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## **Whigs and Liberals**

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The historiography of the British Liberal party has been dominated by one question: why did it decline from being the governing party in 1914 into insignificance by the 1930s? This is the only example in British politics of one of the two main parties losing its leading role, so it is not surprising that it has generated an enormous literature and has coloured virtually every aspect of how the Liberal party, and the Whig grouping which was one of its main precursors, have been viewed. In general, long-term explanations of the party's fall, based on changes in British society, have gradually lost their hold and the party's decline is now usually seen as an unforeseeable political event, precipitated by the party's divisions in World War One. But more recent trends in the historiography of the Liberal party also tend to discuss much more than just the question of the party's

fall and are firmly situated in the turn towards political culture and language in studies of British politics. This essay examines these developments and suggests some future directions for the study of the British Liberal party.

Recent writing on the Whigs and Liberals in the nineteenth century has been a self-conscious reaction to what has been dubbed the 'three-stage model' of British economic, social and political development, which underlay many influential analyses of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> In this scheme the period 1790-1850 was viewed as one of exceptional turbulence, marked by the Industrial Revolution, the initial 'making' of both middle class and working class consciousness and endemic class conflict. The role of the aristocratic Whigs was merely to usher the middle class into the pale of the constitution with the 1832 Reform Act and then to begin a long slide into irrelevance and oblivion; the nascent Liberal party being seen as fundamentally an expression of middle class identity.<sup>2</sup> This meant the Liberals were necessarily engaged in prolonged conflict with working class organisations, especially Chartism. The period 1850-1880 in contrast was characterised as one of rapprochement between the classes, based on economic prosperity and the emergence of an elite within the working class, the 'labour aristocracy', which identified with middle class Liberalism. This situation, though, was superseded in the period 1880-1920, which saw the emergence of a fully-formed class consciousness within the working class. This inevitably led most working class voters to abandon the 'middle class' Liberals for the new Labour party, while the Conservatives

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<sup>1</sup> J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974); R. Harrison, *Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics 1861-1881* (London,

<sup>2</sup> D. Southgate, *The Passing of the Whigs, 1832-1886* (London, 1962).

corralled the frightened forces of property. After 1920 Labour and the Conservatives faced each other as the political representatives of the middle and working classes, reflecting the social reality of a mature capitalist system.

Almost every aspect of this approach has now been challenged. Firstly, historians have substantially rethought the Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Rather than a single dramatic take off into industrialisation, the emphasis is now on a steady period of growth in 1700-1820, followed by a rather faster expansion in 1820-1870. There is no necessity to see the period 1790-1850 as witnessing sweeping changes to the economy, class formation or politics. Secondly, the idea that politics simply reflects social formations has now been discarded in favour of emphasising the central importance of language and the ability of politicians and activists to shape political parties and their fates.<sup>4</sup> Together, these trends have emphasised the continuities rather than the discontinuities of British politics since 1800.<sup>5</sup>

All of these general developments have had huge implications for how the Whigs and Liberals are viewed. One central theme that has emerged is the rehabilitation of the Whigs, who are no longer seen as an obsolete aristocratic clique, but rather as the first modern parliamentary grouping based on principles.<sup>6</sup> Their social status certainly did not stop them successfully participating in the robust popular culture of open constituencies under the

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<sup>3</sup> N. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> E. Biagini and A. Reid, 'Currents of Radicalism, 1850-1914' in Biagini and Reid, eds, *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Politics, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 1-19.

<sup>6</sup> F. O'Gorman, *The Emergence of the British Two-Party System, 1760-1832* (London, 1982).

unreformed electoral system, cultivating the press or taking a serious interest in new economic and social theories.<sup>7</sup> If there is no longer any need to see them as just paving the way for the developing middle class, their effectiveness as participants in the burgeoning public sphere of Georgian Britain can be appreciated.<sup>8</sup> The Whigs had to wait so long to achieve power in 1830, not because they were incompetent or outmoded, but because of the necessity for royal approval and the inherent advantage of incumbent ministers under the unreformed system.<sup>9</sup>

Once the Whigs achieved office, they remained the central component of most British governments down to 1886. The Whig governments of 1830-4 and 1835-41 have been subjected to intensive study and their members classified variously as 'Young Whigs', 'Foxites' and 'Liberal Anglicans'.<sup>10</sup> What all these studies have done, though they do not agree in detail, is to take the ideas of the Whigs seriously, rather than viewing their policies merely as concessions wrung from a reluctant aristocracy by the 'new' middle class. This process does not just refer to the 1832 Reform Act, which most historians now see as an embodiment of the Whig ideal to provide disinterested, but responsive, rule for the country's various propertied groups, rather than the triumph of the 'middle class'.<sup>11</sup> It can

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<sup>7</sup> J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT, 1993), pp. 74-5; E.A. Wasson, 'The Whigs and the Press, 1800-50', *Parliamentary History*, xxv (2006), 68-87; I. Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform, 1830-41: the Politics of Government* (Stanford, CA, 1990), p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> P. Jupp, *The Governing of Britain, 1688-1848* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 231-63.

<sup>9</sup> P. Jupp, *British Politics on the Eve of Reform: the Duke of Wellington's Administration, 1828-30* (Basingstoke, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> R. Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics. Whiggery, Religion and Reform, 1830-1841* (Oxford, 1987); P. Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals 1830-1852* (Oxford, 1990); Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform*.

