

Whig, Liberal or Tory?

Simon Kerry, *Lansdowne: the Last Great Whig* (Unicorn, 2017)

Review by **Iain Sharpe**

HENRY PETTY-FITZMAURICE, FIFTH Marquess of Lansdowne, was born into a distinguished Whig family. His great-grandfather, the second Earl of Shelburne and first Marquess of Lansdowne, was prime minister in 1783, leading the administration that negotiated peace with the United States after the American War of Independence. His grandfather served in successive Whig and Liberal governments, including the great reforming administrations of Grey and Melbourne during the 1830s. He might have become prime minister; both men offered to stand aside in his favour. His father, too, was a Liberal politician, serving as Lord Palmerston's under-secretary at the Foreign Office.

So a career in Whig and Liberal politics was virtually a hereditary duty. He became a Marquess and a member of the House of Lords at the age of 21, following his father's sudden death in 1866, while still a student at Balliol. Political advancement came early: in 1868 he became a junior whip in Gladstone's first administration and in 1870 was appointed under-secretary at the War Office under Edward Cardwell.

Yet Lansdowne's long-term future was to be outside the Gladstonian Liberal Party. He was one of many moderate Liberals who became Liberal Unionists in wake of the Grand Old Man's decision to support Irish home rule in 1886. Yet

even before the home rule schism, his disillusionment with the Liberal Party was apparent. Although in 1880 he was appointed under-secretary of state for India in Gladstone's second administration, he resigned within two months over the government's proposed Irish land reform legislation which he, as an Irish landowner, considered an unacceptable attack on property rights.

Although he became a vocal critic of the Liberal government, this worked in his favour. Possibly in order to get a prominent Liberal critic out of the way, Gladstone appointed him governor general of Canada in 1883. After five years in Canada, he was appointed by Unionist Prime Minister Lord Salisbury as viceroy of India, perhaps as a way of wooing the Liberal Unionists. He returned to Britain and thus to frontline politics at the end of 1894. When the Liberal Unionists entered coalition with the Conservatives in July 1895, he was appointed war secretary. Although he was criticised for the lack of military preparation for the Boer War, which broke out in 1899, this did not stop him being promoted to foreign secretary after the Unionist landslide at the 'khaki' election of 1900.

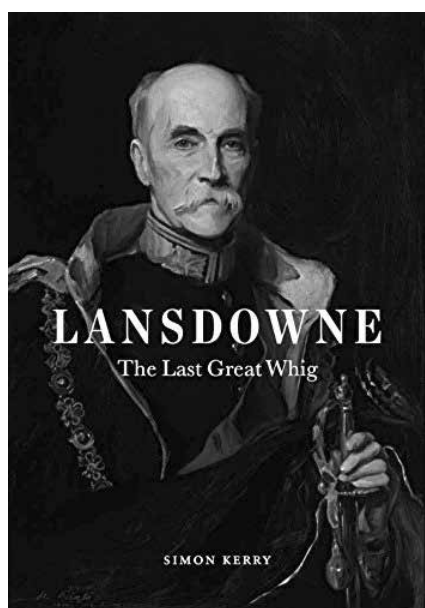
As foreign secretary, he negotiated an alliance with Japan in 1902, and more famously the entente cordiale with France in 1904, bringing to an end a long period of imperial tension between the two countries, and of course Britain's period of so-called 'splendid isolation'. Lansdowne's foreign policy received bipartisan support, with the Liberal government that took office in 1905 stressing its commitment to continuing his diplomatic approach. By contrast, as leader of the Unionist opposition in the House of Lords Lansdowne's role was strongly partisan. He led the overwhelming Unionist majority in the upper house in thwarting Liberal legislation, ultimately rejecting the 'People's Budget' of 1909, a decision which ultimately backfired as it triggered the constitutional crisis which was resolved by the Liberals' 1911 Parliament Act that curtailed the powers of the House of Lords.

The episode for which Lansdowne is best remembered today, however, arose not during his time in high office nor as

an opposition leader, but after he had retired as a frontbencher. In late 1917 his so-called 'Peace Letter', advocating a negotiated settlement with Germany, was published in the *Daily Telegraph*. At once this apparent display of defeatism destroyed his political credibility and was denounced equally by the prime minister Lloyd George, by his own erstwhile Unionist front bench colleagues and by the Northcliffe Press. The allied victory in 1918 disproved his fear that the war was unlikely to come to a swift conclusion. Yet his intervention found an echo in Woodrow Wilson's 'fourteen points' and even in the League of Nations movement in Britain after the First World War.

By any standards Lansdowne's was a substantial career, yet he has been neglected by historians. Until the appearance of this volume, he had not been the subject of a scholarly biography (a hastily written volume by Lord Newton appeared in 1929, two years after his death). Although the author is Lansdowne's great-great grandson, this book is not just an exercise in family piety. Simon Kerry previously completed a PhD thesis on Lansdowne's career as war secretary and has carried out extensive research on Lansdowne's archives, including those still held at the family's Wiltshire seat of Bowood, which have not been extensively used by historians. So the appearance of this volume is welcome.

Yet it is worth adding a note of caution to readers of this journal: although Lansdowne spent most of his career as a Liberal or Liberal Unionist, there is not much Liberal (or even Liberal Unionist) politics in these pages. There are understandable reasons for this. Inheriting his seat in the House of Lords at such an early age, Lansdowne never fought a parliamentary election. And since, by convention, peers did not engage in election campaigning, he appears to have avoided engaging in platform oratory. He was out of the country during the great Liberal schism of 1886 and if he did feel any regrets over leaving the Liberal Party, as many other Liberal Unionists certainly did, this is not discussed here. Despite the book's title, and the author's frequent references to Lansdowne's Whig background, the reality appears to be that, once estranged from the Liberals, he easily fitted in to Tory politics. In that respect, therefore, the book's title is something of a misnomer, and the epithet 'last great Whig' would



perhaps be more appropriately applied to the Eighth Duke of Devonshire who, as Marquess of Hartington, was the leading Whig in Gladstone's second administration and never entirely shed his Liberal sensibilities.

