

Liberals and the 1945 Election

Two recent articles both examined the experiences of the Liberal Party in the dramatic general election of 1945. **Mark Egan and Tony Greaves** review them.

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election

by Malcolm Baines (*Contemporary Record* 9:1, Summer 1995)

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election

by Peter Joyce (Liberal Democrat History Group, Sept 1995)

Reviewed by Mark Egan

Two articles, both entitled *The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election*, have recently been published; one, by Peter Joyce, was circulated with the last edition of this newsletter. The other was written by Malcolm Baines and published in *Contemporary Record* this summer. In this article I intend to review the arguments of both articles and put forward my own assessment of the reasons for the Liberal Party's poor showing in 1945 and of the significance of that election.

In the short 'no-man's land' period between the casting of votes in the 1945 election and their counting three weeks later, the Liberal Party headquarters announced that they anticipated winning between 80 and 100 seats. This immense optimism was based upon the perception, picked up by Mass Observation surveys, that there was a degree of popular goodwill directed at the Liberal Party. However, that goodwill was not translated into votes - partly because only 309 Liberal candidates stood, but more importantly because the Liberal Party was not perceived as a serious contender in the contest to form a new government.

Joyce correctly identifies the party's lack of a coherent image as the fundamental obstacle to success. The party was split ideologically between those who argued that the state could be used to secure reform and those who wished to reduce its role. The party leadership was wary of taking a lead in defining where the party should stand; it was primarily engaged in work within the government before 1945, and was heedful of the damaging splits over free trade in the 1930s. As a consequence, the party tended to describe itself in terms of the two other parties, as a possible moderating influence on the extremes of socialism and Conservatism. Moderation, allied with an emotional appeal to the party's social reforming past, constituted the Liberal image. While there may have been little hostility expressed towards this image it did not imply that electors had any intention of voting Liberal.

This ideological split within the Liberal Party was neither new nor damaging; what was damaging was the lack of direction given by the leadership. During the war years Radical Action, a small group of PPCs and senior party members, succeeded both in forcing the party leadership to declare its independence of any possible post-war 'National' coalition and in ensuring that the 1945 election manifesto was a radical document based on support for social reform. However, again as Joyce and Baines illustrate, fighting an election on those terms made it

difficult to attack the Labour Party, the Liberals' main opponent on the left. The party leadership could have taken a more vigorous stand against nationalisation, rationing, conscription and monopoly; but it chose instead to use Beveridge to promote his report. But Labour was also committed to the social reforms proposed by Beveridge and, moreover, it at least fielded the required number of candidates necessary to form a government. It is no wonder, then, that voters could be both sympathetic to the Liberal programme and supportive of the Labour Party.

Joyce's main contention is that because the Liberal Party could not possibly form a government in 1945, it should have reevaluated its electoral objectives. Given that the party could not have contemplated any deal or arrangement with either of the main parties, following the electoral traumas of the 1930s, and that it could not have retreated into any sectional or regional bias without alienating much of the membership, this implies the party following *The Observer's* advice of 1951 and becoming a pressure group dedicated to persuading the two serious political parties to adopt Liberal ideas when in government. However, given that the party was geared almost exclusively towards raising money for and competing in Parliamentary contests - it barely contested any municipal elections in the 1940s - it is difficult to contemplate how it would have survived at all if it had decided not to aim to win general elections.

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The party was completely incapable of targeting resources into winnable seats, as it does now. Not only did national headquarters have no control over where candidates stood (Torrington, where the Liberal was second in 1950, and which was won in 1958, was not contested in either 1951 or 1955; hopeless Esher was contested in both elections), but also the party had no money to spend on individual seats. The party leadership was not forced into aiming for government by emotional activists, as Joyce states; indeed, many Radical Action members would have been happy to see the party work with Labour after the election. Instead, the party remained geared up, throughout all of its activities, towards fighting national elections and any attempt to reevaluate that aim in 1945 was impossible. The leadership could have made a better attempt at establishing a positive image of the party in the eyes of the electorate, but it would take time for the party to orient itself away from aiming for government and towards local government and byelection contests. Even now, the Liberal Democrats still aim to be the sole party of government after the next election, even if no-one really believes it will happen.

