

Political Science as Political History. Politics before the First World War

Adam Gillett

Murray Edelman, like many other social scientists and historians such as Margaret Somers, considered that popular perceptions of politics were 'constructed'; that is, they did not emerge 'naturally' out of social experience but were shaped by various cultural forces.¹ Much of the most innovative work on modern British political history operates within this cultural vein: the press, public meetings and printed propaganda have all recently been subjected to such reinterpretation.² However, political science journals as historical evidence, especially in studies of modern British politics, remain a relatively under-developed primary source.

This research aims to address this significant lacuna in the understanding of British political culture by studying how the Liberals and Labour were portrayed in political science journals between 1906 and 1914. The importance of political science journals is better to understand the full meaning and significance of political activity and escape the traditionally narrow disciplinary boundaries. As historians seek a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between the electorate and those who seek to represent them, the commentaries of political events written at the time can provide new insight. Whilst there is not scope here to apply an extensive or exhaustive analysis of political science sources from 1906 to 1914, it is hoped that this will be a catalyst for more research in this field.

¹ M. Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); M. Somers, 'The Privatization of Citizenship. How to Unthink a Knowledge Culture' in V. Bonnell and L. Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, (California: California University Press, 1999).

² D. Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5, 2 (1994); M. Roberts, 'Constructing a Tory World-View: Popular Politics and the Conservative Press in Late-Victorian Leeds', *Historical Research*, 79, 203 (2006); J. Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War', *Past and Present*, 190 (2007).

In 1911 Alfred Dennis, Professor of European History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, concluded that:

Historical perspective and the use of sources now naturally denied to the investigator will give the historian in a later generation certain advantages; yet by limiting this article merely to certain impressions of recent party politics, recognizing always that the future historical student will undoubtedly be able to supply corrections, it may be possible to make use with caution of a small portion of such material as is now available to the writer.³

This research does not intend to supply the corrections which Dennis predicted would supplant his work; rather, a chronological rather than thematic approach has been adopted which will note how the 'impressions of recent party politics' changed in the period under discussion and will question some of the established views on the decline of the Liberal party. This research is offering a new interpretation based on hitherto unused sources and is deliberately limited to the impressions portrayed by political commentators of party politics. As such, it does not attempt to apply grand or metanarratives onto the findings to attempt to explain Labour's rise or the Liberals' demise. Future, more extensive research would require a much deeper engagement with the secondary literature than is possible here.

In 1906, the Labour Party was a fragmented coalition of committed socialists and affiliated trade unionists. Edward Porritt, a political historian and journalist based in Hartford, Connecticut, asserted that Labour was struggling as a viable political entity. Although in possession of the parliamentary franchise it 'was so slow in making for itself a commanding place in the House of Commons'.⁴ The abnormal conditions prevailing from 1886 to 1903, including the Boer War and Home Rule crisis, had masked Labour's inability to assert a distinct political identity. In 1918 G. D. H. Cole, the political theorist and libertarian socialist who wrote for the *Manchester Guardian*, commented that in 1906 the party consisted of heterogeneous elements that struggled to assert a cohesive identity.⁵ In contrast, Porritt posited that the Liberals were in one of the strongest positions since present day Liberalism became a force in British politics. The Liberals after the 1906 election were arguably in their most independent position, a platform from which Liberal policies could be initiated and implemented.⁶

³ Alfred L. P. Dennis, 'Impressions of British Party Politics, 1909–1911', *The American Political Science Review*, 5, 4 (November 1911), 509–34, p.509.

⁴ Edward Porritt, 'Party Conditions in England', *Political Science Quarterly*, 21, 2 (June 1906), 206–236, p.235.

⁵ G. D. H. Cole, 'Recent Developments in the British Labour Movement', *The American Economic Review*, 8, 3 (September 1918), 485–504, pp.490–491.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.236.

In 1907 Paul Haworth, Lecturer in History at Columbia University, commented that the Liberal government's legislative campaign was unpredictably moderate and orthodox for a party in such a strong parliamentary position. Licensing reform, military re-organisation, a Scottish land bill and minor Irish reform bills all formed part of the Liberals legislative campaign.⁷ The most significant legislation in Haworth's view was the one that was not passed. He predicted that the failure of the female suffrage bill, which was supported by the Prime Minister but not passed, would have a profound impact on the Liberals in future years. If the Liberals had initiated suffrage they could have captured the female vote and boosted their electoral support before the war.⁸

