	0	0	0	4	0	13	8

Source: Compiled from *Southend Standard*, 6 November 1919, 4 November 1920, 3 November 1921.

Table 4.11: Municipal election results for Walthamstow, 1920-1922⁷³⁴

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1920	0	0	0	0	12	9	18	3
1921	0	0	0	0	11	6	11	5
1922	0	0	0	0	10	6	15	6

Source: Compiled from *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 2 April 1920, 8 April 1921, 7 April 1922.

⁷³² The figure includes the Bromley Common Ward by-election.

⁷³³ After 1921, the municipal election results were not reported on party lines at all and as such cannot be used as an indicator of Liberal vitality 1922-1929.

⁷³⁴ They were not reported on party lines in 1919.

Wrigley has argued that the anti-Labour front in local elections, which the case-study constituencies has reaffirmed, furthered polarisation on class-lines for some working-class and middle-class Nonconformists.⁷³⁵ Similarly, Davies and Morley have argued that the Liberals' tendency to form anti-Labour pacts 'must have weakened their distinctive political identity in the minds of voters'.⁷³⁶ It seems that some Liberals recognised this at the time as well, and a series of articles in *The Liberal Agent* debated 'Must we fight Labour?' One Liberal felt that they gained 'more by losing every municipal election through refusing to join hands with the Tory Party than we appear to gain by any apparent arrangement to defeat Labour.' He also considered that the best way 'to keep timid Liberals' who fear Labour from voting Conservative was to 'show that we are too out to fight Labour'. He finished his article with 'Fight the Labour Party? Yes! A thousand times, yes! And get at it quick.'⁷³⁷

Whilst divisions between the independent and Coalition Liberals led to organisational problems during the immediate post-war years, not all Liberals felt that the Coalition Liberals were beyond the pale. One speaker at the AGM of the Darwen Women's LA 'hoped that the Liberals of the country would stand together at the next election and return a Liberal Government', suggesting that even at the end of 1921 there remained hope for Liberal reunion.⁷³⁸ Rev. Hibbert appealed at the AGM of the Blackpool LA 'for all Liberals to stand true to their principles for whatever differences there were in the Party its principles were eternal'.⁷³⁹ Freddie Guest in a memorandum to Lloyd George felt that there was 'active resentment' at the way Conservatives were given Liberal seats in 1918, but that 'it is quite clear that no real question of principle divides the two sections of Liberals'.⁷⁴⁰

III) The problem of Asquith's leadership of the Party in 1919-1922

One reason for anti-Socialist pacts may have been a lack of faith in Liberalism as an electoral asset. As leader of the Liberal Party, Asquith must take a degree of responsibility for this.

⁷³⁵ C. J. Wrigley, 'Explaining why so many as well as why so few: some aspects of the development of the Labour Party in small towns and rural areas', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 10, no. 1 (1990), pp. 17-22.

⁷³⁶ Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections: Vol. 3*, p. 648.

⁷³⁷ *The Liberal Agent*, Vol. 24, no. 104, July 1921.

⁷³⁸ Darwen Women's LA, AGM, 5 October 1921. For other examples see LCNWLF, Exec., 7 November 1919 and 6 February 1920.

⁷³⁹ Blackpool LA, AGM, 19 March 1921.

⁷⁴⁰ Lloyd George Papers, 'Memorandum' dated 23 December 1920, LG/F/22/2/24.

There is evidence that across the country there was a certain level of dissatisfaction with his stewardship of the party. Liberals were looking to the leadership to provide a strong progressive lead.⁷⁴¹ It could be argued that the Chesterfield Young Liberals were not sufficiently satisfied with Asquith's stewardship when asking 'who is the best leader for New Liberalism, Mr Asquith or Earl Grey?'⁷⁴² The East Walthamstow Junior Liberals held a discussion on whether 'the Liberal Party is in need of a younger leader'. Unusually, the votes for and against were not given but the vote was recorded as 'lost'.⁷⁴³ Lloyd George received a report that the independent Liberals 'say that he [Asquith] does more harm than good to Independent Liberalism when he speaks in the provinces'. Furthermore, it was also recorded that 'at the same time they are extraordinarily loyal to him personally, although they feel a change of leadership is really needed'.⁷⁴⁴

When Asquith returned to the House of Commons after the Paisley by-election in February 1920 a number of Liberal Associations sent him their best wishes.⁷⁴⁵ The rank and file wished Asquith 'success in his fight for Free Liberalism as candidate at Paisley', and subsequently they welcomed his return to the House of Commons.⁷⁴⁶ The Coalition Liberal Annual Report for 1920 sums up Asquith's tenure as Liberal leader in this period: after Asquith was returned in the Paisley by-election, 'the drooping spirits of Liberals revived', but before long 'his lack of policy and feebleness in debate made it evident that no great results could be expected, and disappointment prevailed'.⁷⁴⁷

However, it is not only Asquith who should be blamed for poor Liberal performances in 1919-1922, but also the Liberal elite both in Parliament and in the Liberal organisation. The MLF sent a letter to 'urge' the Whips to consider seriously the use of the 'cinemotor' 'for the purpose of popularising Liberal principles in villages and outlying districts which were often difficult to reach'.⁷⁴⁸ This strategy of innovative propaganda techniques to be used in the countryside would have been a useful and important method of maintaining or wresting rural constituencies from the Conservatives. There was some positive leadership from

⁷⁴¹ MLF, Exec., 18 June 1920 and 24 September 1920.

⁷⁴² Chesterfield Young Liberals, Monthly Meeting, 6 March 1922.

⁷⁴³ East Walthamstow Junior LA, GM, 22 January 1922.

⁷⁴⁴ Lloyd George Papers, 'Coalition Liberal Organisation Annual Report for 1920', LG/F/168/2/16.

⁷⁴⁵ For more on the Paisley by-election consult R. Kelly, 'Asquith at Paisley: the content of British Liberalism at the end of its era', *The Journal of British Studies*, 4, no. 1 (1964), pp. 133-159.

⁷⁴⁶ Southend LA, AGM, 3 February 1920; LCNWLF, Exec., 6 February 1920; Chesterfield LA, AGM, 29 May 1920; West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 30 January 1920; East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 9 April 1920.

⁷⁴⁷ Lloyd George Papers, 'Coalition Liberal Organisation Annual Report for 1920', LG/F/168/2/16. The quote is from the Scotland section of the report but it applies to the whole of the United Kingdom.

⁷⁴⁸ MLF, Exec., 24 February 1920.

Asquith. The Executive of the MLF ‘deeply’ deplored the campaign of murder and reprisals in Ireland, and was convinced that ‘satisfactory government is impossible except on a basis of wide powers of self-determination’. They ‘therefore heartily welcome the proposals outlined by Hon. Asquith [sic] at Ayr to give Ireland a full measure of Dominion Home Rule’. However, support for Asquith was not unanimous, there was another resolution, which was defeated, calling for the removal of Asquith’s mention of Dominion Home Rule and instead calling for ‘comprehensive self-government of Ireland, including fiscal autonomy’ but reserving defence and foreign policy for the ‘Imperial Parliament’.⁷⁴⁹ Although no direct link can be proven, it is evident that Asquith’s Irish policy did win support within his own Party and for Liberals was a strength of his post-war leadership. The Manchester LF thanked Asquith for ‘the great services and staunch support’ given by him towards the Irish Settlement.⁷⁵⁰ The West Walthamstow LA suggested Asquith as their President and it was agreed ‘unanimously and with much enthusiasm’.⁷⁵¹ Another positive of the Asquith regime was a conference of Liberal Members of Parliament and prospective candidates arranged for 24 September 1921.⁷⁵² This would have been useful to share and ideas and to try and boost morale and understanding of Liberal policies. In the event, the urgency of the Liberal need for a housing policy was highlighted.⁷⁵³

Related to the difficult situation in which the Liberals found themselves, and the dissatisfaction with Asquith’s leadership, was the talk of an Asquith-Cecil-Grey alignment of moderate non-Socialists. The Executive of the MLF’s discussion of this reveals various insights into Liberalism in early 1922. It was recorded that ‘it was thought that great advantage would accrue to the Party from the fact that Lord Grey was taking an active part in its counsels’. Tellingly, ‘Opinion was divided as to what would be the result of Lord Grey assuming the chief leadership of the Party.’ The committee’s comments on Asquith’s leadership suggest why some members would be favourable to Grey replacing Asquith. There was ‘a certain discontent with the leadership of Mr Asquith amongst the less well-informed of the rank and file’ which ‘was too pronounced to be entirely ignored’, but they felt that ‘such discontent would be reversed by more active leadership on his part in the House of Commons’. Regarding the Cecil intrigue, the Executive felt ‘that any attempt to “rope in” Lord Robert Cecil so far as the Party was concerned was inadvisable, and that his inclusion

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., 5 November 1920.

⁷⁵⁰ Manchester LF, General Committee, 8 December 1921.

⁷⁵¹ West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 20 April 1921.

⁷⁵² MLF, Exec., 23 September 1921.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., 13 July 1922.

in Party deliberation, in any other way than as an avowed Liberal, would have a weakening effect on the Party as tending in the direction of Whiggism rather than Radicalism'. The independent Liberals were not at this point keen on the return of Lloyd George; the committee 'was decidedly of the opinion that any attempt on the part of Mr Lloyd George to snatch the leadership of the Party would be keenly resented, and, if successful, would bring about serious disintegration'.⁷⁵⁴ A different leader of the independent Liberals between 1919 and 1922 might have encouraged the Liberal Party to make the most of the difficult hand that they were dealt after the Coupon election. However, under Asquith the Liberals neglected the opportunities that they did have and the internal weaknesses of their leadership compounded their difficulties in the immediate post-war period.

IV) The political outlook of the Liberal Party, 1919-1922

It is important to devote space to the policies of the Liberal Party in the post war years for several reasons. Old, irrelevant and unclear policies have been given as a cause of the Liberal decline.⁷⁵⁵ As a former Lord Chancellor in the pre-war Liberal administration outlined in his memoirs, 'there seemed to have set in a period of stagnation' and 'it appeared to be lacking in fresh ideas.'⁷⁵⁶ At the AGM of the MLF in 1919, no resolution could be passed regarding the Nationalisation of the Mines, as after 'a long and animated discussion' opinion 'seemed to be equally divided [and] no decision could be arrived at'.⁷⁵⁷ Nonetheless, every political party has differences of opinion within it and the Liberal Party was no different. In Manchester, it was agreed to have 'a series of debates on political topics upon which there was a lack of unanimity within the Party'.⁷⁵⁸ However, on some occasions decisions may have been unable to be reached because the policies being discussed were unimportant to the party's particular demographic; at the Chester LA, it was suggested that members present 'were not interested' in discussing a 48 hour week and the minimum wage. It could be because the meeting was going on '9-10' at night, but the 'numbers called and the attendance' suggested a general lack

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 3 February 1922.

⁷⁵⁵ Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, p. 223 cites 'lack of effective leadership and uncertainty on issues of policy'. Also see Bentley, 'The Liberal response to Socialism', p. 47 where he states 'All too plainly, liberalism was out of date.'

⁷⁵⁶ R. B. Haldane, *An Autobiography* (London, 1929), p. 308.

⁷⁵⁷ MLF, Exec., 14 October 1919.

⁷⁵⁸ Manchester LF, General Committee, 5 February 1920.

of interest in these issues in Chester.⁷⁵⁹ The lack of discussion and decision on these matters at the grass-roots are vitally important; Morgan has argued ‘in the vital new areas of industrial and social policy, the Independent Liberals cut a feeble figure’, and this is true at constituency as well as parliamentary level. Morgan is right that ‘sections of the party pressed for more radical and more concrete policies’.⁷⁶⁰ One member of the party in Manchester ‘raised the question of having a fighting programme to lay before the electors at the coming election’.⁷⁶¹

Although support for the League of Nations was a new policy in this period, it rapidly became one of the core planks of the Liberal Party programme, and it seems to have been universally accepted.⁷⁶² The MLF was looking for ‘a greatly decreased expenditure on armaments’ as soon as the League of Nations became fully active.⁷⁶³ When criticising the Coalition’s ‘reckless’ Eastern policy in September 1922, they added ‘it is prominently a question for the League of Nations to deal with’.⁷⁶⁴ Given strong Liberal support for the League of Nations, it is unsurprising that League associations seem to target Liberal Associations to provide members and to stimulate organisation.⁷⁶⁵ Some members of the Southend Executive were also on the local committee of the League of Nations Union, and undoubtedly Liberals provided much of its branch membership.⁷⁶⁶

The Liberals also had internal unity over Free Trade and Ireland. The grass-roots denounced the ‘proposed legislation on key-industries and anti-dumping by which the old bad policy of Protection’ was being reintroduced.⁷⁶⁷ Clarke has argued that ‘It was, above all, Ireland that put Lloyd George out of court for many Liberals.’⁷⁶⁸ From the evidence, it seems that Clarke is correct and that it was a unifying force amongst the independent Liberals. The rank and file condemned the coalition government’s ‘naked policy of brute force’ and viewed

⁷⁵⁹ Chester LA, Exec., 15 January 1920.

⁷⁶⁰ Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, p. 203.

⁷⁶¹ Manchester LF, General Committee, 1 May 1922.

⁷⁶² For more on the League of Nations Union and British society see D. S. Birn, *The League of Nations Union, 1918-1945* (Oxford, 1981) and H. McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c. 1918-48* (Manchester, 2011).

⁷⁶³ MLF, Exec., 16 January 1920.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 September.

⁷⁶⁵ See for example, Chesterfield Women’s LA, CM, 1 June 1920.

⁷⁶⁶ Southend LA, Exec., 29 December 1919.

⁷⁶⁷ MLF, Exec., 22 July 1921; Chesterfield Women’s LA, A special CM, 27 January 1921; Chesterfield Young Liberals, Meeting, 18 November 1919; Manchester LF, General Committee, 12 June 1919; Darwen LA, Annual Executive Meeting, 11 July 1921.

⁷⁶⁸ Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats*, p. 214.

with indignation the reprisals carried out against the civilian population.⁷⁶⁹ By the end of 1921, the Manchester LF were able to rejoice at the Irish Settlement and tendered their ‘hearty’ congratulations to Lloyd George on his ‘great achievement’, suggesting that while Ireland initially distanced Lloyd George from the independent Liberals it did not put him beyond redemption.⁷⁷⁰ After the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921, the Executive of the MLF recognised their ‘great struggle’ of over thirty-five years since Gladstone’s first Home Rule Bill was at an end.⁷⁷¹ It was the end of an era as far as Ireland being a decisive (mainland) party political issue. Freddie Guest, an admittedly partisan observer, summed up the difficulty of the independent Liberals: the old Liberal war cries (free trade, temperance and Home Rule) ‘limits the possible audiences to whom they appeal to people over 50 years of age’.⁷⁷² The Liberals now needed to formulate new policies from which to try to gain the support of the newly-enfranchised under the 1918 Act.

There are isolated signs of Progressive Liberal thought at the grass-roots (particularly at the regional level), but they were unable to become established as official party policy in this period. The Executive of the MLF supported radical policies regarding unemployment because, ‘in view of the gravity of the situation’, they felt ‘some amount of work’ should be ensured ‘for a longer period than the end of the year [over three months]’ and that any such scheme should be paid for nationally.⁷⁷³ At the Executive of the MLF in April 1921 there was a resolution in favour of devolution to establish ‘subordinate legislatures in England, Wales and Scotland’ and they ‘warmly approved the principle’ behind it.⁷⁷⁴ The Executive of the MLF was sympathetic to an idea to ‘transfer the Labour exchanges to the Trade Unions in conjunction with the employers’.⁷⁷⁵ At the Women’s Chesterfield LA there was a ‘short discussion on ‘Equal Pay for Equal Work’⁷⁷⁶ However, it is not surprising why this was never able to become party policy in this era – the Chesterfield Young Liberals voted against inviting women to their meetings.⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁶⁹ MLF, Exec., 22 July 1921; Darwen LA, Annual Executive Meeting, 11 July 1921; Chesterfield Women’s LA, AGM, 12 October 1920; Chesterfield Young Liberals, Meeting, 13 September 1920; Manchester LF, General Committee, 6 October 1920.

⁷⁷⁰ Manchester LF, General Committee, 8 December 1921.

⁷⁷¹ MLF, Exec., 9 December 1921.

⁷⁷² Lloyd George Papers, ‘The Political Situation’ undated but most likely not long after 5 January 1922, LG/F/35/1/1.

⁷⁷³ MLF, Exec., 23 September 1921.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 April 1921.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 February 1922.

⁷⁷⁶ Chesterfield Women’s LA, CM, 18 May 1920.

⁷⁷⁷ Chesterfield Young Liberals, AGM, 17 January 1921.

With a specific focus on Walsall, Dean has argued that ‘Nostalgia for the great days of Liberalism’ and a consequent failure to rise adequately to the new political issues of the twentieth century were sources of Liberal weakness.⁷⁷⁸ This is particularly true with the failure to adopt into its national programme more progressive measures that were formulated for a post-Edwardian Age. An example of this was the emphasis on Anti-Waste. In true Gladstonian spirit, it seems that the Liberal Party was as keen on cutting waste as the right-wing press. A resolution passed on National Economy by the MLF in June 1920 viewed ‘with alarm the continued and extravagant expenditure’ almost two years after armistice. They regarded ‘national economy as the first and most urgent necessity of the moment’, and stated that the government should be ‘closing down new departments created for the purposes of the war’ and ‘securing the immediate and drastic reduction of expenditure by those departments which remain’.⁷⁷⁹

However, it seems that the Liberal Party’s position on Anti-Waste was almost inconsistent. The Executive of the MLF thought that the proposed cuts to education were ‘lamentable’. Likewise, whilst they condemned the ‘maladministration of funds’, they warned that cuts in ‘the amount spent on maintaining and improving the nation’s health should be made with the utmost caution and gravest reluctance’, and only if the economy had been shown to be absolutely essential.⁷⁸⁰ The rank and file in all three regions criticised the government for their extravagant spending.⁷⁸¹ Dawson highlighted how retrenchment was ‘a key component’ of Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall, but, as can be seen from the evidence, retrenchment was an important part of post-war Liberalism across the whole country.⁷⁸² In this regard, the independent Liberals were similar to the Coalition Liberals, as their historian has documented their being advocates of ‘drastic economy’.⁷⁸³ This once again highlights the underlying unity of the party at the grass-roots, who were only divided by the split that had occurred at Westminster. The Conservative grass-roots were also very much in favour of reducing government expenditure, so this did not provide the independent Liberals with any distinctive platform.⁷⁸⁴

⁷⁷⁸ Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 67.

⁷⁷⁹ MLF, Exec., 18 June 1920.

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 February 1922.

⁷⁸¹ Darwen Women’s LA, AGM, 22 October 1919; Darwen Women’s LA, AGM, 27 September 1922; Walthamstow LA, Exec., 26 September 1919; LCNWLF, Exec., 5 March 1920 and AGM, 12 July 1921.

⁷⁸² Dawson, ‘Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall’, p. 429.

⁷⁸³ Morgan, ‘Lloyd George’s stage army’, p. 241.

⁷⁸⁴ S. Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, p. 224.

To call for both Anti-Waste and the aforementioned nationally-funded work programme for the unemployed was diametrically opposed, as the former would reduce government spending and the latter increase it. Unfortunately for the Liberals, the Conservative Party were consistently ‘Anti-Waste’, whilst the Labour Party consistently called for action to reduce unemployment, which left the Liberals without a distinctive position. The Liberals insistence on retrenchment would have precluded a deal with Labour: as Hart has shown, ‘for most of the years 1918-26, the Liberals were not progressive’.⁷⁸⁵

Additionally, it was also unfortunate for the Liberal Party that both the Labour and Conservative parties, nationally at least, were consistently opposed to any form of proportional representation. The Executive of the MLF realised that ‘with the rise of a third permanent party in British politics, the difficulty and danger to which Liberals are exposed where they find it necessary to take part in three-cornered fights’. They felt ‘that the only way out lies in a re-arrangement of the method of voting’.⁷⁸⁶ The grass-roots across the country seem to have recognised this as well, but with no agreement on whether to have the Alternative Vote or Proportional Representation of some form.⁷⁸⁷ As the Liberals realised that some form of proportional representation would overwhelmingly benefit them, they were more whole-heartedly converted to electoral reform. However, for Labour and the Conservatives, there was less incentive for change.

V) The general election of 1922

When the Conservative rebellion ousted Lloyd George from power in October 1922, it was possible that the two wings of the Liberal Party would reunite to fight the inevitable general election. This did not occur, and once again the division at the elite level hindered the Liberal Party in the immediate post-war years. After the election, the Coalition Liberals (now known as National Liberals) were reduced to 53 MPs, whilst the independent Liberals increased to 62 MPs. If these groups were taken together the Liberal total would still only be 115 MPs as against 142 MPs for Labour and 344 MPs for the Conservatives. The lost opportunities

⁷⁸⁵ Hart, ‘The Liberals, the war and the franchise’, p. 826.

⁷⁸⁶ MLF, Exec., 4 February 1921.

⁷⁸⁷ Blackpool LA, Exec., 20 March 1922; Chesterfield Women’s LA, CM, 30 March 1920; Walthamstow LA, Exec., 26 September 1919.

outlined earlier in this chapter resulted in the Labour Party making strides at the expense of the divided Liberal Party. Previously, the Liberals combined could have claimed to be the official opposition, but that was no longer numerically possible after 1922.

The outcome of the 1922 general election showed precisely why the Liberal Party needed electoral reform. Manchester provides a clear example where the electoral system disadvantaged the Liberal Party. The *Manchester Evening News* noted that 130,204 votes were recorded against the Conservatives and only 129,457 in their favour, yet they won seven out of the ten seats in Manchester.⁷⁸⁸ The Labour Party won the other three, and consequently the Liberals were totally unrepresented in Manchester. Similarly, the Secretary of the MLF's election report highlighted that in the 33 Liberal contests in the Midlands, the Liberals polled 309,148 votes and had eight MPs elected whilst in the same 33 contests the Conservative Party polled 316,620, for which they secured 19 seats. Unsurprisingly, he concluded that this proved the need for electoral reform. Demoralised, he added there was a 'disparity of reward occurring to effort put forth'.⁷⁸⁹ Yet, it must be highlighted that out of 76 contestable seats, Liberals stood only in 34 (one Liberal, Kenyon at Chesterfield, was returned unopposed), which was not even enough to take half the seats in the Midlands if they had won all those that they contested. The advantage the Liberal Party had lost at the general election of 1918 of being either the governing party or the main opposition was reinforced in this election, as they never contested enough seats to become the government in their own right. The Liberal Party unwittingly contributed to their own downfall by not giving the appearance of being a government in waiting.

Besides the electoral system, the issues in the election did not favour the Liberals. The Secretary of the MLF reported that 'Sir George Younger's tactics were, indeed, so clever that the Liberal Party ... was made to bear its [the coalition's] sins at the polls.'⁷⁹⁰ Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, campaigning on behalf of the unwell Conservative candidate in Coventry, stated 'the new government was the first really Conservative Government and the first really Conservative Prime Minister for 17 years.'⁷⁹¹ The Conservatives promised economy and a different style government and so distanced themselves from the perceived high spending, quick policy change and bureaucratic Coalition government.⁷⁹²

⁷⁸⁸ *Manchester Evening News*, 16 October 1922.

⁷⁸⁹ MLF, Exec., 8 December 1922.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹¹ *Coventry Herald*, 10 and 11 November 1922.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*; *Southend Standard*, 9 November 1922.

