

REPORTS

David Lloyd George: The Legacy

Conference fringe meeting, 9 March 2013, with Kenneth O. Morgan and David Howarth; chair: Celia, Baroness Thomas
Report by **David Cloke**

IN THE 150TH anniversary of his birth, in a joint meeting with the Lloyd George Society at the spring 2013 Liberal Democrat conference, representatives and Group members were invited to consider the legacy of David Lloyd George – not just for Liberalism, and for the party, but for the country as a whole.

Baroness Thomas opened the meeting with a vignette which highlighted the extent to which Lloyd George has played such an integral part in the lives of British Liberals. Her family owned a postcard of a great Welsh disestablishment rally, with Lloyd George wagging his finger at the audience; up in the organ loft was her grandfather.

Lord Morgan, introduced as the world's greatest expert on Lloyd George, was called upon to reflect upon LG's legacy to the country. David Howarth, former Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge, confined his remarks to the impact that Lloyd George had on his party and the lessons from that for the Liberal Democrats. It would be fair to say that one presentation was rather more positive than the other!

Lord Morgan recalled that when he had spoken on behalf of Lloyd George at the Group's 2007 fringe meeting on the greatest Liberal, he had lost out to John Stuart Mill. He wondered whether, now that the Liberal Democrats were in government, members might look more favourably upon him!

He considered first Lloyd George's legacy to the country. Three Ps stood out: Parliament, premiership and party. On all of these, Lord Morgan claimed, Lloyd George had a quite extraordinary impact.

Parliament

For Lord Morgan Lloyd George brought the force of mass

democracy into British parliamentary politics more powerfully and with more lasting effect than anyone before him, including Joseph Chamberlain. He used the force of populism (notably in the Limehouse and Newcastle speeches in 1909) and the power of the media to get things done. This was most notable in the confrontations with the Lords over the 1909 People's Budget and the subsequent Parliament Act. Lord Morgan did not believe that Lloyd George intended the Lords to throw out the budget but he was quite prepared to face them down if they did. Quite extraordinarily, he had urged his cabinet colleagues to spend as much they could in order to build the case for land duties. He wondered to the audience – and to Lord McNally in particular – whether a member of any other cabinet had had a similar experience!

In his campaigning for the Parliament Act Lloyd George indulged in what Lord Morgan described as democratic confrontation, despite the opposition of the King, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other members of the Establishment. Interestingly, given later developments in Liberal policy, fearing a Conservative majority Lloyd George did not want an elected House of Lords, but rather an enfeebled one so, that the elected House would always prevail.

Premiership

Lloyd George was clearly, in Lord Morgan's eyes, the first modern Prime Minister, creating, as he did, so many of the institutions of the modern premiership: the Cabinet Office, special advisers (in the famous 'Garden Suburb' in the garden of Number 10) and personal handling of foreign policy, industrial disputes and the government's

public relations. He cultivated a presidential style, which no Prime Minister had done previously. For some, this style, and his closeness to some newspapers, was too much. Members of the cabinet were reportedly particularly upset at having to meet in Inverness Town Hall in order to accommodate Lloyd George's holiday.

Lord Morgan also noted that Lloyd George was the first Prime Minister to write his memoirs, and to make significant amounts of money as a result. This may also be a reflection of the fact that he was the first Prime Minister not to come from a financially privileged background.

Party

Lord Morgan acknowledged that Lloyd George had divided his party in 1918, but in his view this was a reflection of what had happened during the war. Nonetheless, the split between the pro- and anti-government Liberals had been very rough and ready and there were a number of casualties in the process. This in turn led to the division of the party and serious consequences for all Liberals. It was interesting to note that two of Lloyd George's great heroes had been Joseph Chamberlain, who himself had split the Liberal Party, and Theodore Roosevelt, who broke from the US Republican Party to form the Progressives.

The resulting peacetime coalition (on which, incidentally, Lord Morgan believed he had written his best book) had achievements at first, especially in the area of social reform. It created a different kind of politics, at least for a time, and one much reflected on since the 2010 general election. However, Lloyd George's coalition was inherently unstable; coupled with the smell of corruption and conspiracy, exemplified by the scandal over the sale of titles, this meant that one of his legacies was to make coalitions inherently unpopular. (As an aside, Lord Morgan noted that the atmosphere of the Lloyd George coalition government had been well caught in Arnold Bennett's novel *Lord Raingo*.)

In addition to splitting the Liberal Party and discrediting coalition government, Lloyd George enabled the Labour Party to become the majority party of the

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left. Lord Morgan recalled George Bernard Shaw's advice to the Labour Party conference in 1918: 'go back to Lloyd George and say "nothing doing"' – very sound advice, in Lord Morgan's view.

