

THE 1910 AND 2010 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

This year marks the centenary of the last occasion on which a Liberal government went into a general election. As Ian Packer's article in this issue describes, not only did a Liberal government go into a general election, but one also came out of it too – and not just once but twice, with elections in both January and December 1910. A hundred years later, Liberals Democrats entered the election in opposition and emerged to hold the balance of power in a hung parliament. **Dr Mark Pack** looks back at the 1910 campaigns from the perspective of the techniques used in 2010.

DESPITE THE Liberal government's double victory in 1910, in reality the electoral results were rather more ambiguous. The Liberals went into the January 1910 election with a majority of 130 (and, in practice, a working majority of more like 350 on most issues, given the small number of Conservative MPs, who comprised the main opposition party). Yet they came out of the January election without any majority, and indeed were sixty seats short of one. Just as the 1945 Labour landslide disappeared at the general election that followed it, so too did the 1906 Liberal landslide.

However, unlike the in 1950s, in the early twentieth century there was a sufficient number of MPs from other parties – principally Labour and Nationalists – for the results in 1910 to keep the Liberals firmly in power, with the party winning on both occasions (on most counts) a tiny handful of seats more than the Conservatives. The Liberal grip on power was assisted by the lack of a concept of a 'popular mandate' based on who won the most votes overall. The Conservatives topped the popular vote both times, but, unlike more recent times, that was not a significant factor in post-election manoeuvrings.

The ambiguity inherent in both results helps feed the debate about whether or not the Liberal Party had entered a period of terminal decline before the outbreak of the First World War. There are

signs in the results both of continued Liberal dominance yet also of a changing balance of electoral forces, particularly with forty, and then forty-two, Labour MPs being elected in 1910.

The conflicting signs of continuity and change are also present when comparing the campaign techniques used by candidates in 1910 with those of 2010. Superficially, the two worlds of electioneering are very different, with 2010 having universal suffrage, including women, mass media coverage through the TV and radio, and the increasing use of the internet and marketing, publicity and PR professions which have evolved new languages, approaches and techniques in the intervening century. Scratch under the surface, however, and many signs of continuity emerge.

Campaign finance

The costs of politics are much talked about in 2010 and they imposed a heavy financial burden in 1910, albeit that elections were often more profitable than in the twenty-first century. Years after the 1906 Liberal landslide, Herbert Gladstone boasted how he had made a profit for the Liberal party on the campaign. And not just a small profit: the campaign had cost £100,000 but he had raised £275,000 – a profit of £175,000. In modern money that is a cost of around £8.5 million and a profit of nearly £15 million.¹ In an echo of modern times, both 1906 Liberal victor

2010 ELECTIONS

IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

Campbell-Bannerman and the Conservative Prime Minister Balfour before him were accused of using honours to reward those who had donated to party funds.

One use of central funds was to support key local contests. Although the terminology of target or marginal seats was not centre stage for early-twentieth-century election planning, the methods were frequently similar. For example, for the 1906 election in London the Liberal Chief Whip (it was Chief Whips who organised party election campaigns and elections funds) divided the sixty-one London seats into three groups – twenty-eight it could win, ten it might just possibly win and twenty-three it was unlikely to win – and then concentrated financial help and party agents on those first twenty-eight. The money came with strings – it had to be matched locally and was only given where candidates were in place. That combination of segmenting and setting conditions is very similar to what has been done in the run-up to the 2010 general election by all parties.²

Large scale leafleting

Whilst the financial pictures in 1910 and 2010 bear striking similarities, the length of campaign was typically different. For many candidates and campaigners, polling day in 2010 was the culmination of a local campaign that had seen several years of intense effort; but in the early twentieth century

there was far less campaigning all year round.³

In 1910, events also conspired to encourage such pauses in campaigning for, as the National Liberal Federation reported in its 32nd Annual Report, ‘There is always a natural tendency to lethargy in the early months following a General Election. But to this have been added the exceptional conditions brought about by the death of King Edward [in May 1910]’.