The Liberals tried to remind the electorate that it was the Conservative Party who had been the major players in the Lloyd George Coalition ‘and were equally responsible with the other wing of the coalition for all the mess and muddle’. The Liberal candidate for Beckenham attacked the Conservatives for using Lloyd George’s name ‘in times of success’ but not when it was a ‘liability’, and consequently after putting ‘their best friends into power’ now used ‘those who were their second best friends’.⁷⁹³

However, it was not just the Conservative Party which was able to appeal to potential Liberal voters in 1922. The Secretary of the MLF felt that Labour’s Capital Levy policy ‘appealed very strongly to poorer working class voters’. He also added that ‘the power of the Trade Unions was strongly illustrated’ in providing votes and organisation for Labour.⁷⁹⁴ The Liberals did not have a social programme as attractive as the Labour Party or any additional advantage accruing from trade union organisation. Lord Emmott, whilst speaking on the platform of the Liberal candidate, stated they could not ‘afford the Labour Programme at present’ and that the Capital Levy would ‘cripple industry’.⁷⁹⁵ In many constituencies the campaigns revolved around the alternatives of a Conservative government or Labour policies. The Liberal Party accidentally contributed to this with their attacks on Labour’s nationalisation and Capital Levy policies.⁷⁹⁶ The Liberal drift since the war also encouraged former supporters to move away from the party. In Harborough, a former Liberal MP supported the Labour candidate, as he was the ‘most likely candidate to represent the interest of working men and women’.⁷⁹⁷

Moreover, several Liberal candidates continued to use traditional party shibboleths in their electioneering. When Lieutenant-Colonel Meyer was adopted as candidate for Blackpool, he was hailed as ‘a man with the spirit of Gladstonian Liberalism’.⁷⁹⁸ The candidate for Harborough was proud to stick to ‘the old watchwords of the party, “peace, retrenchment, and reform’, as he felt they were just as applicable in 1922 ‘as they were to Gladstonian times’.⁷⁹⁹ To this end, the government’s foreign policy was attacked as wasteful.⁸⁰⁰ The Liberal candidate in Southend attacked the ‘303 millions of money [that] had been wasted in Mesopotamia, Russia and Palestine, and there had been reckless squanderings

⁷⁹³ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 26 October 1922.

⁷⁹⁴ MLF, Exec., 8 December 1922.

⁷⁹⁵ *Coventry Herald*, 10 and 11 November 1922.

⁷⁹⁶ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 26 October and 9 November 1922; *Chester Chronicle*, 4 November 1922; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 November 1922.

⁷⁹⁷ *Market Harborough Advertiser*, 14 November 1922.

⁷⁹⁸ Blackpool LA, Special Meeting of the LC, 28 October 1922.

⁷⁹⁹ *Market Harborough Advertiser*, 14 November 1922.

⁸⁰⁰ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 9 November 1922.

in Europe'.⁸⁰¹ In a similar vein Liberal candidates advocated retrenchment of government expenditure.⁸⁰² Free Trade was also a vital part of Liberal policy on the campaign trail.⁸⁰³ The Liberal candidate for Coventry discussed temperance, which was not an important election issue this year, and he subsequently came bottom of the poll.⁸⁰⁴ The overall impression given of Liberal programmes across the country is that they would have been at home in the nineteenth century, especially given the absence of anything resembling the New Liberalism. With the Liberals divided and offering an aged programme, part of responsibility for the party falling behind the Labour Party in terms of seats won lies squarely on the shoulders of the Liberal elite and their own deficiencies.

So how were Liberals able to get elected in the face of the beginnings of political polarisation and a deficient programme? It seems that Kenyon faced no opposition in Chesterfield due to his personal prestige in the constituency, with the Labour Party coming to the conclusion 'that the hope of winning the seat was extremely remote'.⁸⁰⁵ Dean argues there was a personal vote for the Liberal, Pat Collins, in Walsall.⁸⁰⁶ Collins stood on a traditional platform of 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform' and unsurprisingly, he advocated 'a powerful League of Nations, and not a skeleton or make-believe' one. More unusually, he wanted the Peace Treaty revised and universal disarmament. Whilst stating 'the extravagance of the late government had been most appalling', Collins had no constructive and definite social reform policies. The Conservative candidate in Walsall, Lady Cooper, tried to polarise politics between Labour and Conservative at her adoption meeting, but this tactic was not successful.⁸⁰⁷ Moreover, Collins tried to present Liberalism as 'the buffer between reaction on the one hand and Socialism on the other'.⁸⁰⁸ The Liberals tried to position themselves in between the two extremes, as they 'were out to work for the welfare of all the people, not for any class, but for all the classes.'⁸⁰⁹ This middle position may have ended up satisfying few. To take one example, the Liberal candidate for Beckenham said 'the unemployed had a right to be maintained, but there was a limit to which the state could go'.⁸¹⁰ With the contrast

⁸⁰¹ *Southend Standard*, 9 November 1922.

⁸⁰² *Chester Chronicle*, 4 November 1922; *Manchester Guardian*, 11 and 15 November 1922.

⁸⁰³ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 9 November 1922; *Chester Chronicle*, 4 November 1922; *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 31 October 1922.

⁸⁰⁴ *Coventry Herald*, 10 and 11 November 1922.

⁸⁰⁵ *Derbyshire Times*, 4 November 1922.

⁸⁰⁶ Dean, *Town and Westminster*, pp. 94-95. The research for this thesis confirmed this and the above argument. See *Walsall Observer*, 4 November, 11 November and 18 November 1922.

⁸⁰⁷ *Walsall Observer*, 4 November 1922.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 November 1922.

⁸⁰⁹ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 26 October 1922; *Southend Standard*, 9 November 1922.

⁸¹⁰ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 9 November 1922.

between the Conservative and Labour position, this put the Liberal candidate in between two polarised sides.

In the case-study constituencies there is evidence of Liberal disunity costing the Liberals seats and of campaigning against each other to the disadvantage of both. In Leicester, a pact between the National Liberals and Conservatives resulted in one National Liberal being returned, but he took the Conservative Whip soon after the election.⁸¹¹ However, this meant that in Leicester West a National Liberal fought an independent Liberal, with the result that they split the vote and Labour won the seat. Attacks on the National Liberals and Lloyd George's record in the Coalition government were common place in the Home Counties, the Midlands and the north-west.⁸¹² However, other Liberal candidates were 'not going to say one word against Lloyd George'.⁸¹³ A third group lay in between the two positions, and felt that although Lloyd George had done 'great work' for his country in the past, the post-war coalition years were not great.⁸¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, the Labour and the Conservative parties exploited these issues when speaking at public meetings.⁸¹⁵ There is also evidence that the Liberal Party was already caught in the third party trap of the electoral system by 1922. One Conservative candidate rhetorically asked 'in the circumstances, would it be possible for Mr. Asquith to have a majority at the next parliament?'⁸¹⁶ With the Liberal candidate for the Platting division in Manchester receiving only 5.7 per cent of the poll, it was noted that Liberal voters supported the Labour candidate because of 'his genuine chance' of defeating the Conservative candidate.⁸¹⁷ The Liberal divisions are important as they made it harder for the Liberal Party to be taken credibly as an alternative government.

Yet, while Liberal divisions were being exploited, there is evidence that a degree of reunion occurred in certain constituencies. In Manchester, Liberal unity was achieved before the 1922 general election. The *Manchester Evening News* reported that both Free Liberals and Coalition Liberals 'are agreed that to fight each other in the Manchester area would be the height of folly'. They also quoted 'one prominent Coalitionist' as asking 'why ... should we be divided? There is now no coalition, and there can be no Coalition Liberal candidates as there is no coalition.'⁸¹⁸ The Liberal candidate for Darwen claimed that during the previous

⁸¹¹ *Leicester Mercury*, 2 November 1922.

⁸¹² *Beckenham Advertiser*, 26 October 1922; *Chester Chronicle*, 4 November 1922.

⁸¹³ *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 31 October 1922.

⁸¹⁴ *Southend Standard*, 9 November 1922.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*; *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 4 November 1922.

⁸¹⁶ *Southend Standard*, 9 November 1922, 3 May 1923.

⁸¹⁷ *Manchester Evening News*, 16 November 1922.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23 October 1922.

few years there had been ‘very few Coalition Liberals in the Division’, but those who had ‘placed their Liberalism before anything else’ were helping him in his fight against ‘a real reactionary [Conservative] Government’.⁸¹⁹ Even though Manchester, and ‘in particular’ Exchange Division, ‘found both wings of the Liberal Party united for success’, the split during the post-war Coalition government proved too much: ‘it was hardly expected that disorganisation brought about during many months of separation could be repaired in two or three weeks’.⁸²⁰ The Darwen Women’s LA ascribed the defeat in Darwen to ‘the organisation in other parts of the district’ being ‘not sufficiently strong’.⁸²¹

Even though the election result was a great blow to the Liberal Party, they felt that the situation was far more positive than in 1918: ‘after the defeat of 1918 everything was dead, but on this occasion there is the utmost liveliness’, and they were preparing for future contests.⁸²² The Chair of the MLF said that ‘the election had brought forward a tremendous number of enthusiastic young workers and it would be a great pity if that enthusiasm was allowed to subside’.⁸²³ As the *Walsall Observer* pointed out, individually Asquith and Lloyd George would lead ineffective groups in Parliament, but if they united ‘Liberalism might play an important part in the scheme of opposition’.⁸²⁴ It was this potential that concerned Liberalism at its grass-roots after the election. However, as historians of the Labour Party have noted, ‘certainly from [the general election result of] 1922’, Labour was now ‘a serious challenger for power and an alternative government’.⁸²⁵ It was this reality, rather than any Liberal potential, which makes Scott’s comment in his diary on 6 December 1922 an acute assessment of the outcome of the general election for the Liberal Party: ‘it was a disaster for the Liberal Party worse if possible than that of 1918 because there was less excuse for it’.⁸²⁶ There was less excuse for it because, as this chapter has shown, the Liberals neglected their potential since 1918 because the party was divided, and this was a period of lost opportunities.

⁸¹⁹ *Darwen News*, 8 November 1922.

⁸²⁰ Manchester Exchange LA, AGM, 20 April 1923.

⁸²¹ Darwen Women’s LA, CM, 7 December 1922.

⁸²² MLF, Exec., 8 December 1922.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁴ *Walsall Observer*, 18 November 1922.

⁸²⁵ J. Shepard and K. Laybourn., *Britain’s First Labour Government* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 16.

⁸²⁶ T. Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911-1928* (London, 1970), p. 433.

Chapter 5

Reunion, the First Labour Government and the third-party trap, 1922-1924

It has been suggested that during the period from the fall of the Coalition in October 1922 to the general election of October 1924, British politics was in transition and the fate of the Liberal Party was decided.⁸²⁷ Cook argues that it was ‘a succession of political blows coming on top of the changing social structure that reduced the Liberal Party from supremacy to impotence’.⁸²⁸ This chapter will critically evaluate his proposition with particular focus on the opportunities for the revival of the Liberal Party in the early 1920s, and will assess the party’s response to the challenges that it faced and the reasons for the approaches which it adopted. This period consists of two halves, with the first part being from the 1922 general election to the 1923 general election. Examining the Westminster elite, Wilson noted that ‘feelings remained a formidable obstacle to reunion’.⁸²⁹ The attitude of the grass-roots is absent from the historiography, which this section of the chapter will remedy.⁸³⁰ The chapter also outlines how the delayed reunion hindered the development of the party’s policies and further reorganisation on the ground. The second period covered was from the aftermath of the 1923 general election to the general election of 1924.⁸³¹ Cook has argued that between December 1923 and October 1924, ‘the decline of the [Liberal] Party was transformed into its downfall’.⁸³² He explained that this was because of the mistakes and miscalculations of the Liberal elite.⁸³³ The second section will examine grass-roots reaction to the formation of the

⁸²⁷ Cook, *Age of Alignment*, p. 3.

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 342 and *passim*.

⁸²⁹ Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, p. 261.

⁸³⁰ Cook has a couple of examples in *Age of Alignment*, Ch. 5 but the chapter is primarily concerned with the Liberal elite and reunion not grass-root feeling. For more on Liberal politics nationally 1922-1923, including the lack of progress regarding reunion see Campbell, *Lloyd George*, pp. 28-79.

⁸³¹ For Liberal politics nationally in this period see Campbell, *Lloyd George*, pp. 80-106.

⁸³² C. Cook, ‘A stranger death of Liberal England’ in Taylor, A. J. P., (ed.), *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (London, 1971), p. 287.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

first Labour government and finds Liberal support for Asquith's course of action. The missed opportunities for reorganisation at the constituency level will also be explored.

D) Reunion after the 1922 general election

The surviving association minute books make it clear that there were different views at the grass-roots about how quickly reunion should occur within the Liberal Party. An important initial impediment in the way of reunion was articulated by Geoffrey Howard at an Executive meeting of the MLF, where he pointed out that before reunification 'they must know whether there was going to be a fresh coalition with the Tory Party'. In the same vein, he added: 'they must be certain that there was no intention of forming a fresh centre group after the Liberal force had called together again'. Charles McCurdy, the National Liberal MP for Northampton, was more practical in his position on reunion. He thought that 'the importance of the question depended entirely upon the use of which a united Liberal Party might make of their new found unity'. Articulating how this could occur, he said that the first step should be a face to face meeting to 'discuss whatever differences there might be'. He stressed that his ideal was that 'there would be no proscription and no ostracism', both of which were important from the National Liberal perspective. Importantly, he appreciated the needs of both sections when he added 'there could be no reunion that would do injury to the position of Mr. Asquith as leader of the Liberal Party on the one hand, or which demanded that the National Liberals should abandon their leader'. At the very same meeting, and speaking after McCurdy, the Earl Beauchamp said 'the question of reunion should not be taken too seriously', adding that there should be more discussions on the party line in the House of Commons.⁸³⁴

The majority of the grass-roots of the party were eager for full reunion, regardless of personal animosity. As Beauchamp himself wrote to Maclean, 'up and down the country the rank and file are urging us to unite again'.⁸³⁵ One constituency where the grass-roots wanted unity was the Coventry LA, who desired 'complete Liberal Re-union'. They added that

whilst fully appreciating the great work which the leaders of both sections of the Liberal Party have accomplished, the members of this association feel that the

⁸³⁴ MLF, Exec., 22 June 1923.

⁸³⁵ 7th Earl Beauchamp to Maclean, Donald Maclean papers, 20 January 1923, MS C. 467/9.

possibilities for future usefulness of the Liberal Party, either as a government, or as an opposition, are being considerably reduced by the present divisions in the Houses of Parliament and in the country. Further, this meeting feels that the adherence of both sections of the Liberal Party to traditional Liberal principles is sound and therefore trusts that complete unity will quickly be realised.⁸³⁶

In a similar vein, the candidate for Southend stated that Liberalism was suffering from ‘disunity and failure’, and that ‘unity of spirit, unity of desire and unity of action’ were ‘necessary and desirable for Liberalism’ to be a success.⁸³⁷ The Executive of the Blackpool LA considered ‘that every effort should be made for the unity of the Liberal Party without delay’, and sent letters to Asquith and Lloyd George to this effect, showing equal treatment of both sides requesting that they both put to one side their personal feeling and work together for the good of the party.⁸³⁸ Likewise, the AGM of the Darwen LA resolved unanimously that it was ‘imperative that at the earliest possible moment we should close our ranks, and stand again as a completely united party’, and they also sent their resolution to both Lloyd George and Asquith, again displaying equal treatment to both sides.⁸³⁹ The evidence suggests that McCurdy’s desire for no proscription and no ostracism was not an issue for the bulk of the rank and file. The primary responsibility for delay belongs to the parliamentary elite, as outlined by Beauchamp.

While there was a dominant feeling towards reunion within the party, the past was not always so quickly forgotten. The General Committee of the Manchester LF had a long and protracted discussion on Liberal reunion, after which they agreed unanimously to deplore the decision of Asquith and the Liberal Chief Whip to demand regular and continuous co-operation in the division lobby of the House of Commons before there could be reunion. This debate shows that whilst they did in principle support a speedy reintegration, some members supported Asquith’s position which only served to delay reunification. At the same meeting, a resolution on reunion that included praise for Asquith, Donald Maclean ‘and other leaders of the Liberal Party’ was not voted on, perhaps because the majority present realised its partisan nature would not help matters.⁸⁴⁰ However, the following series of resolutions put forward by the Chester LA shows how strong feelings against Lloyd George remained, at least for some:

⁸³⁶ Coventry LA, Special Meeting of Officers, Executive and members of the Association, 31 January 1923.

⁸³⁷ Southend LA, Extract from the *Southend-on-Sea Observer* 2 May 1923 after Exec., 13 April 1923.

⁸³⁸ Blackpool LA, Exec., 9 March 1923.

⁸³⁹ Darwen LA, AGM, 12 May 1923.

⁸⁴⁰ Manchester LF, General Committee, 23 March 1923.

That the Chester Liberal Association earnestly trusts that every endeavour will be made for the coalescing of the two Liberal wings, in the interests of the unity of the party[,] as our present unhappy position is having a seriously detrimental effect upon old adherents of the faith, and especially so upon the younger members of our Party, many of whom, in a state of perplexity, are in danger of being permanently lost to us. We would further add, that, in our opinion, time is of the utmost importance in this matter.⁸⁴¹

However, a telling amendment was passed by 80 votes to 9, and is also worth quoting in its entirety:

That this meeting of the Chester Liberal Association while deploring the division in the Liberal ranks pledge their support to the leaders of the Liberal Party in the action they have taken with regard to Mr Lloyd George's proposals. We hold that the principles of Liberalism are not open to barter or bargaining: that active support of the party's policy in the House of Commons is the only proof of good faith or recognition. We regret that Mr Lloyd George should think that this is a matter that could be settled by compromise.⁸⁴²

As seen in Chester, some of the bitter feelings amongst the Liberals in Parliament were also evident amongst the rank and file. The support of such associations, even if they were a minority of all Liberal associations, would legitimise the actions of the leadership in taking reunion slowly. Consequently, no significant headway was made regarding Liberal reunion before November 1923. This was another period of lost opportunity for the Liberal Party, as whilst it remained still effectively divided, its Labour and Conservative opponents were tending to their own houses, while the Liberals stood outside theirs talking amongst themselves.

Campbell argued that Lloyd George was 'not seeking re-admission to Asquith's party, but recall by the acclamation of the rank and file.'⁸⁴³ While most of the grass-roots wanted Lloyd George returned to the inner circle of the Liberal Party, it is clear that this idea was not received by all Liberals with enthusiastic and universal approval. Dawson's point that in Devon and Cornwall reunion 'was not painful' could be extended to most Liberals at the grass-roots across the case-studies.⁸⁴⁴ It is also consistent with Hart's research that found that 'over 50 constituencies had merged Liberal and National Liberal Associations' by September 1923.⁸⁴⁵ Nevertheless, remaining divisions in the parliamentary party were also represented

⁸⁴¹ Chester LA, AGM, 10 April 1923.

⁸⁴² Ibid.

⁸⁴³ Campbell, *Lloyd George*, p. 44.

⁸⁴⁴ Dawson, 'Politics in Devon and Cornwall', p. 342.

⁸⁴⁵ M. Hart, 'The decline of the Liberal Party in Parliament and in the constituencies, 1914-1931', University of Oxford D. Phil (1982), pp. 212-213.

to a lesser extent at the grass-roots. Leadership and unity from above would have accelerated grass-roots union, which could only have been beneficial for the party. This was not the case, and so the period between the 1922 general election and the 1923 general election constitutes another period of lost opportunity that stems back to 1918.

II) Liberal re-organisation after the 1922 election defeat

Whilst reunion was not being actively pursued by the upper echelons of the Party machinery, it was important for them to begin reorganisation – a difficult matter with some pieces missing, but one that needed to be tackled as speedily and effectively as possible. It was recorded that an informal meeting of Liberal women in the Midlands took place on 22 March 1923 to discuss ‘co-ordinating women’s work’ in the region.⁸⁴⁶ Consequently, a Women’s Advisory Council was formed of three representatives of each division in the area, with the minimum target of meeting at least three times a year. Miss Mary Fawkes of the MLF was set to work on reorganising Walsall, with the aim of retaining it at the next general election.⁸⁴⁷ A branch of the National League of Young Liberals was formed in September 1923, suggesting that the work was bearing fruit.⁸⁴⁸ Whilst these actions would not necessarily guarantee a Liberal victory in Walsall, if it engaged some potential Liberal workers in between elections and maintained contact with the electorate then it could be judged a success. This development suggests that Liberalism was still alive in Walsall and could, if reorganisation was pursued as keenly in other areas, have resulted in an attempt at national revival for the party. However, generally this was not the case, and the months after the 1922 general election should be considered as wasted potential. In most areas, they did not have Walsall’s advantage of having a sitting MP, so the importance of local and national leadership is evident. This was manifest in Chesterfield, where the President of the Chesterfield LA meet the Liberal Chief Whip to discuss co-operation between the Chesterfield, Clay Cross and North East Derbyshire constituencies, as they were similar in ‘social and industrial life and political aims’.⁸⁴⁹ Another example showing the possibility for co-operation in neighbouring

⁸⁴⁶ MLF, Exec., 20 April 1923.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid., 22 June 1923.

⁸⁴⁸ Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 69.

⁸⁴⁹ Chesterfield LA, Exec., 7 July 1923.

constituencies can be illustrated when the Harborough LA in combination with the Leicester and Melton LAs planned to hold a ‘Grand Bazaar’ in the spring of 1924.⁸⁵⁰

Some associations wanted to take advantage of the ‘enthusiasm for Liberal principles evoked by the recent general election’.⁸⁵¹ By March, the Beckenham LA had four lectures planned and had printed 1000 handbills, 100 window bills and had taken four adverts out in a local newspaper to try and build momentum.⁸⁵² Other associations focused on restructuring ward by ward, and wanted to make their finances ‘stronger + more democratic’, no doubt referring to the fact that very often in Liberal Associations a few men normally provided the vast majority of the money.⁸⁵³ Good by-election results in other parts of the country also lifted and maintained the morale of Liberal activists.⁸⁵⁴ Liberal potential to improve on the 1919-1922 period is evidenced in increased attendances at meetings: an attendance of 53 members at the Executive Committee of the West Walthamstow LA in June 1923 was considered a ‘record’ high.⁸⁵⁵

However, there are some signs of unconstructive actions in the period after the 1922 general election. From the Liberal perspective it was very inconvenient that the prospective Liberal candidate for Southend resigned as he was going to India.⁸⁵⁶ Similarly, activists continued to be lost to other commitments or death.⁸⁵⁷ Some constituencies, such as Chester, discussed selecting prospective candidates early in the life of the parliament, but no action was taken.⁸⁵⁸ Consequently, when the general election was called they did not have a candidate.⁸⁵⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Trinity and St. Oswald Women’s LA felt that if the candidate had developed his links with the constituency longer then he would have had more chance of success.⁸⁶⁰ Steel’s research has found that the London LF received reports of agents having left or being sacked, ‘with income being hard to come by’.⁸⁶¹ There is evidence of this in some of the case-study constituencies. In Southend, there was such concern over finance that the Secretary did not claim his expenses, as he was ‘pleased to do what he could

⁸⁵⁰ Harborough LA, Exec., 3 March 1923.

⁸⁵¹ Beckenham LA, CM, 25 November 1922.

⁸⁵² Ibid., 26 March 1923.

⁸⁵³ Southend LA, Exec., 18 May 1923, FC, 5 April 1923.

⁸⁵⁴ *Southend Standard*, 3 May 1923.

⁸⁵⁵ West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 25 June 1923.

⁸⁵⁶ Southend LA, Exec., 15 June 1923.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid., 18 May 1923, 19 October 1923; Darwen Women’s LA, CM, 16 February 1923; LCNWLF, Exec., 12 June 1923.

⁸⁵⁸ Chester LA, Exec., 18 June 1923.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid., FGP, 13 November 1923.

⁸⁶⁰ Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women’s LA, CM, 14 December 1923.

⁸⁶¹ A. M. Steel, ‘Explaining Changes in Political Party Fortunes in Greater London 1918-1931’, Queen Mary, University of London, PhD thesis (2005), p. 222.

to keep the ship afloat'.⁸⁶² In April 1923, the Coventry LA gave their Secretary three months notice of his dismissal, which was 'necessary owing to the financial position' and because no assistance was forthcoming from the Central LA.⁸⁶³ This was counterproductive, and along with the tardy reunion discussed before, is evidence of self-inflicted wounds that weakened the Liberals relative to their main competitors.