Writing in 1908 Charles Beard and Carlton Hayes, Lecturers in History at Columbia University, posited that the annual conference of the Labour Party in that year changed the dynamics of British party politics. The Party rejected an amendment to its constitution embodying socialistic principles but 'passed a resolution declaring that the time had come when the Labour party should adopt socialism as the definitive object of the organisation.'⁹ This, it was argued, gave the party a clear purpose and direction and, under the new leadership of Arthur Henderson, signalled Labour's intent on developing a clear policy platform and capturing a sector of the electorate. Importantly, Porritt believed 1908 signalled the beginning of Labour building its electoral support from the working class as 'it came to be regarded, in and out of Parliament, as the embodiment of the new independent and aggressive Labour movement in British politics.'¹⁰

Writing sixty years later, the historian Trevor Wilson asserted that the Liberals' victory of 1906 was the beginning of a revival that was based upon working class votes and backed by solid legislative success over the following six years.¹¹ However, Beard and Hayes argued in 1909 that the Liberals' tenure in government 'was marked more by failure on the part of the ministry to pass important measures than by successes.'¹² This indicates that there is a significant disparity in the retrospective analysis of a historian and a political commentator writing at the time. There is not scope here to attempt to cross examine these assertions, but this could form the basis of future investigations. What is evident is that the political

⁷ Paul L. Haworth, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 22, 2 (June 1907), 359–384, p.376.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ C. A. Beard and C. H. Hayes, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 23, 2 (June 1908), 351–384, p.372.

¹⁰ Edward Porritt, 'The British Socialist Labour Party', *Political Science Quarterly*, 23, 3 (September 1908), 468–497, p.468.

¹¹ Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935*, (London: Collins Fontana, 1966).

¹² C. A. Beard and C. H. Hayes, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 24, 2 (June 1909), 343–376, p.364.

commentaries indicate that before 1909 there was nothing to suggest that the Liberals could or would be usurped by Labour; whilst they emphasise the Liberals legislative campaign was modest, they note that they were electorally secure and show that Labour was struggling to unite the different working class and industrial factions behind a clear party policy.¹³

From 1909 the rhetoric and focus of political commentaries shifted to discuss politics largely along class lines. This coincided with Lloyd George's introduction of the 'people's budget,' which provided social insurance partly financed by land and income taxes. However, it met with staunch opposition from the Conservative-dominated House of Lords who argued it contained large aspects which were not covered under fiscal policy. This divided the parties as the Conservatives broadly opposed the budget, the Liberals naturally supported it and the Nationalists abstained from voting.¹⁴ The budget lead Porritt to surmise that 'England never was aroused as it was aroused from April 1909 to February 1910' and that 'they were attempting the most difficult task ever faced by a Liberal Government.'¹⁵ This implies that the budget was a critical juncture in pre-war party politics.

It can be concluded that the budget was the first major political issue which was fought on class lines, as was felt by Porritt at the time:

From about the middle of July until the end of the propaganda for and against the Budget, and again after the constitutional crisis had been reached by the action of the Lords on November 30th, and until the polling began in the middle of January, the struggle had undoubtedly its class aspects.¹⁶

The involvement of the Dukes and Earls evoked strong class feelings and public opinion turned against what remained of the feudal system and support grew for the reform of the House of Lords. The intensity of political feeling amongst the electorate in the January 1910 general election was demonstrated by a turnout of eighty-seven percent.¹⁷ The Liberal majority however was cut by some one hundred seats, and Asquith became leader of a minority government dependent upon the Nationals and Labour.¹⁸

¹³ P. F. Clarke, 'The Electoral Position of the Liberal and Labour Parties, 1910–1914', *The English Historical Review*, 90, 357 (October 1975), 828–836, p.832.

¹⁴ C. A. Beard and C. H. Hayes, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 24, 4 (December 1909), 730–760, p.749.

¹⁵ Edward Porritt, 'The Struggle over the Lloyd-George Budget', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 24, 2 (February 1910), 243–278, p.244.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.252.

¹⁷ S. Rosenbaum, 'The General Election of January, 1910, and the Bearing of the Results on Some Problems of Representation', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 73, 5 (May 1910), 473–528, p.484.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.502.

This evidence allows for a reinterpretation of how party politics has been perceived before the war. For some historians class did not play a major role in politics until after the Representation of the People Act.¹⁹ It has also been argued that the 1910 elections marked the emergence of class politics.²⁰ Others asserted that it was the passing of the 1911 Parliament Bill which cast capitalism and socialism in open conflict.²¹ However, this re-analysis suggests that it was the introduction of the budget in 1909, and not the elections on it in 1910 or the passing of the bill in 1911, that should be considered as the point at which class became a major factor in the British political system.