Yet, having offered that caveat, it is fair to conclude by saying that Dr Kerry

has made a useful addition to scholarship on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British politics and colonial administration.

Dr Iain Sharpe is an administrator at the University of London and a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.

Letters to the Editor

Elections in Glasgow

May I add two important footnotes to David Hanson's research on the curious 1874 Liberal election leaflet ('Vote for Mr Crum and one other Liberal', *Journal of Liberal History* 102 (spring 2019))?

First, Hanson concludes that if the Glasgow Liberals had sorted out agreement on candidates earlier, the outcome could have been different – 'divided parties lose elections'. He is wrong, as he is imposing the logic of uninominal first-past-the-post elections on this three-member constituency.

Glasgow then (1868–85) voted by a crude form of proportional representation, whereby each voter had two votes for three seats, so offering one seat to a minority party with at least a third of the total vote. At the 1868 and 1880 elections, the Liberals had more than two-thirds of the vote and took all three Glasgow seats. But in 1874, the Liberal share dropped below 65 per cent, so a Tory won one seat. It made no actual difference to the outcome that the Liberal vote was spread over five candidates.

Secondly, the 1874 election was a transitional one for the interplay between candidate choice and party choice. Before the 1872 Ballot Act, as the votes cast were added up in public during polling day(s), it was easy to distinguish between front-runners and also-rans. Hence people voting later in the day could choose between candidates with a real chance and not cast a wasted vote – a crude form of what we now call tactical voting.

This meant that a contest between candidates of the same party could go to the poll, with the weaker candidate

withdrawing in favour of the stronger after the first hour or two of voting. That reduced the need for parties to fix agreement in advance, especially in strongly Liberal urban constituencies, where the party would win anyway.

All that changed when, with the secret ballot, there was no longer a certain way of knowing how the votes were piling up. However, old habits died hard, so in 1874 there were still several cases of rival Liberal candidates fighting it out on polling day. By 1880 there were few such cases and from 1885, with general use of the uninominal constituency, they became extremely rare.

Thus among the ten London constituencies, no less than four had Liberal candidates in excess of the two places available in 1868 (that did not cost the party any seats at all); three still had excess Liberal candidates in 1874 (which arguably helped the Tories to win a seat in each of Southwark and Tower Hamlets) but – perhaps after that warning – there was only one such case in 1880.

A final thought: did the introduction of the secret ballot reduce effective democracy in Britain by giving the political parties this incentive to restrict choice? In many other European countries, the right of voters to choose between candidates of the same political hue was retained via the two-ballot system (and later, when list systems appeared, by the right to alter the list). The second ballot was a Radical demand in Britain in the 1880s, but support for it faded as party dominance grew.

Michael Steed

Welsh Liberal Party 1966–70

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- 40 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Elfyn Morris to John Gibbs, dated 21 June 1966. Just to note, Deacon states that the meeting was held on the 11 June 1966.
- 41 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Elfyn Morris Jones to Gruffydd Evans (chairman of the Liberal Party Executive), 26 July 1966.
- 42 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Hooson to Major Parry Brown, 10 June 1966.
- 43 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Elfyn Morris to John Gibbs, 21 June 1966.
- 44 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Michael Meadowcroft to Hooson, 22 Mar. 1967.
- 45 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter to Mary Murphy from Hooson, 10 Feb. 1967.
- 46 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Bob Morgan to Hooson, 1 Nov. 1967.
- 47 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter to Bob Morgan from Hooson, 9 Nov. 1967.
- 48 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter to Peter Jacobs from Hooson, 24 Nov. 1967.
- 49 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Hooson to Elfyn Morris, 1 July 1966.
- 50 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Hooson to Mary Murphy, 13 Oct. 1966.
- 51 Steve Belzak, 'Swinging in the '60s to the Liberals: Mary Murphy and the Pontypridd Urban District Council', *Journal of Liberal History*, 68 (Autumn 2010), p. 30.
- 52 Deacon, *Welsh Liberals*, p. 150; in 1959, Lord Ogmore defected from Labour to the Liberal Party as he was disillusioned with the party's stance on nationalisation and felt the Conservatives could only be beaten by an anti-socialist alternative.
- 53 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Murphy to Hooson, 12 July 1967.
- 54 Deacon, *Welsh Liberals*, p. 177.
- 55 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Jones to Hooson, 2 July 1967.
- 56 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, Box 45, letter from Rhys Gerran Lloyd to Emlyn Thomas, 11 Feb. 1969. The initial letter, from Thomas, does not appear to be in the archive.
- 57 Deacon, *Welsh Liberals*, p. 167.
- 58 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Hooson to Mr Watson of Basingstoke, 22 Feb. 1967.
- 59 Jones, *Welsh Elections*, p. 114.
- 60 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Hooson to Pratap Chitnis, 24 Oct. 1967.
- 61 Edwards, 'Political Change in North West Wales', p. 242.
- 62 NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, letter from Hooson to Lloyd Morris, 5 Jan. 1967.
- 63 Peter Joyce, *Realignment of the Left? A History of the Relationship between the Liberal Democrat and Labour Parties* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 129.
- 64 David Roberts, 'The Strange Death of Liberal Wales' in John Osmond, *The National*