<sup>11</sup> L. Mitchell, 'Foxite Politics and the Great Reform Bill', *English Historical Review*, cviii (1993), 338-64.

even be argued that it was the Whigs who helped bring the concept of the 'middle class' into everyday use, partly by arguing they were enfranchising this group in 1832.<sup>12</sup> Parry has gone furthest in outlining a coherent set of themes and ideas that underlay the Whig approach to politics from the 1830s to the 1880s – including a commitment to govern in the interests of all the nations of the United Kingdom, responsiveness to popular grievances, a belief in the harmony of social groups and undogmatic Christianity (rather than narrow Anglicanism) and a specific version of patriotism, which viewed Britain as leading Europe in the paths of liberty, constitutional government and humanitarianism.<sup>13</sup> Works like Parry's have raised the reputation of the leading Whigs, especially Lord John Russell and Palmerston, and filled out the picture of how the Whigs connected with British society.<sup>14</sup> The idea of a rapprochement between Whigs and middle class Liberals in the 1850s has not entirely disappeared, but it has been reconfigured. If the Whigs accepted, in 1845, the need to repeal the Corn Laws and a minimal, low-tax central government, rather than their more interventionist policies of the 1830s, this was a shift that left the Whigs, especially under Palmerston, more firmly ensconced in national power than ever, nor were these developments purely a response to external pressure.<sup>15</sup> The formation of 'middle class' consciousness remains much-debated, but historians increasingly view this group as deeply divided by religion

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<sup>12</sup> D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: the Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780-1840* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 4; J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> E. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855-1865* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, pp. 155-217.

and politics, as well as occupation and wealth, with many of its constituent parts focused on exercising authority in the local arena, rather than national affairs.<sup>16</sup>

This analysis dovetails with increasing doubts about the achievements of those MPs (often from a middle class background) who described themselves as Radicals and argued for more far-reaching reforms in the constitution, taxation and administration than the Whigs were prepared to undertake. For instance, business MPs often just did not agree about what they wanted to achieve (e.g. on issues like introducing limited liability for companies) any more than the middle class as a whole did.<sup>17</sup> 'Independent' Radicalism among MPs died out by the end of the 1850s as the agenda of reducing government expenditure was achieved.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly, historians have drawn attention to the ways in which, after 1832, all non-Conservative MPs in Great Britain shared a common identity, even if the name 'Liberal' only gradually came into common use in 1847-1859.<sup>19</sup> This did not mean that Liberal MPs constituted a party in the contemporary sense, but most self-described Radicals were attached, sometimes more loosely, sometimes more tightly, to Whig governments and Salmon has demonstrated that the registration requirements of the 1832 Reform Act had an enormous impact in stimulating party organisation at the local level.<sup>20</sup> Parry places the foundation of the parliamentary Liberal party as early as 1834, though others continue to

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<sup>16</sup> M. Savage, J. Barlow, P. Dickens and T. Fielding, *Property, Bureaucracy and Culture: Middle Class Formation in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1992), pp. 36-57; S. Gunn and R. Bell, *The Middle Classes: their Rise and Sprawl* (London, 2003), pp. 1-20.

<sup>17</sup> G. Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 187-93.

<sup>18</sup> M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> J. Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832-52* (Chichester, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> P. Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832-1841* (Woodbridge, 2002).

prefer the traditional moment of the meeting at Willis's Tea Rooms in 1859, in which MPs agreed to bring down the minority Conservative administration.<sup>21</sup> Whichever of these two parameters is preferred there is now agreement that Radicalism and Whiggery were a spectrum of opinion rather than polar opposites based around class.

Popular Radicalism's relationship with the Whigs was much more problematic. Older traditions of interpretation saw popular Radicalism as essentially an expression of working class consciousness, culminating in Chartism.<sup>22</sup> More recently, Stedman Jones's work has led the way in emphasising the ways in which popular Radicalism represented a plebeian tradition dating back to the eighteenth century, rather than a new form of class consciousness, let alone class conflict.<sup>23</sup> Seen in this light, the gap between Chartism and parliamentary Radicalism (and even Whiggism) was bridgeable in some circumstances. If some moments (e.g. the presentation of the Charters in 1842 and 1848) seemed to drive the movements apart there were consistent efforts to bring them together over a programme of franchise and financial reform and, as Chase has pointed out, Chartism was not hostile to all parliamentary activity.<sup>24</sup> In this interpretation it was logical that many ex-Chartists should move into Liberalism in the 1850s and 1860s, as it seemed to offer hope of progress on

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<sup>21</sup> Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 108; A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart & Mind'* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 103-04.

<sup>22</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).

<sup>23</sup> G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90-178.

<sup>24</sup> M. Turner, 'Thomas Perronet Thompson, "sensible Chartism" and the Chimera of Radical Unity', *Albion*, xxx (2001), 51-74; C. Skelly, *Moral Force Chartism: its Origins, Nature and Development, 1836-1850* (Saarbrücken, 2013); M. Chase, "'Labour's Candidates": Chartist Challenges at the Parliamentary Polls, 1839-60', *Labour History Review*, lxxiv (2009), 64-89.

extending the right to vote, restricting the role of the Church of England, Free Trade and reduced indirect taxation. To historians like Biagini, this was an entirely rational strategy on matters that affected working class activists and the most obvious way to promote the traditional concerns of plebeian Radicalism both before and during Chartism.<sup>25</sup> It did not require any explanation through elaborate theorisations about the creation of new strata of the working class. Indeed, the concept of the mid-Victorian labour aristocracy as the driver of working class Liberalism has taken some hammer blows recently and most historians doubt such a group was a new development in this period, or that it held moderate political views based on its role in the economy.<sup>26</sup> Biagini's analysis, like that of Stedman Jones, centres on long-term continuity in popular ideas and language, but Joyce has taken linguistic analysis further, denying any class element at all in the world view of Radical working men, who he suggests saw themselves as part of 'the people' or even 'humanity'.<sup>27</sup> This view has provoked a good deal of criticism, not only from those who have pointed out the coded nature of class references in the symbols and practices of popular Radicalism, but from historians who have emphasised the continued tensions between Liberals and Radicals (often with a background in Chartism or Trades Unionism, however they defined their class position to themselves).<sup>28</sup> Rival

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<sup>25</sup> E. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 8-16.