Whereas Joyce outlines the problems with the Liberal campaign in 1945, Baines sets out to describe four ways in which the election could be described as a watershed for the Liberal Party. First, and most importantly, the Liberal Parliamentary Party was reduced to a rump of mainly Welsh and south western MPs, with no representation in urban areas; and this shift away from the party's urban remnants was more or less repeated in the 1945 local elections. However, this retreat was simply the culmination of a process begun in 1924. After that election the Liberal Party could no longer claim to be one of the major parties of government in Britain and could no longer hold on to any urban seats, except in exceptional circumstances. In 1924 only seven Liberals won three-cornered fights, and only six were elected in Britain's eleven largest cities, with only Percy Harris defeating a Conservative. In 1935, only two of the Liberal Party's nine urban seats were won in three-cornered contests against the two other major parties. With the Conservative and Labour Parties both fighting more seats than ever before in 1945, those exceptional circumstances diminished still further, although seats in Bolton and Huddersfield were later won by the Liberal Party after arrangements were reached with the Tories.

Secondly, the 1945 election brought Labour to power with an outright majority for the first time; this was followed by a degree of speculation about the possibility of Liberal-Conservative pacts. This speculation was encouraged by Churchill and by Liberal opposition to aspects of Labour's nationalisation plans. However, the resurgence of anti-socialism within the party, as opposed to the radicalism of the war years, did not occur until 1947, after Horabin defected to Labour, and only replicated the party's stance during the mid-1920s, another period when the Liberal Party defined itself primarily in terms of its opposition to other parties rather than in terms of its own policy aims.

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Thirdly, the defeat of Sinclair and all of the Liberal members of the wartime coalition left a vacuum in the party leadership which the Parliamentary Party was not well equipped to fill. The job of leader was offered to Gwilym Lloyd George, who very soon joined the Conservative ranks. This was a serious problem for the party, especially as Clement Davies proved to be an ineffectual leader who did little to reinvigorate the party. However, it is debatable how effective Sinclair would have been as leader of the Liberals after 1945. His opposition to Liberal contestants in wartime byelections, and his aristocratic connections with the Churchills did not endear him to many party activists; his leadership would probably only have survived because of the paucity of challengers for his position.

Finally, in the aftermath of the 1945 election the Liberal Party threw itself into organisational improvements, stipulated in the report into defeat, *Coats Off For The Future!* This led in 1950 to the fielding of 475 candidates, enough to allow a Liberal government to be elected for the first time since 1929. However, if the 1924 election was a watershed in terms of

signalling the end the pre-1918 electoral base of the Liberal Party, the 1950 election was a watershed for the aims and attitudes of party activists. As Baines rightly points out, the aim of party activists after 1945 was to ensure that enough candidates would stand next time to permit the election of enough Liberal members to form a government; and it was argued that this would persuade 'Liberal-butts' to swing behind the party. After 1950 this illusion was shattered and it took a quarter of a century for that number of Liberal candidates to stand again. After 1950 activists realised that Parliamentary contests were almost all hopeless, and activities had to be refocused elsewhere if the party was to survive.

Although the party remained committed to working for the election of Liberal Members of Parliament, ideas such as the targeting of resources, in operation by the 1964 election, and a realisation of the usefulness of byelections - a Liberal byelection team was in operation by the mid-1950s - became apparent. More importantly, activists began to switch their attention to local elections and the party's local strength began to pick up after 1953. It took a comprehensive electoral disaster for which no ameliorating circumstances could be blamed for the Liberal Party to reformulate its aims and its policies; 1945 was a grim defeat for the party, but it was the 1950 debacle which inspired the changes which led to later revival.

Both articles offer a significant contribution to our understanding of the 1945 general election - one of the most startling of modern times - and the Liberal Party's fortunes in it. Baines highlights the factors which, he argues, make the election a watershed for the party, especially the loss of many prominent Liberal MPs, defeated at the polls. He also emphasises the traditional nature of local Liberal campaigns and concludes that Labour, not the Liberals, was best placed to gain from the increased acceptance of social egalitarianism amongst the electorate. Joyce's analysis is different, concentrating on the tactical mistakes the party made. The decision by the party to fight the election as an independent entity was not matched by a clear redefinition of the party's identity, reflecting ideological splits within the organisation. Furthermore, the party could not possibly have formed a government after the election - and yet fought to achieve that aim. Both articles make depressing reading for Liberals, but they explore the factors and problems with which the Liberal Party has had to cope since 1945, and which still influence our party today.

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election

by Peter Joyce (Liberal Democrat History Group, Sept 1995)

Comments by Tony Greaves

My first comment is one of congratulation on organising the production of this paper, together with some disappointment at the ephemeral nature of its format. Nor do I like the stilted academic prose style that Peter Joyce uses; surely if a paper is worth wider publication it is also worth the effort to make it more easily readable (I am arguing for elegance rather than tabloidese!).

My second observation is that Joyce does us a real service in