

The Young Scots Society

A lost Liberal legion

Apathy among youth towards politics is a matter of concern to modern political parties. This was evident in the 2001 general election, notable for a low turnout, when under 40 per cent of the 18–24 age group voted. It was not always so. Post-1945, youth organisations such as the Young Conservatives, Young Liberals and Young Socialists were valuable to their parent parties, to whom, in recent decades, they have at times proved a source of embarrassment. Even more remarkable was the part played in Scottish political life by the Young Scots Society in the years before 1914, when about 40 per cent of adult males could not vote in elections.

The electoral consequences which can derive from party disunity were illustrated in the 1900 general election, which shattered the long-established Liberal dominance in Scotland and saw a resurgence of Unionism, not least, for example, in Glasgow, where Liberal representation was eliminated in all seven constituencies.¹ Radical Liberals opposed to the Boer War clashed with those of imperialistic tendencies who converged around Lord Rosebery. Among the former was James M. Hogge, later to become MP for East Edinburgh, who played a leading role in the formation of the Young Scots Society.

The Society was conceived at a meeting in Edinburgh on 26 October 1900, when it was resolved to form a society 'for the purpose of educating young men in the fundamental principles of Liberalism and of encouraging and stimulating them in the study of social sciences and economics'.² Rapid expansion followed. In 1903, there were 3,000 members in thirty branches while, by 1914, 10,000 members were recorded among fifty branches. These branches were formed throughout the country, with the majority in urban areas.

From the outset emphasis was placed on the political education of members, soon to be complemented by campaigning. The branch syllabi indicate regular meetings to discuss topics such as temperance, women's suffrage, old age pensions and the

functions of municipal government. Conference resolutions show the wide remit undertaken by the YSS, with a strong stress on its Scottish identity. In 1902, the Leith Branch urged 'action for Home Rule All Round, the taxation of Land Values, the reform of our Licensing Law and the effective solution of the housing problem'. The 1904 YSS conference condemned indentured Chinese labour in South Africa, protested against the use of the title Edward VII 'out of regard for the honour, historic past and rights of Scotland' and urged the General Council to organise a National Celebration of the fourth centenary of the birth of John Knox.³

The impact of the YSS was soon felt as 'New Liberalism' with a radical thrust, and had an impact on parliamentary candidates. In 1902, Hector Macpherson, Editor of the *Edinburgh Evening News*, warned that 'Liberalism had become a bunch of cheap expedients and candidates from being missionaries of great principles had degenerated into bands of strolling players'. In the next few years, the YSS proposed remedies in a series of publications and, in the *Young Scot*, a monthly one. The members envisaged national regeneration based on self-government leading to legislation on land reclamation, temperance, the Poor Law, cheaper transport and a reorganisation of the educational system 'so that all may have equal opportunity to develop their faculties and no talent be allowed to run to waste'.⁴

While the YSS was never fully integrated into party organisation, it assumed the much-needed task of improving organisation. 'Constituency caucuses were harangued into activity'⁵ and YSS criticisms of the quality of many Liberal candidates were effective. The Young Scots' vigorous radical policies found a welcoming response from some leading and several future parliamentarians. By 1905, the YSS claimed the support of sixteen MPs, among them Henry Campbell Bannerman, James Bryce, George MacRae and James Dalziel and of fifteen candidates, including James Hogge, Arthur Dewar, Robert

Munro and John Gulland, some of whom 'rose to prominence through the activities of the Young Scots who had done so much to revitalise the Scottish Liberals both organisationally and intellectually'.⁶

Campaigning zeal was fully displayed between 1903 and 1906 on behalf of the defence of free trade against tariff reform. The mass distribution of propaganda leaflets aimed at retaining or wooing working men's support, based partly on the fear that protectionism would increase the price of food, was combined with open-air demonstrations addressed by leading Liberals. However, the 1906 general election was won not just on the trade question, and YSS literature reveals the emphasis put on social issues. A 1905 edition of the *Young Scot* had stated: 'If the social problem is ignored, one may predict the imminent revolt from Liberalism of the working classes. The Young Scots must guide the party in the more excellent way of the New Liberalism'. Thus the threat from the emerging Labour Party was clearly foreseen and the need for radical policies to counteract it. It is significant that, apart from in one of the seats in Dundee, there was no equivalent in Scotland to the arrangement in England which allowed Labour to contest some constituencies in 1906 without Liberal opposition.⁷

After 1906 'the radical edge of Scottish Liberalism was reinforced by electoral success and the intake of the new YS MPs'.⁸ This was reflected in a flow of demands for far-reaching reforms and, in particular, against the Conservative-dominated House of Lords, always a subject of vehement denunciation in YSS leaflets. The YSS conference of 1908, clearly ahead of government policy at the time, sought women's franchise, PR by STV, the taxation of Land Values, local option, and proposed that 'the public have the right of access to and free fishing in all Scottish streams and natural lochs'. In keeping with the tendency whereby religious issues, not least those relevant to denominations, could become matters of political controversy, it protested against the action of the Bishop of Lahore in preventing the use of Presbyterian rites in a garrison church in India and demanded 'redress without further delay'.