<sup>26</sup> R. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford, 1976); G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London, 1840-1880* (London, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> J. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford, 1994); A. Taylor, "'The Glamour of Independence": By-elections and Radicalism during the Liberal Meridian, 1869-83' in T. Otte and P.

candidatures within the Liberal party were a regular feature of elections up to 1885 and arguably only declined with the radicalisation of the whole party after 1886.

Liberalism remained a broad and quarrelsome church, but there is now much agreement that in the 1850s and 1860s it was marked both by underlying ideological continuity and a drawing together of fissiparous elements.<sup>29</sup> One new feature in this process was a more direct relationship between Liberal leaders and activists in the country. This was initiated by Palmerston in the 1850s, but was brought to new heights by Gladstone – the dominant figure of Liberalism from the 1860s to the 1890s.<sup>30</sup> His populist campaigns gave him a hitherto unthought-of standing.<sup>31</sup> To Vincent, Gladstone’s appeal was fundamentally irrational and a kind of substitute for practical policies; but to Biagini this merely symbolised his modernity as the kind of charismatic leader who was required to ignite the enthusiasm of voters – but one who was careful to retain and embody the appeal to popular Radicalism that had made his followers Liberals in the first place.<sup>32</sup>

Gladstone’s leadership provided a triumphant culmination for mid-Victorian Liberalism and a symbol of Liberals’ ability to function successfully in a

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Readman, eds, *By-elections in British Politics, 1832-1914* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 99-120.

<sup>29</sup> J. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857-1868* (2nd edn, Hassocks, 1976) and M. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), in contrast to D.A. Hamer, *Politics of Electoral Pressure: a Study in the History of Victorian Reform Agitations* (Hassocks, 1977).

<sup>30</sup> H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone* (2 vols, Oxford, 1986-1996); R. Shannon, *Gladstone* (2 vols, London, 1982-1999).

<sup>31</sup> A. Saab, *Reluctant Icon. Gladstone, Bulgaria and the Working Classes, 1856-1878* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform*, pp. 369-425.

<sup>32</sup> Vincent, *Formation of the British Liberal Party*, pp. 211-35; E. Biagini, *Gladstone* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 57-74.

system with a mass electorate - the Conservatives (with support from Radical Liberals) had extended the vote to all male householders in the boroughs in 1867 and the Liberals applied this system to county seats in 1884, ensuring over three quarters of the electorate was working class.<sup>33</sup> However, the 1880s have usually been interpreted as a decade of crisis and decline for the Liberal party. This is firstly because of the dominant event in Gladstone's later career – his decision to embrace Irish Home Rule in 1885 and the resultant split in the Liberal party in 1886, with a substantial group of opponents of this policy decamping to a separate Liberal Unionist party, in alliance with the Conservatives.<sup>34</sup> Gladstone's motivations for this dramatic volte-face have been much-debated, though explanations that emphasise his Machiavellian attempts to gain office through alliance with the Irish Nationalists, a misguided crusade to unite Liberals, or his determination to avoid any commitment to social reform have now been overshadowed by interpretations which emphasise Gladstone came to his decision gradually after an intensive course of reading and reflection.<sup>35</sup> For Gladstone, Home Rule was an attempt finally to solve the 'Irish Question' by reconciling the Nationalist movement to Ireland's continued membership of the United Kingdom. However, why this decision split the Liberal party has continued to be controversial. Older interpretations saw it merely as the occasion for the Whigs and other moderate, propertied Liberals to leave a party

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<sup>33</sup> R. Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics: the Making of the Second Reform Act* (Aldershot, 2011); A. Jones, *The Politics of Reform 1884* (Cambridge, 1972); D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 99-129.

<sup>34</sup> I. Cawood, *The Liberal Unionist Party: a History* (London, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> A. Cooke and J. Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain, 1885-86* (Brighton, 1974); D.A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 108-23; J. Loughlin, *Gladstone, Home Rule and the Ulster Question, 1882-93* (Dublin, 1986), pp. 180-96, 286-90.

they feared had lurched to the left under Gladstone – and indeed most of the party’s great landowners, as well as some of its leading intellectual spokesmen and some prominent businessmen did leave it in 1886.<sup>36</sup>

However, Ireland had never been an easy issue for Whigs and Radicals; while they had been no less committed to the Union than Conservatives, many had always been uneasy about naked assertions of British power and had sought to conciliate Irish Catholic opinion. Gladstone’s conversion to Home Rule could be seen as one possible development of these policies. However, a substantial minority of Liberals did not view the matter in this light and saw Ireland as a society that required the rule of law and liberal values to be imposed upon it and Irish Nationalism as a fundamentally illiberal movement.<sup>37</sup> The split of 1886 can therefore be seen as an ideological division within Liberalism about Ireland, rather than a proxy for other arguments or class conflicts.<sup>38</sup> This can in turn explain why some Radicals as well as moderates opposed Home Rule and the difficulty in matching up the social background of Liberal MPs to their opinions on Ireland in 1886. Some historians, though, have continued to emphasise the ‘high political’ context to the Liberal split – particularly in explaining Gladstone’s refusal to conciliate the rebels or the motives of key Liberal Unionists like Joseph Chamberlain.<sup>39</sup>

This division within Liberalism has continued to be linked to debates about the party’s decline. For historians like Parry the Liberal party after 1886

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<sup>36</sup> G. Goodman, ‘Liberal Unionism: the Revolt of the Whigs’, *Victorian Studies*, iii (1959), 173-89.