Lord Morgan then turned to some general reflections on the broad cultural changes initiated by Lloyd George, which had had a very direct, powerful and long-lasting impact, down to the present time. First, Lloyd George helped to make Wales a political reality. He had not been alone in this – Lord Morgan acknowledged that there had been others who were influential, notably Tom Ellis – but Lloyd George, through disestablishment and through tackling the power of the Welsh gentry, made Wales a more democratic nation, increasingly confident of its own capacity. *Cymru Fydd* (Young Wales or Wales of the Future), which he helped lead, clearly anticipated devolution.

In elaborating during questions, Lord Morgan added that the concept of home rule was a fluid one, but he was confident that it meant something like the devolution of our own day. It was something that Lloyd George wished for other countries of the Empire, not just Wales, and had seen implemented in South Africa in the aftermath of the Boer War. Lord Morgan also argued that it was inconceivable that Wales would break away and in that there was a distinction with Ireland.

No other politician, Lord Morgan argued, could make a stronger claim as the founder of the welfare state. Lloyd George laid the basis for it in the 1909 Budget (and later in 1914) using a redistributive, progressive budget to fund welfare, create employment and assist children. This was followed by the National Insurance Act of 1911, creating a comprehensive system of universal benefits and a new concept of 'social citizenship'. All this was drawn on by Beveridge in his later report. An extraordinary achievement, Lord Morgan believed, accomplished without much help from others in the cabinet, apart from Asquith.

This concern for social reform did not end in 1914. The 1918 coalition began with a very strong social programme: subsidised public housing, started under his minister Christopher Addison, and the

widening of the scope of unemployment insurance. Lord Morgan noted that Lloyd George was often accused of pursuing the low road, but many of the great minds of public life had worked closely with him in pursuing this agenda.

Whilst Lloyd George's jingoism and militarism during the First World War meant that it was not Lord Morgan's favourite part of his career, it demonstrated that he was an extraordinary leader. In contrast to Churchill, he succeeded despite not having full control of the House of Commons and despite the Generals playing politics and conniving with the Court. The war made the state much more powerful in social, economic and cultural spheres and this too was part of Lloyd George's legacy – including votes for women, which he had always supported, and a strengthened role for trades unions.

In foreign affairs, Lord Morgan acknowledged that Lloyd George has been much-criticised for the part he played in the creation of the post-war world and the entrenchment of the principle of nationality that we still have today. Beyond Europe, two of his creations, Palestine and Iraq, caused serious problems which proved to be mishandled by successive governments. Nevertheless, he was, as Keynes recognised, the one 'peacemaker' who sought to revise the Versailles settlement, though this sometimes drifted into appeasement. By the very end of the inter-war period, however, he had become a powerful and brilliant critic of appeasement and assisted Churchill in becoming Prime Minister.

Lord Morgan also argued that Lloyd George had a very special insight into Ireland. As a Welshman he had a sense of what it meant to be under the heel of the English, and as a Nonconformist he appreciated the outlook of the Protestants of Ulster. Despite that, he was responsible for the very dark phase in Anglo-Irish history, the shameful exploits of the 'black and tans'. However, he had a reverse gear; he changed the policy and created a settlement that has broadly lasted – a major achievement for these islands, in Lord Morgan's view. A consequential legacy of this time, however, was that the Irish Catholic vote went to the Labour Party.

During the inter-war years Lloyd George was the major political proponent of Keynesianism and, indeed, anticipated him in the 1924 and 1925 Liberal Summer Schools. The slogan 'We can conquer unemployment' demonstrated a leader who was not paralysed by the idea of debt but believed that depression could be counteracted by promoting growth, investment and employment. It was a positive characteristic of both Keynes and Lloyd George, Lord Morgan argued during questions, that their ideas evolved.

In summing up Lord Morgan argued that Lloyd George's adoption of new ideas and desire to move forward was a positive contrast with the other great British war leader, Winston Churchill. The appeal of Churchill was a nostalgic one and he himself fought to maintain an outmoded class system and a fading Empire. By contrast, Lloyd George was a critic of the class system, of the Establishment and of conventional wisdom: 'a critic who changed his world'. As depicted in his statue in Parliament Square, Lloyd George points the way forward. And as Lloyd George himself said of Abraham Lincoln at the unveiling of his statue, also in Parliament Square, 'he lost his nationality in death ... truly he belongs to the ages'.

Lady Thomas then turned to former Cambridge MP and now the Director of the MPhil in Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, David Howarth, for his thoughts on Lloyd George's legacy and lessons for the party.

Howarth prefaced his remarks by noting that he could not match Lord Morgan's depth of knowledge of Lloyd George and that he was merely giving the views of a retired politician and current social scientist. He also noted that he was probably going to give a more negative judgement than Lord Morgan. He then outlined an aspect of Lloyd George's character that made the whole exercise problematic. As Lord Riddell, one of the great diarists of early twentieth century had observed, Lloyd George 'is the only person I know who is not obsessed with ghosts'. As Lord Morgan had said, Lloyd George looked forward; there was thus something of a paradox in worrying about the ghost of

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someone who did not worry about them himself.