The 1909 budget had a significant effect on the composition of the Labour party. Before the budget the party effectively was split into four groups: the Liberal Labour group, the Miners Federation, Independent Labour and the Trade Union groups. However, after the first election of 1910 the formulation of the party altered as the Liberal Labour group disappeared as a distinct political party and the Miners Federation merged with Independent Labour and the Trade Union groups to become known as the National Labour party. This merger was only made possible by the growing influence of Independent Labour and the Trade Unions in parliament and the constituencies. An example of this was the shift in allegiance of the Miners Federation from the Liberals to Labour. This not only strengthened Labour, it had a significant impact on the Liberals standing in working class communities.²²

Whilst Labour had made a significant step towards becoming a cohesive political entity, the Liberals were beginning to show signs of internal division. Modern historical analysis cites the split between Asquith and Lloyd George during the war as a major factor in Liberal decline.²³ Writing in 1910, Carlton Hayes and Edward Sait (Professor in Politics at Columbia University) show that this split was evident long before the war began:

(...) dissension prevailed in the government between Mr. Lloyd-George and those representing Radical policies and Labour interests on the one hand and Mr. Asquith and the more moderate Liberals on the other.²⁴

¹⁹ N. Blewett, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885–1918', *Past and Present*, XXXII (1965), pp.27–56.

²⁰ P. F. Clarke, 'Electoral Sociology of Modern Britain', *History*, 57, 189 (1972).

²¹ K. Hutchinson, *The Decline and Fall of British Capitalism*, (New York: Scribner, 1950), p. 113.

²² Edward Porritt, 'The British Labour Party in 1910', *Political Science Quarterly*, 25, 2 (June 1910), 297–316, p.299.

²³ S. H. Beer, *British Politics in the Collectivist Age*, (1965; New York: Random House, 1969), pp.144–9.

²⁴ C. H. Hayes and E. M. Sait, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 25, 2 (June 1910), 360–392, p.380.

This suggests that whilst the war may have accelerated the decline of the Liberals, claims that it was the reason for the split between Asquith and Lloyd George is overly simplistic.²⁵ Consequently, in 1910 there was some indication of a change in the composition and cohesion of the Liberals and Labour.

By 1910 Labour were considered a cohesive party and the rhetoric and emphasis in political science journals suggest they were beginning to gain ground on the Liberals.²⁶ Had the budget not caused the early dissolution of parliament, Labour would have put forward double the amount of candidates for the 1910 general elections than it had in 1906.²⁷ The Liberals were struggling to convey their message to the electorate, especially in working class constituencies. Labour, in contrast, was praised for carrying 'its message direct to the people.'²⁸ The political commentaries appear to suggest that from 1910 the Liberals political identity was becoming less prevalent in what was becoming an overcrowded political system.

Furthermore, there appeared to be less cooperation between the Liberals and Labour. In 1910 Arthur Henderson stated 'there has been no alliance with the Liberal Party. There can be no alliance. It would be against our constitution.'²⁹ Henderson brushed aside claims that they withdrew candidates as a concession to the Liberals, emphasising, perhaps tellingly, that they simply were not in a strong enough position to field candidates in every district. Labour polled badly in the by-elections between 1911 and 1914 but this view is distorted as they were making their first appearance in seven of them, and in five out of those seven it did improve its vote.³⁰ This draws the conclusion that whilst changes were occurring, it was a slow process; whilst Labour became more independent and cooperation with the Liberals decreased, they were still not in a position to challenge the Liberals electorally.

The biggest restriction to Labour was highlighted by Alfred Dennis in November 1911. He contended that there was not the ideological space in the current political system for 'the attitude or policy of the Nationalist and Labour parties.'³¹ Labour was in a much stronger position than it had been

²⁵ J. Turner, *British Politics and the Great War. Coalition and Conflict, 1915–1918*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

²⁶ Porritt, 'The British Labour Party', p.302.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.303.

²⁸ Porritt, 'The Struggle over the Lloyd-George Budget', p.248.

²⁹ Arthur Henderson, *Manchester Guardian*, 11 December 1909, quoted in Porritt, 'The British Labour Party', p.304.

³⁰ Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910–1924*, (1974; Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p.82.