Whilst some Liberal organisations were beset with financial problems, for others, the fall of the coalition provided a fresh start. The Secretary of the MLF reported that 'there was a great deal of activity in most constituencies', and added that 'the constituencies that had been the worst for the last ten years were those which were now keenest for work to be done'.⁸⁶⁴ To some degree, this would be because the end of wartime truce and the end of the Coalition provided an opportunity for independent Liberalism to resurface without being unpatriotic. In the Midlands, 96 meetings had been held in the autumn season up to 5 October 1923, 92 of which had been organised directly through the Federation, which underlines its importance.⁸⁶⁵

Overall, whilst by the time of the 1923 general election Liberal organisation was not in excellent condition, Cook's claim that it was 'in a state of chronic weakness' goes too far the other way. Undoubtedly, some associations were derelict and moribund in 1923.⁸⁶⁶ However, other constituencies were active, and some were beginning reorganisation in what was the first year of a presumed full-term parliament. At the Liberal grass-roots, morale was improving as the party was on the way to being re-united, although the national leadership could have done more in this direction, which would invariably have spurred even more activity.

III) The political positioning of the Liberal Party, 1922-1923

The state of the Liberal mind immediately after the 1922 general election is readable by both the policies they were advocating, and those they were not. Unsurprisingly after the results of the 1922 general election, the Liberals sought electoral reform, particularly by means of the

⁸⁶² Southend LA, Exec., 21 August 1923.

⁸⁶³ Coventry LA, Advisory Committee, 11 April 1923.

⁸⁶⁴ MLF, Exec., 2 February 1923.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid., 5 October 1923.

⁸⁶⁶ Cook, *Age of Alignment*, pp. 27-48.

Alternative Vote.⁸⁶⁷ Revealingly, the Executive of the MLF discussed how the current electoral system discouraged ‘Liberals from fighting because of the extreme doubtfulness of the result’ when ‘weighed up against the expenditure of energy, time and money’, whilst ‘a party in a constituency without a candidate is very difficult to keep alive.’⁸⁶⁸ Electoral reform was a concern of the rank and file, as shown by the East Walthamstow LA’s acceptance of the offer of a speaker from the Proportional Representation Society.⁸⁶⁹

Similarly, some of the grass-roots realised how important having a coherent, credible and progressive industrial policy would be to their prospects. The Executive of the MLF resolved that ‘it is strongly necessary that every opportunity should be taken by the leaders of the party to advocate and explain the new industrial policy as adopted by the [National] Liberal Federation’. Importantly, the resolution also stated that the policy was ‘calculated to make a strong appeal to the industrial classes, but that at present it is not adequately known or understood’.⁸⁷⁰ The party leadership were not only responsible for the formulation of policy, but also, in the age of mass newspaper circulation, for their advocacy. Dutton has argued that after the 1922 general election the Liberals needed to define their position in the changed political spectrum with more precision than hitherto.⁸⁷¹ The rank and file recognised this, and they clearly felt that their national leadership should have been more effective.

Alternatively, the grass-roots of the Coventry LA felt that the solution to the ‘bad trade and unemployment’ was ‘the fullest possible use of the League of Nations to restore international goodwill’, as well as the ‘extension of the Whitley Councils to promote co-operation in all branches of industry at home’.⁸⁷² The League of Nations was universally popular at the grass-roots.⁸⁷³ Liberals protested against the French occupation of the Ruhr and, unsurprisingly, the League of Nations was seen as the solution to the crisis.⁸⁷⁴

Free Trade remained a bed-rock policy for all Liberals at the grass-roots, and not only for domestic economic reasons. The LCNWLF explained their support in these terms:

That this meeting once more reaffirms its belief, not only that the fiscal system of Free Trade is best suited to these Islands, but also it is the only system which can foster the spirit of

⁸⁶⁷ For example, see Coventry LA, Special Meeting of Officers, Executive and members of the Association, 31 January 1923.

⁸⁶⁸ MLF, Exec., 2 February 1923.

⁸⁶⁹ East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 7 September 1923.

⁸⁷⁰ MLF, Exec., 9 March 1923.

⁸⁷¹ Dutton, *Liberal Party*, p. 90.

⁸⁷² Coventry LA, Special Meeting of Officers, Executive and members of the Association, 31 January 1923.

⁸⁷³ East Walthamstow Junior LA, GM, 8 May 1923; LCNWLF, AGM, 30 May 1923.

⁸⁷⁴ Chester LA, Exec., 18 June 1923; MLF Exec., 2 February 1923.

independence of all nations mutually upon each other and prevent tariff wars, which create national ammonites and eventuate in ruinous and bloody wars.⁸⁷⁵

There was also discussion of some aspects of social policy by the rank and file. The East Walthamstow Junior Liberals debated whether the state should maintain and manage hospitals, and concluded that it should by 38 votes to 13.⁸⁷⁶ The Chester LA passed a resolution against the licencing of betting, whilst the Manchester LF discussed the type of houses that should be built.⁸⁷⁷ Discussion on social policy at the grass-roots was limited, and this represents another reason why the post-1922 period is one of missed opportunity. As well as not uniting during this period and not actively reorganising across the country, the party never reformulated its policy positions to meet the new franchise and in doing so missed another opportunity for the party. In this respect, the Liberal Party had less appeal (including class-based appeal) in this period than it had before the First World War.

IV) The Tariff general election of 1923

When the Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, announced his Protectionist proposals in October 1923, the rapidly ensuing general election united the Liberal Party behind the old shibboleth of Free Trade, which ‘at once rallied both wings of the Liberal Party as nothing else could’.⁸⁷⁸ The Coventry LA seemed genuinely pleased that reunion had occurred, calling themselves ‘the united forces of Liberalism’ when they selected their candidate for the general election.⁸⁷⁹ Furthermore, their chosen nominee was ‘pleased to say that all friction between the two wings of the Liberal Party had been healed’.⁸⁸⁰

As might be expected, the battle against Protection preoccupied Liberal election strategy in the case-study constituencies. With Free Trade relevant in this election, this enabled the Liberals to have a coherent discourse that gave them a relevant policy with which to discuss the economy. A typical Liberal advertisement summed up the Liberal argument: ‘Free Trade means: Better trade. Better trade means more employment.’⁸⁸¹ The Liberal candidate in Chester attacked the Conservative policy by arguing that ‘if they were going to

⁸⁷⁵ LCNWLF, AGM, 30 May 1923.

⁸⁷⁶ East Walthamstow Junior LA, GM, 9 January 1923.

⁸⁷⁷ Chester LA, Exec., 18 June 1923; Manchester LF, General Committee, 13 April 1923.

⁸⁷⁸ Manchester Exchange Division LA, AGM, 18 February 1924.

⁸⁷⁹ Coventry LA, GM, 19 November 1923.

⁸⁸⁰ *Coventry Herald*, 23 and 24 November 1923.

⁸⁸¹ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 22 November 1923.

tax imports they were going to do something that would increase the price of the commodities’, and Liberals across the country focused on how it would raise food prices.⁸⁸² The Liberals also tried to use the battle over Free Trade to portray themselves as moderates as compared to the Conservative Party who advocated Protection, ‘class legislation in its very worst form’.⁸⁸³ The Liberals were also able to utilise the nationalistic argument to defend Free Trade as well as focus on practical criticisms as the Conservatives, who wanted to change the system, had to try and justify their policy. The Conservative candidate for East Walthamstow had to devote time to countering Liberal arguments, and so ‘he denied that Free Trade had built up the wealth and prosperity of Great Britain’.⁸⁸⁴ The Liberals were quick to seize on this, and a speaker in Walthamstow West accused Baldwin of acting ‘in a panic, and the country had been asked to depart from the old ways that had served them so well and join the government in a gamble’.⁸⁸⁵ In Bromley, the Conservative candidate proposed that ‘each trade and industry should be taken on its merits’ regarding whether it was included in the government’s protectionist programme, to which the Liberal candidate responded by calling this ‘a policy of disturbance’, and pointing out that it was a far cry from the tranquillity promised by the Conservatives at the last election.⁸⁸⁶ Across the country the united Liberals were particularly better resourced than they had been in 1922: the *Manchester Guardian* reported that the Liberals had an abundance of quality speakers, whereas the Conservatives were having to use inexperienced speakers.⁸⁸⁷ In order to help disseminate their policies, the Liberal Party spent huge sums on the election: the Liberal candidate in Coventry was provided with £1,000, although the £300 given to the Darwen candidate and £400 to the candidate in Leicester East were nearer to the norm.⁸⁸⁸

As Hart has argued, Free Trade was the only issue ‘which gave the Liberals authority over Labour’.⁸⁸⁹ In constituencies with a Conservative MP and where Labour was historically weak, this put the Liberal Party in the position of being the prime challenger. This enabled the Liberals to win Blackpool for the first time since the constituency was created 1885, in a straight fight with the Conservative candidate. Leicester South and the Blackley, Exchange

⁸⁸² *Cheshire Chronicle*, 24 November 1923.

⁸⁸³ *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 1 December 1923.

⁸⁸⁴ *Walthamstow Guardian*, 23 November 1923. For the heritage and political culture of Free Trade see F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008).

⁸⁸⁵ *Walthamstow Guardian*, 23 November 1923.

⁸⁸⁶ For the Conservatives election address *Beckenham Advertiser*, 22 November 1923. For the ‘policy of disturbance’ attack, *Ibid.*, 29 November 1923.

⁸⁸⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 December 1923.

⁸⁸⁸ H. H. Asquith papers, 1923 general election expenses, MS 142.

⁸⁸⁹ Hart, ‘The decline of the Liberal Party’, p. 223.

and Withington divisions were gained in straight fights against the sitting Conservative MP, whilst Moss Side and Rusholme divisions in Manchester were won in three-cornered contests. The resulting return of five Liberals from the city of Manchester was a reminder of the party in its Victorian heyday, but it was to prove only a brief one. In a three-cornered fight in Chesterfield, Kenyon was able to defend the seat and even narrowly achieved more than 50 per cent of the poll. In Darwen, the Liberal candidate defeated the sitting Conservative MP and secured 48.8 per cent of the poll in a three-corned fight. Given the essentially conservative nature of the appeal by the Liberals in 1923, it is not surprising that the Liberals polled well in Conservative seats that had been attracted to the tranquillity of Bonar Law's message in 1922. Howe has suggested 'free trade Liberalism' in 1923 had lost 'many of its social democratic features of 1906-14', and this may also be a reason why the Liberal appeal was so successful in Tory areas as it was as much of centrist position as the one taken by the Conservative government prior to its conversion to Protectionism.⁸⁹⁰

The essentially conservative nature of their programme, and the support of some Conservatives and the abstention of others, meant that the Liberals were also able to achieve creditable results that did not result in victory.⁸⁹¹ In Manchester Hulme, the Liberal candidate came a close second in a three-way contest, and was only a mere 1.6 per cent of the poll behind the victorious Conservative. In Bromley, the Liberal finished second, only 883 votes behind the winning candidate, having secured 41.9 per cent of the poll in a three-cornered fight. Given the close nature of the Bromley result, the local press speculated that under a proportional electoral system, only a bare majority of the Labour candidate's second preferences would have been necessary to provide victory for the Liberal.⁸⁹² This raises an important point, as a statistical analysis of the voting figures shows that under a strictly proportional system the Liberals' 29.7 per cent of the vote would have yielded 183 seats (they won 158), the Conservatives' 38% would have provided 234 (they won 258), and Labour's 30.7% would have secured 189 (they secured 191).

The effect of the electoral system can be identified in the Midlands as well. There were 55 Liberal candidates for the 76 available seats in the Midlands, a noticeably higher number compared to the two previous elections. Yet the Liberals were only able to defend six of their seats and win eight others, whilst losing seven seats, so there was a net gain of only

⁸⁹⁰ A. Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846-1946* (Oxford, 1997), p. 282.

⁸⁹¹ For the suggestion that 'Free Trade Conservatives' abstained See *Beckenham Advertiser*, 18 December 1923. For the one local Unionist saying he was going to vote Liberal and that some other Conservatives were as well and some were abstaining see *Southend Standard*, 29 November 1923.

⁸⁹² *Beckenham Advertiser*, 18 December for the description 'Free Trade majority'.

one in this election. With fourteen seats in the Midlands, they were clearly behind the Conservative and Labour Parties, who had 38 and 23 seats respectively. However, in terms of votes cast, the Liberals were a well-placed second with 502,124 votes, in front of Labour's 414,965 and behind the Conservatives' 566,464. Under a directly proportional system, the Liberals could have expected to win 26 seats, the Conservatives 29 and Labour 21. Not surprisingly given the disparity between votes cast and seats won, the Executive of the MLF wanted Liberal leaders to pursue electoral reform after the election. However, it must be stressed that in the Midlands, the main beneficiary of the 1923 general election was the Labour Party, which increased the seats that it held from 17 to 23.⁸⁹³

Whilst the focus on Free Trade was appropriate for this election, its passionate and articulate defence masked deficiencies in every other policy area, with the important exception of foreign policy and the League of Nations. As noted above, this approach brought the Liberals some success against the Conservatives, but by no means universally so. In Westmorland, the Liberals were 'up in the air' according to one Liberal, as they were finding it difficult to find a candidate. One member of the selection committee noted that one of the reasons for this was 'some of the possible candidates did not like the prospect of having to work so wide a constituency at such short notice'.⁸⁹⁴ So, for the third general election in a row the Liberals did not field a candidate in Westmorland, providing the Conservatives with another unopposed return.⁸⁹⁵ Similarly, in Faversham the Liberals did not nominate a candidate, leaving the Labour Party candidate the only alternative to the Conservative MP for the third general election in succession. In these two instances most clearly of all, the Liberal drift of 1919-1922 and the delayed reunion of 1922-1923 came home to roost in the 1923 general election.

Nonetheless, most Liberal success came at the expense of the Conservatives. Understandably, the Home Counties LF were satisfied with the 1923 general election results, as 'only once in the history of our Federation, in the flood tide of 1906, have more Liberal members being returned in our area'.⁸⁹⁶ Cook has stressed 'in rural and residential England votes were won from both Conservative and Labour'.⁸⁹⁷ However, the contests against Labour candidates were far less successful for the Liberals. The Liberals came second in three-cornered contests in Leicester West and Walthamstow West, both behind the victorious

⁸⁹³ MLF, Exec., 14 December 1923.

⁸⁹⁴ *Westmorland Gazette*, 24 November 1923.

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1 December 1923.

⁸⁹⁶ Home Counties LF, Report of the AGM 1924; after 1923 there were 15 Liberal MPs.

⁸⁹⁷ Cook, 'Stranger death of Liberal England', p. 305.

Labour candidate. In Coventry, Leicester East and Walthamstow East the Liberal finished bottom of the poll. However, the worst position of all in terms of the case-study constituencies was in the Ardwick, Clayton, Gorton and Platting divisions of Manchester, because these Labour strongholds were not even contested by the Liberals.

It has been noted that in 1923, the Liberal campaign ‘was noticeably lacking in constructive and detailed radical proposals’.⁸⁹⁸ This and the previous chapter noted an absence of such policies in 1919-1922, so it unsurprising that this was not resolved in a surprise general election with little time to unify the elites and prepare for an election. The bland nature of non-Free Trade appeals in the election is served by an example from Bromley, where the candidate stated: ‘the united Liberal Party were not going to promise them any magic remedy’. He added ‘unemployment would only be cured by the peace and cooperation of the nations of the world’, and it seems that the only practical solution that they were offering were ‘permanent tribunals to see that the people were not exploited by high prices’.⁸⁹⁹

Some lingering Liberal-Labour co-operation may have survived in several constituencies, and this may in part explain some of the straight fights (as in Manchester) between either a Liberal or a Labour candidate against a Conservative. The Liberal candidate in Bromley was still making positive noises regarding cooperation with Labour stating that ‘a great deal’ could be done by working together, and that ‘if they looked at the two manifestos they would see that there were many points on which they agreed’, except the Capital Levy.⁹⁰⁰ This might have been a ploy to attract Labour votes, but it highlighted the potential for co-operation from the Liberal perspective, particularly under a different electoral system. However, the Labour candidate disagreed and said that if the Liberals believed they were so similar why had the Liberals contested the seat in 1922 general election, after not doing so in the 1919 by-election; an example of how the Party’s drift 1919-1922 affected their later prospects.⁹⁰¹ The Capital Levy was targeted by Liberals when Labour was their main rival in the constituency, which would hardly be conducive to co-operation between the two.⁹⁰² However, a minority of Liberals were successful in urban constituencies against Labour, and the results in Walsall and Chesterfield highlight the importance of the personal standing

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 299.

⁸⁹⁹ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 22 November 1923.

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁰¹ Ibid., 6 December 1923.

⁹⁰² *Walthamstow Guardian*, 23 November 1923.

which results in more votes.⁹⁰³ The Conservative candidate in Chesterfield farmed 300 acres and was ‘an expert shorthorn breeder’, but he was not the most suitable candidate to challenge Kenyon’s popularity in a mainly coal-mining and working-class constituency like Chesterfield.⁹⁰⁴

Hutchinson’s study of Scottish politics suggests that in the 1923 general election ‘the Liberals were by no means a spent force’, and the case-study constituencies support that view, particularly in more rural or middle-class constituencies.⁹⁰⁵ However, even though the Liberal Party had improved its position since 1922, it was the Labour Party which gained the most from the unexpected general election in 1923. The electoral arithmetic meant that the increase in MPs and the spur to reunion at all levels of the Party coincided with a challenging political situation for Liberals, as the formation of the first Labour government presented an alternative centre-left to the electorate. In part, the Liberal Party’s own inertia since 1918 contributed to the Labour Party being able to form its first government in January 1924.

V) The Liberal Party and the First Labour Government, 1924

It has been asserted that ‘the most serious Liberal mistake’ may have been to install the Labour government in January 1924.⁹⁰⁶ However, this argument overestimates Asquith’s scope for manoeuvre.⁹⁰⁷ The Liberal rank and file seemed broadly understanding and accepting of the decisions that their leadership took in giving the Labour Party the chance to govern. The Executive of the MLF, immediately after the 1923 general election, felt that if Labour was to be asked to form a government, the Liberals ‘should give friendly support as long as the policy pursued was in accordance with Liberal views’.⁹⁰⁸ After the Labour government took office, the Executive of the MLF ‘heartily’ endorsed Asquith ejecting ‘from office the incompetent and reactionary government’ of Baldwin, and ‘in giving fair play to the Labour Party to form a government according to constitutional practice’. They also hoped that ‘the Liberal Party in the House of Commons, while retaining complete freedom, may be able to co-operate with the government in the furtherance of Liberal principles both at home and abroad’.⁹⁰⁹ The LCNWLF also passed a resolution praising Asquith for his ‘wise and

⁹⁰³ For Walsall, see Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 98.

⁹⁰⁴ *Derbyshire Times*, 24 November 1923.

⁹⁰⁵ I. G. C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland, 1832-1924* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 318.

⁹⁰⁶ Hart, ‘Decline of the Liberal Party in Parliament and in the constituencies’, p. 231.

⁹⁰⁷ See Campbell, *Lloyd George*, pp. 80-85 for the context of Asquith’s course of action.

⁹⁰⁸ MLF, Exec., 14 December 1923.

⁹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8 February 1924.

courageous leadership'.⁹¹⁰ The Executive of the Harborough LA agreed with Asquith's policy of giving the Labour Party a chance to govern as a minority government. They seemed particularly glad that there was no return to coalition, declaring that 'it was only in the full exercise and enjoyment of freedom and independence that the Liberal Party' would be able to 'advance the cause of Liberalism and maintain an efficient organisation for the purpose of giving effort to Liberal principle in future legislation'.⁹¹¹ The theme of Liberal independence was not confined to the Midlands. At the AGM of the Home Counties LF, a resolution from the Gillingham LA urged 'the vital necessity' of a 'progressive programme' that 'will endeavour to stress, rather than attempt to smooth over, the fundamental differences, in Economic Principles, Ideals and Methods of attainment, which create an unbridgeable gulf between the Socialistic Labour Party and the Individualistic Liberal Party on the other'. The resolution also urged the party to 'retain its absolute independence, and to refuse to enter into any alliance with either of its opponents', but instead to 'support impartially any government, whether Labour or Conservative, which is prepared to carry out Liberal principles'.⁹¹² Although, after discussion the 'resolution was by leave withdrawn', it still provides an insight into what some of the grass-roots were thinking at this important time.⁹¹³ The Liberal candidate for Southend observed that as the Labour Party had come second to the defeated Conservatives, Asquith had displayed 'statesmanship' in giving the Labour Party the chance to form a government.⁹¹⁴ However, as Bentley has noted, 'in one fell swoop' the Liberal Party had 'branded itself indelibly as the party which put in the socialists'.⁹¹⁵

VI) Liberal reorganisation after the formation of the first Labour government

After the 1923 general election, and with the advent of a Labour Government, it was vitally important that the Liberal Party reorganise as soon as possible. This would be important both to 'consolidate' the gains made in 1923 and to attempt to reclaim their pre-war position.⁹¹⁶ There is evidence that some associations made progress in this direction, but it was by no means smooth sailing. The Coventry LA demonstrates both good and bad practice. By the

⁹¹⁰ LCNWLF, AGM, 23 February 1924.

⁹¹¹ Harborough LA, Subcommittee, 9 February 1924.

⁹¹² Home Counties LF, Report of the AGM 1924. Cook found a resolution with the same meaning from the Yorkshire LF, *Age of Alignment*, p. 251.

⁹¹³ Home Counties LF, Report of the AGM 1924.

⁹¹⁴ *Southend Standard*, 31 January 1924.

⁹¹⁵ Bentley, 'The Liberal response to Socialism', p. 55.

⁹¹⁶ Manchester LF, General Committee, 15 February 1924.

end of January 1924, they had appointed a sub-committee to discuss reorganisation and the appointment of a full-time secretary, an important and worthwhile step given how close the 1923 contest had been.⁹¹⁷ However, attempts to improve the organisation were not aided when the agent resigned in May 1924.⁹¹⁸ Later in the year, the LA planned a fete for September 1924 – the first time since the war that they had tried to organise an event of this nature.⁹¹⁹

Some Liberal associations adopted candidates early in the Parliament. By the end of March 1924, nine Liberal candidates had been selected in the Midlands, and the number had increased to a total of eighteen by the summer.⁹²⁰ There is evidence from the case-study constituencies in all three regions that candidates were being selected ahead of the 1924 general election.⁹²¹ In Chester, a ‘lady’ was to be appointed on £130 a year to organise, speak and collect subscriptions.⁹²² Such appointments made propaganda easier to undertake and to take part in the ‘Great Liberal Campaign’, specifically ‘to answer against Conservative and Labour Party calls that the Liberal Party was down and out’. To this end, in the Midlands, 365 meetings were planned, with the further aim of holding 600 by the end of July.⁹²³ In fact, by 18 July it was claimed that 592 meetings had been held – an impressive achievement.⁹²⁴ New members were still joining the East Walthamstow Junior Liberals, and the whole picture is of East Walthamstow being an active organisation.⁹²⁵ A month after the 1923 general election, the Liberal Party was active in Southend, where the prospective candidate attended a meeting at a Congressional Church Hall with ‘a full attendance’, a very useful exercise considering how close the Liberals had come to winning Southend in 1923.⁹²⁶

Of course, it is important not to over-state the activity and vibrancy of Liberal organisations in this period. The Walsall reorganisation discussed after the 1922 general election was only completed immediately before the 1924 general election, with the revision of the rules of the association.⁹²⁷ However, changing the institutional framework was not the most important task for an association – active canvassing and an electoral strategy were

⁹¹⁷ Coventry LA, Advisory and FC, 31 January 1924.

⁹¹⁸ Ibid., Advisory Committee, 8 May 1924.

⁹¹⁹ Ibid., 14 July 1924.

⁹²⁰ MLF, Exec., 28 March 1924, 18 July 1924.

⁹²¹ Chester LA, Exec., 21 March 1924; East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 14 December 1923, 13 June 1924.

