

Biography

Larry Iles and Robert Ingham take a look at the life and political career of the first woman Liberal MP, Margaret Wintringham (1879–1955).

The first woman Liberal MP

It is well known that the US-born Conservative socialite Viscountess Nancy Astor was the first woman to sit in the House of Commons, for Plymouth Sutton from 1919. Perhaps less well known is the first woman to be elected to Parliament, Countess Markievicz (née Gore-Booth), elected as Sinn Fein Member for Dublin St Patrick's in 1918 who, of course, never took her seat. Now unknown is the first UK-born woman MP, Margaret Wintringham, the Liberal Member for Louth from 1921 to 1924. She blazed a trail as the first radical woman MP in an era when the House of Commons truly was an all-male institution and scorn was often poured on the notion of there being a relevant and distinctive women's perspective on important political issues.

Margaret Longbottom was born on 4 August 1879 in Oldfield, West Yorkshire, the daughter of David Longbottom of nearby Silsden. She was educated at Keighley Grammar School and trained as a teacher at Bedford College, gaining work in Grimsby. The school of which she became headmistress in Grimsby is now named after her. In Grimsby she met Thomas Wintringham, a timber inspector who had unsuccessfully sought to represent the town in the Liberal interest in a by-election in 1898. They married in 1903 at Ilkley Congregational Church and settled in Louth, Lincolnshire.

Wintringham soon became involved in a wide-range of voluntary organisations, becoming a prominent member of the local community. Inspired by its role in Canada, she founded a branch of the Women's Institute and was later involved with the organisation at a national level. She chaired the Women's War Agriculture Committee and was a member of the Lincolnshire Agriculture Committee, which promoted home-grown food at the expense of imports. She was President of Louth Women's Liberal Association, which she built into one of the biggest

in the country, and was involved with Louth Auxiliary Hospital.

Thomas Wintringham was elected as Member for Louth at a by-election in June 1920 as an Asquithian Liberal. The seat had traditionally been Liberal, with a strong dissenting vote in its many villages and hamlets, but the result was still something of a surprise and was the only independent Liberal gain of the year. His wife's local prominence may have contributed to his success, not least because she had organised relief work following a severe flood in the district. His career was brief – he died of a heart attack in the House of Commons Smoking Room on 8 August 1921, aged 54. Margaret Wintringham was chosen to contest the resulting by-election; the local Liberals no doubt were keen to benefit from the sympathy she might attract as well as her own public record. She was advised by the party leadership to keep quiet at hustings and to wear widow's weeds. The Tories fought hard to regain the seat, accusing the Liberals of calling the by-election in indecent haste, but Wintringham's easy manner on the doorstep and, crucially, the support she received from women's suffrage societies across the UK ensured she won by 791 votes. It was a particularly impressive victory given that Labour had intervened for the first time in Louth and had taken nearly one-fifth of the vote, primarily from the industrial areas on the constituency's Yorkshire fringe.

Her campaign generated much interest in the press, both at home and overseas, *The Times* being particularly horrified that a Liberal woman should have defeated a Tory knight. Women's groups were naturally delighted that a further blow had been struck for their cause and that, unlike Lady Astor, Wintringham was one of their own. It must have been intimidating for Wintringham to enter the House of Commons as one of only two women

Members. In later speeches she often asked men in the audience to appreciate how uncomfortable they would have felt joining an almost entirely female assembly. Some MPs, most notably the veteran Conservative Sir Frederick Banbury, were openly hostile, as was the Tory press, which often chose to report the activities of women Members in a flagrantly sexist manner. When eight women Members were returned in 1923, Wintringham acted as their unofficial cross-party coordinator (a difficult job given the differences between them) and she used this role to raise the profile of 'women's issues', such as birth control.

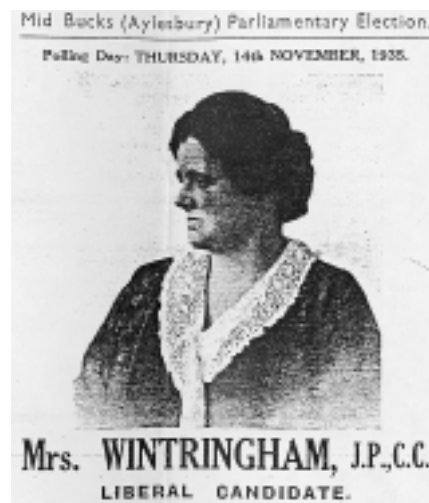
The House of Commons quickly discovered that Wintringham was a new phenomenon: an energetic, radical woman. Her maiden speech, which made the front page of the *New York Times*, savaged as 'false economy' the public expenditure cuts of the Lloyd George coalition. She was firmly on the left of the Liberal Party, describing herself as a progressive, and spoke mainly on social issues. She made good use of parliamentary questions and brought new issues to the fore, such as women's pay and employment conditions. Amongst the causes she took up were the failure of the Hong Kong authorities to tackle child slavery and prostitution; the dismissal, on economic grounds, of Fiji's only woman maternity doctor; the deportation to the Irish Free State of supporters of de Valera in the civil war, who were likely to face execution; and the failure of the Canadian authorities to extract maintenance payments from former World War One soldiers who had fathered illegitimate children in the UK. At the Women's Liberal Federation's conference in 1924 she made a strong attack on the Labour Government's failure to sign up to the new International Labour Organisation covenants on the exploitation of women and child labour, which contributed to a ministerial U-turn on the issue. Wintringham also introduced a Private Member's Bill to make the provision of child support more egalitarian, which was opposed by some reactionary elements in her own party but which spurred the Labour Government into

introducing its own measures and eventually formed the basis of Tory legislation.