<sup>37</sup> Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, pp. 292-303.

<sup>38</sup> T. Jenkins, *Gladstone, Whiggery and the Liberal Party, 1874-86* (Oxford, 1988); W.C. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis: the British House of Commons in 1886* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> Jenkins, *Gladstone, Whiggery and the Liberal Party*, pp. 230-93.

was fundamentally different from its predecessor and much weaker; the split deprived the Liberals of any claim to the Whig tradition of disinterested government that balanced the interests of all and this development made it much less popular (it only once gained a majority after 1885 – in 1906).<sup>40</sup> This was just as important in harming Liberalism's popularity as the loss of support to the Liberal Unionists in areas like Birmingham and Glasgow. From a rather different perspective, Lawrence has argued that the party's remaining Nonconformist supporters were able to push it into fundamentally unpopular positions, especially over the regulation of working class behaviour on drinking, gambling and sexual morality and this helps to explain the party's electoral difficulties.<sup>41</sup> It has also been suggested, rather less convincingly, that if the Liberals had not lost Joseph Chamberlain in 1886 they could have taken up social reform and secured their popularity with working class voters.<sup>42</sup> What all these arguments imply is that the Liberal party's problems created a space for the Labour party to emerge on the Left of British politics.

But in many long-standing interpretations of the Liberals' decline the party's split in 1886 was only incidental. The 1880s marked a crucial moment in Liberalism's decline, not because of events in parliament, but because of developments in society and the economy that ensured Liberalism lost its appeal to the working class in favour of Labour, which could make an explicit appeal to workers' growing class consciousness. The period from the 1880s to the 1920s witnessed a 'remaking' of the working class, based on increased conflict in the

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<sup>40</sup> Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, pp. 306-11.

<sup>41</sup> J. Lawrence, 'Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914', *English Historical Review*, cviii (1993), 629-652.

<sup>42</sup> T.A. Jenkins, *The Liberal Ascendancy, 1830-1886* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 217-18.

workplace, a more complete segregation of the classes, as working class suburbs grew outside city centres, and an increasingly homogenous working class culture. This essentially sociological argument underlay much of the case for the unavoidable decline of Liberalism from the 1880s onwards, buttressed by histories of the Labour party that emphasised the party's growing organisation and electoral appeal in 1900-1914.<sup>43</sup>

This approach is now very much on the wane, under a twin assault on both its underpinnings and its empirical evidence. Historians are no longer willing to trace an unproblematic increase in working class identity to the years between the 1880s and 1914, any more than they are to ascribe it to the 1840s. Instead, there is much more emphasis on what divided members of the working class rather than what united them; even at the most basic economic level, divisions between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' workers, or between workers in different regions, do not seem to have shrunk in any major and continued fashion in 1880-1914.<sup>44</sup> As increasing working class consciousness is no longer accepted as a given aspect of the period from the 1880s onwards, the Liberal party's fortunes can now be judged in a much less gloomy fashion. The empirical evidence on the party's electoral fortunes, for instance, does not suggest a picture of decline before 1914. After the doldrums of the 1880s and 1890s the Liberals won an overall majority in 1906, retained office in 1910 (twice) with the help of their Labour and Irish Nationalist allies, and the result of the election due

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<sup>43</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Making of the Working Class'; R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (Oxford, 1974).

<sup>44</sup> R. Harrison and J. Zeitlin, eds, *Divisions of Labour. Skilled Workers and Technological Change in Nineteenth Century England* (Brighton, 1985); E.H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1973);

in 1915 might well have been similar.<sup>45</sup> On this basis, the Edwardian era could be viewed as witnessing a crisis of Conservatism, rather than Liberalism and detailed work on Labour's organisation and electoral performance suggests it was in no position to mount a major challenge to the Liberals.<sup>46</sup>

The reasons assigned for the Liberals' success, though, have started to change. The pioneer in this field was Clarke.<sup>47</sup> He accepted that voting had become more class-based by 1914 but suggested the Liberals had benefited from this by capturing the working class electorate through their advocacy of social reforms, particularly the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908. This position was supported by Freedden's detailed analysis of the advocacy of social reform by the party's 'New Liberals'.<sup>48</sup> However, if class-based voting had not become the main feature of the electoral system by 1914, it is no longer necessary to think of social reform as the only reason for the Liberals' success in this period. Increasingly, historians have come to realise that other issues that had once been dismissed as irrelevant in 1900-1914 were quite as important to voters in this period as social reform.

This analysis has now extended across the whole spectrum of Edwardian politics. A number of historians have argued persuasively that Irish Home Rule continued to arouse strong popular passions around issues of democracy and

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<sup>45</sup> I. Packer, 'Contested Ground: Trends in British By-elections, 1911-1914', *Contemporary British History*, xxv (2011), 157-73.

<sup>46</sup> E.H.H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: the Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880-1914* (London, 1995), pp. 267-306; Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*.

<sup>47</sup> P. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971).

<sup>48</sup> M. Freedden, *The New Liberalism: an Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford, 1978).

national and religious identity.<sup>49</sup> Free Trade has been reconfigured as less a defence of laissez-faire than an argument for cheap food for working class consumers.<sup>50</sup> Historians of religion have increasingly postponed the secularization of British society into deep in the twentieth century, making the Edwardian obsession with the battle between the Church of England and Nonconformity intelligible.<sup>51</sup> Issues specific to Scotland and Wales, including the beginnings of arguments for self-government, now seem distinctly modern.<sup>52</sup> The cause of land reform has been rescued from oblivion as a key component of the Edwardian political scene, and an issue that both reflected the important role that aristocrats still played in politics and was capable of incorporating policies of rural reconstruction, housing reform and minimum wages.<sup>53</sup> Finally, no historian would now deny the central importance of women's suffrage and women's role in society to Edwardian politics.<sup>54</sup> This rehabilitation of issues other than social reform has made it possible to see Liberalism's success before 1914 as based partly on its identification with a whole range of issues that reached back into the nineteenth century but which were still relevant to voters.