When campaigning did pick up, it featured large quantities of written literature. The broad picture of twentieth-century electioneering is of the heavy use of leaflets in the early parts of the century, which falls away in later years as mass media start to dominate but then rises again in the last quarter of the century.

The volume of literature in the early twentieth century was impressive. In 1906 the Liberal Publication Department centrally issued no fewer than 25 million leaflets and books – for an electorate of just over seven million. That is equivalent to more than three items for every elector in the country, without including any literature produced outside of the LPD.

The 1910 elections were similarly paper intensive:

Beforehand it was hardly expected that the figures of 1906 could or would be exceeded, but as a fact the number of separate publications put into circulation during the General Election

period was more than half as great again in [January] 1910 as in 1906. As the [Liberal Publication] Department does not distribute literature broadcast, but sells it to the various localities, this increased volume of business in the best possible proof that the publications are deemed attractive and useful ... Over forty-one millions of separate publications were sent out from 42, Parliament Street in two months.⁴

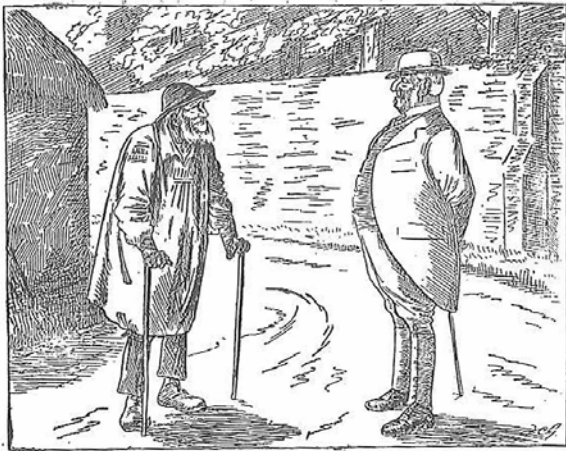
This material included 104 different leaflets, four booklets, five sets of campaign notes, draft posters and printed pictures and posters.

Although the nature of the printed election material in 2010 was different in many ways from 1910, including the widespread use of full colour printing and of direct mail, in terms of volume and the value attached to distributing pieces of paper, a campaigner from 1910 would have felt at home in 2010 and vice versa. Two aspects would, however, have struck them as different: the role of music and the content of the literature.

Music

Political songs were a common feature of elections in the early twentieth century and there were ‘nearly a million Liberal song sheets’ distributed for the January 1910 election. These songs typically took well-known tunes and replaced the words with a political message. For example, *The*

THE NEST EGG.



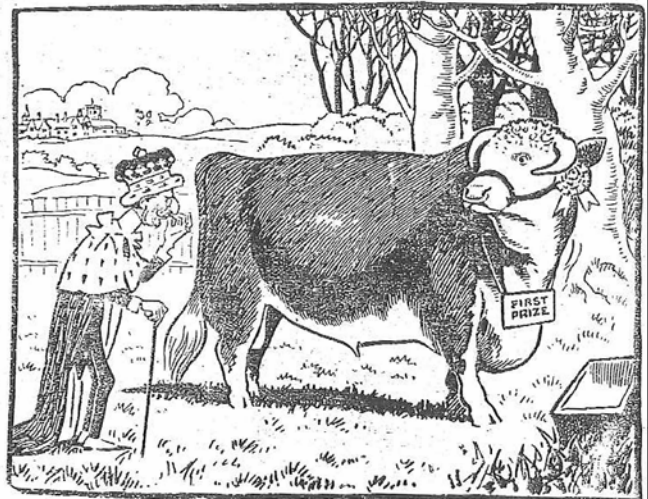
[From the "WESTMINSTER GAZETTE"]

The Squire: *I don't approve of these Old Age Pensions—people who have saved nothing should get nothing.*

Old Labourer: *Beggin' your pardon, squire, but what's been the use of the likes o' we trying to save when we knew we never couldn't save enough to live on? Now, these yur Old Age Pensions 'll be a zort o' nest egg as 'll put a little 'cart into folk an' make it worth while trying to put aside a bit.*

[The Tories pretend to be afraid that the result of Old Age Pensions to old people of 70 and over will be to get rid of thrift altogether.]