For Howarth the place to start was to try and look for a parallel figure in more recent history, and for him that was Tony Blair. Both men proved to be enormously disruptive figures in their respective parties; both were dynamic, with frequent eye-catching initiatives; both indulged in tactical manoeuvres of dazzling rapidity; both were, in their different ways, brilliant orators and able to come to terms with the media of their day; and both, some might allege, did not always have the highest standards of honesty.

They were also both obsessed with big business, and admired businessmen; Lloyd George, for example, once said that Leverhulme was worth ten thousand sea captains. In Howarth's view, bringing men like Sir Eric Geddes into his government was a sign of his excessive admiration of the dynamism of big business. There was also a link with Lloyd George's cultivation of Keynes. Similarly, Tony Blair was keen on bringing in new theorists and new ideas, though he often subsequently fell out with them.

Possibly connected to these strands was a similar attitude to 'big-tent politics': that one person could rise above party, could be bigger than their party and could reconstruct politics around their own personality. They were also both uninterested in history, which had significant consequences for what they did. The big difference between them was that Blair did not split his party – which, Howarth contended, gives us a glimpse at how divisive a figure Lloyd George was.

To highlight this, Howarth turned to the 1918 general election and its consequences. He began by saying that he did not believe that the 1918–22 government marked the end of Liberal England; that occurred in the 1930s, when the party split three or even four ways. Nonetheless, what happened in this period did represent a serious weakening of the party, which meant that it was less able to survive what happened in the 1930s.

In Howarth's view, Lloyd George's manoeuvres in 1918 were utterly disgraceful. Having decided that the Liberal Party was dead the Coalition Liberals

began negotiating for an electoral pact with the Tories very early on, with a view to putting forward a joint programme. Howarth suggested that the Maurice debate of May 1918 gave Lloyd George the justification he required; in that debate Asquith had led his official Liberals into the lobbies against the government over the allegation, made in the press by a senior army officer, that it had starved the Western Front of resources in order to use them in the Mediterranean, and had misled Parliament over it. This meant that Lloyd George was able to argue (to himself at the very least) that the Liberals that had voted against him could not be trusted with post-war reconstruction.

This argument did not stand up to much scrutiny, however, as Howarth pointed out that the list of MPs that voted against the government and the list of those who received the coalition 'coupon' in the 1918 election were not mutually exclusive. In addition, some who had supported him were abandoned because they were in the wrong seats, which left a very bad taste.

Lloyd George's attitude to his fellow Liberal MPs was also reflected in the speech he gave on 12 November 1918, to which he had invited all Liberal MPs. In it he claimed that he would be a Liberal until he died, and would never abandon the party. He then went through a list of measures important to Liberals and argued that the coalition should continue; a motion was then passed in support. At the same time, however, he was negotiating a joint programme with the Tory leader Bonar Law, including a loosely disguised form of Imperial Preference.

A combination of puzzlement at the joint programme and the use of the coupon caused deep resentment throughout the 1920s and beyond. Indeed, Howarth had personal connections with people who had known Asquith – they hated Lloyd George.

Howarth believed that Lloyd George had a peculiar notion as to his friends were. He had an ambitious plan to form a 'fusion party' with the Conservatives. Strangely it was not an alliance of moderates but of extremists; Howarth wondered whether it was an attempt to reunite the Chamberlainite wing

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of the Conservative Party with the collectivist wing of the Liberals. Despite expending a great deal of time on this project it fell apart, but one consequence of it, however, was that it made reunification of the Liberal Party in 1923 extremely difficult.

Howarth also noted that when Lloyd George decided to start his own party it had no activists. The Liberal Party locally had not split. He had money and access to new ideas, but the painful truth is that the breakthroughs mentioned by Lord Morgan did not lead to electoral success. Why was that, Howarth asked? In his view it was very clear that the events of 1918–22 had alienated too many of the troops on the ground; they wandered away. It was noticed at the time that Labour campaigns in constituencies were being run by previous Liberal activists. Labour did not just capture Liberal Party intellectuals, it gained its local base as well.

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In answering the questions that followed, the speakers were able to provide some further illumination on the points that each of them had made. Regarding the split in the Liberal Party, Lord Morgan argued that the big division occurred before Lloyd George became Prime Minister, over conscription, and that this reflected the unhappiness of many Liberals over the war. He did not agree, however, that Lloyd George shared responsibility for dragging the country into an unnecessary war. He did not think that doing nothing was an option, and having decided to go to war Lloyd George argued that the government should exercise the full power of the state to win it. Lloyd George felt that many Liberal critics of the war only half wanted to win it.

On the Maurice debate Lord Morgan argued that it had been a major mistake by Asquith and that if Lloyd George had lost it the war would have been run by the army and not the civil power. Howarth agreed with him on the substance of the debate. His difficulty was with how Lloyd George gone about winning it – a dilemma that continues to trouble Liberals in the present day.