³¹ Alfred L. P. Dennis, 'Impressions of British Party Politics, 1909–1911', *The American Political Science Review*, 5, 4 (November 1911), 509–34, p.533.

in 1906 but, as is asserted in contemporary analysis, it was still narrow, weak and could be marginalised.³² On a national level the party had a limited policy platform and the emphasis had not fully shifted from 'cultural politics' – a rivalry of contrasted, classless cultural units – to class politics. Regionally, 1911 was marked by Labour unrest, in July alone rioting occurred in Manchester, Hull, Liverpool, Cardiff and Glasgow.³³ This disrupted the Liberal government but also did nothing to show Labour as a viable party of government rather than as an extremist pressure group. The Labour party's links with the unions created an 'us-and-them' mentality that meant they struggled to appeal to other sectors of society.³⁴

In Dennis' 1911 article, he criticised the Liberals for attempting to 'profit by incitement to class hatred'.³⁵ In the short-term the impact of this tactic was limited, with many observers from the working class exasperated by the Liberals refusal to identify 'at least their probable general proposals for the reform of the membership of the second chamber'.³⁶ In the long-term, the Liberals incitement of class hatred was disastrous as the political system reorganised on class lines and the Liberals did not appear to represent, to any justifiable extent, a class.

By the time the long drawn out constitutional crisis had been resolved in August 1911 the Liberals had won, in retrospect, a hollow victory; this period had a negative short term affect on the party and highlighted a number of its deficiencies.³⁷ In December 1912 Hayes and Sait noted that the Liberal party was in a period of, albeit slow and protracted, decline. 'In the interval between 10 December 1910 and 1 November 1912, the Liberals had lost eight seats to the Unionists; even the famous Mid-Lothian constituency had turned Unionist'.³⁸ The Liberals attempted to halt this trend in 1912 by promising 'to become famous by reason of the large number of important measures submitted for consideration'.³⁹ Asquith promised legislation on Irish Home Rule, Welsh disestablishment, reform of Indian government, universal manhood suffrage and regulating trade unions. This was an ambitious and positive policy platform which could have re-asserted a clear party identity.

³² P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

³³ C. A. Beard and C. H. Hayes, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 26, 4 (December 1911), 735–772, p.759.

³⁴ David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Kinnock*, (London: Heinemann, 1991), pp.18–20.

³⁵ Dennis, 'Impressions of British', p.533.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Roy Jenkins, *Mr. Balfour's Poodle: Peers Versus People*, (London: Heinemann, 1954).

³⁸ C. H. Hayes and E. M. Sait, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 27, 4 (December 1912), 728–768, p.754.

³⁹ C. H. Hayes and E. M. Sait, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 27, 2 (June 1912), 351–384, p.369.

This legislative platform appears mistimed; it should have been attempted between 1906 and 1910, when the Liberals were in strong political position. Intense industrial unrest and Suffragette protests blighted the government for the four years before the war and detracted from their ambitious policy goals.⁴⁰ It was heavily attacked by the Conservatives who claimed that the Insurance Act alienated a large number of Liberal supporters, the Welsh disestablishment act would prove to be too costly and that in the fight for the Irish Home Rule Bill the Liberals would meet their Waterloo.⁴¹

It has been asserted that the decline of the Liberal party was inevitable due to their inability to adapt to social and political changes.⁴² This view is not supported by the political commentaries which show that the Liberals were still in a strong position electorally. The Hanley by-election has been used as an example of Liberal strength. Despite the threat that Labour would withdraw its support from the government if it contested the seat, the Liberals not only put up a candidate, they won the seat. Hayes and Sait suggest that Labour had no choice but to back down as they held little political power and were still the junior party to the Liberals.⁴³

The political commentaries do not support the modern historical analysis that by the outbreak of the war the working classes were searching for political alternatives to the Liberals.⁴⁴ In June 1913 it was noted that 'in spite of the deleterious influence of the Balkan War, industrial conditions were generally prosperous.'⁴⁵ Lloyd George had averted and settled a number of strikes and by 1913 the industrial unrest had lost the zeal and vigour it had two years earlier. They do acknowledge that the growth of trade unions strengthened the base of Labour support; the formation of the Triple Alliance between miners, railwaymen and dockers to coordinate industrial action in 1913 was an indicator of how the unions were becoming a cohesive force which required political representation. The evidence from political science journals calls into question the assertion by modern historian Roy Gregory that the miners switch to support Labour was one of the most important developments in Labour's history.⁴⁶ The political commentaries show that until 1918 there were at least two Liberal MP's representing miners and significant regional variation makes Gregory's

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Hayes and Sait, 'Record of Political Events', (December 1912), p.754.

⁴² K. Laybourn, *Modern Britain Since 1906: A Reader*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p.42.

⁴³ Hayes and Sait, 'Record of Political Events', (December 1912), p.755.

