

THE 1906 LANDSLIDE

THERE IS something about an electoral landslide that inevitably captures the popular imagination – the sense of a new era, a decisive change in public opinion, the occasion for a fundamental reappraisal of the way in which Britain is governed. Of course, an element of deception is involved. Neither in 1906 nor in 1945, 1983 or 1997 did the victorious beneficiary of an electoral landslide manage to secure even half of the popular vote. When rates of turn-out are taken into account, any notion of a decisive pronouncement on the part of the electorate becomes even more problematic.

The British electoral system, moreover, can easily translate a relatively narrow victory in terms of the popular vote into a runaway supremacy in the new House of Commons. Even in 1906 the defeated Conservatives (Unionists) held on to more than 43 per cent of the votes, roughly the same share that saw them romp home in 1983 and 1987, and a considerably higher percentage than was necessary to secure them a crushing victory in 1922.

For all that, history will surely note that at both the beginning and the end of the twentieth century the main anti-Tory party secured a stunning electoral success after a lengthy period of Conservative government. Both in 1906 and

in 1997 contemporaries were conscious of a seminal moment in the country's political history. 'Where were you when Portillo lost?' was a question that summed up for many the night of 1–2 May 1997, as eighteen years of Conservative government came to a largely unregretted end. Back in 1906 some seemed to sense almost revolutionary change. As Tory seats tumbled, with even the party leader, Arthur Balfour, among the defeated, the *Manchester Guardian* commented with only slight exaggeration:

A candidate had only to be a Free-trader to get in, whether he was known or unknown, semi-Unionist or thorough Home Ruler, Protestant or Catholic, entertaining or dull. He had only to be a Protectionist to lose all chance of getting in, though he spoke with the tongues of men and angels, though he was a good employer to many electors, or had led the House of Commons, or fought in the Crimea.¹

'What is going on here', suggested the cerebral Balfour, with one eye warily contemplating the success of thirty representatives of the Labour Representation Committee, 'is a faint echo of the same movement which has produced massacres in St Petersburg, riots in Vienna and Socialist processions in Berlin'.² Nine

decades later Blair's first reaction to the landslide was somewhat less eloquent. 'I don't believe it. This isn't real, you know. Don't pay attention.'³

History may one day look kindly upon the Blair government, but at the time of writing it is difficult to escape a mood of disillusionment and disappointed expectations. The promise of 1997 has not, it seems, been fulfilled. In its day, like all administrations, the Liberal government was also loudly criticised by its opponents over its controversial programme but, after the passage of 100 years, the reputation of the government elected in 1906 is beyond question. The administration that followed was, by any criteria, one of distinction. In expanding ideas about the role and scope of government in British society, altering perceptions about the limits of taxation and beginning a process of constitutional reform, it can credibly be described as one of the two or three decisive administrations of the entire century.

It is timely to celebrate the Liberal victory and to review the achievements of the government which flowed from it. In this edition of the *Journal* **Thomas Otte** looks at a neglected aspect of the campaign of 1906 – the role of foreign affairs. This was, after all, a period of fundamental importance in Britain's diplomacy as well as its domestic

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politics. More prominent in the minds of most electors was the debate between free trade and protection or, as many saw it, the choice between the large and the small loaf. As a free-trade party, however, the victorious Liberals faced major problems in terms of financing their government's programme; **Ian Packer** offers an authoritative review of Liberal economic policy in this era. Both economics and foreign affairs played a significant role on the philosophy and ideology of the Liberals, and **Alison Holmes** takes a look at the development of the New Liberalism in this light.

Asquith and Lloyd George will inevitably be regarded as the political giants of this government, but the premiership of Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1905–08) is too easily forgotten. **Ewen Cameron's** article seeks to reassess a figure who, perhaps even more than Andrew Bonar Law, deserves the title of 'unknown Prime Minister'. Elsewhere in the *Journal* there is also a review of a new biography of CB by Roy Hattersley as well as reviews of biographies of Asquith, Balfour and Lloyd George, all published simultaneously by Haus in their series on the lives of Prime Ministers of the twentieth century. These particular PMs are chosen here because of their roles in the 1906 general election and their rele-

vance to the government which followed from it.

No problems of anonymity, of course, surround Winston Churchill, whose long cabinet career began with his appointment as President of the Board of Trade in 1908. Churchill renounced his party Liberalism and rejoined the Tories in the 1920s but, as **Richard Toye** argues, his Liberal pedigree remained important to him and he attempted to use it as a political asset as late as the 1950s.

So much of the government's work was groundbreaking that it was bound to leave much of its business unfinished. It has become almost a truism that Attlee's Labour government of 1945–51 constructed the Welfare State on the foundations laid by the Liberals four decades earlier. Yet one piece of business remains incomplete to this day. The preamble to the Parliament Act of 1911 referred to the creation of 'a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of a hereditary basis'. Only in the very month of writing (March 2007) has the House of Commons finally (if somewhat cynically) renewed its commitment to this goal. Yet perhaps we have all been mistaken. **Vernon Bogdanor** offers a persuasive case in suggesting that the Liberals actually regarded the arrangements of 1911 as a final settlement of the second-chamber question.

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For all its achievements, a tantalising paradox surrounds this government. Victorious in 1906 and again, twice, in 1910 (albeit at the cost of its parliamentary majority), this government turned out to be the last, to date, in the Liberal Party's history. Ever since the 1930s, when the young George Dangerfield penned his famous and seductively persuasive *Strange Death of Liberal England*, historians have argued over the origins of this decline. Was all well in 1914 and the Liberal Party the victim of the unforeseeable catastrophe of World War One? Or did the seeds of decay predate the war? Were they in fact present at the very moment of electoral triumph in 1906? **Martin Pugh** and **David Dutton** debate this still-contentious historical conundrum.

Yet few in 1906 would have had any notion of Liberal decline. No one can know what will be said of these times, but after 100 years, we can focus more clearly on a remarkable electoral triumph and the results which followed from it.

David Dutton and Alison Holmes are the guest editors of this special issue of the Journal of Liberal History.

- 1 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Jan. 1906.
- 2 S.H. Zebel, *Balfour: A Political Biography* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 143.
- 3 A. Seldon, *Blair* (London, 2004), p. 259.