⁹²² Chester LA, Agent sub-committee, 4 April 1924.

⁹²³ MLF, Special Exec., 13 June 1924.

⁹²⁴ Ibid., Exec., 18 July 1924.

⁹²⁵ East Walthamstow Junior LA, GM, 18 March 1924.

⁹²⁶ *Southend Standard*, 31 January 1924.

⁹²⁷ Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 69.

what was most needed. Even though the Chesterfield Women's LA also became active again in January 1924 (after not having met since 20 October 1921), the organisation did not remain as active as a political party would want, as after 17 June 1924 there is no recorded meeting until 17 April 1925 – ten months later.⁹²⁸ The Chesterfield Young Liberals were quiet during the period of the first Labour government. In Southend, it was reported that there had been 'no success' with the local Liberal magazine.⁹²⁹ Also in Southend, one member of the Pier and Thorpe Ward 'regretted the slackness of Liberals in his ward', lamenting that it was hard to get members to attend meetings or find enough helpers to cover the district.⁹³⁰ Those constituencies without a candidate found it 'almost impossible to work up enthusiasm in the villages without a candidate'.⁹³¹ At a conference in Lancashire, it was noted that 'younger people' should be attracted to Liberalism 'and that without active propaganda this could not be done', an implicit criticism that not enough was being done in this direction. Liberals also lost the advantage of having Nonconformist support against their political opponents, as it was noted 'in more than one constituency Nonconformist ministers were reluctant to take sides'. Perhaps even more worryingly for the Liberals, it was noted at the same conference that 'Nonconformity in places had been drifting towards Labour'.⁹³² Some of the Liberal elite were preoccupied with divisions within the party (such as between Lord Gladstone and Lloyd George over the latter's political fund). Gladstone argued that '[t]he absolutely essential thing is the fixing of candidates. This cannot be done without a firm financial guarantee.'⁹³³ The latter assertion is debatable, but some aspects of recruitment would have been aided by financial support. The intra-party fighting at the top of the party discouraged those at the grass-roots who wanted to do more.

Even when the will was there, the financial position of the party at the local level hindered progress. An examination of Southend provides an insight into the financial precariousness of some associations. When the Home Counties LF suggested a week of open air meetings in connection with the Great Liberal Campaign, the Southend association replied that they would be happy to support speakers but could not pay for this.⁹³⁴ By March 1924, the position in Southend was so dire that the Association disconnected the telephone line and planned to sack the agent. However, it should be pointed out that in the very same meeting at

⁹²⁸ Chesterfield Women's LA, CM, 14 January 1924.

⁹²⁹ Southend LA, Exec., 14 January 1924.

⁹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 May 1924.

⁹³¹ South Westmorland Women's LA, 23 August 1924.

⁹³² LCNWLF, Atherton Conference, 17 May 1924.

⁹³³ H. H. Asquith papers, letter's from Lord Gladstone to Asquith, MS 34.

⁹³⁴ Southend LA, Exec., 21 July 1924.

which they were contemplating such drastic cuts, they planned to have 250 posters, 10,000 handbills and two small adverts in the local press in order to advertise a public meeting.⁹³⁵ A month later they discussed whether they could afford to retain the Secretary; they decided to do so, but only on a month-by-month basis. The LA had 546 subscribers providing £132, which is not a large sum considering the number of subscribers.⁹³⁶ Southend was not the only Liberal organisation to incur debts after the battle over Free Trade in 1923. After the 1923 general election, the West Walthamstow LA had a deficit of £92.⁹³⁷ The Liberal candidate for Walthamstow West had a wealthy friend who was willing to fund the running of a local Liberal paper, suggesting that even in the early 1920s, Liberals still had access to a fair amount of individual wealth on occasion.⁹³⁸ The LCNWLF had an overdraft of £1586, but an annual income of only £700.⁹³⁹ The Manchester LF had a debt of £2000 in July 1924.⁹⁴⁰ By the end of the financial year this deficit was £3098, the 1924 general election having increased expenditure to Associations and Federations who were already in debt.⁹⁴¹ Campbell's point that the Liberal Party was 'exceedingly impoverished' certainly extends to the grass-roots, but after two general elections in two years this would be expected.⁹⁴²

VII) Liberal Policies during the Labour Government, 1924

The Liberal Party should have developed a programme during the period when the Labour government was in office, as it was not expected to last and another general election would soon be forthcoming. This is especially the case as the Liberals would not be able to rely on the appeal of Free Trade. This is because the Conservative Party dropped the policy of Protectionism and because the Labour Party demonstrated themselves to be a friend of Free Trade while in office. Labour's support for Free Trade impressed life-long Liberals: the Executive of the MLF endorsed a resolution praising the Labour government's decision to

⁹³⁵ Ibid., FC, 12 March 1924.

⁹³⁶ Ibid., 30 May 1924.

⁹³⁷ West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 18 December 1923.

⁹³⁸ Ibid., 23 February 1924.

⁹³⁹ LCNWLF, Copy of letter to Sir Donald Maclean, 15 November 1924.

⁹⁴⁰ Manchester LF, General Committee, 17 July 1924.

⁹⁴¹ Ibid., Revenue Account, 1924.

⁹⁴² Campbell, *Lloyd George*, p. 90.

end the McKenna Duties from August 1924.⁹⁴³ Worley has suggested that Snowden's 'moderation may have done much to convince many Liberals that Labour was now the standard bearer of its treasured ideals', and there is some evidence for this.⁹⁴⁴ Labour's very support for Liberal principles became a serious predicament for the Liberal Party. If Liberal officers were satisfied then it is possible that Liberal voters were also impressed with the progressive policies of Labour in power. If so, they would then be able to vote Labour whilst still remaining liberal. Unsurprisingly, so soon after the Free Trade election of 1923, Free Trade remained popular amongst Liberals.⁹⁴⁵

There was a shift in direction regarding the Liberal Party's position over electoral reform at the regional level. The Secretary of the MLF was instructed to write to each of the Liberal Associations in the area, 'asking them to appeal to their own members' to support Proportional Representation as against both the Alternative Vote and the Second Ballot.⁹⁴⁶ Similarly, the LCNWLF passed a resolution in favour of proportional representation.⁹⁴⁷ However, the shift solely in favour of Proportional Representation was not unanimous; the Harborough LA passed a resolution in support of the Alternative vote as against Proportional Representation.⁹⁴⁸

There are also a number of resolutions that were passed in one of the case-study constituencies which reflected elements of Liberal thinking. The Hoe Street Ward LA sent a resolution both to Asquith and to Ramsay MacDonald (as Prime Minister), stating that instead of extra cruisers being built, 'if any extra money is to be spent on armaments it should be spent on aircraft and air defence'.⁹⁴⁹ There is evidence of mixed views on the Russian Treaty at the grass-roots. The LCNWLF felt that 'without expressing any definite opinion as to the merits or otherwise of the Russian Treaty', it was 'desirable that the rank and file of the Party should be informed and consulted before the Party is irrevocably committed against a rapprochement with Russia'.⁹⁵⁰ While the Executive of the MLF approved 'recognition of the Russian Soviet Government' and the attempt to create trading relations, they 'strongly' protested against the treaty as they felt it would not guarantee any tangible results.⁹⁵¹ This

⁹⁴³ MLF, Special Exec., 13 June 1924.

⁹⁴⁴ Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, p. 79.

⁹⁴⁵ LCNWLF, AGM, 23 February 1924.

⁹⁴⁶ MLF, Exec., 28 March 1924.

⁹⁴⁷ LCNWLF, AGM, 23 February 1924.

⁹⁴⁸ MLF, Exec., 2 May 1924.

⁹⁴⁹ Hoe Street Ward LA, GM, 3 March 1924.

⁹⁵⁰ LCNWLF, Exec., 12 September 1924.

⁹⁵¹ MLF, Exec., 19 September 1924.

suggests that the MLF would have supported the Liberal Party in the House of Commons if they had withdrawn their support for the Labour government over this issue.

Turning to domestic policy, a Liberal conference in Lancashire noted ‘that generalities are not wanted, but forceful utterance of Liberal principles as applied to present day problems’ and it was added that a ‘strong lead was essential’.⁹⁵² However, the only example of specifics comes from the Manchester LF, who passed a resolution stating that they were ‘convinced that lack of economic security is one of the main contributory causes of dissatisfaction with our social system’, and therefore any future Liberal social legislation ‘should be to establish security of livelihood’. They outlined that the existing National Insurance Acts should be extended to provide ‘A more comprehensive and generous scheme of Unemployment Insurance’ along with ‘the establishment of National Health Insurance on a family basis’.⁹⁵³ When examining the Liberal intelligentsia’s response to socialism, Bentley noted that they realised that the Liberals needed ‘something progressive’ to say.⁹⁵⁴ It seems that the Liberal grass-roots recognised this as well. However, the period of the first Labour government was another period of missed opportunity for the Liberals. They neglected social and economic policy and their efforts towards reorganisation were patchy. This was no platform on which to fight the next general election, but these were internal weaknesses and so the Liberal Party bears responsibility for contributing to its own downfall.

VIII) Municipal election results, 1923-1924

The Liberal drift and decay since 1918 is also evident in the municipal elections of 1923-1924. The results for the case-study constituencies show two distinct trends, the first of which was towards anti-Socialist pacts with the Conservatives or other anti-Labour groups.

Table 5.1: Municipal election results for Walthamstow, 1923-1924

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1923	0	0	0	0	13	8	14	5
1924	0	0	0	0	11	6	11	5

Source: Compiled from *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 30 March 1923 and 11 April 1924.

⁹⁵² LCNWLF, Atherton Conference, 17 May 1924.

⁹⁵³ Manchester LF, LC, 19 February 1924.

⁹⁵⁴ Bentley, ‘The Liberal response to Socialism’, p. 59.

In Walthamstow, it is quite clear that the Independents were an anti-Socialist grouping, as they only contested seats against the Labour Party.⁹⁵⁵ The Liberal Party almost certainly had a positive relationship with the Walthamstow Ratepayers' and Tenants' Federation: they contacted the Northern Ward LA 'with a view to a mutual agreement' on the candidates for the local council elections, and the Liberals agreed to send a deputation to discuss this.⁹⁵⁶ The readiness of Liberals to enter into municipal pacts must be in part due to weaknesses in their organisation and policy, as noted earlier in the chapter. The limited number of contests for Bromley, and the absence of any contests in Beckenham, Harborough, Kendal and Penge, reflects the anti-party feeling which remained in local government politics in this period. The Chesterfield and Southend results are recorded in the local press on a non-party basis, and so cannot be used to determine party strength during this period.

The second set of results highlight another trend, where the Liberals retained the ability to win representation at the local level.

Table 5.2: Municipal election results for Blackpool, 1923-1924

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1923	4	4	7	2	1	0	2	1
1924	4	2	8	5	0	0	6	2

Source: Compiled from S. Davies and B. Morley (eds.), *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919-1938: A Comparative Analysis: Volume One: Barnsley-Bournemouth* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 428-460.

Table 5.3: Municipal election results for Chester, 1923-1924

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1923	3	1	3	3	3	2	0	0
1924	4	3	3	3	3	0	0	0

Source: Compiled from *Cheshire Observer*, 3 November 1923 and 8 November 1924.

Table 5.4: Municipal election results for Coventry, 1923-1924

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1923	7	6	5	4	12	2	2	0
1924	5	5	7	5	10	0	0	0

⁹⁵⁵ Northern Ward LA, Exec., 12 February 1923.

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid., AGM, 29 January 1923.

Source: Compiled from Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections: Vol. 3*, pp. 63-135.

Table 5.5: Municipal election results for Darwen, 1924

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1924	1	1	4	2	2	0	1	1

Source: Compiled from *Darwen News*, 27 October 1923 and 5 November 1924.

Table 5.6: Municipal election results for Manchester, 1923-1924

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1923	13	4	26	14	18	8	2	0
1924	12	6	22	11	18	7	6	1

Source: Compiled from *Manchester Guardian*, 2 November 1923 and 3 November 1924.

Whilst far from having a perfect record, the Liberals evidently retained some ability to beat either Labour or Conservative candidates in a straight fight, and sometimes even in three-way contests. The above results challenge Cook's conclusion that by mid-1923 in the major cities of England the Liberals lacked 'vitality, youth, policy or purpose'.⁹⁵⁷ The Liberals were able to hold their own in a core of wards, and in these areas Liberalism remain a potent force. In Darwen, at a meeting of the West Central Ward, one member noted that 'although he did not think we should be called upon to fight' the municipal election in 1923, they were 'quite ready with a candidate'.⁹⁵⁸ This suggests that even when the Liberals did not contest a seat, it was not necessarily because their organisation was derelict or the party's cause entirely hopeless. Sir Benjamin Johnson, chairman of the LCNWLF, wrote to Maclean that 'the outcry about defective organisation is sheer rubbish'. Instead, he argued that 'The Party was victim – the predestined victim – of the circumstances of the time and its own blunders, and no organisation in the world can save us.'⁹⁵⁹ This comment to Maclean is important because it reiterates that the fortunes of local Liberalism were largely dependent on national politics, and the Liberals at the grass-roots cannot be blamed for the circumstances and blunders that their superiors made. The above are only a selection of results from the case-study constituencies, and the success of the Liberal Party at the grass-roots should not be exaggerated. Clearly, the Liberal Party was not the most dominant political party in local

⁹⁵⁷ Cook, *Age of Alignment*, p. 87.

⁹⁵⁸ West Central Ward LA, Meeting, 4 October 1923.

⁹⁵⁹ LCNWLF, Copy of letter to Sir Donald Maclean, 15 November 1924.

politics in Britain in the 1920s. Nonetheless, during this period the party clearly retained pockets of substantial support.

The social side of political organisation remains very much apparent between 1923 and 1924, and highlights pockets of Liberal activity and support at the local level. Southend was not a traditional Liberal constituency, but it had a particularly lively social side: at the start of January 1923, it was recorded that ‘a very successful social was held’, whilst in the summer of 1923 Miss Savage held a whist drive on her lawn.⁹⁶⁰ Day trips were also organised, and a ‘Ladies Working Party’ held at the Southend Liberal Club every Monday from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.⁹⁶¹ Social activities to raise money remained a matter of course for some associations, and the East and West Walthamstow LAs held a children’s fete, sales of work and jumble sales to raise revenue.⁹⁶² The Darwen Women’s LA ran sewing classes, and made a profit of £22 from an ‘American Tea’.⁹⁶³ At the Annual Social of the Trinity and St. Oswalds Women’s LA ‘about 100 members were present’, where twelve hands of whist were played before a musical programme.⁹⁶⁴ Whether this would attract younger members is a valid point that was raised by contemporaries.⁹⁶⁵ The South Westmorland Women’s LA held a social gathering and had a musical programme and ‘three young ladies ... caused much amusement with a sketch called Gooseberry Court’.⁹⁶⁶ More constructively, the Young Liberals provided the chance for young people to gain practise in public speaking; in Chesterfield, one member requested ‘that the apportioning of speakers be more carefully dealt with’ for future meetings, ‘in order to help the younger speakers to gain confidence and experience’.⁹⁶⁷ It is evident that there remained potential at the grass-roots of the Liberal Party with some adherents as committed as ever. However, they were let down by the tardy reunion with the National Liberals in 1923 and the lack of policy development during this period.

⁹⁶⁰ Southend LA, Exec., 5 January 1923, 20 July 1923.

⁹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Annual Report 1923, found with FC, 8 January 1924.

⁹⁶² West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 26 May 1924, 7 July 1923; East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 1 June 1923.

⁹⁶³ Darwen Women’s LA, CM, 2 July 1923, 5 September 1923.

⁹⁶⁴ Trinity and St. Oswalds Ward Women’s LA, CM, 14 June 1923.

⁹⁶⁵ Darwen Women’s LA, CM, 25 January 1923.

⁹⁶⁶ South Westmorland Women’s LA, Social Gathering, 7 April 1924.

⁹⁶⁷ Chesterfield Young Liberals, CM, 10 July 1924.

IX) Disaster: the general election of 1924

The 1924 general election came about due to the Conservative Party supporting the Liberal amendment instead of their own motion in the debate on the Campbell case, and the Labour Prime Minister choosing this moment as the most favourable for the dissolution of Parliament.⁹⁶⁸ Anti-Communist rhetoric was common in the 1924 general election, and the evidence suggests that this was to the detriment of the Liberal Party as well as the Labour Party. The Manchester Exchange Division LA summed up the election when they recorded that ‘the year 1924 will be long remembered as the most disastrous to the fortunes of the Liberal Party’. They felt that the election began on the ‘loan to Russia’ issue, but then developed into ‘the danger of socialism’, which ‘swept the Liberal Party very nearly out of existence’.⁹⁶⁹ In Coventry, as elsewhere, the Conservatives stated they were ‘the only party which has stood aloof from this conspiracy against England, to see that, as this combination sinks in the bog of communism, they do not carry with them the British Empire.’⁹⁷⁰ As the Liberals had tacitly supported the Labour government for the past ten months, they would be easily associated with any such conspiracy in the minds of the electorate. The result was that the Conservative candidate ousted the sitting Labour MP, whilst the Liberal finished bottom of the poll, 10,000 votes behind the Tory. The victorious Conservative candidate in Blackpool felt that he won ‘because Blackpool, like the rest of the country, is firmly determined to have nothing to do with Socialism’.⁹⁷¹ After the result was declared, the successful Conservative candidate in Darwen similarly said ‘We have dealt a blow to Socialism, and also to those who would show an affectionate relationship towards socialism.’⁹⁷² Here the defeated Liberal candidate noted that the ‘Anti-Socialist cry’ was responsible for poor Liberal performances in triangular contests.⁹⁷³ Sir Hamar Greenwood, a former Liberal who took the Conservative Whip after being elected as a Constitutionalist in Walthamstow East in 1924, argued that ‘the menace of Socialism was a new menace in the history of our great and beloved country that fundamentally affected the old party lines’.⁹⁷⁴ In

⁹⁶⁸ Cook, *Age of Alignment*, pp. 265-278; Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government*, pp. 161-184.

⁹⁶⁹ Manchester Exchange LA, AGM, 14 February 1925.

⁹⁷⁰ *Coventry Herald*, 19 and 20 September 1924.

⁹⁷¹ *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 30 October 1924.

⁹⁷² *Darwen News*, 1 November 1924.

⁹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5 November 1924.

⁹⁷⁴ *Walthamstow Guardian*, 17 October 1924.

the words of the *Manchester Guardian*, the consequence was that the Liberals were having to argue against the idea that the Conservative Party were ‘firemen needed to put out the flames of revolution’ and that the Liberals were ‘keeping the real firemen from the pumps’.⁹⁷⁵

Although the anti-Socialist cry was a very important factor in the Conservative victory and the poor results for the Liberals, there were other factors that contributed to their dismal performance. Some were unpredictable, as in Walsall where the Liberals lost the advantage of having the local candidate, due to the eleventh-hour Conservative candidate being ‘a very popular local sportsman’.⁹⁷⁶ The Conservatives attacked the supposed instability of a three-party system, with the chairman of a meeting in Walsall claiming that there was the possibility of ‘elections every six or eight months’, which would be ‘ruinous to the trade and commerce of the country’. The position of the Liberals in this election, in between the Conservatives and Labour, did not negate that Conservative attack. Councillor Leckie, speaking on behalf of the unwell Liberal candidate, said that the Liberals were prepared ‘to support the Labour government in a truly progressive policy, but not socialistic’ – but was such a difference tangible to the electorate?⁹⁷⁷ This difficulty can be seen in a speech given by Liberal Councillor John Gardener in Coventry, who stated that ‘Liberals stood for a progressive, yet safe, policy’ – but did not Baldwin’s ‘New Conservatism’ provide this?⁹⁷⁸

Kenyon was able to avoid the Liberal massacre in 1924 due to his own personal popularity. It seems that the local Conservatives did not nominate a candidate because of the weakness of their own position and desire not to split the anti-Labour vote, and not because of any pact with the Liberals. When approached by the Conservatives, Kenyon had told them that he would stand as a Liberal ‘without qualification or pledge’ and that even ‘if he did not get their votes, he would have commanded their respect’.⁹⁷⁹ Indeed, the defeated Labour candidate in Chesterfield felt that he lost because of ‘Kenyon’s well-deserved popularity’, and asserted that if it had been a choice between Labour and Liberal principles, Labour would have won.⁹⁸⁰ Even though Kenyon only faced a straight fight against Labour, the Liberals stressed the need ‘for work and the possibility of indifference hurting our cause’.⁹⁸¹ However, the Chesterfield League of Young Liberals stated that they did not take an official part in this

⁹⁷⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 29 October 1924.

⁹⁷⁶ Dean, *Town and Westminster*, p. 99.

⁹⁷⁷ *Walsall Observer*, 18 October 1924.

⁹⁷⁸ *Coventry Herald*, 10 and 11 October 1924.

⁹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Special Meeting of the General Council, 14 October 1924.

⁹⁸⁰ *Derbyshire Times*, 1 November 1924.

⁹⁸¹ Chesterfield LA, Special Exec., 14 October 1924.

election, although their individual members were at the disposal of the agent to use as he thought best. Worryingly for the Liberal Party, they claimed that ‘had it not been for Young Liberal Speakers the Liberal Party would have had very little platform at all.’⁹⁸² This suggests a declining pool of willing and able orators, which is not necessarily surprising given the polarisation of politics that was developing with increasing momentum in the early 1920s.

One crucial reason for the heavy Liberal defeat nationally was outlined by the Secretary of the MLF. He pointed out that ‘many difficulties’ had prevented the Liberals from finding candidates for constituencies during the year before the 1924 election. He argued that this was ‘lamentable’ and meant that ‘the Liberal Party was practically defeated before the first shot was fired, owing to the paucity of candidates to carry the flag’. It was only ‘after great exertions’ that they were able to find 40 candidates, some at the last minute, to fight in the Midlands.⁹⁸³ Evidence for the truthfulness of the Secretary’s report can be found in Coventry, where the Conservative candidate seemed delighted to point out that the Liberal Party could not achieve power as they had nominated too few candidates, yet they still hoped ‘to bribe one party or coerce the other’.⁹⁸⁴ The LCNWLF recorded that the Liberals only held five seats in the region after the 1924 general election, having lost 21 and having run no candidate in a further 41.⁹⁸⁵ One of the latter was Westmorland, where no Liberal candidate was nominated for the fourth general election in a row. In the *Westmorland Gazette* there were a couple of letters, one from ‘Common-Sense Liberals’ and one ‘A Life-Long Liberal’ both subtly encouraging Liberals to vote ‘constitutionally’; that is, Conservative.⁹⁸⁶ Even without the immense disadvantage of running too few candidates, the polarisation of politics and the return to the two-party system had been overwhelming. The Secretary of the MLF stated that ‘even where there was a Liberal candidate’, news had reached him that ‘the Liberals in this area, as elsewhere, actually cast their vote for the Tory candidate as providing the best reply to the socialist appeal’.⁹⁸⁷

In 1924, the Liberal Party was still able to expend considerable resources in supporting its candidates. The nominee in Coventry received £800 (£200 less than the year before), the candidate in Darwen £250 (£50 down on the year before), and the Blackpool candidate £500 (exactly the same as the year before).⁹⁸⁸ However, this had little effect against

⁹⁸² Chesterfield Young Liberals, Parliamentary election, 29 October 1924, emphasis in original.

⁹⁸³ MLF, Exec., 21 November 1924.

⁹⁸⁴ *Coventry Herald*, 24 and 25 October 1924.

⁹⁸⁵ LCNWLF, Exec., 14 November 1924.

⁹⁸⁶ *Westmorland Gazette*, 25 October 1924.

⁹⁸⁷ MLF, Exec., 21 November 1924.

⁹⁸⁸ H. H. Asquith papers, 1924 general election expenses, MS 142.