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<sup>49</sup> E. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876-1906* (Cambridge, 2007); D. Jackson, *Popular Opposition to Irish Home Rule in Edwardian Britain* (Liverpool, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> A. Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846-1946* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 230-73; F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 33-133.

<sup>51</sup> C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> I.G.C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland 1832-1924: Parties, Elections and Issues* (Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 234-245; J.G. Jones, 'E.T. John and Welsh Home Rule, 1910-14', *Welsh History Review*, xii (1987), 453-87.

<sup>53</sup> I. Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: the Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906-1914* (Woodbridge, 2001); P. Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914* (Woodbridge, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> M. Pugh, *The March of the Women: a Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914* (Oxford, 2000).

This emphasis on continuity across the 'long' nineteenth century has reinforced the view that it was events during the First World War that provide the most profound disjuncture in the party's history and the most convincing explanation of its downfall. Debates about why the war was so toxic for the Liberals have tended to mirror the themes that have dominated analysis of the party's fortunes before 1914. Older analyses saw the war as merely speeding up trends in society and the economy that were already apparent from the 1880s onwards and that rapidly reinforced working class consciousness and thus the trend towards Labour voting. As with the pre-1914 era, historians are no longer so sure these trends can be identified. If the war helped Labour challenge the Liberals, this can be seen as a political rather a social process – by allowing it to serve in the Cabinet and stimulating the expansion of trades unions and their political funds.<sup>55</sup>

But this allowed Labour to take advantage of the Liberals' difficulties rather than ensuring it would displace them. However, in a final chronological flourish of the idea that Liberalism could not cope with modernity, some historians have been eager to argue that the Liberals were particularly poorly-equipped to wage total war because of their squeamish attachment to civil liberties and hostility to increasing the State's role in the economy.<sup>56</sup> The party thus failed the final test of modernity – it could not organise the 'Great War'. This argument, though, has proved difficult to demonstrate, as the Liberals had

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<sup>55</sup> McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party*; A. Reid, 'The Impact of the First World War on British Workers' in R. Wall and J. Winter, eds, *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 221-33; Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, pp. 351-83.

<sup>56</sup> T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935* (London, 1966), pp. 30-5.

proved willing to push the boundaries of the State forward in the area of social reform before 1914 and accepted everything from State control of the engineering industry to conscription in 1914-1916. The Liberals' implosion was fundamentally a matter of high politics – Lloyd George's coup, which replaced Asquith as prime minister in December 1916.<sup>57</sup> Attempts to relate this event to divisions in the party before 1914 have proved unconvincing.<sup>58</sup> Primarily the split in 1916 was as unforeseeable as Gladstone's declaration for Home Rule in 1885. But unlike the crisis of 1885-1886 it was difficult to discern any ideological rift between Asquith and Lloyd George. The latter merely asserted he would be a more effective wartime prime minister than the former.

Historians have been reluctant to accept that personal power struggles can determine grand political events, such as the decline of the Liberal party. But by uncoupling politics from the determinism of explanations that centre on class and economic developments, this at least becomes possible. However, the more recent emphasis on the continuity and resilience of long-standing Liberal narratives in the nineteenth century is not much more hospitable to the idea that the party might be brought down by a squabble at the top. This view can be meshed more neatly with the high political notion of the Liberals' downfall if Lloyd George's coup is placed in a wider context. The division of 1916 was not healed (formally) until 1923. This was just at the time when the voting system underwent its greatest change under the 1918 Reform Act, which enfranchised

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<sup>57</sup> J. Turner, *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict 1915-1918* (New Haven, CT, 1992), pp. 112-51.

<sup>58</sup> E. David, 'The Liberal Party Divided, 1916-1918', *Historical Journal*, xiii (1970), 509-32 and M. Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left, 1902-1914* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 156-184, contradicting T. Wilson, *Downfall*, p. 37 and M. Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: a Study in British Political Thought, 1914-1939* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 20-1.

all men over 21 and women over 30, and it was crucial to recruit new voters.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, this was a time when the Liberals faced challengers from both Left and Right, who had been invigorated by the war.<sup>60</sup> But, just as importantly, the great Liberal issues of the pre-war period were also undergoing dramatic transformations. Irish Home Rule disappeared once most of Ireland became independent in 1921. Free Trade was increasingly undermined by world economic competition and changing ideas about how to protect consumers. Land reform became less pressing as great landowners disappeared in the wholesale disposal of country estates post-world war one.<sup>61</sup> These narratives did not disintegrate overnight (Free Trade greatly helped the reunited Liberals at the 1923 general election), but they required the party's attention and ingenuity to ensure they continued to work on their behalf. A party at war with itself was in no condition to act with this kind of dexterity.

The Liberals' difficulties with handling these longstanding themes and narratives were intensified by its problematic position in the party system after the 1918 general election. Once they ceased to be the main governing party, or the official opposition, they were forced to define themselves in terms of their relationship to the other two parties. After 1918, Labour's role as the main opponent of the Conservatives polarised politics around attitudes to organised labour and welfare payments, particularly unemployment benefit. On these issues the Liberals found it difficult to say anything distinctive as the positions

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<sup>59</sup> Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, pp. 384-417.