THE TRUE PRINCIPLES OF HEREDITY.



NOBLE LORD—"By jove, you're a fine fellow there's no doubt about that!"

THE BULL—"Yes my lord, so would you be had your ancestors been selected as carefully as mine have been."

VOTE FOR

D. A. THOMAS

AND

Abolition of the Lords' Veto.

Printed and Published by S. Glossop & Sons, New Street Works, Cardiff.

Times of 4 January 1904 reported on a by-election in Ashburton, Devon,⁵ giving the words of the Liberal Working Men song, to be sung to the tune of Auld Lang Syne:

Let Newton Abbot lead the way
And Teignmouth follow on
Bovey, Dawlish and Moreton too,
Chagford and Ashburton.

The once again in freedom's fight
United we'll combine,
Send Mr Eve to Parliament
And lick the Tories fine.

For Harry Trelawney Eve, my boys,
With him we all agree,
We'll fight for him and work for him
And make him our MP

Political singing has not completely died away, whether in the

Labour Party with its renditions of the Red Flag at party conferences continuing well in to the late twentieth century or with the Liberator Song Book still produced by a group of liberal and Liberal Democrat activists. However, such singing is now primarily aimed at an internal audience at internal events, rather than being part of public campaigning.⁶

Public music in the 2010 election was mostly confined to theme tunes, played during TV broadcasts, or after speeches and the like. Whether or not the tunes had words with them, this was music to be listened to rather than, as in 1910, songs to be sung by supporters.

Content of literature

It was not only the role of music which varied between 1910 and 2010. Looking at a political leaflet from either year, it is immediately clear which year it is from, and not only because of different printing

Liberal election leaflets from 1910

technologies and typographical fashions but also because of the style and form of the content.

In 2010 election literature was usually A3 or A4, with some newspapers that were approximately the equivalent of eight sides of A4, plus longer, but largely unread, national election manifestos. By contrast, in 1910 long items of literature and associated pamphlets were extremely common.

For the January 1910 election 900,000 copies of two election editions of the *Liberal Monthly* were distributed. Pamphlets of twenty or more closely printed pages were also common. In 1910 these frequently included lengthy constitutional arguments – a reflection of the fact that the major political issue of the moment was the constitutional role of the House of Lords. Those arguments were often bolstered, and the literature lengthened, by detailed recitations of evidence from history.

THE STORY OF OLD AGE PENSIONS

I.—UNDER THE TORIES

1895.—Tory Government returned to power pledged to give Old Age Pensions. The promise of Old Age Pensions was the most attractive item in the "Social Programme" put forward by Mr. Chamberlain in 1894 and "fully approved" by the Tory leader (the late Lord Salisbury) before the General Election of 1895.

1895–1905.—Tories in power for a period of ten years. **Nothing done**, except the appointment of one Commission and three Committees to inquire into the question. Subject suddenly discovered to be not in Mr. Chamberlain's Department!

II.—UNDER THE LIBERALS

1906 (Jan.).—Liberal Government returned to power unpledged to give Old Age Pensions.

1906 (Nov.).—"The matter will be dealt with as soon as time and money permit." (SIR H. CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN.)

1907.—A definite sum set aside as a "nest egg" for Old Age Pensions. "It is our intention, before the close of the next Session of this Parliament to lay firm the foundations of this Reform." (MR. ASQUITH.)

1908.—**Old Age Pensions Act Passed.**

1909.—Pensions paid from New Year's Day to pensioners of over 70, the number on October 1st being 682,000, nearly all getting 5s. a week.

Study these Two Records and you will easily decide which is the Better of the Two.

THE TWO LOAVES

(BOTH ARE FOUR-POUND LOAVES.)

<p>THE GERMAN LOAF <u>UNDER PROTECTION.</u></p>  <p>TAXED LOAF.</p>	<p>THE BRITISH LOAF <u>UNDER FREE TRADE.</u></p>  <p>UNTAXED LOAF.</p>
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(The prices are the average prices for 1908 in Berlin and London as given in an Official Blue Book, No. 4954 of 1909, page 193.)