‘the deadly effect [of] the present electoral system [as it] works against the Liberal Party’.⁹⁸⁹ In the Midlands, the total Liberal poll in the 40 seats which they contested was 341,097, with a paltry three seats to show for it. On the other hand, the Conservative Party, who had nearly three times the Liberal vote with 993,193 votes from all the seats they contested, was rewarded with 53 seats; this was 19,863 votes per seat, compared to 113,699 for each Liberal elected. The Labour Party was less disadvantaged by the electoral system, polling 771,948 votes from all the seats they contested and winning 20 seats, at a ratio of 38,597 votes per seat. If the 2,106,238 votes cast for the three parties in the Midlands had been divided proportionately, then each party would have approximately the following number of seats: Liberals, 12; Conservatives, 36; and Labour, 28. Of course, if there had been a different electoral system, the question arises of whether the Liberals might have fielded more candidates and subsequently polled more, or if voters might have felt that voting Liberal would not be a wasted vote. The Secretary of the MLF further pointed out that even if the Liberals had polled the same number of votes as the Conservatives, they would only have won 18 seats. The conclusion was that three-cornered fights had ‘not hurt the Tory Party’, but had struck ‘a deadly blow at the Liberal and Labour Parties’.⁹⁹⁰ The defeated Liberal candidate for Darwen suggested that his result, where he was less than 1,000 votes behind the victorious Conservative candidate, ‘showed the unfairness of the present electoral system’, as in one-member constituencies the top of the poll takes all.⁹⁹¹

The weather was cited by the Liberals as an additional cause of their heavy defeat.⁹⁹² However, there was another factor over which the party had more control. The lost periods of opportunity since 1918 outlined in chapter four and in this chapter led to a policy vacuum. A resolution proposed by the Executive of the MLF blamed the defeat in 1924 on the lack of detailed and coherent policy. They called for:

the clear cut definition and consistent advocacy by our leaders of a radical fighting programme, dealing with Housing, Unemployment and National Development, Industrial Policy, Social Insurance, Rating and Land Reform, Education, Proportional Representation, Disarmament, the maintenance of Free Trade, and Temperance, based on the resolutions approved by the Party through the medium of the National Liberal Federation Council.⁹⁹³

⁹⁸⁹ MLF, Exec., 21 November 1924.

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁹¹ *Darwen News*, 5 November 1924.

⁹⁹² MLF, Exec., 21 November 1924.

⁹⁹³ Ibid.

Their Labour and Conservative opponents exploited the lack of clear and definitive Liberal policies. The Conservative candidate for Chester said that if he happened to be on the same platform as the Liberal candidate, ‘he proposed not merely to deal with the Russian question but with the whole question of unemployment and [the Liberal] party’s utter lack of policy in dealing with that question’.⁹⁹⁴ The one practical policy which the Liberal Party had, based on the Liberal Coal and Power report, was portrayed as a more reasonable policy than Labour’s proposed nationalisation of the mines.⁹⁹⁵ However, apart from this, the mantra of ‘Peace, Retrenchment and Reform’ was still prevalent.⁹⁹⁶ This old slogan may have been highlighted because those principles represented the views of active Liberals. In Beckenham, one Liberal proposed a resolution in support of the candidate ‘because he was a standard bearer of the Liberalism of Gladstone, Bright, Harcourt and Campbell-Bannerman’.⁹⁹⁷ The Liberal Party still tried to portray itself as standing ‘for the good of the community as a whole – without the distinction between class or party’.⁹⁹⁸

The vague Liberal position during this election allowed the continued polarisation of the electorate between Labour and Conservative.⁹⁹⁹ In South-East Essex, Alderman Brooks, a former President of the LA for that constituency, advocated voting Conservative because he did not like the Socialism of the Labour Party.¹⁰⁰⁰ A speaker at one Conservative meeting urged voters not to vote Liberal, as after the election he expected that the Parliamentary Liberal Party to be so few that they could be brought to the House of Commons in a single charabanc.¹⁰⁰¹ Voting Liberal was portrayed as a wasted vote, and there is evidence of the party being caught in the third-party trap of the electoral system. The *Cheshire Chronicle* reported that ‘timid Liberals vote Conservative’.¹⁰⁰² On the other hand, the Labour candidate at Southend appealed to Liberals as ‘there was definite movement in the Liberal ranks towards Labour’, and as evidence of this he had on his platform Charles Pilley, who had stood as a Liberal candidate at the last election and ‘now he had thrown in his lot with Labour’.¹⁰⁰³ It is also telling that the Labour candidate for Bromley, H. J. Wallington, had

⁹⁹⁴ *Cheshire Chronicle*, 18 October 1924.

⁹⁹⁵ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 October 1924.

⁹⁹⁶ See the advert with the Liberal candidates meetings listed in *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 October 1924.

⁹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 October 1924.

⁹⁹⁸ *Southend Standard*, 23 October 1924.

⁹⁹⁹ See for example attacks on Nationalisation by the Conservative candidate at Bromley *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 October 1924.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Southend Standard*, 16 October 1924.

¹⁰⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 23 October 1924.

¹⁰⁰² *Cheshire Chronicle*, 1 November 1924.

¹⁰⁰³ *Southend Standard*, 23 October 1924.

previously been active in Liberal politics before joining the Labour Party after the First World War.¹⁰⁰⁴

The Liberal MP in Darwen spent much of the early part of the campaign discussing the Campbell prosecution and the Russian Treaty. He claimed that ‘there was not a trade union in this country which would send money to Russia at this present time’, and argued that trade could instead be promoted ‘by loaning it to countries whose ideals of commercial morality were the same as ourselves, or lend it to our colonies’.¹⁰⁰⁵ The Liberal candidate for Bromley felt that the Labour Party had ‘rushed the election in order to avoid a full discussion on the Russian Treaty’.¹⁰⁰⁶ The Chapel End LA sent a resolution protesting against the loan to Russia as they felt that money could be used to correct the ‘unemployment and shortage of houses’ at home rather than abroad.¹⁰⁰⁷ However, not all Liberals supported this line; the chairman of a Liberal meeting in Chester felt that the Liberals had a very sound manifesto ‘which he accepted from A to Z’, but he had ‘one slight difference, and that was in connection with the Russian question’, as ‘they could not afford to ignore a great nation such as Russia’.¹⁰⁰⁸

During the campaign, Liberals uttered supportive remarks about the record of the Labour government which put the Liberal party in a difficult strategic position. For example, the chairman of a Liberal meeting in Darwen admitted that ‘the Labour Party did two good things’, namely ‘the budget introduced by Mr. Snowden’ and its policy on reparation repayments.¹⁰⁰⁹ The Liberal candidate for Blackpool went further still, defending the Labour Government by stating that ‘I think in many directions the late Labour Government showed full capacity to govern, and I strongly object to men such as Mr. Philip Snowden being described as Socialists and clowns’.¹⁰¹⁰ The historiography of this period has stressed that the first Labour Government established the Labour Party ‘as the main progressive party’ of British politics and demonstrated that they could ‘govern in a moderate and traditionally recognisable manner’.¹⁰¹¹ Even Liberals themselves had recognised the latter during the course of the Labour government. However, there was no progressive unity in this election. In return for the Liberals’ supportive remarks, the Labour Party attacked the Liberals, taking

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 October 1924.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Darwen News*, 11 October 1924.

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 October 1924.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Chapel End Ward LA, Exec., 22 September 1924.

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Cheshire Chronicle*, 18 October 1924.

¹⁰⁰⁹ *Darwen News*, 18 October 1924.

¹⁰¹⁰ *Gazette News for Blackpool*, 25 October 1924.

¹⁰¹¹ Shepherd, and Laybourn, *Britain’s First Labour Government*, p. 22.

the line that ‘there is no essential difference’ between the Liberal and Conservative Parties.¹⁰¹² In Southend, the Labour Party contested the seat for the first time because they claimed that after the government was formed ‘Asquith made an unfortunate speech in which he said the Liberal Party had placed the Labour Party in office and now they would feed out of the hands of the Liberal Party’. Unsurprisingly, they felt that ‘Labour was not going to feed out of the hands of either Party.’¹⁰¹³

The Conservatives were happy to exploit Liberal divisions and to reinforce the narrative of Labour candidates that it was a straight choice between Conservative or Labour to form a government. The Conservative candidate at Southend attacked the Liberal Party for having been ‘a great Party’, so ‘great they had people in it of all opinions’, and so some had voted with the Conservatives and some with Labour.¹⁰¹⁴ This was borne out in the election: even though Labour lost the election, their share of the overall vote rose by 2.6 per cent, whilst the Liberal share of the vote slumped from 29.7 per cent to 17.8 per cent. The 1924 general election was a disaster for the Liberals; with only 40 MPs and significantly behind the other two parties, the two-party system had been restored. However, unlike in the Edwardian period it was now the Liberal Party that was the third party in the system and not Labour. Whatever the respective merits of the Conservative and Labour parties between 1918 and 1924 the Liberal Party’s own divisions and delays hindered their chances just as much as the strength of their opponents. The culmination of these self-inflicted wounds was the calamity of the 1924 general election. The findings in this and the previous chapter have challenged the thesis that Liberal decline was inevitable by highlighting the nature of these self-inflicted wounds and their consequences.

¹⁰¹² *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 October 1924.

¹⁰¹³ *Southend Standard*, 16 October 1924.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 October 1924.

Chapter 6

Lloyd George Revival, 1924-1929

The history of the Liberal Party from 1924 to 1929 divides into two halves. The first consists of the period from the general election in October 1924 until Lloyd George became the leader of the Party in October 1926. This is generally considered a time of drift, although some important activity was undertaken: *The Land and the Nation* (known as the Green Book) and *Towns and the Land* (known as the Brown Book) were published 9 October 1925 and 24 November 1925 respectively, and the Million Pound Fund was launched.¹⁰¹⁵ Reaction to the Green and Brown Books and the fate of the Million Pound Fund have yet to be examined at the local level of the Party.¹⁰¹⁶

The second period, from the final split between Asquith and Lloyd George as a result of the General Strike to the outcome of the 1929 general election, saw the major attempt at Liberal revival under Lloyd George. Hitherto, the final rift between Asquith and Lloyd George has only been examined from a national perspective.¹⁰¹⁷ However, grass-roots opinion on the split will reveal the direction in which the Liberal Party was headed in 1926, and how the rank and file viewed the division between Asquith and Lloyd George. Once Lloyd George became the leader of the Liberal Party, there was a renewed sense of purpose and direction, as well as more funds for organisation and propaganda.¹⁰¹⁸ Several by-elections in this period had encouraging results, and *Britain's Industrial Future* (known as the Yellow Book) was published.¹⁰¹⁹ For these reasons, the party in these years has generally been seen in favourable light. However, the 1929 general election proved beyond reasonable doubt that the Liberal Party had become the third party in British politics, assailed on the left by Labour and on the right by the Conservatives. Unusually for a third party, the Liberals were the focus

¹⁰¹⁵ Campbell, *Lloyd George*, p. 120; Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, pp. 337-354.

¹⁰¹⁶ The exception to this is M. Dawson, 'The Liberal Land Policy, 1924-1929: electoral strategy and internal division', *Twentieth Century British History*, 2, no. 3 (1991), pp. 272-290.

¹⁰¹⁷ Campbell, *Lloyd George*, pp. 136-156; S. Koss, 'Asquith versus Lloyd George: the last phase and beyond', in A. Sked and C. Cook (ed.), *Crisis and Controversy: Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor* (London, 1976), pp. 84-86; Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, pp. 354-362.

¹⁰¹⁸ Campbell, *Lloyd George*, pp. 157-239; Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, pp. 363-374.

¹⁰¹⁹ For by-election results, see Campbell, pp. 161-165, 207, 211-212; For the Liberal Yellow Book, see Campbell, *Lloyd George*, pp. 196-205; Dawson, 'Liberal Land Policy', p. 283 and p. 289.

of attention during the election, with the unemployment programme of the Yellow Book taking centre stage.

D) Liberal reorganisation, 1924-1926

After the disaster of the 1924 general election, the Liberals needed to reassess their party from top to bottom in order to try and maximise their potential for the future. One aspect of this was to review the organisation of the party. Consequently, a decision was taken to seek a £500,000 fighting fund in order to finance district federations, provide grants at general elections, aid the weakest constituencies, conduct national campaigns and maintain a competent headquarters staff.¹⁰²⁰ At a Liberal convention held in January 1925, the target was raised to the more ambitious figure of one million pounds, and this became known as the Million Fund. Unsurprisingly, three elections in two years meant that some associations, such as Coventry LA, felt that they could not contribute any money to the national party.¹⁰²¹ It was recorded that in 1924 ‘only 70 members subscribed’ to the Coventry LA, which highlights how an increasing burden fell on a relatively small number in some localities.¹⁰²² The possibility of having ‘Liberal Stamps’ was discussed in Coventry, and it was thought that this would be ‘a very fine advertisement for Liberalism’; accordingly the Coventry LA tried to contribute to the Liberal Million Fighting Fund by ordering 10,000 stamps and 500 cards.¹⁰²³ However, it was later noted that ‘this Headquarters Scheme had not been popular’.¹⁰²⁴ When discussing the Million Fund, one member of the Harborough Executive expressed his view that ‘if the Division pays its own expenses year by year without being dependent on the generosity of a prospective candidate or Member ... it was all that could be expected’.¹⁰²⁵ The Darwen LA printed 10,000 circulars to be sent to those who had promised to vote Liberal at the 1924 general election, asking for a subscription varying from one to five shillings.¹⁰²⁶ This request was to cover grants totalling £750 to two Liberal Clubs and a Reform Club.¹⁰²⁷ The regional body was in a similar position: the LCNWLF requested more funds from constituencies in order to help clear their bank overdraft. They suggested that £10 a year

¹⁰²⁰ MLF, Exec., 21 November 1924.

¹⁰²¹ Coventry LA, Advisory Committee, 9 December 1924.

¹⁰²² *Ibid.*, FGP, 18 March 1925.

¹⁰²³ *Ibid.*, 29 April 1925.

¹⁰²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 February 1926.

¹⁰²⁵ Harborough LA, Exec., 2 May 1925.

¹⁰²⁶ Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 27 May 1925.

¹⁰²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 August 1925.

should be paid to the Federation, a substantial increase from two guineas. They also recommended that a regional fighting fund be created.¹⁰²⁸ Whilst some progress was made with the Million Fund, it was certainly not an overwhelming success at the grass-roots. The *Liberal Agent* recorded that ‘it seems reasonable to assume that the Million Fund has not been overwhelmed with contributions since last May’ adding that it ‘must not die of inaction’, as it was ‘not healthy for a great Party to be financed by one man – or even by a group of wealthy men’.¹⁰²⁹

At the same time, an enquiry was undertaken into the condition of the party by Asquith. The MLF was asked to meet representatives of the national party in Birmingham in order to express their views on its policy and organisation.¹⁰³⁰ However, this was a lost opportunity for a really inclusive discussion because only five days notice was given and few deputations were able to attend. The recorded points of their discussion provides a bird’s eye view of the Liberal Party at the start of 1925. Lack of finance was the most common complaint. The need for more candidates, more detailed policies and more unity at headquarters were also frequent criticisms. The women’s deputation stressed the need for more candidates who were ‘working men and women’, and ‘the need of women workers who know the lives of the poor – this is where Labour gets ahead of us’.¹⁰³¹ Similar criticisms were heard in the north-west; according to the *Manchester Guardian*, the following response was given at the meeting between the headquarters representatives and the north-western delegates: ‘There must be real unity; the party machine must be made genuinely democratic and freed from any arbitrary control by leaders or whips; Liberal candidates must fight everywhere; and there must be a national appeal for funds.’¹⁰³² At a ‘special and private’ meeting of Liberal Associations in the north-west held two months later, a further prime concern was the need for a Liberal programme, which indicates how the policy vacuum since the war was hurting the party’s prospects.¹⁰³³ The Liberal grass-roots had identified where the party had made mistakes since 1918 and had informed the elite of these issues, but by 1924 it may have already been too late to recover their former position.

Moreover, while some steps were made to improve Liberal organisation, there were also signs that in some respects it actually deteriorated after the 1924 general election. The

¹⁰²⁸ LCNWLF, Private, found before Report of a Special Meeting, 5 February 1926.

¹⁰²⁹ *Liberal Agent*, Vol. 28, no. 120, January 1927.

¹⁰³⁰ MLF, Exec., 21 November 1924.

¹⁰³¹ *Ibid.*, 23 January 1925.

¹⁰³² *Manchester Guardian*, 21 November 1924.

¹⁰³³ LCNWLF, Special and private meeting, 17 January 1925.

Walsall branch of the Young Liberals wanted the MLF to call ‘a meeting of leading Liberals to decide on leadership’, a particularly important point as Asquith had lost his seat in the election.¹⁰³⁴ However, they decided to leave the matter open, and not to contact the MLF. This was most likely because the prevailing view at the Executive of the MLF was that they were glad that Asquith had the ‘dignity of an Earldom’, and they affirmed their ‘continued confidence’ in him.¹⁰³⁵ After the election, the Leicester LF was disbanded, with the three constituencies preferring to work separately. The Executive of the MLF commented that this was to be ‘regretted’ and it was a weakness: instead of pooling resources, it could encourage an abdication of responsibility for the fortunes of Liberalism in the rest of the city.¹⁰³⁶ By June 1927, the Executive of the MLF felt that their very limited staff had prevented them from achieving more in reorganisation, and had hindered their efforts as part of the national aim to get ‘at least 500 candidates selected’ by the end of July 1926.¹⁰³⁷

A motion was put to change the time and place where the LCNWLF met, as ‘we are now living in a democratic age’, with the aim to ‘encourage the assistance and enthusiasm of young people’, but it was withdrawn and the practice of a mid-day meeting on the second Friday every month was continued.¹⁰³⁸ This decision inhibited wider social representation on the executive of the regional body, as it made it almost impossible for not only working-class men to attend, but also those in such lower middle-class occupations as office work and teaching. Similarly, women were not adequately represented in the midlands; in January 1927, George Thorne, MP for Wolverhampton East, said that he ‘had recently discovered that women Liberals were rather grieved that they had no direct representation on the Council’ of the MLF - but the Executive committee took no action.¹⁰³⁹

After the 1924 defeat, the Southend Liberals recognised that they needed to reorganise. They decided that a ‘corps of speakers’ should be arranged, with as far as possible each person specialising on a particular topic. They felt this was necessary so that ‘the public’ would ‘gradually obtain detailed acquaintance with Liberal proposals in place of the generalities and negative criticism of opponents so common now’.¹⁰⁴⁰ There are signs that Liberal organisations began successfully to recruit new members during this period. After a social in a public hall in Beckenham, the Secretary read the names and addresses of 48 men

¹⁰³⁴ Walsall Young Liberals, GM, 9 December 1924.

¹⁰³⁵ MLF, Exec., 13 February 1925.

¹⁰³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24 April 1925.

¹⁰³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 April 1926, 3 June 1927.

¹⁰³⁸ LCNWLF, Exec., 20 March 1925.

¹⁰³⁹ MLF, Special Exec., 25 March 1927.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Southend LA, Exec., 21 November 1924.

and women who had ‘signified their wish to join the association’.¹⁰⁴¹ By May, they had recorded that they had received 38 applications for membership, indicating that reorganisation was under way and that pockets of support for Liberalism survived.¹⁰⁴² In March 1925, the Walsall Young Liberals held a meeting to encourage people to join; between 70 and 80 people attended, and they were able to sign up ‘about 40’ new members after the close of the meeting.¹⁰⁴³

The Westmorland LA agreed a new constitution in May 1925, which was a fresh start.¹⁰⁴⁴ They had not contested the constituency since a by-election in 1915, but by early 1926 they had started to approach prospective parliamentary candidates.¹⁰⁴⁵ Although finance was cited as a problem by Liberals in early 1925, even after the debacle of 1924 they retained the ability to raise reasonable sums at the grass-roots. The bazaar held by the Manchester LF in March 1925 made a profit of ‘around’ £5,200.¹⁰⁴⁶ The Coventry LA also noted a profit from a Bazaar they held of £240, and a meeting which was addressed by Lloyd George made a net profit of £67.¹⁰⁴⁷ By similar methods, both Southend and West Walthamstow were able to either clear or significantly reduce their deficits during 1925 and 1926.¹⁰⁴⁸ Of course, securing finance was not always guaranteed; when the Manchester Women’s Central Council held a social evening in November 1925, it was noted that it had been ‘unsuccessful’ from both the number attending and from the financial perspective.¹⁰⁴⁹ However, it was noted in July 1926 that a garden fete was ‘an unqualified success’, with around 1,200 attending and 775 having tea’, and making £78 profit.¹⁰⁵⁰ This shows that just because an association can be perceived as weak on one occasion, does not mean that its organisation was always poor and that no improvements were possible.

Overall, morale seems to have been at its lowest during the years 1924-1926. When Gisbourne, the prospective Liberal candidate for Coventry withdrew in March 1926, the association’s President reported that the former candidate’s view was that there was no ‘great

¹⁰⁴¹ Beckenham LA, Exec., 26 February 1925.

¹⁰⁴² Ibid., 19 March, 23 April, 28 May 1925.

¹⁰⁴³ Walsall Young Liberals, Special Meeting of Young Liberals, Workers and friends wishing to join the League, 10 March 1925.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Westmorland LA, GM, 25 May 1925.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ibid., CM, 3 February 1926.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Manchester LF, General Committee, 3 April 1925.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Coventry LA, FGP, 16 February 1926.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Southend LA, FC, 12 May 1925; West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 22 June 1925, 28 September 1925, AGM, 23 March 1926.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Manchester Liberal Women’s Central Council, CM, 1 December 1925.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Ibid., 20 July 1926.

interest' shown by Liberal members in the House of Commons, except Lloyd George.¹⁰⁵¹ In a letter to the association, the retiring nominee also stated that the position in Coventry was 'hopeless' because of 'the strong Conservative organisation and the equally strong, if not stronger, Labour organisation'.¹⁰⁵² However, Gisbourne remained the candidate for another year, and faced criticisms from Liberals of being lazy, which was contrasted with the attitude of the sitting MP.¹⁰⁵³ The Southend association felt that their candidate should have given the borough more attention; after this was put to him in a letter, the candidate subsequently resigned.¹⁰⁵⁴

In several cases, the organisation became weaker after the 1924 defeat. Some within the Coventry LA felt that it was 'a hopeless task and waste of money' to contest the seat at the next election, unless they had 'a well-known outstanding politician'.¹⁰⁵⁵ In June 1926, the Chairman, Treasurer and Agent of the Southend LA all resigned, although the Chairman still helped with the Fighting Fund, and the Chesterfield association went through a similar crisis in October 1925, with both the Secretary and Agent resigning.¹⁰⁵⁶ In consequence, the Chesterfield Liberals approached the North East Derbyshire and Clay Cross divisions to suggest that they share one agent and office, although 'otherwise meeting their own liabilities'.¹⁰⁵⁷ The Liberal candidate in Harborough decided in November 1924 to end his payment to the Association, which left the constituency finances in such a precarious state that the full time Secretary had to be made redundant, despite concern from the Chief Whip and the Secretary of the MLF.¹⁰⁵⁸ Likewise, the agent in Beckenham was relieved of his duties because of the perilous financial position of the Association.¹⁰⁵⁹

The Walsall by-election of February 1925 provides some evidence for an optimistic view of Liberal potential, whilst at the same time highlighting the predicament of the party. The Liberals put a lot of effort into the contest; the Secretary of the MLF visited Walsall four times, and Miss Hewnes of the MLF worked there as well.¹⁰⁶⁰ The Liberal candidate finished second with 2,493 votes less than the winning Conservative, but 690 in front of Labour, and

¹⁰⁵¹ Coventry LA, Advisory Committee, 22 March 1926.

¹⁰⁵² Correspondence to the Coventry LA, 8 April 1927, Gisbourne to E. O. French, President of the Coventry LA.

¹⁰⁵³ Coventry LA, FGP, 26 January 1927; Gisbourne finally withdrew as candidate in May 1927.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Southend LA, Special Exec., 18 March 1927.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Coventry LA, Advisory Committee, 26 September 1927.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Southend LA, Exec., 25 June 1926; Chesterfield LA, Exec., 22 October 1925.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Chesterfield LA, Exec., 22 October 1925.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Harborough LA, Exec., 15 November 1924, 19 December 1925, 13 February 1926.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Beckenham LA, Exec., 12 November 1924.