<sup>60</sup> N. Keohane, *The Party of Patriotism: the Conservative Party and the First World War* (Farnham, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> J.J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow 1896-1936: Socialism, Suffrage, Sectarianism* (East Linton, 2000), pp. 125-54; Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, pp. 189-348; Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land*, pp. 178-193.

'for' and 'against' on, for example, unemployment benefits were fully occupied.<sup>62</sup> Both Labour and Conservatives on the other hand were in a prime position to annex those parts of Liberalism they saw as compatible with their rhetorical traditions. After 1916 much of pre-war Liberalism and the remaining themes that had sustained it migrated to Baldwin's Conservatives (financial rectitude, governing on behalf of the whole nation) or to MacDonald's Labour (Free Trade and moderate social reform); and the Liberal party that was left increasingly faced an identity crisis, if only because it was so much smaller and less successful than its pre-war predecessor.<sup>63</sup>

Historians have tended to see this situation as leaving the Liberals with three choices. The first was to attempt to find a new way of appealing to the electorate. The most plausible attempts to do this were Lloyd George's ingenious schemes in 1925-1929 for land reform and his proposals to 'conquer unemployment' through public works. There has been some debate about how convincing these ideas were, but unanimity that they failed to break into the Labour and Conservative party's rhetorical battle about welfare spending versus lower taxation.<sup>64</sup> The second choice was to accept that the party had nothing left to say and that its ideas and narratives primarily existed in other parties. This was the route taken by half the Liberal MPs in 1931-1932, when they formed the new Liberal National grouping in permanent alliance with the Conservatives and

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<sup>62</sup> R. McKibbin, 'Class and Conventional Wisdom: the Conservative Party and the "Public" in Inter-war Britain' in McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 259-293.

<sup>63</sup> P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999); D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald: a Biography* (2nd edn, London, 1997).

<sup>64</sup> J. Campbell, *Lloyd George: the Goat in the Wilderness, 1922-1931* (London, 1977); R. McKibbin, 'The Economic Policy of the Second Labour Government, 1929-1931', *Past and Present*, lxxviii (1975), 95-123.

agreed that even Free Trade would have to be compromised. As Dutton has emphasised, this further split represented a huge blow to the party's viability.<sup>65</sup>

The third choice was simply to carry on and hope. Finding new policies, or re-activating old ones, that would increase the party's appeal proved an insoluble difficulty, though. As recent studies of Liberal policy have emphasised, Liberals were reduced to simply mimicking appeals already fully embodied by other parties, as with their enthusiasm for the Beveridge Report in 1944-5, or hostility to nationalisation in 1947-50; or associating themselves with ideas that seemed impossibly out-dated (Free Trade) or which nobody cared about (co-ownership).<sup>66</sup> In this situation, it seemed entirely possible by the early 1950s that the party would disappear altogether.

That the Liberal party did not vanish, and instead experienced a series of limited revivals and contractions, until it merged with the Social Democrats in 1988, has been explained in a number of ways. The context for all these explanations is provided by the related concepts of partisan de-alignment and class de-alignment.<sup>67</sup> Political scientists noted, especially from the 1970s onwards, that the number of voters who identified strongly with either of the two main political parties was declining, both because the electorate was increasingly dissatisfied with their performance in office and because class was becoming less clearly identified with voting behaviour. This situation provided the opportunity for other parties to break into the political system, and that

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<sup>65</sup> D. Dutton, *Liberals in Schism: a History of the National Liberal Party* (London, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> P. Sloman, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929-1964* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 149-63, 173-7, 195-9.

<sup>67</sup> I. Crewe, B. Särilvik and J. Alt, 'Partisan Dealignment in Britain, 1964-1974', *British Journal of Political Science*, 7:2 (1977), 129-90; M. Franklin, *The Decline of Class Voting in Britain* (Oxford, 1985).

meant primarily the Liberals, who, until the 1970s, had no competitor as a third party with an existing structure, a presence in Parliament and some name recognition.

More detailed explanations of why the Liberals survived, but could manage no more than periodic revivals, have taken a number of paths. Some historians have emphasised the central importance of developments at the level of high politics, especially the role of a number of charismatic leaders, archetypically Jo Grimond, in making the Liberals appear electable.<sup>68</sup> Arguably, the arrival of a politics in which personalities and media image were of key significance helped obscure the Liberals' continued difficulties with finding distinctive and popular policies (by the 1960s they were most associated with membership of the European Economic Community and proportional representation – neither of which mattered much to voters).<sup>69</sup> A vague image of modernity and a willingness to embrace the use of television and advertising techniques made up for some of these deficiencies, but may also help to explain why Liberal revivals tended to be transient.

Other approaches to this phenomenon have concentrated on aspects of the Liberals' identity: they have been described both as a centrist party, existing ideologically between the two other parties, and as a party of the periphery, strongest in the areas most distant from 'modern', class-based politics. Both positions offered a viable basis for some public support, but were inherently unstable. The appeal of centrism was intermittent as it depended on perceptions

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<sup>68</sup> A. King, ed., *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections* (Oxford, 2002); M. McManus, *Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire* (Edinburgh, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> M. Egan, *Coming into Focus: the Transformation of the Liberal Party 1945-64* (Saarbrücken, 2009), pp. 149-52.

of extremism in other parties;<sup>70</sup> and Liberalism's identification with peripheral areas could always be challenged, both because these identities were often weak in England and because other parties expressed these identities more directly where they were stronger, particularly Nationalists in rural Scotland and Wales.<sup>71</sup> However, recent analysis has suggested that both definitions of Liberalism post-1945 require heavy qualification.