STICK TO FREE TRADE AND AN UNTAXED LOAF.

In many respects, party pamphlets did what think tanks and bloggers now do for political parties. For example, *The House of Lords: who they are and what they have done* by Harold Spender came out in a revised edition in 1909 with fifty-six pages of detailed argument, much of which went through the history of past Lords votes. Partly the length was a necessary result of the argument being made, namely that the Lords had consistently blocked many worthy measures. But it also reflected a willingness by many people to read lengthy political pieces.⁷ An advert on the inside back cover of Spender's work gives an indication of the scale on which these pamphlets were consumed, with a sliding scale of prices ranging from six copies through to 1,000.

These lengthy pamphlets typically read like a cross between a political argument and a history book. J. M. Robertson MP's pamphlet of 1910, *The Great Budget*,

justifies the Liberal government's approach to taxation with a line of argument that starts with the medieval city state of Florence, passes through Charles I and the Long Parliament with a nod in the direction of Pitt the Younger, before getting to the late nineteenth century and the financial policies of William Gladstone. But it soon diverts back to sixteenth-century Holland, ancient Athens and a host of other historical stops before commencing a contemporary argument. Such detailed justification and extensive context for a political case would now far more commonly be found online or in a think tank's publication than in a party's election literature.

Literature in 1910 was inclined to be text heavy and printed in black only, with the occasional use of other colours such as red. Even items intended to be posted up on walls, in a form of political fly-posting, often contained a fair amount of text. Picture (or, more

accurately, cartoon) posters were much more common in 1910 than in previous elections, but text heavy posters were still common. Despite the importance attached to promoting individual candidates, posters were frequently political messages and not the modern-style name-recognition type posters.

The Conservatives tended to favour large posters, whereas the Liberals more often used a number of different small posters covering a range of issues to take up an equivalent amount of space.

With text-heavy designs, graphical variation either came from the inclusion of cartoons or from the imaginative use of blank space. One cartoon showed a peer putting an obstacle on the track in front of a train marked 'Progress', while a Liberal leaflet from 1910 had a front page asking: 'Is the House of Lords a fair and impartial second chamber? Turn over the page if you wish to find some facts that will help you to

answer this question.' Inside are two pages each headed as containing the bills 'rejected, wrecked or mutilated by the Lords' during the last Tory and Liberal governments respectively. The Liberal page is packed with bills while the Tory page has a large blank space with 'None' printed in the middle.

Helped by 1909 being the centenary of William Gladstone's birth, he featured in many Liberal publications. But the overriding content in 1910 in centrally produced Liberal literature was the Lords, with a touch of naval armament, pensions, free trade and food prices,⁸ and a smattering of other issues getting a mention now and again. A similar pattern was present in local literature, with a little more emphasis perhaps on the budget, social reform more generally, the government's record and, in December 1910, home rule.

The House of Lords issue mixed both principled and pragmatic arguments. The pragmatic were along the lines of the leaflet mentioned above, highlighting measures the House of Lords had blocked. Typical of the principled arguments was a one-sided leaflet/poster with simply the one slogan, 'Give the LAST WORD in legislation to The House of Commons which you YOURSELVES elect.' These arguments and slogans echoed that used on the banner about Prime Minister Asquith when he launched the first 1910 general election campaign with a speech at the Albert Hall: 'Shall the People be Ruled by the Peers?'

Just as campaign songs of the time often used popular tunes and caricatured popular lyrics in order to provide a common frame of reference for the audience, so in literature there was the use of parables and faux fairy tales. The Liberal leaflet 'A little parable', for example, used this format to make the case for free trade, reproducing a story that first appeared in the *Westminster Gazette* of a housewife going into a shop. In discussion with the shopkeeper, it turns out that all the goods have gone up in price thanks to tariff reform, even though the shopkeeper himself is clearly doing well, judging by the affluent clothes he is wearing in the accompanying cartoon.