¹⁰⁶⁰ MLF, Exec., 13 February 1925.

the Secretary of the MLF regarded this result as ‘exceedingly good’, and felt that with ‘steady organising and educational work’ the seat could be won.¹⁰⁶¹ However, the campaign tactics of the Labour Party in this by-election were telling, with the Labour candidate declaring: ‘If you think there is any real difference between the Tories and that Party that does not know it is dead, Vote Liberal.’¹⁰⁶² A speaker for the Conservative Party was still playing the Bolshevik card, saying that they ‘had got hold of the trades unions’ and that ‘the industrial disputes in which they [the loyal, unsuspecting British workers] were compelled to take part in were deliberately invented in Moscow’, whilst at one rally, the Conservative MP for Ipswich attacked the last Liberal government’s unpreparedness for the First World War.¹⁰⁶³

In other parts of the country during the period that Asquith was still the leader of the Party, a strategy of ‘mass attacks’ was used which meant holding many meetings and canvassing. It was considered they were ‘a great success’, as they encouraged activity ‘in some divisions where work was at a standstill’.¹⁰⁶⁴ Renewed activity was mentioned in previously derelict areas with new Liberal associations being set up.¹⁰⁶⁵ However, it is clear that much more activity was possible and that some associations were in decay; there is a gap in the minutes of the Blackpool LA between 10 April 1926 and 3 March 1927 suggesting that the Association was moribund at that time.¹⁰⁶⁶ Likewise, the Chesterfield Women’s LA did not meet between 17 April 1925 and 23 March 1926, perhaps because of the resignation of the Secretary.¹⁰⁶⁷ Even in active associations, an impression is given of an ageing membership.¹⁰⁶⁸

II) The final Lloyd George-Asquith split, 1926

Unfortunately for the Liberals, the most significant event nationally for their party in the mid-1920s was the final rift between Asquith and Lloyd George. This occurred because Lloyd George responded to the General Strike in a different tone from other leading Liberals, and he

¹⁰⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20 March 1925.

¹⁰⁶² *Walsall Observer*, 21 February 1925. For other information on the Walsall by-election of 1925 see Dean, *Town and Westminster*, pp. 102-106.

¹⁰⁶³ *Walsall Observer*, 21 February 1925.

¹⁰⁶⁴ MLF, Exec., 20 November 1925.

¹⁰⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 January 1927.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Blackpool LA, AGM, 10 April 1926, Officers Meeting, 3 March 1927.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Chesterfield Womens LA, CM, 17 April 1926, 23 March 1926.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Southend LA, Annual Report 1925, stapled to the FC, 15 January 1926.

did not attend a crucial shadow cabinet meeting; his reason for this being to avoid a ‘row’¹⁰⁶⁹. Belatedly, Asquith rebuked Lloyd George in a letter, to which the latter replied publicly, printing Asquith’s letter at the same time.¹⁰⁷⁰ The Executive of the MLF expressed their ‘profound regret that it was considered necessary to publish the correspondence between Lord Oxford and Mr Lloyd George which appeared in the press on 26 May’.¹⁰⁷¹ A month later, one member of the Executive withdrew a resolution as he considered it ‘was futile owing to the personal antagonism amongst the leaders of the Party’, and that things had not improved since the NLF conference. At the same meeting, Arthur Brampton, President of the National Liberal Federation, said that he ‘wondered what hope there could be for Party unity when there were two organisations, two headquarter staffs, and two funds’.¹⁰⁷² This split at the top of the party evidently adversely effected the Million Fund scheme; in September 1926, it was recorded that ‘at the moment local action in most parts of the area appeared to be suspended’.¹⁰⁷³

The position of the Chesterfield Young Liberals suggests that they wanted to be loyal to both Asquith and Lloyd George, but also that they perhaps felt Lloyd George had been right to take the line he did. It was recorded that a

discussion took place on the emergency resolution of the National Liberal Conference e.g The variance of Lord Oxford and Lloyd George. Our delegate ... was given freedom to vote after hearing the discussion of the conference. The meeting whilst recognising the leadership of Lord Oxford and Asquith did not wish for Mr. Lloyd George to be ostracised.¹⁰⁷⁴

A similar sentiment was reported by a delegate’s report of the National Liberal Womens conference of 1926, where the re-elected President, Mrs Wintringham, had asked the delegates ‘not to accentuate’ the differences in the party ‘but to help heal them’. Her message also contained well wishes for Lord Oxford’s illness. A delegate from the hall then asked ‘does this imply anything against Mr Lloyd George?’, to which the President had answered that it did not, stating that she had not ‘mentioned the subject’.¹⁰⁷⁵ At the General Meeting of the Chesterfield Young Liberals, their delegate to the meeting stated that both Lord Oxford

¹⁰⁶⁹ Campbell, *Lloyd George*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁰⁷¹ MLF, Exec., 28 May 1926.

¹⁰⁷² *Ibid.*, 23 July 1926.

¹⁰⁷³ *Ibid.*, 17 September 1926.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Chesterfield Young Liberals, CM, 15 June 1926.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Chapel End Ward LA, Report of the Womens National LF Conference, 22 and 23 June 1926.

and Lloyd George ‘were essential for the well being of the future of the Liberal Party’.¹⁰⁷⁶ The LCNWLF did not want to take sides in the dispute, and ‘after a long discussion’ they ‘decided it would be in the best interests of the Party not to pass any resolution concerning the difficulties that had arisen between Lord Oxford and Lloyd George’.¹⁰⁷⁷ In a similar spirit, the Darwen LA passed a resolution declaring ‘That we as an Association do not take any part in the present squabbles at headquarters but remain neutral, but do all we possibly can to secure the return of a Liberal candidate for the division.’¹⁰⁷⁸

The potential level of disillusion was shown at a meeting of the Westmorland LA, where one member proposed a resolution: ‘That we notify Headquarters that in view of their quarrels & and lack of interest in & a failure to find a candidate for this constituency we intend to leave the whole organisation in abeyance & do nothing further’. However, there was no seconder, and it was noted that they did not want to let the organisation break down when ‘the previous collapse after the war’ was being fixed.¹⁰⁷⁹ Similarly, at a special meeting of the South Westmorland Women’s LA, a resolution was moved to ‘deplore the present dissensions between the present leaders of the Liberal Party’, and that ‘in order to prevent the dissolution of organised Liberalism throughout the country it urges that a new + progressive leader be elected immediately.’ Here again, however, it was ‘decided by a considerable majority that no action be taken’.¹⁰⁸⁰ Whilst it is evident that the Westmorland Liberals were sick of the internal disputes, in common with other Liberal Associations in all regions, they were unwilling to take sides or to condemn Lloyd George.

When Asquith announced on 14 October 1926 his decision to retire from the leadership of the party, the Executive of the MLF formally announced ‘its deep regret’ and thanked him for the ‘eminent services’ which he had rendered to the party and the nation ‘through a long and distinguished public career’. In fact, it seems possible that a majority of the MLF executive wanted Lloyd George to become the leader of the Liberal Party; at the same meeting where Asquith’s resignation was discussed, the minutes contain an entry: ‘Position of the Party – it might be wise to invite Mr Lloyd George to address the AGM of the Federation when held in January.’¹⁰⁸¹

¹⁰⁷⁶ Chesterfield Young Liberals, GM, No date [but between 15 June 1916 and 7 October 1926].

¹⁰⁷⁷ LCNWLF, Exec., 4 June 1926.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 10 February 1927.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Westmorland LA, Meeting of Westmorland Delegates, 4 September 1926.

¹⁰⁸⁰ South Westmorland Women’s LA, Special GM, 14 June 1926.

¹⁰⁸¹ MLF, Exec., 19 November 1926.

Nonetheless, when Asquith resigned as leader there were respectful responses from many Liberal Associations. The appreciation from the LCNWLF was typical of most sentiments, with ‘its admiration of the great and noble qualities which have characterised his long and public life and its appreciation of the fine and devoted service he has rendered to the Liberal Party and the Nation’.¹⁰⁸² Whilst the Executive of the Harborough LA also responded respectfully to Asquith’s resignation, the main concern of their resolution was the need for unity; only ‘by a closing up of the ranks and the cessation of internal bickering and strife the electors of the country will be assured of the desire of the Liberal Party to help in the restoration of the Nation’.¹⁰⁸³ It is clear that after Asquith had resigned as leader of the party, the grass-roots wanted to move forward as one party, with no further splits. The LCNWLF decided that their Chairman should write to Vivian Phillips, Chairman of the Liberal Party Organisation 1925-1927, and Lloyd George ‘emphasising particularly the danger of either side having anything of a personal victory.’¹⁰⁸⁴ Besides this, there were numerous other resolutions and speeches from the grass-roots calling for ‘unity’ and for the leaders to ‘sink their differences’.¹⁰⁸⁵ It also clear that a lot of associations during the crisis practiced what they preached and did not involve themselves in the fall-out; like the Association in Blackpool, Liberals were ‘content to be Liberals without splitting our forces to go either on one side or the other’.¹⁰⁸⁶

When Asquith died in 1928, the grass-roots passed numerous resolutions paying tribute to him and expressing their gratitude for his lifetime of service to the Liberal Party.¹⁰⁸⁷ The reactions to Asquith’s death suggest that even though they did not condemn Lloyd George’s stance over the General Strike, they still held Asquith in high esteem and, given the silence from many associations during the 1926 crisis, did not want to have to choose between them.

¹⁰⁸² LCNWLF, Exec., 15 October 1926.

¹⁰⁸³ Harborough LA, Special Exec., 23 October 1926.

¹⁰⁸⁴ LCNWLF, Exec. 10 December 1926.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Southend Standard*, 18 November 1926; West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 27 November 1925.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Blackpool LA, AGM, 24 March 1927. For another example of restraint see Beckenham LA, Exec., 16 June 1926.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Blackpool LA, AGM, 23 March 1928; East Walthamstow Young LA, GM, 21 February 1928; Home Counties LF, Report of the AGM, 1928; MLF, Exec., 10 February 1928; Southend LA, Exec., 24 February 1928; Westmorland LA, FC, 17 February 1928.

III) Reorganisation of the Party after Lloyd George became leader

After Lloyd George became the Leader of the Party, there was evidence of more reorganisation and greater activity, and signals that more money would be forthcoming from headquarters.¹⁰⁸⁸ In March 1927, one member at Blackpool remarked that they ‘were more cheerful’ and encouraged than they ‘had been for many years’, because ‘the Party had a new organisation and a programme’, which indicates that some saw the advantages which Lloyd George had brought.¹⁰⁸⁹ Certainly, there were financial benefits: another ‘Fighting Fund’ was set up nationally in June 1927, and this was useful as the Liberals recognised that ‘money spent judiciously now, in educating and organising public opinion in favour of Liberalism, will reap its reward in the number of votes cast’.¹⁰⁹⁰ The ‘mass attack’ campaigns continued under Lloyd George’s leadership, and there is evidence that these took place in all three of the case study regions.¹⁰⁹¹ Spending by the regional bodies to facilitate these operations was considerable, with constituency associations being offered the assistance of speakers and woman organisers without charge.¹⁰⁹² The regional staff also increased in number and status: the LCNWLF appointed a female assistant secretary on £300 per year, and an organising secretary on £350 a year, and also increased the general secretary’s salary from £500 to £600 per year.¹⁰⁹³ A month later a further woman organiser was appointed on £150 per year, plus expenses.¹⁰⁹⁴ The Federation also moved premises and purchased the fittings which were already in the new office, so clearly a lot of money was being spent during this period.¹⁰⁹⁵

The importance of the role of regional organisers can be seen, with their officials giving advice on reorganisation to constituencies and being involved in the appointment of agents, as at Harborough.¹⁰⁹⁶ The importance of regional organisation was also evident in the north-west. It was recorded that Sir Herbert Samuel, chairman of the party’s organisation nationwide, had noted Westmorland as one of the constituencies where ‘a candidate must be

¹⁰⁸⁸ As Campbell has noted, strictly speaking, Lloyd George did not become Liberal leader but was only chairman of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons. However, regardless of his formal position ‘the reality of his leadership was undisputable’; Campbell, *Lloyd George*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Blackpool LA, AGM, 24 March 1927.

¹⁰⁹⁰ MLF, Exec., 14 June 1927.

¹⁰⁹¹ LCNWLF, Exec., 14 September 1928; MLF, Exec., 18 November 1927; Southend LA, Exec., 26 January 1927.

¹⁰⁹² Walsall LF, Exec., 3 October 1927.

¹⁰⁹³ LCNWLF, Exec., 9 September 1927.

¹⁰⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 October 1927.

¹⁰⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1928.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Harborough LA, Exec., 19 November 1927; Chesterfield Women’s LA, CM, 23 March 1927.

found'.¹⁰⁹⁷ The organising Secretary of the LCNWLF 'urged' the Westmorland Liberals to appoint a full-time agent and recommended a candidate to them, and within a few days, the agent's appointment had been made.¹⁰⁹⁸ However, repeated attempts to secure candidates were less successful, with several refusals due to financial factors.¹⁰⁹⁹ Eventually, the selection sub-committee received 'verbal assurances that Mr. Ward's candidature would be acceptable to Headquarters and would receive financial backing', and he was duly endorsed as candidate at the end of October 1927.¹¹⁰⁰ The association also had to buy a motor-car, given the wide geographical spread of that constituency.¹¹⁰¹ All of this amounts to proof of a significant improvement since the war, as the Westmorland Liberals had not contested the seat since a by-election in 1913. There is evidence that reorganisation and extra spending also occurred in the Home Counties, as the Beckenham LA appointed a new secretary and agent in 1928.¹¹⁰²

Overall, it seems that the increased spending on organisation did reap benefits and contributed to the Lloyd George revival. In February 1929, it was recorded that 33 Young Liberal branches had been established in the Midlands.¹¹⁰³ In 1927, the Westmorland League of Young Liberals had noted with satisfaction that some of the 'most active young men and women' at Liberal meetings were in its fold and that it had a membership of 'about 120'.¹¹⁰⁴ The faithful remained as committed as ever: even though the Westmorland area was flooded, 12 members made it to a meeting, one of whom even 'left her flooded cellars' to attend.¹¹⁰⁵ In the 1929 election campaign, the Secretary and Agent of the Beckenham LA was able to recruit seven new canvassers, six new volunteers for the distribution of the newspaper, six volunteers to take poster boards and twelve volunteers for clerical work, all of whom were in addition to the usual members of the Executive.¹¹⁰⁶ Membership also increased, rising in Beckenham by 40 per cent in 1927, and a further 33 per cent in 1928.¹¹⁰⁷ In June 1928, it was noted that several members who had left the Party 'some time ago' wanted to rejoin.¹¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁹⁷ Westmorland LA, Annual Meeting of Westmorland Delegates, 23 July 1927.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ibid., Sub-committee, 27 July 1927.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Ibid. and 4th Meeting of the Selection Sub-committee, 15 October 1927.

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4th Meeting of the Selection Sub-committee, 15 October 1927, Council Meeting, 29 October 1927.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid., AGM, 19 May 1928.

¹¹⁰² Beckenham LA, Special Exec., 29 October 1928.

¹¹⁰³ MLF, Exec., 9 February 1929.

¹¹⁰⁴ Westmorland LA, Annual Meeting of Westmorland Delegates, 23 July 1927.

¹¹⁰⁵ South Westmorland Women's LA, GM, 3 November 1927.

¹¹⁰⁶ Beckenham LA, Exec., 15 April 1929.

¹¹⁰⁷ Ibid., AGM, 24 February 1928, 21 January 1929.

¹¹⁰⁸ Higham Hill and Lloyd Park LA, Exec., 13 June 1928.

Increased membership also encouraged financial self-sustainability. The Blackpool LA raised nearly £3000 in three years, and the Southend LA had 254 subscribers in August 1928.¹¹⁰⁹ Of course, while some associations were in a strong position, others were not. In East Walthamstow the deficit rose from £85 in March 1927 to £230 in November 1927, and then to approximately £324 in September 1928.¹¹¹⁰ In the neighbouring West Walthamstow division, the debt was £438, although by general election in 1929 it had been reduced to £177.¹¹¹¹ The financial difficulties that Liberal Clubs faced are illustrated by the Southend LA assuming the assets and liabilities of the town's Liberal Club.¹¹¹²

Although the Liberal organisation did improve during Lloyd George's early years as leader, it was not all smooth sailing. The Blackpool LA refused a request for increased subscriptions from the LCNWLF as they felt 'that the Federation gave very little help to this association'.¹¹¹³ The Blackpool Liberals tried to select a candidate in April 1928, but after he had spoken to several friends in the division who told him that 'a Liberal wouldn't have a shadow of a chance', he decided to withdraw.¹¹¹⁴ It is clear that there were numerous rejections; in March 1928, it was recorded that 'a number of gentlemen' had been invited to become candidate but the invitations were rebuffed.¹¹¹⁵ The President, Treasurer and the Hon. Secretary of the Blackpool LA resigned in November 1928 because they felt they did not have the support of the association.¹¹¹⁶ Five months later their resignations were withdrawn, but the whole drama would not have been conducive to efficient organisation before the 1929 general election.¹¹¹⁷ After the Liberals finished second in a three-cornered fight in the 1929, the underlying tensions resurfaced. One member spoke out and said 'we must have someone in authority who will get more closely in touch with Liberal principles and with the ideals of Liberal members of the Town Council and not have meetings called only when it suits those who are officials'.¹¹¹⁸ Another squabble that would not have assisted matters occurred in Manchester, where the Hon. Secretary of the Ardwick Division complained that the Manchester LF neglected the organisation in his division, although a report produced by the

¹¹⁰⁹ Blackpool LA, AGM, 23 March 1928; Southend LA, FGP, 21 August 1928.

¹¹¹⁰ East Walthamstow LA, AGM, 7 March 1927, Exec., 9 November 1927, 12 September 1928.

¹¹¹¹ West Walthamstow LA, AGM, 27 February 1928, Exec., 26 April 1929.

¹¹¹² Southend LA, FGP, 10 April 1929.

¹¹¹³ Blackpool LA, Exec., 8 August 1927.

¹¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Candidate Selection Committee, 13 April 1928.

¹¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 March 1928.

¹¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Special Exec., 19 November 1928.

¹¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Exec., 18 March 1929.

¹¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, AGM, 2 August 1929.

Executive Committee in its turn observed that there had been ‘little or no activity’ in Ardwick since the war.¹¹¹⁹

More funds did not necessarily equate to automatic reorganisation. In February 1928, only 24 of the 75 constituencies in the Midlands area had both a candidate and an agent, six constituencies had a candidate but no agent, and nine constituencies had an agent but no candidate.¹¹²⁰ However as the election approached, regional bodies could report more satisfactory progress: in October 1928, it was ‘reported that 47 candidates had been adopted’ in the north-west.¹¹²¹ Some revealing general conclusions were made about the state of grass-roots Liberalism in the Midlands in early 1928:

Wherever we tap constituencies it is not difficult to find groups of Liberals scattered about. They belong, however, either to the better type of working class or the lower ranks of the middle class. In some cases leadership is difficult to find, and in all cases money is stiff.¹¹²²

Thus, whilst pockets of Liberal support could be found, external funding could not cure all of the party’s internal problems.

IV) Policy reappraisal under Lloyd George

Between 1924 and 1929, the Liberals produced several original and progressive policies, with the advantage that they were practical enough to be conceivably enacted in government. The first such policy was the proposals based on the *Coal and Power* report, originally published on 12 April 1924. Apart from the Irish question in 1920-21, this was the first time since 1914 that the Liberal Party had a clear, concise and effective policy for national government. If the party would have had such distinct and positive policies immediately after the War, it might well have increased its credibility - but by 1925 they were stuck in the third-party trap, with no chance of enacting their manifesto.

The Liberal Land Policy was another distinctive policy, but it was more controversial than the *Coal and Power* policy. This was partly because some Liberals felt it had been put on the agenda without being approved by the whole party first.¹¹²³ In addition, some

¹¹¹⁹ Manchester LF, General Committee, 4 February 1927, 11 March 1927.

¹¹²⁰ MLF, Exec., 10 February 1928.

¹¹²¹ LCNWLF, Exec., 19 October 1928.

¹¹²² MLF, Exec., 10 February 1928.

¹¹²³ *Ibid.*, 12 June 1925.

members of the party were critical of the policy: one member at Coventry could ‘not support the Liberal cause if Mr Lloyd George’s Land Nationalisation Scheme is adopted’, whilst a speaker at the meeting of the Hoe Street LA was ‘not entirely in favour of the Lloyd George Land Policy’.¹¹²⁴ In this context, a series of meetings on the Land Campaign were organised for 1926 on the basis that they were ‘expository meetings, and that no resolutions approving or disapproving, are passed’.¹¹²⁵ The LCNWLF unanimously endorsed a resolution which had been forwarded to them from the Western Counties Federation, stating that they welcomed the opportunity to hold a private conference on the issue but that no public meeting should be held until the policy was approved by the National Liberal Federation.¹¹²⁶ As this body did approve it a year later, the initial apprehension was probably due more to the way in which it had been promoted by Lloyd George, without going through the usual party channels, than to the policy itself.¹¹²⁷ Similarly, the Home Counties LF recorded that ‘the original proposals produced considerable division in the party’ and that it even ‘drove some people from our ranks, including some half dozen M.P.s or candidates’. However, the modifications at the Land Conference of 17-19 February 1926 ‘materially altered the situation and went far towards uniting the Party on an agreed and elastic programme’.¹¹²⁸

In other districts, the local associations were clearly in favour of the land proposals. The Darwen LA welcomed the prominence being given to the issue, and whilst respecting that ‘in a large question like this’ that there was ‘room for divergence’, they urged the leaders ‘to set an example of cooperation to present a united front’.¹¹²⁹ East Walthamstow felt that with Lloyd George’s ‘leadership in the “Coal and Power” and Land Policy Proposals, the Party will regain its position in the country’. They also added a hope that ‘Liberals who cannot keep with the majority of the Party, will cease to cause confusion in the ranks.’¹¹³⁰ The Walsall Young Liberals were proud of the land policy, as they had felt it had ‘roused the Labour Party to the extent that its members were calling for something better’.¹¹³¹ Clearly, whilst the land proposals caused some dissent, they also undoubtedly motivated many of the Liberal grass-roots.

¹¹²⁴ Coventry LA, FGP, 14 October 1925; Hoe Street LA, GM, 2 November 1925.

¹¹²⁵ MLF, Exec., 20 November 1925.

¹¹²⁶ LCNWLF, Exec., 10 July 1925.

¹¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, AGM, 15 March 1926.

¹¹²⁸ Home Counties LF, Report of the AGM 1926.

¹¹²⁹ Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 2 December 1925.

¹¹³⁰ East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 12 January 1927.

¹¹³¹ Walsall Young Liberals, Exec., 6 October 1925.