With her emphasis on social issues, and her outspoken contempt for the cosy, all-male boorishness of the House of Commons,¹ Wintringham came across to many as a wild radical. She was certainly portrayed as such by her Tory opponent in 1924 after being one of only fifteen Liberal MPs to back the Government over its Russian policy, the issue on which it fell. Her family background was one of conventional Liberalism, however – she once reminisced in the House of Commons about walking miles with her brothers to hear Gladstone speak – and she was at heart a party loyalist. She also commanded the respect of the House when she spoke on agricultural questions, something to which *The Times* paid tribute in her obituary. Wintringham had urged the party leadership to focus on the Liberals' positive domestic agenda rather than to talk up the Bolshevik menace in 1924, and she backed the official Liberal line against the 1926 General Strike. She was in favour of the 1931 National Government, at least at first. Had she followed many of her contemporaries into Labour in the mid-1920s she might well have returned to Parliament, but she stuck with the Liberals.

Wintringham increased her majority in the 1922 election to 883, though she probably expected to do better than that. Labour's withdrawal from the hustings, apparently in her favour, benefited the two older parties in almost equal measure. Although her majority again increased in 1923, this time to 1,101, Wintringham could not resist the tide which swept away most Liberal MPs in 1924. In that election she lost by 1,344 votes to the Conservative candidate, A. P. Heneage, a moderate local farmer, who was to hold the seat until 1945.

Wintringham made two unsuccessful attempts to return to Parliament. In 1929 she must have been hopeful of regaining Louth: she polled her highest ever total – 13,560 – but lost by 439 votes. Labour's return to the fray may have been a decisive factor, but her election address was uncharacteristically lacking in vigour, reflecting her



exclusion from the new ideas fermented by Lloyd George and his supporters. Few Liberals stood in 1931 and Wintringham was no exception, but in 1935 she contested Aylesbury. If not totally hopeless – the division had returned a Liberal in 1923 – it was a safe Tory seat and an odd choice for a former MP. She lost by over 11,000 votes. She was not asked to contest the 1937 by-election for the seat, nor did she pursue an initial interest in contesting the Gainsborough constituency.

Wintringham was an active contributor to many aspects of Liberal politics. She was President of the Women's Liberal Federation on three separate occasions and regularly contributed to the *Women's Liberal News* until it was closed down in 1936. She used this platform to give her views on social issues in the many countries she visited, causing controversy in 1934 when she praised nursery education and the equality of men's and women's working conditions in the Soviet Union.² She was also a regular contributor to the *US Christian Science Monitor*. During the Second World War she called in the letters page of *The Times* for more to be done for injured merchant seamen, a particularly emotive issue in Grimsby. She served for many years on the executive of the radical women's Six Points Group, was an independent member of Lindsey County Council, and was also a magistrate in the county.

Late in life Wintringham moved from Louth to Lincoln and then London, where she died in a nursing home on 10 March 1955, aged 76. Even at the time of her death she was unknown to

most Liberals, her name preserved only as the title of a prize awarded at Women's Liberal Federation conferences. Wintringham played a crucial role in the process by which 'women's issues' were recognised as being of central importance to society, and in beginning to break down the overt sexism of the British establishment.

Wintringham's disappearance from the upper echelons of the Liberal Party after the 1930s is both curious and disappointing, but perhaps she lacked the social connections of the Bonham Carters and Lloyd Georges or was regarded by the party establishment as

being dangerously left-wing. The Liberal Party lost one of its biggest assets by marginalising Wintringham from the 1930s until her death. It is tempting to think that she would have been better suited to the politics of more recent years than to the more conservative 'safety first' politics of the 1920s.

Margaret Wintringham is the subject of only one other biographical essay, in *A Biographical Dictionary of Feminists*.³ She was profiled in the New York magazine *Current Opinion* in March 1922 and a statement of her political beliefs, in the form of two addresses to the Liberal Summer School,

was published in the *Christian Science Monitor* on 18 October 1924.

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1 See *Daily Telegraph*, 'Mrs Wintringham's Address', 18 May 1922.

2 *Women's Liberal News*, 'Impressions of Russia', July 1934.

3 Vol. 2, O. Banks (Ed.), London, 1990.

Research in Progress

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 2) for inclusion here.

The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906. The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. *Andrew Gardner, 22 Birdbrook House, Popham Road, Islington, London N1 8TA; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10). Any information welcome, particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

Edmund Lamb (Liberal MP for Leominster 1906–10). Any information on his election and period as MP; wanted for biography of his daughter, Winfred Lamb. *Dr David Gill, d.gill@appleonline.net.*

Joseph King (Liberal MP for North Somerset during the Great War). Any information welcome, particularly on his links with the Union of Democratic Control and other opponents of the war (including his friend George Raffalovich). *Colin Houlding; COLGUDIN@aol.com*

The political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP. Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935. Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39. *Chris Fox, 173 Worpleston Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

Crouch End or Hornsey Liberal Association or Young Liberals in the 1920s and 1930s; especially any details of James Gleeson or Patrick Moir, who are believed to have been Chairmen. *Tony Marriott, Flat A, 13 Coleridge Road, Crouch End, London N8 8EH.*

Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s. Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN*

The Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45. Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunder (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s. *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

The Young Liberal Movement 1959–1985; including in particular relations with the leadership, and between NLYL and ULS. *Carrie Park, 89 Coombe Lane, Bristol BS9 2AR; clp25@hermes.cam.ac.uk.*

The revival of the Liberal Party in the 1960s and '70s; including the relationships between local and parliamentary electoral performance. Access to party records (constituency- and ward-level) relating to local activity in London and Birmingham, and interviews with key activists of particular interest. *Paul Lambe, University of Plymouth; paul.lambe@ntlworld.com.*

The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79. Individual constituency papers, and contact with members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*