A new development in 1910 was the use of large newspaper advertisements. Their popularity has waxed and waned in elections during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but their use really started in December 1910.

Other aspects of campaigning

In addition to the literature put out by the party's central publication department, there was locally produced literature, including local newspapers and pamphlets from local figures. The mix of canvassing, public meetings or lectures (the prevalence of the latter showing the didactic emphasis of campaigns which saw a need to educate as well as to persuade), pamphlets, leaflets and local newspapers made up a long-standing staple of local campaigning.⁹

The volume of this campaigning was assisted by voting taking place on different days in different constituencies. As a result, although campaigns were more decentralised in 1910 than in 2010, there was scope to move effort about as polling finished in some seats and started in others. In January 1910, this included a wave of Liberal ministers going to make speeches in the West Country in January in response to poor initial election results in the region. Winston Churchill was amongst those despatched to try to turn the tide in those West Country seats which had not yet voted. Austen Chamberlain blamed this incursion for the failure of the Conservatives to make expected gains in several Devon county seats: 'we were overwhelmed at the last moment by the weight of oratory on the government side'.¹⁰

The physical distances many voters had to travel to vote, combined with the paucity or expense of public and private transport options for many, meant candidates put significant efforts into transporting voters. The election of 1906 had been the first motorcar election with the then still new technology making its first big impact. Almost half the country's cars were used for electioneering in 1906, and in 1910 the motorcar continued to play an important role. A bonus for the

Conservatives was the support of motorcar manufacturing firms Rover, Swift and Daimler who provided vehicles for the 1910 campaigns. Across both parties in the January election perhaps as many as four million voters were taken to and from the polls.¹¹

Less glamorous, but effective in its own way, was the bicycle. As late as the inter-war years, the Liberal election manual *The Conduct and Management of Parliamentary Elections* was extolling the virtues of having, 'a corps of cyclists, formed from those who ride and who display no eagerness for house-to-house canvassing'¹² whose role would be to distribute literature and to trace electors who have moved.

Another aspect of campaigning was the exercise of influence – together with, particularly in rural areas, older forms of campaigning such as intimidation and the exercise of power by landlords over others still lingering.

Partly in response to the January 1910 election the Liberal Party created the Gladstone League both to campaign on free trade and land reform and also to battle voter intimidation:

The Gladstone League sought to organise rural villagers into small, self-governing groups of men and women who would read newspapers together, discuss political questions, and be ready to work, at the next election, 'to preserve the independence of electors, to secure the supremacy of the House of Commons, to oppose taxes on food of the people, and to establish the people's rights in regard to the land.'¹³

Despite the franchise being greatly restricted in 1910 compared to 2010, public participation in elections ran high. Amongst voters turnout was consistently far higher; but elections themselves were also in part entertainment for the public, as one witness recalled from 1906 in Bath:

At election times one of the sights was to see these brothers [one Tory, one Radical] driving round Bath with harness, whip, horses, dogcarts and themselves decorated in party

Almost half the country's cars were used for electioneering in 1906, and in 1910 the motorcar continued to play an important role.

colours. It looked like a competition for the best-dressed dogcart.

And also:

I was outside the Old Herald Office watching the results of the polling come in. There was an immense crowd reaching from St Michael's, Bridge Street, to the top of New Bond Street; excited, pushing and swaying.¹⁴

Primaries: not such a new idea

There is one footnote which intriguingly suggests the public may have been involved in other ways too: it comes from the Gower.¹⁵ During the 2005–10 parliament, the question of using open primaries has been debated in British politics, and have been used on a limited scale by the Conservative Party, as an innovation based on importing American practices. However, the Liberal Party got there a century earlier with an open primary.

Held on 22 November 1905, the Gower primary was open to any 'loyal' Liberal voter, with provision for anyone voting in the primary to have to make a public declaration of loyalty to the Liberal Party if challenged before casting their ballot. The contest between T. J. Williams and J. Williams saw 5,062 votes cast out of a total electorate (including non-Liberals) of 13,212.¹⁶ T. J. Williams won, but went on to lose to a different J. Williams in the 1906 election.