Policies which were far less controversial for Liberals were their strong support for the League of Nations and the traditional commitment to Free Trade.¹¹³² The Walsall Young Liberals at one of their meetings discussed ‘Protection or Common Sense’, with the minute-taker recording six pages of notes.¹¹³³ Temperance was still of interest to some associations in some regions, and the Western Federation sent a resolution calling for ‘temperance reform’; but the Executive of the MLF decided to take no action on the question.¹¹³⁴ However, when the Harborough LA selected a candidate, he was asked for his views on temperance, and a Liberal speaker at an Executive Meeting in East Walthamstow explained his views on temperance, showing how important this issue still was to some Liberals at the grass-roots.¹¹³⁵

The Liberals devoted more attention to industrial policy in this period, and Lloyd George’s ‘Industrial Enquiry’ was welcomed.¹¹³⁶ The findings of the Industrial Enquiry were eventually published on 2 February 1928 as *Britain’s Industrial Future*, and was commonly known as the Yellow Book. It was an extremely detailed document for a party publication. One also can sense that some of the Liberal grass-roots were intimidated by the scale and complexity of the analysis; the President of the Blackpool LA stated that ‘if there are any criticisms’ of the Liberal Industrial Policy it was ‘that it is too big and comprehensive’.¹¹³⁷ However, there was little comment on other industrial matters. The LCNWLF passed a resolution opposing the Conservative government’s Trade Disputes Bill of 1927, and there was very little grass-root comment on the General Strike.¹¹³⁸ East Walthamstow thanked Sir John Simon for his speeches during the General Strike, but this is not representative as Simon had been MP for Walthamstow 1906-1918, and they followed his career closely afterwards.¹¹³⁹ After the strike was over, the West Walthamstow Liberals urged that the coal dispute be settled on the lines of the Samuel Commission’s Report.¹¹⁴⁰

Electoral reform was still sought, but it was not an issue at the forefront of the Liberal agenda: in Blackpool one member ‘protested that the most important reform, proportional

¹¹³² Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 10 February 1927, 28 September 1928; LCNWLF, AGM, 15 March 1926, Exec., 8 May 1925, 11 December 1925; Manchester Liberal Women’s Central Council, CM, 23 March 1926; MLF, Exec., 17 September 1926; East Walthamstow Women’s LA, Meeting, 4 December 1928; Home Counties LF, Report of the AGM 1928.

¹¹³³ Walsall Young Liberals, GM, 24 March, 25 March 1925.

¹¹³⁴ MLF, Exec., 18 November 1927.

¹¹³⁵ Harborough LA, Exec., 8 October 1927; East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 3 July 1925.

¹¹³⁶ LCNWLF, AGM, 5 February 1927.

¹¹³⁷ Blackpool LA, Adjourned meeting of subscribers and members of the Association, 13 April 1928.

¹¹³⁸ LCNWLF, Exec., 6 May 1927.

¹¹³⁹ East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 4 June 1926.

¹¹⁴⁰ West Walthamstow LA, Exec., 26 July 1926.

representation' was 'always left to the end of the agenda'.¹¹⁴¹ One problem was that whilst there was support for electoral reform, there was no consensus on what was the most appropriate system to adopt.¹¹⁴² There was still the traditional demand for economy, but this was now in the uncontroversial form of criticism of the Conservative ministry. A resolution submitted to the Executive of the MLF in 1927 deplored the Conservative government's failure to carry out their promises of economy.¹¹⁴³ Previously in 1925, the Executive had opposed the remission of supertax as 'unnecessary relief for the wealthiest section of the Community'.¹¹⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, it seems that the return of a Conservative government helped to focus Liberal criticism against it.¹¹⁴⁵

During these years, the party acquired significant new policies to place alongside its traditional faith in Free Trade and temperance, and its new-found approval of the League of Nations and electoral reform. In many ways, the overhaul in Liberal doctrine paralleled the top-down revival that the constituencies were going through as well. As Charles Masterman is reported to have said: 'I've fought him as hard as anyone, but I have to confess, when Lloyd George came back to the party, ideas came back to the party'.¹¹⁴⁶

V) The social activities of the Liberal grass-roots

The social side of Liberal organisation remained largely unchanged in these years, and of course was often linked with fund raising. Events included garden parties, tea meetings, jumble sales and community singing.¹¹⁴⁷ The latter was also present in the north-west as well, and musical programmes at social events were not uncommon.¹¹⁴⁸

¹¹⁴¹ Blackpool LA, Exec., 17 September 1928.

¹¹⁴² Walsall Young Liberals, Exec., 16 February 1926.

¹¹⁴³ MLF, Exec., 6 May 1927.

¹¹⁴⁴ MLF, Exec., 12 June 1925.

¹¹⁴⁵ Harborough LA, Exec., 2 May 1925, 23 July 1927; MLF, Exec., 24 April 1925; Walsall LA, Leasehold Reform Meeting, 13 October 1927.

¹¹⁴⁶ L. Masterman, *C. F. G. Masterman: A Biography* (London, 1968), pp. 345-346.

¹¹⁴⁷ Chesterfield Women's LA, CM, 13 January 1927, 20 July 1927, 3 February 1928, A Meeting and Tea, 13 September 1927, 12 October 1927, 7 December 1927.

¹¹⁴⁸ South Westmorland Women's LA, AGM, 18 September 1928; Trinity and St. Oswald's Ward Women's LA, Social Meeting, 15 February 1927.

Several large scale social and fundraising events took place during this period. The Walsall LA held a 'Liberal Big Blue Bazaar' on 21-25 February 1928 with an assortment of national figures from the Liberal Party opening the event each day. A preliminary balance sheet suggested a profit of around £929 – a very creditable achievement.¹¹⁴⁹ At Southend's 'Liberal Fancy Fair' of 17-18 November 1926, there was an orchestra and soloists, a needlework store, a 'sketch' given by the Young Liberals, a cake competition, a flower stall, an Ice Cream Stall and a 'Juvenile concert' where 'well known local children will appear.'¹¹⁵⁰ Chapel End organised a children's party to which and around 160 children turned up, and 50 adults were enrolled as members of the party.¹¹⁵¹ Day-trips were also not uncommon in certain constituencies.¹¹⁵²

Besides the larger socials and expeditions, a variety of meetings and other activities took place at the grass-roots. The Walsall Young Liberals claimed to have held 94 meetings in 1927, including 24 weekly meetings which had an average attendance of 25 persons.¹¹⁵³ The Beckenham LA held a social in October 1926 which it was claimed that 160 people attended, and that 'a considerable number of new members had been enrolled.'¹¹⁵⁴ The minutes of Beckenham LA's social committee provide an insight into middle-class culture in the 1920s. There were to be games: a Proverb competition, an advertisement competition and a hat-making competition 'for gentlemen', games of Sir Rodger de Coverly and musical chairs.¹¹⁵⁵ There were also ideas for a Ladies Whistling competition, guessing Musical Airs and a Spelling Bee.¹¹⁵⁶ A games tournament here was so successful that another tournament was organised.¹¹⁵⁷ In Manchester, the Levenshulme Liberal Club stated they had made sufficient money on tennis and the bowling green 'to clear all liabilities'.¹¹⁵⁸ Whist drives still took place, and the Walthamstow Juniors still played the seniors in this period, whilst the Chester Women's organisation planned a Whist Drive to raise money towards the costs of a Peace Pilgrimage.¹¹⁵⁹

¹¹⁴⁹ Walsall LA, Joint Meeting of the Exec. and the Bazaar Committee, 17 April 1928.

¹¹⁵⁰ Southend LA, 'Liberal Fancy Fair', Bazaar Programme 1926.

¹¹⁵¹ East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 29 January 1926.

¹¹⁵² Southend LA, Annual Report 1925, stapled to the FC 15 January 1926, Annual Report 1926, found after Exec., 26 January 1927; South Westmorland Women's LA, Trip, 8 September 1927.

¹¹⁵³ Walsall Young Liberals, AGM, 17 January 1928.

¹¹⁵⁴ Beckenham LA, Exec., 19 October 1926.

¹¹⁵⁵ Ibid., Social Committee, 21 September 1925.

¹¹⁵⁶ For another instance of a Spelling Bee see South Westmorland Women's LA, Social, 11 March 1929.

¹¹⁵⁷ Beckenham LA, Exec., 8 October 1928.

¹¹⁵⁸ Manchester LF, Exec., 29 January 1929.

¹¹⁵⁹ East Walthamstow LA, Exec., 4 September, 2 October 1925; Chester Women's LA, CM, 17 May 1926.

Liberal women still operated within a gendered political sphere in this period. Tea at the AGM of the LCNWLF was served ‘by the kindness of ladies of the Rochdale and Royton Associations’.¹¹⁶⁰ The Chester Women’s LA was primarily a vehicle used to supply and serve tea and refreshments at Liberal social events.¹¹⁶¹ The women of the Beckenham LA held an ‘American tea and a small sale’, suggesting this type of fund-raising event amongst sections of the middle-class.¹¹⁶²

VI) Municipal election results, 1925-1929

There was an overall deterioration of the Liberal position at a local level during these years. The position was complicated by the different ways Liberals contested politics at the local level. Herbert Samuel had ‘strongly urged’ that Liberals should contest local elections.¹¹⁶³ However, some Liberal associations preferred to arrange anti-Socialist pacts with the Conservative Party. In May 1925, the Coventry Liberals met to discuss their pact with the Conservatives, as it expired that year. During the debate, one Alderman stated that ‘if the pact were broken, it would be goodbye to the Liberal Party on the Council’, and he added that the Liberal Councillors were not assisted by the Liberal Executive and had to rely on personal help and influence.¹¹⁶⁴ However, there was much resentment and opposition to the pact; one ward which declined to collect subscriptions for the Liberal Association while the pact was in operation, had raised £25 to run their own Liberal candidate.¹¹⁶⁵ To make the situation for Coventry Liberalism even more precarious, a Liberal was adopted by the Conservatives for Stoke Ward, which put the Liberal ward committee ‘in something of a quandary’.¹¹⁶⁶

¹¹⁶⁰ LCNWLF, AGM, 15 March 1926.

¹¹⁶¹ Chester Women’s LA, CM, 17 January 1928.

¹¹⁶² Beckenham LA, Exec., 18 August 1926; Chester Women’s LA, CM, 24 May 1927.

¹¹⁶³ MLF, Exec., 22 June 1928.

¹¹⁶⁴ Coventry LA, Special Meeting of the Liberal Aldermen, Councillors, Advisory Committee and five members of the Exec., 11 May 1925.

¹¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, FGP, 19 May 1926.

¹¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Advisory Committee, 18 October 1926.

Table 6.1: Municipal election results for Coventry from 1925-1929¹¹⁶⁷

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1925	7	6	5	5	10	1	0	0
1926	5	5	7	5	11	2	0	0
1929	0	0	0	0	15	9	16	6

Source: Compiled from Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections: Vol. 3*, pp. 63-135.

Since 1920, both the Liberal and Conservative Parties had enjoyed near perfect success due to their municipal alliance in Coventry. However, when they formally ran as Coalition candidates in 1929, the Labour Party was able to make a considerable breakthrough. For the purposes of this thesis, the prime question is why the Liberals would agree to a municipal pact in the first place. In Coventry, the answer is that it was clearly in their own interests to do so. In 1925 and 1926, 11 of the 12 Liberals put forward were returned – an incredibly high ratio. Such anti-Socialist pacts were also successful elsewhere in the country as well.

Table 6.2: Municipal election results for Chesterfield from 1926-1929¹¹⁶⁸

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1926	0	0	0	0	6	4	7	2
1927	0	0	0	0	7	1	10	7
1928	0	0	0	0	6	2	9	6
1929	0	0	0	0	7	5	9	3

Source: Compiled from *The Derbyshire Times*, 7 November 1925, 6 November 1926, 5 November 1927, 3 November 1928, 9 November 1929.

In Chesterfield, the Labour Party became more successful, and in this coal-mining constituency the non-party or anti-Labour line was less effective – a particular worry for the Liberals, who had benefited from it previously. The results for Walthamstow highlight how the Liberals struggled without municipal alliances. In suburban Walthamstow, the Liberals were significantly behind the Labour and Conservative parties in terms of seats contested and seats won.

¹¹⁶⁷ There were no elections held in Coventry in 1927 and 1928.

¹¹⁶⁸ In 1925 the contests were not reported on party lines.

Table 6.3: Municipal election results for Walthamstow, 1925-1929¹¹⁶⁹

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1925	0	0	0	0	13	6	14	7
1927	3	0	11	5	12	7	0	0
1928	0	0	11	6	11	5	0	0
1929	1	1	3	1	7	7	4	0

Source: Compiled from *Walthamstow, Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 10 April 1925, 19 March 1926, 8 April 1927, 6 April 1928, 29 March 1929.

The results for Leicester demonstrate how useful municipal pacts with the Conservatives could be for Liberals and, perhaps, how some Liberal councillors were dependent upon Conservative votes.

Table 6.4: Municipal election results for Leicester, 1924-1929

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1924	8	3	10	7	13	3	0	0
1925	6	5	5	3	9	2	0	0
1926	4	0	7	1	7	7	1	0
1927	5	2	8	1	10	8	3	0
1928	6	4	5	1	11	5	1	0
1929	3	0	6	3	7	6	1	0

Source: Compiled from *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 3 November 1924, 3 November 1925, 2 November 1926, 2 November 1927, 2 November 1928, 2 November 1929.

There were anti-Socialist pacts in 1925 and 1928, and they were the only municipal contests in which the Liberals could be described as successful. In 1928, a Liberal who benefited from the anti-Socialist pact admitted that ‘without the Conservative support I have had in Westcotes Ward I wouldn’t have given “tuppence” for my chance of being here to-night as a councillor’. He added ‘Liberalism seems to have lost its hold on the people, and during the last few years a lot of Liberals have turned socialist, and a lot have turned Conservative’, and concluded that ‘Three-cornered fights mean but one thing – putting the socialist in.’ Similarly, a Liberal candidate for Charnwood in Leicestershire admitted that ‘We can’t keep the Socialists out unless we work together.’¹¹⁷⁰ However, combined with this, there remained on the part of many a strong loyalty to Liberalism. In 1926, the defeated Liberal candidate for Charnwood claimed that he had ‘received two invitations. One was to join the Conservatives

¹¹⁶⁹ There were no contests in 1926 as there was a truce.

¹¹⁷⁰ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 2 November 1928.

and be given a safe seat. The other was to join the Labour Party and be given a safe seat', but added that most probably he would 'be popping up again for Liberalism on November 1st next year', which he did, in Castle Ward.¹¹⁷¹

Although there may have been some advantages for Liberals in anti-Labour pacts, there was a significant downside. This was expressed when a Liberal Trade Unionist Conference held on 25 April 1925 concluded that pacts constructed against Labour 'had the inevitable result of driving industrial Liberals into the ranks of Labour'.¹¹⁷² Some Liberal Associations fought independently and secured some creditable results. In Darwen, the election results were recorded without party labels in 1927, but a Liberal meeting celebrated two gains.¹¹⁷³

Table 6.5: Municipal election results for Darwen, 1926-1929¹¹⁷⁴

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1926	2	2	1	1	3	0	0	0
1928	2	2	0	0	1	0	1	0
1929	3	3	2	2	5	0	0	0

Source: Compiled from *Darwen News*, 31 October 1925, 3 November 1926, 2 April 1927, 3 November 1928, 2 November 1929.

The results for Chester, Blackpool and Manchester also show that Liberals were still able to win representation at the local level, although not as successfully as the Conservative or Labour parties.

Table 6.6 Municipal election results for Chester, 1925-1929

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1925	1	0	2	2	2	2	1	0
1926	3	2	4	4	4	2	1	0
1927	4	4	4	4	4	0	0	0
1928	5	3	5	5	5	2	1	0
1929	4	2	5	2	4	4	0	0

Source: Compiled from *Cheshire Observer*, 7 November 1925, 6 November 1926, 5 November 1927, 3 November 1928, 9 November 1929.

¹¹⁷¹ Ibid., 2 November 1926.

¹¹⁷² MLF, Exec., 12 June 1925.

¹¹⁷³ Darwen LA, Officers Meeting, 2 November 1927.

¹¹⁷⁴ There were no contests in 1925 and in 1927 they were recorded on non-party grounds so difficult to ascertain political labels.

Table 6.7: Municipal election results for Blackpool, 1925-1929

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1925	5	1	9	6	0	0	6	2
1926	8	3	11	7	2	0	3	1
1927	5	1	8	6	4	0	2	1
1928	3	2	7	5	0	0	4	0
1929	4	3	5	4	3	0	3	0

Source: Compiled from *Manchester Guardian*, 3 November 1925, 2 November 1926, 2 November 1927, 2 November 1928, 2 November 1929.

Table 6.8: Municipal election results for Manchester, 1925-1929

Year	Liberal		Conservative		Labour		Independent	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
1925	11	4	23	14	20	9	8	1
1926	11	4	24	9	22	14	4	0
1927	14	6	21	7	14	9	11	2
1928	11	7	29	11	26	13	28	1
1929	14	7	25	5	22	16	11	0

Source: Compiled from *Manchester Guardian*, 3 November 1925, 2 November 1926, 2 November 1927, 2 November 1928, 2 November 1929.

Of course, it should be noted that tacit agreements with the Conservatives could exist in any locality, and sometimes these were not recorded. However, in the case of Manchester, it was recorded in the Liberal Councillors Committee minutes that ‘there was tentatively no pact between the Liberal and Conservative caucuses’, although it was also noted that ‘largely owing to the difficulty of securing candidates, an understanding had been arrived at’ and the two parties would not oppose each other’s candidates.¹¹⁷⁵ Besides a lack of candidates, three-way contests and the lack of organisation could harm Liberals; it was noted that Withington Ward was lost because of the intervention of a Labour candidate and a lack of ‘loyal and hard workers’ on behalf of the Liberal cause. The failure in Moss Side was partly due to the Chairman of that division appearing on the Conservative platform.¹¹⁷⁶ Whilst some Liberals had moved to supporting other parties, others retained their faith in the Liberal flag and wanted to fly it; in December 1928, the Higham Hill and Lloyd Park Ward sent a resolution

¹¹⁷⁵ Manchester Liberal Councillors, undated letter in minute book (most likely for the municipal elections November 1926).

¹¹⁷⁶ Manchester Municipal Representation Joint Committee, A Survey of Municipal Elections 1926, no date.

to their constituency executive that at least one candidate should be run in the local elections.¹¹⁷⁷

VI) The general election of 1929

In 1929, the Liberals realised that it was ‘essential’ to run enough candidates to make it clear that they were making a ‘definite bid for power’ and ‘not merely a sufficient number of members to act as a balancing Party’.¹¹⁷⁸ By April 1929, 59 candidates had been adopted in the Midlands, a considerable improvement on 1924. The Liberals also mounted a substantial campaign in April, with the MLF recording that 47 of the constituencies in their area ‘were running at least twenty meetings during the month’. For the election campaign, Liberal organisations were often well-funded and had support from their regional body; during the campaign, the Midlands had six organisers (one Young Liberal organiser, two travelling organisers and three women organisers) and five vans, ‘including a giant land speaker van’.¹¹⁷⁹

However, in the event, having a sufficient number of candidates, an energetic campaign, and a well-funded and staffed party machine was not enough. In all of the case-study constituencies in the Midlands, the Liberal finished a poor bottom of the poll. In Chesterfield, Kenyon’s retirement and the intervention of a Conservative candidate cost the Liberals heavily, as the new candidate even finished 2,586 votes behind the Conservative, even though that party had not contested the seat since the by-election of 1913. The only case-study constituencies where the Liberals were successful were Darwen, Manchester Blackley and Manchester Withington. In Darwen, Samuel narrowly turned a Conservative majority of 935 in 1924 into a Liberal majority of 462 in 1929, with the Labour candidate coming third with only 20 per cent of the poll. The Liberal candidate in Manchester Blackley overcame a Conservative majority of 3,182 to attain a Liberal majority of 888, and in the Manchester Withington, Ernest Simon headed the poll with a 1,885 majority. The Liberals secured second place in three-corned fights at Blackpool, Bromley, Chester, Manchester Exchange and Rusholme, Walthamstow West and Westmorland, and also lost the straight

¹¹⁷⁷ Higham Hill and Lloyd Park LA, Exec., 11 December 1928.

¹¹⁷⁸ MLF, Exec., 11 January 1929.

¹¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 April 1929.

fight with the Conservatives in Southend. However, elsewhere the Liberal was in third place: in four of the Manchester divisions (Clayton, Gorton, Hulme and Moss Side), Faversham, and Walthamstow East, whilst the party did not even contest Manchester Ardwick and Platting.

These results occurred for a variety of reasons. It could be fairly said that the Liberal Party's prominent support for the League of Nations was not rewarded at the polls. In Coventry, the Conservative candidate attacked the Liberal Party's candidate for 'always' seeming to 'devote his attention to the League of Nations', adding that the League was a national affair not a party issue.¹¹⁸⁰ There was no opportunity to exploit this issue in Bromley, as the Labour candidate had been a member of the League of Nations Union since it was created.¹¹⁸¹ In Southend, the Conservatives closely matched the Liberal position on the League of Nations, so that there was essentially no difference between the two.¹¹⁸² The failure of the League of Nations factor to be a vote winner is not surprising, as there was no major international crisis before or during the campaign. The Liberal pronouncements in favour of Free Trade also did not seem to aid the Liberals in this election largely because Baldwin had in 1928 publically ruled out any Conservative advance towards Protectionism.¹¹⁸³ The Land Campaign did not feature heavily in the election.

What is more surprising is the relative failure of the unemployment policy, given its promising exposure and that unemployment was regarded as the most important issue of the day.¹¹⁸⁴ The LCNWLF believed that the party's unemployment scheme 'had caught the attention of the electorate'.¹¹⁸⁵ The local press in Chester reported that Liberal meetings were so well-attended that they had struggled to find large enough venues for the audiences. Here the Liberals attacked the Conservative claim to have resolved the housing problem, and argued that the Liberals proposals to reduce unemployment would lead to an increase in homes built.¹¹⁸⁶ The Liberal candidate in Bromley placed the unemployment proposals at the forefront of his agenda, and stressed how practical it was to improve around 7,000-10,000 bridges that were not capable of carrying the traffic necessary, whilst the Liberal candidate at Southend particularly argued for the extension of the telephone system and the Road Scheme,

¹¹⁸⁰ *Coventry Herald*, 12 and 13 April 1929.

¹¹⁸¹ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 May 1929.

¹¹⁸² For examples see *Southend Standard*, 23 May, 30 May 1929.

¹¹⁸³ Found after the entry for LCNWLF, CM, 12 April 1929. For other speeches in favour of Free Trade see *Blackpool Times*, 28 May 1929; *Manchester Guardian*, 13 May 1929; *Southend Standard*, 23 May 1929.

¹¹⁸⁴ *Blackpool Times*, 28 May 1929; *Faversham and North-East Kent News*, 18 May 1929; *Manchester Guardian*, 4 May 1929.

¹¹⁸⁵ LCNWLF, CM, 12 April 1929.

¹¹⁸⁶ *Cheshire Chronicle*, 18 May 1929.

which he would claimed would benefit 48 trades and both unskilled and skilled labour for five years.¹¹⁸⁷

Both Conservative and Labour opponents spent much of their time discussing how unworkable the proposals were, and stressing that Lloyd George could not be trusted to keep his promises. The Conservative candidate in Chester highlighted Liberal divisions over the proposals, and claimed that some Liberals who knew ‘they were impracticable and impossible’ had ‘actually gone to the length of resigning’.¹¹⁸⁸ However, in the case-study constituencies during the campaign, there were no examples of this. In Chesterfield, the Conservative candidate criticised the kind of work which the Liberal programme would produce, arguing that it would ‘turn all the skilled artisans of the country into navvies’, and he labelled the whole thing ‘ridiculous’.¹¹⁸⁹ In fact, the Liberal candidates seemed to relish the attention being focused upon their policies. The Liberal candidate for Leicester South declared ‘the Liberals were going to embark on a policy of action not inertia’, adding that ‘there was a similarity between Labour and Conservatives – an absence of ideas’.¹¹⁹⁰ However, speaking after his defeat, the Liberal candidate for Leicester West suggested that ‘people did not understand the Lloyd George proposals or they would have voted for them’.¹¹⁹¹ There is evidence of contradictions in the instincts of some Liberal politicians between the radical policies of Lloyd George and nineteenth century Gladstonian economic policy. In Walsall, the first of the Liberal candidate’s fourteen points was to have ‘economy in public expenditure’, which ran counter to his fifth point of ‘a definite employment policy and not merely a policy of money relief for unemployment’.¹¹⁹² Similarly, in Beckenham the Liberals attacked the Conservative government for raising taxes and for spending £30,000,000 more than the last Labour government.¹¹⁹³

The nature of the first-past-the-post electoral system also determined how the Labour and Conservative parties campaigned against the Liberals. Whilst the Labour Party played on the fact that they were the main alternative to the Conservative Government, the Conservative Party portrayed itself as the main opponent of the Labour Party.¹¹⁹⁴ There were examples of a ‘life long Liberal’ speaking on the Conservative platform in Walsall, and a defeated Liberal

¹¹⁸⁷ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 May 1929; *Southend Standard*, 16 May 1929 and 23 May 1929.