While in 1910 there was a Conservative recovery in England, the Liberals consolidated their position in Scotland, helped by skilful YSS campaigning concentrated largely on Unionist-held seats and Liberal marginals.⁹ Special efforts were made in the industrial burghs and counties in the west where Conservative strength had been augmented by Liberal Unionist support after 1886. Candidates who were vocally in favour of YSS policies were given a great deal of assistance.¹⁰

Home rule was a feature of the Scottish radical tradition; a Scottish Home Rule Association was created with Liberal support in 1886. Although Liberal MPs proposed bills to that effect from the 1890s on, there was no great momentum behind the movement. To provide the necessary impetus, the YSS intensified its clamour for home rule to be placed high on the Liberal agenda. In 1909, the Society's constitution was changed, to include the specific aim 'to further the national interests of Scotland and secure the right of self-government'. Stress was always placed on the prospect of an Edinburgh-based parliament being a means to the end of securing reforms.¹¹

To promote this aspiration, the YSS did three things concurrently – engaged in unrelenting propaganda and campaigning, displayed rather insensitive nationalist prejudices in candidate selection and maintained pressure on Liberal MPs. Warmly supportive of Irish home rule, members were confident that it would be followed by a Scottish Home Rule Bill within the lifetime of the parliament elected in December 1910. Two arguments shrewdly used for such haste were that Irish home rule would be more acceptable to some of its opponents if presented as the first instalment towards a federal structure for the UK, soon to be extended to Scotland, and that reduced Irish representation at Westminster would make Scottish home rule more difficult to achieve in the face of resolute Conservative opposition.

At the Young Scots' lively and well-reported meetings, heckling was not only an art but delighted the crowds and was encouraged by the speakers. Periodically, a horse-drawn van was

hired to tour parts of the country, literature was freely distributed en route (such as a comprehensive leaflet produced in 1912, *60 Points for Scottish Home Rule*) and evening public meetings were held. When accommodation could not be found for a night, members slept in the open air, so great was their enthusiasm for the cause.¹² Their activities aroused admiration and alarm among opponents. After a by-election the Unionist chairman of North Ayrshire urged on his party the need 'of bringing in more of the younger generation to oppose the Young Scots and others on the Radical side'.¹³ The Conservative-sponsored Junior Imperial League never matched the effectiveness of the YSS before 1914.

Prospective candidates were screened and, at times, efforts made to block English ones.¹⁴ Just as in the past two decades Scottish Tories have sought 'cities of refuge' in England, many English Liberals were tempted to secure nomination for what were then deemed safe seats in Scotland. In the summer of 1911, Charles Masterman considered it diplomatic to withdraw from his quest for Glasgow Tradeston¹⁵ while, surprisingly, in view of the GOM's Scottish connections, there was resentment at the nomination of his grandson W. G. C. Gladstone for a by-election in Kilmarnock in the autumn. The National Council of the YSS only endorsed him after he pledged to work for the speedy enactment of Scottish home rule.

The voting record of MPs was monitored and those absent from a 1912 Scottish Home Rule Bill division were made to account for themselves. Included in that number was one of the MPs for Dundee – Winston Churchill. Such was the influence of the Young Scots that MPs were careful not to antagonise them, as many depended on their support at election times, especially as there were indications that the national leadership could not take their support for granted. Some members at the 1912 National Council expressed concern that help was always given to Liberal candidates even when Labour ones were 'more sound on progressive principles'. Some threatened to aid Labour candidates if there was any weak-

ening by the Asquith Government in promoting home rule.

The considerable pressure exerted on the government was effective. Asquith's Government between 1910 and 1914 was confronted with major problems – the struggle with the House of Lords, the antics of the Suffragettes, labour unrest, the deep rift over Irish home rule. Although Asquith's attitude was supportive it was a lukewarm support, as he wished to proceed by stages, giving precedence to Ireland. However, 'without enthusiasm, the government allowed itself to be persuaded by the Scots MPs that home rule for Scotland and Ireland should proceed more or less in step'¹⁶ as an earnest of a comprehensive devolution policy. Accordingly, a Bill proposing an Executive and Parliament for Scotland and the retention of seventy-two MPs at Westminster from Scotland passed its second reading in 1913 and despite strong opposition from the Unionists,¹⁷ who asserted that there was no popular demand for such a measure, seemed set to reach the statute book. It proved to be a false dawn, however, because the outbreak of war in 1914 led to the suspension of home rule for Ireland and Scotland.

The 1914–18 War had adverse effects on the YSS. The Young Scots condemned German militarism and supported the government. Most branches were placed in a state of suspended animation, although some activity was maintained at national level. Despite valiant efforts, the YSS was not destined to recover its former momentum. Its decline cannot be dissociated from that of the Liberal Party. The rejuvenation of the Unionists after 1918 and the gravitation of many political activists towards the Labour Party were ominous signs for those who had hoped for home rule from a now divided Liberal Party. In 1920, Viscount Haldane warned the Edinburgh Branch of the YSS of the menace that Labour aspirations posed to Liberalism. Efforts were made to face up to this and regain impetus after Liberal reunion in 1923. A modest revival followed but political polarisation along class lines with Labour 'able to reap benefit from the enfranchisement of 1918',¹⁸ the loosening of links between Liberals and Roman Catholics, to the advantage

of Labour, after the Irish settlement of 1921, Liberal failure to make larger gains in the 1929 general election, and renewed divisions among Liberals at national level after the formation of the National Government in 1931 all contributed towards the collapse of branch and national organisation in the years before 1939.