The primary appears to have gone unremarked other than in contemporary local newspaper reports, which, combined with the lack of any clear reason why Gower should have used a novel and unique system, suggests this may well not have been the only primary of the time.

Conclusion

The little puzzle that the Gower's primary leaves behind illustrates a wider point. Despite the growth of the political science profession, the detail of how campaigns are organised and run is very rarely documented in public. Even those outside observers who are

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interested are held back by the shrouds of secrecy around what is a competitive profession in what is largely a zero-sum endeavour: if one party wins a seat, by necessity that means the other parties lose it. As a result, many of the questions that this comparison of campaigning in 1910 and 2010 may provoke are not readily answerable.

In addition, this article has not looked at the 'national campaign' where, due to the rise of mass media, presidential-style politics and the grip of national party HQs, the 2010 campaign looks very different from that of 1910.

Nonetheless, we can see many similarities, especially in the fields of finance and the emphasis on the large-scale use of literature. There is an essential similarity in many of the aspects of campaigning which would make a local helper from 2010 feel rather at home in a 1910 election.

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- 1 Although the central costs were low compared to current expenditure, at a local level the situation was very different with a candidate in a 1910 contested election typically declaring election expenses of around £85,000 in modern money.
- 2 The Liberal Party's machine did not just look after its own candidates. As a result of the close relations and electoral deals with the Labour Party, in some seats it was the Liberal organisation which ran campaigns for Labour candidates.
- 3 There were some exceptions, and the Liberal defeat in the 1908 Mid-Devon by-election was blamed by some Liberals partly on the fact that the Tory candidate had 'assiduously and lavishly nursed the constituency ... [the sitting Liberal] had been conspicuous by his absence': Neil Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: The General Elections of 1910* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 45.
- 4 National Liberal Federation, 32nd Annual Report.
- 5 Thanks to Graham Lippiatt for

highlighting this report.

- 6 Will.i.am's 'Yes We Can' song for the Barack Obama 2008 US presidential campaign is a rare exception to this.
- 7 This wordiness was also reflected in candidates' election addresses, which averaged around 1,000 words each in 1910: Blewett, *Peers, Parties and People*, p. 315.
- 8 Possibly a defensive reaction by Liberals to rising food prices in rural areas. See P. Lynch, *The Liberal Party in Rural England 1885–1910: Radicalism and Community* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), Chapter 6. Thanks to Graham Lippiatt for drawing my attention to this source.
- 9 For example, see Lynch, *Liberal Party in Rural England*, p. 141.
- 10 Quoted in Blewett, *Peers, Parties and People*, p. 104.
- 11 Blewett, *Peers, Parties and People*, pp. 293–4. Candidates without cars found themselves needing to remind voters of the secrecy of the ballot while encouraging them to get lifts from their rivals, as with the Labour candidate in Cocker-mouth whose January 1910 placards read, 'Ride to the poll in Tory and Liberal motor cars, but vote Whitehead.'
- 12 William Woodings, *The Conduct and Management of Parliamentary Elections: A Practical Manual*, 9th edn., eds. H. F. Oldman and J. Manus (London: Liberal Publication Department, 1933), p. 2.
- 13 Lynch, *Liberal Party in Rural England*, p. 205. In addition to the intimidation of individual voters, the use of physical violence to attempt to break up meetings of opponents and intimidate speakers was not unknown, both in rural and urban areas. For several examples see Blewett, *Peers, Parties and People*, pp. 103–4.
- 14 Quoted in Stephen Tollyfield, 'Battling Bath Liberal', *Journal of Liberal History*, 48, Autumn 2005, p. 23.
- 15 Thanks to Steve Belzak of the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff who both first drew my attention to this primary and shared with me his research findings.
- 16 That 38 per cent turnout compares with a 24 per cent turnout in the Conservative Party's all-postal primary in Totnes in 2009. Votes were used to elect delegates who in turn selected the candidate.