⁴⁴ A. Hutt, *The Post-war History of the British Working Class*, (1937; Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1974), pp.9–40.

⁴⁵ Carlton Hayes and E. M. Sait, 'Record of Political Events', *Political Science Quarterly*, 28, 2 (June 1913), 350–384, p.374.

⁴⁶ R. Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics, 1906–1914*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

claims difficult to quantify.⁴⁷ The political commentaries suggest that Home Rule and female suffrage had a bigger effect on the Liberals than class based issues. In 1913 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies chose to 'work against the Liberal candidate in future parliamentary elections and to cooperate with pro-suffrage Labourites.'⁴⁸ This indicates another disparity between the political commentaries and modern historical analysis.

By 1914 it was evident that there had been a change in emphasis in British politics. In June 1914 Charles Allin, a Lecturer in European History at the University of Minnesota, noted that 'the struggle is now largely one of class interests.'⁴⁹ The political commentaries focused less upon the individual actions of the party's and instead cited how the new social and economic issues were the catalyst for a reorganisation of the old party system. These new issues had forced the party members to reconsider their allegiances, and a much wider difference of opinion began to occur on party policy.⁵⁰ According to Allin the Liberals were only held together by the strength of their premier, whilst the Conservatives were hopelessly divided on issues of fiscal and social policy.⁵¹ Labour was suffering similar internal division as they attempted to weld together trade union factions with socialist idealists. In short, Allin believed that parliament was, just before the outbreak of the war, close to 'degenerating into a factional assembly'.⁵²

This research has based its conclusions on simply what the political commentators wrote about party politics between 1906 and 1914. It has utilised hitherto neglected sources but recognises the restrictions and limitations of this approach. The methodology would benefit from exploring the political bias of the commentators, and also analysing their credibility to give such assessments. Equally, comparisons with British political commentaries and further engagement with secondary sources would provide greater depth and reliability. However, what it has done is explore party politics in this period from a new perspective and highlighted some disparities with modern historical analysis which could be the focus of future research. As such, some general observations can be made.

Between 1906 and 1914 there was a shift in how the political commentators discussed the two parties of the left; initially, the Liberals and Labour were mutually exclusive. After 1910 the style and rhetoric changed

⁴⁷ G. D. H. Cole, 'Recent Developments', pp.490–491.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ C. D. Allin, 'The Position of Parliament', *Political Science Quarterly*, 29, 2 (June 1914), 214–243, p.214.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.217–218.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.218.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.219.

to discuss them as separate competing entities. It is evident that the political standing of Labour and the Liberals varied in this period; at times the Liberals appearing in a position of strength and at the others Labour appeared to be closing the gap. Hence, it is extremely difficult to make an overall assessment of either party's success or failure in the eight year period.

The period between 1906 and 1914 can be seen as two phases. The first is defined by the 1909 budget and the second by Suffragette and trade union unrest. The budget changed the composition of the political system and began the process of realignment along class lines. It appears that the Liberals neglected to adjust to this change, using class where possible as a political weapon. This challenges the interpretation that the Liberals were victims of the rise of class politics; in reality, they were a catalyst and accelerator of this process. They failed to recognise the importance of class and subsequently did not attempt to appeal to a specific section of it. The Liberals decision to make the 1910 elections a referendum on the budget was in retrospect a failure; whilst they defeated the Conservatives, it weakened their own position. They were subsequently reliant on Labour who, whilst not in a position to make a significant impact, gained credibility and began to assert a cohesive political identity.

After 1910 the Liberals could have re-asserted their dominance by implementing the radical policy proposals outlined by Asquith in 1911. However, Suffragette violence, civil unrest in Ireland and trade union strikes restricted the government, forcing them to become reactive rather than proactive. The protests destroyed the social and political consensus upon which the Liberals depended.⁵³ Hence, the Liberals were unable to implement their ambitious policy proposals. Without a clear and achievable policy platform they lost popular support and gave the impression of political impotence.

These two phases lead to one profound change in the composition of the political system. In 1911 Dennis had asserted that there was not the ideological space in the political system for the Labour party. However, by 1914 this had changed. Without representing a class interest, and restricted by the protests, the Liberal's political identity decreased. They were not in decline; they were merely restricted sufficiently for Labour to find an ideological space upon the political spectrum. United as one political party, bolstered by trade union support and gaining credibility by supporting the Liberals from 1910, Labour became a viable political entity. It may be argued that Labours success after the war was established by these two phases before the war.

⁵³ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, (1935; London: Paladin, 1961), p.60.

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Adam Gillett

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Adam Gillett

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