The Liberals were never just a party of the periphery even at their nadir in the early 1950s, when much of their remaining strength in local government and two of their six seats were in urban Lancashire and Yorkshire. When the party began to revive, most of its new votes, if not its seats, were won in suburban England, especially in the south-east and north-west.<sup>72</sup> These phenomena can best be explained by examining how the Liberals had to function in a mainly two-party system. This was not as a 'centrist' party but either as an ally of, or a competitor with, the other parties. In the early-mid 1950s the Liberals retained much of their residual presence by functioning as a very junior ally of the Conservatives. But, at the same time, the Liberals remained the main opposition to the Conservatives in a few areas where Labour was weak, especially some of northern Scotland and the English south-west – they were both a Conservative and an anti-Conservative party at the same time. Once signs of revival were apparent in the early 1960s the national party rejected its local anti-Labour pacts. This left the Liberals' dependent on their

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<sup>70</sup> D. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 219-224 on the 1974 General Elections.

<sup>71</sup> G. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain since 1918: Political Decline, Dormancy and Rebirth* (Exeter, 2000); L. Bennie, J. Brand and J. Mitchell, *How Scotland Votes: Scottish Parties and Elections* (Manchester, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> Egan, *Coming into Focus*, pp. 164-225.

anti-Conservative identity, which was most likely to deliver parliamentary seats in those peripheral areas where it had best survived the party's near-extinction. But it gained most of its new voters in suburban England as the most obvious home both for disillusioned Conservative voters who could not identify with Labour and for Labour voters who hoped a Liberal might defeat a Conservative where a Labour candidate could not. Again, this did not necessarily represent a centrist appeal, but a purely tactical, and very unstable, coalition. The party's identity was negative – electors chose it for what it was not in reference to the two main parties.<sup>73</sup> This, too, helps to explain the periodic nature of the party's revivals – it had little in the way of a core vote. The pattern of waves of Liberal revival, followed by decline, established in the late 1950s, continued until the party's merger with the Social Democrats in 1988, but without resolving the fundamental question of just what the party stood for; whatever it was, though, it was only remotely related to its predecessor of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries

The turn against social factors, especially class, as the determinants of the Liberal party's fate now holds the field, but this process does present some problems. Most importantly, by emphasising continuity over discontinuity, it does not always make clear how and why Liberalism changed at all in this period. However, the Liberal party *did* undergo a number of transformations between 1800 and 2000 – most importantly in the 1830s, the mid-1880s and 1916-24. All were associated with interactions between events in high politics and changes in the structure of the electoral system: in the 1830s the Tory

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<sup>73</sup> K. Young, 'Orpington and the Liberal Revival' in C. Cook and J. Ramsden, eds, *By-Elections in British Politics* (London, 1973), pp, 198-222, especially pp. 208-09.

government collapsed, producing a Whig regime, a massive change to the electoral system and a huge boost to political organisation and partisanship; in the 1880s the Liberal party lost an important segment of its support over Irish Home Rule at the same time as the electoral system acquired a clear working class majority and politics became much more centred on elections as plebiscites on the government, political programmes and national party organisation; finally in 1916-24 the Liberals split and declined to third party status in conjunction with another massive expansion of the electorate and further changes to the nature of campaigning.<sup>74</sup>

In turn, these events produced decisive changes in the Liberal party – producing its first incarnation in the 1830s, weakening it in the 1880s and unexpectedly destroying it as a major force in 1916-24. But each crisis also had an important impact in the realm of political culture and ideas. In the 1830s, by entering government, the Whigs had to define their attitude to a host of pressing political matters on which their views were not clear at all before 1830, as in the case of Poor Law reform. Their own legislation led them to enact reforms that had not been central to their identity in opposition, as with municipal reform, and their attempt to govern in a balanced and disinterested fashion produced interventions in society that had not been foreseen, as with the Factory Act (1833), and to take up new positions on the corn laws, electoral reforms like the secret ballot and the removal of religious disabilities. Similarly, after 1885 the Liberal party's official ideology became much more radical and programmatic,

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<sup>74</sup> Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work*; E.H.H. Green, 'An Age of Transition: an Introductory Essay', *Parliamentary History*, xvi (1997), 1-17; J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: the Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 96-129.

not just on Home Rule, but on a whole range of issues from land reform to temperance, once many moderates defected. Finally, in 1916-24 the party's position at the centre of politics imploded and as a third party it found it increasingly difficult to retain ownership of key themes in its identity and to effectively manipulate those with which it was still identified in a new political environment.<sup>75</sup>

None of these developments suggest that there were not underlying continuities in Liberal mentalities across these periods. However, re-emphasising these disjunctures based on the interaction between high politics and political structures provides an explanatory mechanism for how Liberalism itself could change rapidly. This methodology also suggests where further research is urgently needed. While developments in the 1830s and 1880s have been examined at length, much less has been written about the Liberal party in 1916-24, even though, if the party was performing well in 1914, as current research indicates, this was the crucial moment in the party's decline. In particular, intensive study of how Liberalism reacted to and positioned itself with regard to other parties and ideologies would shed much-needed light on its difficulties in recovering from the disasters of 1916-1918.

This is not to suggest that the current emphasis on political culture and language is played out. There are a number of areas where this process is still in its infancy. For instance, the importance of concepts of masculinity has been strongly emphasised in relation to debates about the 1867 Reform Act, both in justifying who might be enfranchised - working men who displayed 'manly

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<sup>75</sup> A. Mitchell, *The Whigs in Opposition 1815-1830* (Oxford, 1967); M. Barker, *Gladstone and Radicalism: the Reconstruction of Liberal Policy in Britain 1885-94* (Hassocks, 1975); Dutton, *History of the Liberal Party*, pp. 68-103.

independence' - and who was excluded.<sup>76</sup> But the significance of these concepts in subsequent Liberal discourses (other than female suffrage) has received very little attention. Yet its implications were wide-ranging in areas as diverse as Irish Home Rule, which could be presented as a recognition that the Irish had achieved a 'manly' self-control and deserved self-government, to Edwardian social reform, which had to be carefully presented as not infringing on masculine independence - especially at a time when women's right to enter the male public sphere was supported by many Liberals.