¹¹⁸⁸ *Cheshire Observer*, 18 May 1929.

¹¹⁸⁹ *Derbyshire Times*, 18 May 1929.

¹¹⁹⁰ *Leicester Mercury*, 30 May 1929.

¹¹⁹¹ *Leicester Mail*, 31 May 1929.

¹¹⁹² *Walsall Observer*, 4 May 1929.

¹¹⁹³ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 23 May 1929.

¹¹⁹⁴ *Darwen News*, 25 May 1929; *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 May 1929, 23 May 1929; *Coventry Herald*, 12 and 13 April, 3 and 4 May 1929; *Leicester Mercury*, 24 May 1929; *Walsall Times*, 11 May 1929.

candidate in Chesterfield complaining of ‘feeble organisation’ prior to the calling of the election and ‘hesitant support from prominent Liberals in the division’.¹¹⁹⁵ The Conservative *Leicester Mail* repeatedly stressed that the best way for Liberals to keep Labour out was to vote Conservative, and the comments of the defeated Liberal candidate for Leicester South suggest that this rhetoric worked, as ‘Many Liberals undoubtedly voted Conservative’.¹¹⁹⁶ It seems that Liberal attempts to galvanise support by suggesting that ‘Liberalism stood between the two [Labour and Conservative parties], with a practical policy’ did not work, and did not counter the effects of being in the third party trap.¹¹⁹⁷ 1929 was the first campaign to feature a variety of different cohesive and extensive Liberal policies since the pre-war by-elections. Yet, caught between the polarising force of the electoral system, it was all to no avail.

Another long-standing problem was even less successfully faced. Whilst this was the first election in which the ability of the Party leadership (namely, Lloyd George, Earl Grey, Sir John Simon and Sir Herbert Samuel) could be presented as having ‘the necessary drive and determination for seeing the big jobs through’, Lloyd George’s flaws as a leader could also be exploited by the other two parties.¹¹⁹⁸ In Walsall, Dr. Thomas Macnamara, the Liberal candidate tried to gain votes for his role in formulating the 1911 Insurance Act, but had to answer numerous questions regarding the post-war Lloyd George Coalition government of which he was a part, including why they shelved the Sankey Report and why they introduced the protectionist Safeguarding of Industries Act.¹¹⁹⁹ Once again, the importance of the Lloyd George Coalition in Liberal Party politics can be seen, even seven years after it fell. Another common theme was to attack Lloyd George for not sticking to his pledges and that therefore his promises to cure unemployment were meaningless.¹²⁰⁰

Although, 64 Liberal candidates stood in the Midlands, only four were elected which was a ‘great disappointment’. The Chairman of the MLF Geoffrey Mander said that ‘considering everything’ that they had done ‘to win on this occasion’, he ‘confessed he was not very hopeful about the future’. What is more, he added ‘the present [Labour] government

¹¹⁹⁵ *Walsall Times*, 1 June 1929; Chesterfield LA, Exec., 9 July 1929.

¹¹⁹⁶ *Leicester Mail*, 28 May 1929, 31 May 1929, 1 June 1929.

¹¹⁹⁷ *Walsall Times*, 11 May 1929.

¹¹⁹⁸ *Beckenham Advertiser*, 16 May 1929.

¹¹⁹⁹ *Walsall Observer*, 18 May 1929.

¹²⁰⁰ For examples of Labour attacks see *Beckenham Advertiser*, 23 May 1929; *Cheshire Observer*, 25 May 1929; *Darwen News*, 25 May 1929. For a Conservative attack see *Beckenham Advertiser*, 23 May 1929; *Coventry Herald*, 12 and 13 April 1929; *Faversham and North-East Kent News*, 18 May 1929; *Leicester Mail*, 30 May 1929; *Southend Standard*, 30 May 1929.

would act on Radical lines and therefore tend to attract to themselves the support of many who had hitherto been active members of the Liberal Party.’¹²⁰¹

Once again the electoral system counted against the Liberals in the 1929 general election, and only 59 MPs were returned from the whole of the United Kingdom. The 590,235 votes cast for Liberal candidates in the Midlands elected only four MPs; this represented 147,558 votes per MP, compared to 40,905 votes for each Conservative MP and only 28,441 for each Labour MP. The picture was similar in the north-west, where if ‘every vote had an equal value’, the Conservatives would have had 24 MPs instead of 29, Labour 24 MPs instead of 30, and the Liberals 16 MPs instead of five.¹²⁰² After the result, the Executive of the MLF felt that ‘the second ballot is impractical, and the Alternative Vote almost useless’ and they wanted Headquarters to bring before Parliament some form of Proportional Representation that would end ‘these glaring discrepancies’ which they felt was not only unjust to them but a ‘standing danger’ to Parliamentary Representation.¹²⁰³ Across the country, under the first-past-the-post system, the Liberal reward was to elect only 19 MPs more than in the debacle of 1924, which was a paltry achievement considering the reorganisation of the party machine and the reformulation of policy under Lloyd George. It was clear that if the Liberals could not make significant headway when so many factors had improved, then the future looked bleak indeed.

¹²⁰¹ MLF, Exec., 20 June 1929.

¹²⁰² LCNWLF, Exec., 14 June 1929. It was noted that their analysis was only for ‘those divisions in which each Party was engaged’.

¹²⁰³ MLF, Exec., 26 July 1929; LCNWLF, Exec., 14 June 1929.

Conclusion

This pioneering detailed analysis of the Liberal grass-roots provides a new perspective on the conventional wisdom in respect of the decline of the Liberal Party. Earlier studies took too deterministic a view of the rise of the Labour Party and the decline of the Liberal Party. Consequently, the vital period for the origins of the party's problems was located in the Edwardian period. The evidence and analysis presented in this thesis shows that Liberal success in that period was built on firm foundations and was arguably the most dynamic of any of the three mainland parties. Later studies focused upon the personal division between Asquith and Lloyd George, and laid the downfall of the Liberals at their door. However, the process by which a rift in the Parliamentary party caused the party's fortunes to deteriorate across the whole country was not explained. This examination of the Liberal grass-roots has identified the years 1919-1922 as the crucial period of missed opportunity and decline for the Liberals. The presence of Liberals in the Coalition confused the party's supporters, and in 1919 the party in the constituencies undisputedly drifted. This opened up political space for the Labour Party, who took advantage as evidenced in the municipal elections of 1919. Even though the Spens-Valley by-election increased Independent Liberal identity and activity, reservations remained up to the 1922 general election. While the Liberals drifted, the Labour Party solidified its hold on second place in many constituencies. From the perspective of the Liberal grass-roots, this process had occurred by 1922, but further self-inflicted Liberal mistakes in 1922-24 over re-union and the lack of policy reappraisal enabled the Labour and Conservative parties to embed themselves as the two major parties in a two-party system.

As shown in this thesis, what was happening at the grass-roots contributed decisively to the decline of the Liberal Party. With constituencies such as Faversham and Westmorland that did not nominate any Liberal candidates for four successive general elections between 1918 and 1924 being replicated across the country, the party did not have enough candidates to be a credible contender for government. As noted in the introduction, Liberalism had areas of historic strengths and weaknesses like all political parties. By 1929, all three regions examined in this thesis were areas where the Liberals were in an unenviably weak position. On this statistical level, the Liberal experience of decline was similar in all three regions. A detailed examination of the case-study constituency Liberal associations finds that the experience of the rank and file was also essentially homogenous.

The common experience of the sample of associations between 1910 and 1929 could be summarised as follows. Firstly, the New Liberalism was prevalent in the association and it was on the agenda. However, traditional Gladstonian Liberalism still remained important to the membership, and this was clearly shown by their passionate commitment to Irish Home Rule. The New and the old Liberalism worked in tandem during these years and the association was in working order. During the war, if the association either became moribund or directed its energy towards the war effort. During the December crisis of 1916, they supported the King's government to lead the war effort to a successful conclusion. However, they also supported Asquith's continuance as leader of the Liberal Party. A language analysis of the two sentiments suggests genuine support for Asquith and an undercurrent of antipathy towards Lloyd George, but no desire to burn any bridges with him. With the boundary changes as a result of the Representation of the People Act, the association began to think electorally and perhaps reorganise as a result. When Lloyd George called an election immediately after the war, the Liberals were taken aback both by the timing and the nature of his coalition government. If the association ran a candidate, they still voiced their support for Lloyd George and often portrayed themselves as friendly supporters of the Coalition, even if they did not have the 'Coupon'. A heavy defeat in 1918 to the Coalition candidate demoralised the activists. For the first half of 1919, the association did not meet. The evidence suggests that this was because the members were not sure if they were to be included amongst the supporters of the Coalition government, as many of them were Coalition Liberals. The Spen Valley by-election in December 1919, where a Coalition Liberal ran against an Independent Liberal allowing Labour to win the seat, increased the 'Free Liberal' identity of the organisation. The association still drifted in 1920, not yet convinced that the Coalition Liberals were beyond the pale. During 1921 and 1922, the association prepared for a general election but lacked any distinctive programme to win votes in a general election. Liberals sought retrenchment, but so did the Coalition Liberals, the Conservatives and the Anti-Waste League pressure group. In the 1922 general election, the association's candidate would invariably finish second or third.

After the election, the majority of the association wanted a speedy reunion with the Coalition Liberals and were frustrated when the Westminster elite prevented this from happening. Consequently, the association, like the parliamentary party, continued to drift until they were surprised by Baldwin's call for Protectionist policies and the ensuing general election of 1923. Here the common experience deviates. If the association was in a seat of historic Conservative strength, then it was likely that the Liberals faced a straight fight

against the Conservative and were either victorious (either for the first time since 1906 or even since the constituency was created in 1885), or a whisker away from victory. The battle to save Free Trade, playing the safe and British policy cards worked to great effect and covered up policy deficiencies elsewhere. However, if the Association was in core or promising Labour territory, then the Free Trade cry did not work against another party that was also in favour of Free Trade, and the Liberal finished second or third, some way behind the victorious Labour candidate. The self-inflicted Liberal drift since 1918 disadvantaged the Liberals due to Labour being the official opposition since 1918, and this was exploited by Labour and Conservative candidates in 1922 and 1923. After the 1923 general election, the Liberals supported Asquith's constitutional move in allowing the Labour government to form an unfettered minority administration. The association was also particularly happy that the Liberal Party retained its independence and was not in a coalition with either Labour or the Conservatives. The association would be in a precarious financial position, but after two general elections in a year this was to be expected. The association would also pass comment that they were impressed with some measure that the Labour government passed, which was rather worrying because if the Labour Party had shown its fitness to govern to the Liberal rank and file, it is logical that this sentiment might be held by Liberal voters more generally.

The 1924 general election was an unmitigated disaster for the association. The anti-Socialist rhetoric during the election hurt its candidate, as his party had 'put the socialists in'. The Liberal would come a poor third, and at this point morale reached its lowest point. After the election, the faithful did carry on and tried to rebuild, and small positive and localised steps were made in this direction. However, the association found it difficult to find a candidate due to the poor prospects of them getting a return for the amount of money they were expected to subscribe. The Million Fund was a failure, although it did raise some money and spur activity. The association gave the impression of an ageing membership. If it decided to leave a formal comment on the final Lloyd George-Asquith split, then they reacted angrily to this. Ideally, they wanted Asquith and Lloyd George to work together and both to remain key figures in the Liberal Party. However, they saw an attempt to edge Lloyd George out of the party and consequently were sympathetic with his position.

When Lloyd George became leader, the association seemed to enjoy something of a revival. They were able to hire an agent and secure a candidate with an apparent influx of money from above. The membership of the association also increased in this period. There is also evidence that the redefinition of policy under Lloyd George was embraced at the grass-roots. In the 1929 general election, the association's candidate had a distinctive policy

position that was a direct answer to the unemployment question, but the fact that the Liberals were so far behind the other two parties and therefore unlikely to form a government was used against them by his opponents. Lloyd George's record concerning unemployment and the failure to nationalise the mines was used against the Liberal candidate by his opponents. The Liberal candidate's attacks against Labour and their Socialist nationalisation policies may have played into the hands of both the Tories and Labour, by contributing to polarising the election. Even though the Liberal candidates' vote increased, under the first-past-the-post electoral system with single-member constituencies, the Liberal received no reward for his level of support from the electors.

However, two constituencies stand out as different from the above 'typical' Liberal experience. These are Chesterfield and Walsall. They were not as representative because of Kenyon's success in 1918, 1922, 1923 and 1924 and Collins' success in 1922 and 1923. The two similarities between the constituencies are that they were both working-class constituencies and were socially and economically areas of high Labour potential. This is why their success in 1923 was atypical, because most Liberals in these areas were defeated by Labour in that year. In the last analysis, the success of both candidates can be explained by their personal popularity. Kenyon had the additional advantage of being a Liberal-Labour candidate from before the First World War, and was also a respected and long-standing MP by the 1920s. It is perhaps that those advantages, and a straight fight against Labour, that helped Kenyon survive in 1924 whereas Collins lost to a Conservative in a triangular contest.

There are certain key themes that stand out from an examination of the Liberal grass-roots during the nineteen-year period of 1910-1929. The most significant is arguably the missed opportunities that passed by the Liberal Party because of their own disunity. Between December 1910 and August 1914, the Liberal Party manufactured effective opportunities, and was as successful as it could be reasonably expected to be after five years in office. From August 1914 to December 1916, the grass-roots achieved as much could be done during wartime, considering the difficulties which the Liberal and Asquith Coalition governments suffered during the war. During the December 1916 crisis and beyond, the grass-roots remained united so the opportunity for the parliamentary elite to resolve the personal differences between Lloyd George and Asquith was there. Even this missed opportunity during the course of the war was not fatal, as the Labour and Conservative parties remained somewhat constrained by how much progress they could make without being labelled unpatriotic. The next big missed opportunity was not fighting the 1918 general election as a united party – either all in or all out of the Coalition. It was not the existence a coalition in

1918 that was the problem for the Liberals – it was the existence of a coalition with only half of the Liberal party in it. On the one hand, this was the fatal blow to the Liberal Party, as it set the direction the Liberal Party would take 1918-1924 and gave the Labour Party the status and motivation as the official opposition party. On the other hand, the election results in 1918 were so unrepresentative coming immediately after the war and with the party system in a state of flux that the situation should be regarded as recoverable.

However, this thesis puts forward the new interpretation that it was between 1919 and 1922 that the ultimate and most costly missed opportunity for the Liberal Party occurred. After the 1918 general election, the Liberal Party drifted throughout 1919. The context of Labour's impressive 1919 municipal election results was the Liberal Associations' neglect of politics in that year. The evidence presented in this thesis suggests that this Liberal drift occurred because Liberals were not sure of their relative position to the Coalition Liberals. Were they friends, enemies or one party? When this was answered at the Spenn Valley by-election at the end of 1919, it helped many associations to realise they needed to wake up from their hibernation. However, some associations still neglected campaigning because they did not want to offend the Coalition Liberals. The Labour Party took full advantage of its own opportunities, one of which was Liberal Party disunity. Another opportunity which the Labour Party exploited was the Liberal Party not being as progressive or radical as it had been before the war, a self-inflicted tactical mistake by the Liberals that Labour capitalised on in the general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924. Another mistake, whilst not as damaging as the drift of 1919-1920, was not to have united before the 1922 election or immediately after it. The reasons for this lie with the parliamentary elite, as the majority of the grass-roots demanded a speedy reunion and were frustrated when it did not occur. It was during this second period of drift that the Labour Party solidified its hold on the status of official opposition. Consequently, during the 1923 general election, Labour was able to exploit its new prestige and the outdated policies of the Liberals, to reach the position of forming their first minority administration. Contrary to some of the historiography, letting Labour form a government was not a lost opportunity; Asquith's scope for manoeuvre was very limited, and the Liberal rank and file appreciated this.

The evidence outlined in this thesis shows that Liberal decline was not inevitable. The irony for the Liberal Party was that by the time an opportunity did come along, the attempt by Lloyd George to revive the party in 1926-29, it was too late and the Liberals had irretrievably become the third party in British politics. This thesis has shown that the Liberals tried to make the most of the potential that Lloyd George's revival offered them, but they were

defeated most of all by the electoral system. The impact of the electoral system is another key theme of this thesis. In the Edwardian period, it was an ally of the Liberals as it contained the Labour Party and showed both Liberal and Labour leaders the advantages of a 'progressive alliance'. However, from 1918 onwards, the first-past-the-post system became a hindrance, as the votes which Liberals were able to attract were not proportionately translated into seats. The primary beneficiary of this was the Conservative Party.

At the municipal level, the Liberal tendency to participate in anti-Socialist pacts could be viewed as either an opportunity taken or yet another self-inflicted wound. The evidence suggests that the Liberals did benefit from these alliances, although not as much as did the Conservative Party. However, over the nineteen years of this study, the anti-Socialist pacts were evidently less effective at the end of the period than at the start. The pacts had the effect of polarising the electorate either for or against Labour, and as the Conservatives were a more effective anti-Labour depository of votes, the Liberals became more irrelevant. Nevertheless, not all Liberals entered into municipal pacts and there remained wards across the country with substantial pockets of Liberal support.

There is another trend apparent in the case-study constituencies which reflects a homogeneity amongst them. There was a distinct preference for male professionals to be selected as candidate for general elections. The only instance of a LA considering to adopt a female candidate was in Southend, and this fell through due to financial reasons and her declining to become candidate after a meeting with the Labour Party. However, this was an isolated example, and the specific evidence of the Harborough LA shows that there was a conscious preference for male candidates. Furthermore, in all three regions Liberal associations found it progressively more difficult between 1918 and 1926 to secure candidates.

The nature of the appeal from Liberal candidates was as homogeneous as a party running over 300 candidates could expect. The Liberals were arguably the most consistent party in its appeal during the years 1910-1929, but this reflects a lack of adaptability rather than a strength. Besides much of the specifics of the New Liberal agenda and the unemployment policies of Lloyd George in the later 1920s, a thread of the same old policies persisted throughout: Free Trade, electoral reform of some sort, support for the League of Nations (from 1918), and retrenchment in areas that did not jeopardise social reform. Only over the issue of temperance is there a lack of uniformity; the women's, the more middle-class and the more rural Liberal associations were the most likely to include this amongst their programmes and questions to candidates.

There was a considerable number of married couples in Liberal associations, and this is similar to what Hunt noted for the Labour Party in Manchester.¹²⁰⁴ Another similarity is that some of the female members of the Liberal Party were involved in other political bodies; in the Liberal case, this was primarily the League of Nations Union.¹²⁰⁵ A further parallel is that Liberal women were also heavily involved in running bazaars and jumble sales which raised money for the constituency parties. Based on the evidence of the Liberal grass-roots, the women involved in the party were in strictly gendered roles: they were allowed to be in charge of organising social events and serving tea at the AGM, but the real power of decision lay in the hands of the Executive, which remained predominantly run by men.

Some of the most active and social associations could also be some of the electorally weakest, which highlights how ‘good’ organisation and activity does not automatically produce electoral success.¹²⁰⁶ This detailed investigation has shown that the Liberal grass-roots complained about the exact same problems as the Conservatives namely, financial deficits, small attendances at meetings and how disadvantageous their position was when without a candidate to fly the flag.¹²⁰⁷ If these were issues for the most successful party of the inter-war period, then it can be suggested that these problems were endemic, and therefore they cannot automatically be seen as being responsible for the downfall of the Liberal Party. Throughout the thesis, it has been noted that there was a core of activists who remained Liberals during these years, who believed that a Liberal Government in 1929 was possible, and who kept the Liberal flag flying.

There is one weakness that the Liberal Party had relative to the Conservative and Labour parties, and that was the lack of appeal of its leadership to the wider electorate. However, during the first phase of this study, this was not the case. Asquith and Lloyd George and the wider Liberal leadership appeared as being relatively young and dynamic. The wartime Asquith-Lloyd George split of 1916 caused self-inflicted wounds and was an obvious negative factor. However, a less obvious fault was the lack of appeal of the Liberal leadership to the country. This was particularly evident under Asquith in 1918-1926. In 1918 he was tarnished with having being unable to lead the country to victory, in stark contrast to Lloyd George, who constructed a narrative that the Coalition with the Conservatives was

¹²⁰⁴ K. Hunt, ‘Making politics in local communities: Labour women in inter-war Manchester’ in Worley, Matthew (ed.), *Labour’s Grass Roots* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 85.

¹²⁰⁵ In Hunt’s example for Labour in Manchester it was the Women’s International League. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹²⁰⁶ A similar pattern for the Labour Party is noted in M. Worley, ‘Introduction: Labour’s grass roots’, in M. Worley (ed.), *Labour’s Grass Roots* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 3.

¹²⁰⁷ For the Conservative examples, see Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, pp. 183-198.

necessary to rebuild Britain after the war. Even during the elections of 1922-1924, Conservative speakers would make reference to Asquith's failed leadership during the war. However, the problems due to Asquith's post-war leadership go beyond his tarnished reputation. Asquith remained wedded to the past, and never showed sufficient urgency in repairing the organisation and recalibrating the party's policies after 1918. Of course, this was not exclusively his responsibility. The other Independent Liberals at the elite level were also responsible, and deserve the majority of the blame for the tardy reunion with the National Liberals. Before the First World War, Asquith and his colleagues had balanced the appeal between the old and New Liberalism. Even in the post-war years, the rank and file retained a respect for Asquith, although there were signs of dissatisfaction throughout the 1918-1926 period over the lack of detailed policy. After Lloyd George became leader, the party had detailed and radical proposals, and with care and attention given to the party machine by Herbert Samuel. Lloyd George's peace-time coalition record was attacked by Conservative and Labour alike by 1929 but this was not the Liberals only reason for failure in 1929. By 1924, the Liberals were entrenched in third place under the polarising effects of the electoral system. However, between 1919 and 1922 this was not the case and the failed leadership of the party is responsible for the Liberals not fulfilling their post-war potential.

Throughout this thesis, the agency that political parties have has been evident. Of course, there are constraints on the actions of a political party, and this was particularly evident during the political truce during the war and polarising effects of the electoral system. Nonetheless, there remained a remarkable scope for the Liberals to change their appeal to meet changing social and economic change which the Liberals neglected to do. Voters did not automatically vote Labour and Conservative on class lines, those parties had to nurture and evolve an appeal to attract voters. The Liberals neglected to do the same until they were disadvantaged by their position under the electoral system; a constraint they did not have 1919-1922.

In the final analysis, the evidence from the grass-roots is that the significant problems arose when serious and persistent disunity at leadership level began in 1916 and culminated in half of the Liberal Party contesting the 1918 general election in a coalition with the Conservatives and the other half outside it as Independents. Before December 1916, it seems that the Liberal grass-roots were united and supporting the war effort. Following the December 1916 crisis, the Liberal grass-roots seem to have been unified behind Asquith's leadership of the party, but to have remained supportive of the British government during the war. If the party had fought the 1918 general election as one, even if Lloyd George's personal

popularity could not fend off a lurch to the right, the Liberal Party would have finished a clear second behind the Conservatives. This would have changed the whole complexion of the post-war years; instead, they were a wasted opportunity for the Liberals because the existence of a coalition containing Liberals paralysed them. This allowed Labour the space to grow into, a process that accelerated during the war but was not complete by 1918. The years 1922-1924 in many ways represented Labour's clear arrival as the alternative government. The years 1924-1929 highlighted the role that the electoral system played in the decline of the Liberal Party from the 1918 general election onwards. The forces of Liberalism were not united by 1923 and they were already in the third party trap; the results of the 1923 general election confirmed this with the resulting Labour government, and Labour's moderate actions legitimised them as the alternative government in a primarily two-party first-past-the-post electoral system. The disaster of 1924, with the great loss of seats and reduction to minor party status, formalised a situation that had developed since the Coupon Election in 1918.

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