In a world of a government influenced by opinion polls, focus groups, spin-doctoring, control-freakery, the decline of public meetings and political indifference verging at times on cynicism, the YSS has long since been forgotten.¹⁹ Yet its legacy merits more attention than has been accorded to it. The Young Scots Society was an invaluable campaigning force in the successful defence of free trade and election victories in 1906 and 1910. Thereafter, as a formidable pressure group, its members were 'the spearhead of the attack which forced the Liberal government to support Home Rule for Scotland'.²⁰ Capable of accelerating the advance of Liberal fortunes before 1914, they were as powerless as the party's organisation to reverse decline after 1918.²¹ They were men of independent mind who practised the Gladstonian belief in the need for political passion. Their example can still inspire. We do well to honour their memory.

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1 Glasgow results

	Unionist (Cons)	Liberal Unionist	Liberal	Labour
1900	4	3	–	–
1906	–	2	4	1

2 Richard J. Finlay, *A Partnership for Good? Scottish Politics and the Union since 1880* (1997) p. 53.

3 *Muirhead Papers*, National Library of Scotland ACC 640 1. This large collection of letters, speeches, publications, press cuttings, conference agendas and resolutions constitutes a valuable source of information re the YSS. Roland E. Muirhead, who died in 1964 at the age of 92, was for long an active Liberal and President of Bridge of Weir YS. He transferred his allegiance to the ILP, then, losing faith in existing parties, moved towards nationalism of an independent nature, becoming a founder member of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, which was later integrated into the Scottish National Party.

4 *Muirhead Papers* ACC 6401.

5 Richard J. Finlay, p. 53.

6 Michael Dyer, *Capable Citizens and Improvi-*

dent Democrats, The Scottish Electoral System, 1884–1929 (1996) p. 93.

7 Result of 1906 general election in Scotland: Liberal 58; Unionist 10; Labour 2.

8 Richard J. Finlay, p. 56.

9 Some of the several seats involved were as follows: Dumfries Burghs where John Gulland had small majorities in 1906 (633) and in a 1909 by-election (292) was retained in Jan. 1910 (573). Wick Burghs which had been Unionist in 1900 and 1906 was gained and held by Robert Munro in Jan. 1910 (275) and Dec. 1910 (211). In South Edinburgh, Arthur Dewar, who had regained the seat in 1906 from a Liberal Unionist and retained it in a 1909 by-election on becoming Solicitor-General for Scotland, was returned in Jan. 1910 as was C. H. Lyell in Dec. 1910 when Dewar became a Senator of the College of Justice.

10 Results of 1910 general elections in Scotland: Jan: Liberal 59; Unionist 9; Labour 2. Dec: Liberal 58; Unionist 9; Labour 3.

11 'We submit to the government that they make Home Rule for Scotland as a means of land reform and social reform the supreme issue of Scottish policy. We urge all Scottish progressive members to cease to cherish vain hopes of Scottish reform from London.' YSS Annual Conference (1911), National Library of Scotland, ACC 3 72 1.

12 Information from the late John G. Gray, solicitor and former Liberal councillor in Edinburgh, whose father was a prominent member of the YSS before and after the 1914–18 War. The author has in his possession a copy of a lecture which J. G. Gray gave in 1991 to the Scottish Liberal Club re Liberal politics in Edinburgh in the 20th Century.

13 *Ayr Advertiser* 28/12/1911.

14 Richard J. Finlay, p. 60.

15 Y. S. Handbook (1911) p. 13.

16 Michael Fry, *Patronage and Principle, A Political History of Modern Scotland* (1987) p. 128.

17 After 1910 there were negotiations for a merger between the Conservatives and the Liberal Unionists. These made more rapid progress in England than in Scotland for conclusion in 1912 and were aided by hostility towards Home Rule. A modern Conservative historian wrote 'The Scottish Right continued to draw its main strength from those groups which had deserted the Liberals in 1886. Thus it was appropriate for the combined party to assume the name of Unionist.' Fry, p. 130.

18 Michael Fry, p. 142.

19 The author recalls visiting Alexander Begbie, an Edinburgh lapidary, who died in 1957 at the age of 81. One of the last of the pre 1914 Young Scots, he was the epitome of the well-informed Radical working man who never wavered in his political loyalty and deplored the lack of fervour and activity by Scottish Liberals after the 1950 general election.

20 Jack Brand, *The National Movement in Scotland* (1978) p. 172.

21 Liberal decline in the face of Unionist success in becoming the main opposition to Labour can be seen in the 1922–24 general election results. It did not become a reality until 1924.

	Unionist	National Liberal	Liberal	Labour
1922	13	12	15	29
1923	14	–	22	34
1924	36	–	8	26