There are also a number of fields in which Liberal discourse has been much more fully explored, but only within limited chronological boundaries. This is most notable in the case of patriotism, which Parry has examined in detail, but only as far as 1886.<sup>77</sup> Yet patriotism was a deeply contested feature of the Liberals' identity in the years down to 1914. The Liberal Imperialist and Radical strands within the party espoused very different views of foreign policy, but how these were justified and related to both Liberalism and patriotism remains to be examined - the most recent major studies of Liberal Imperialism and Radicalism date back to the early 1970s.<sup>78</sup> The same might be said of Liberalism's relationship with other systems of thought in society, especially religion. A great deal has been written about the importance of Nonconformity to Liberal electoral support, the centrality of religious controversies to Liberal legislation

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<sup>76</sup> C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race and Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>77</sup> J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism*.

<sup>78</sup> H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: the Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford, 1973); A.J.A. Morris, *Radicalism against War 1906-1914* (London, 1972).

and of personal religion to the motivations of key figures, especially Gladstone.<sup>79</sup> But the study of theology and its inter-relationship with Liberalism stops short in the 1860s and 1870s, although it is at least arguable that many developments in Liberal policy and discourse, from temperance to social reform, were deeply involved with developments in theology, especially in the Nonconformist churches.<sup>80</sup>

The study of Liberalism's political culture and discourse can also be pushed forward by new methodologies. Now that parliamentary debates and newspaper reports of politicians' speeches are increasingly available in digital form it is possible to undertake large-scale text mining of this material. This process is only just beginning, but it will make possible quantitative as well as qualitative analyses of the content of political language. In turn, this will provide new ways of testing current ideas about the continuity of Liberal discourse across the long nineteenth century, and identifying how and when the content of Liberals' political language changed. This will be particularly important for analysing key turning points, such as the crises of the 1880s and 1916-24, and the Liberal message and image at general elections and over key pieces of legislation.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> T.A. McDonald, 'Religion and Voting in an English Borough: Poole in 1859', *Southern History*, v (1983), 221-37; J. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party 1867-1875* (Cambridge, 1989); R. Shannon, *Gladstone: God and Politics* (London, 2007).

<sup>80</sup> B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford, 1988); I. Packer, 'Religion and the New Liberalism: The Rowntree Family, Quakerism and Social Reform', *Journal of British Studies*, xlii (2003), 236-57.

<sup>81</sup> L. Blaxill, 'Quantifying the Language of British Politics, 1880-1910', *Historical Research*, lxxxvi (2013), 313-41.

In turn, this process will make it possible to recover the public language of Liberal MPs – a key step in increasing knowledge of this group, about whose overall characteristics and views much still remains to be discovered. Historians have called insistently for high and low politics to be joined up; and MPs represent the missing middle in this relationship, conveying local concerns to the party leadership and the leaders' message to activists and localities.<sup>82</sup> A wide-ranging analysis of what they said in Parliament and their constituencies is one way to reach a much surer identification of how the concerns and language of high and low politics interconnected and developed.

Finally, big data will not only allow more insight into the language used by MPs, it will make available much more material for prosopographical studies of this group, and thus help recover the social context of Liberalism at this crucial intermediary level. Liberalism was not just a set of discourses, it was also a lived social reality for its exponents and existed at the level of familial and friendship networks, club and pressure group memberships, church affiliations, charitable endeavours and business relationships. Liberals' political language existed within this context and recovering the interrelationships and extra-parliamentary identities of Liberal MPs will help understand how this language was connected to Liberals' actions and activities. It is even beginning to be possible to discover something of the social context of Liberal constituency activists, by matching up local party records with census data and other local

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<sup>82</sup> S. Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?' in D. Cannadine, ed., *What is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 36-56; J. Lawrence, 'Political history' in S. Berger, H. Feldner and K. Passmore, eds, *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London, 2003), pp. 183-202.

material.<sup>83</sup> As digitisation gathers pace, this body of work will grow and it will be possible to reach firmer conclusions about the social profile of the party membership and some of the key aspects of their identity, such as religious affiliation. Taken together, all these developments provide the opportunity of answering questions about both what Liberalism was understood to be and who found the creed attractive.

There are, therefore, a number of ways in which the current emphasis on political culture and language in the study of Liberalism can be developed and pushed forward. Some of these will undoubtedly shed further light on the question of the Liberals' decline, especially by examining the key period of 1916-24. But they also offer the real possibility of finally putting that debate into the much wider context of an examination of the nature of the Liberal party and its actions. The party's decline will always be a central feature of its history; but the Liberal party was the dominant political force in Britain for nearly a century and there is much more to say about it than that it ceased to be an effective political force after the First World War.

### Suggested Reading

E. Biagini, *Liberalism, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge, 1992).

P. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971).

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<sup>83</sup> P. Lynch, *The Liberal Party in Rural England 1885-1910* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 61-72.

- D. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2004).
- T.A. Jenkins, *The Liberal Ascendancy, 1830-1886* (Basingstoke, 1994).
- J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998).
- I. Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform, 1830-41: the Politics of Government* (Stanford, CA, 1990).
- J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT, 1993).
- J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006).
- D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990).
- J. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857-1868* (2nd edn, Hassocks, 1976).