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Meeting Report
The Strange Death of Liberal England:
Revisited

Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting, 10 July 2023, with Professor Vernon Bogdanor CBE and Professor Richard Toye; chair: Anne Perkins.

Back in 2012, when I started my PhD journey, the very first book that I purchased was George Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, first published in 1935. My first chapter was to assess the link between the collapse of the Liberals in England and the Liberals in Wales. I read it within a few days, it was a hard book to put down. The story just flowed and the plot unravelled like a great whodunnit. However, I noted its contradictions, the ire directed at the key actors, in particular, Lloyd George and the Conservatives. I was struck by the animosity that Dangerfield directed at Lloyd George and the Welsh.

However, as the first book that I had read on the subject, I thought it to be a plausible description of the decline and, had I read nothing else on the subject, I very may well have accepted it as the definitive account. Yet, Dangerfield was the start of a rabbit hole that any historian of the era must descend. What became obvious was that Dangerfield was the beginning of a debate and it is a testament to his work or, at least, its effect on the academic and public consciousness, that it took around 30 years for the next major work on the subject to be published. Trevor Wilson's *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-35*, published in 1966, identified the cause to be the illiberal actions of the Liberals during the First World War to be at fault. Then came Peter F. Clarke's *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, Duncan Tanner's *Political Change and the Labour Party* and a whole host of other articles and books on the

English and Welsh decline by, among others, Kenneth O. Morgan, Tanner & E.H.H. Green, Russell Deacon and J. Graham Jones.

With each new work, it became obvious that all of these authors were using Dangerfield's work as their jumping-off point. Whilst none of them fully agreed with the arguments in the *Strange Death of Liberal England*, they all acknowledged the debt owed to this work. As a contemporary historian, no matter whether you are looking at the Liberals, the cultural changes of the period, the rise of the Labour Party or the dominance of the Conservative Party, you must acknowledge a debt, make reference to or actively engage with *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Dangerfield's work looms large and cannot be ignored.

It is in this context that the Liberal Democrat History Group convened a special meeting on Dangerfield's work, *The Strange Death of Liberal England – Revisited*.

The meeting was chaired by the journalist Anne Perkins, who is currently writing a biography of Violet Bonham Carter. The special guest speakers were the historians Vernon Bogdanor and Richard Toye. Bogdanor had recently published his own contribution to the debate *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain: Politics and Power Before the First World War* (2022, Biteback) and Toye has published widely on the period including *Lloyd George and Churchill: Rivals for Greatness* (2008, Pan Books) and, as co-editor with Julie V. Gottlieb *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (2013, Palgrave MacMillan).

Vernon Bogdanor

Bogdanor began by issuing two warnings. The first was that he would not be talking about the '...strange death of the Liberal Party, but of a Liberal culture which he (Dangerfield) thought had died in 1914 and I think had not died in 1914...' The second warning was that the Liberal Party before the First World War was a 'very different animal' to the Liberal Party that

emerged after the Second World War and the Liberal Democrats. He qualifies this by stating that the Liberals before the First World War were in favour of single-chambered government, having fought the hereditary House of Lords on issues such as land reform and Lloyd George's 'People's Budget'. He also reminds us that the Liberals were very much in favour of the First Past the Post electoral system, having won a landslide General Election victory in 1906, albeit on a minority of the vote – almost 49%.

Bogdanor then began to set out his case that Liberal Britain was in a state of flux in the pre-WWI era, challenging the Liberals but not fatally wounding them. There were ideological challenges to traditional Gladstonian Liberalism, Joseph Chamberlain was calling for the end of Free Trade and the political system was moving from an aristocratic to a democratic system. Women and trade unions were also demanding representation and recognition. Yet, Bogdanor pointed out that a major turning point of the era was that the economy had become part of the political debate, something which had not occurred in the previous century. Bogdanor argued that the 19th Century debates had been constitutional and religious, but the 20th Century debate was about managing the economy. He points out that the economy and Westminster were once seen to be separate spheres, neither could influence the other, but this was no longer the case. William Harcourt's famous remark 'We're all socialists now' pointed to the move to a planned economy and the change of debate. This newfound focus on the economy then led to the social question and a realisation that societal inequalities were no longer 'divinely ordained.' They could be tackled by the state and its management of the economy.

For Bogdanor, Dangerfield's thesis that Liberal England was killed by the inability of the Liberal Party to meet the challenges of Labour, the Suffragettes or a failure to resolve the Irish issue was incorrect. Bogdanor points out that these and the other issues of the pre-WWI

era had been, largely, sorted out. The House of Lords had been dealt with, the trade unions were being incorporated into the state, Ireland was on the way to a solution and the suffrage issue would eventually be resolved after the War.

Issue One: Women's Suffrage

The second part of Bogdanor's talk expanded on two of the issues that Dangerfield identified as finishing off Liberal England, namely women's suffrage and Ireland. For Bogdanor, the first issue was something that the Liberals had not succeeded on before the War and the second was something that he felt they had succeeded at. On the suffrage question, he notes that Britain had claimed to fight the Boer War on a question of democracy. The Outlanders, British citizens living in Transvaal, were given no vote and their grievances could not be dealt with. In effect, it was argued, the lack of a vote marked them with a badge of inferiority. Bogdanor linked the Outlander's feeling of inferiority to that of women feeling inferior in the land of their birth, due to the lack of voting rights. Yet, he points out that by the mid-1880s, women made up 17% of the local electorate and by the 1890s, 1500 women were being elected to local government.

Bogdanor further points out that there was a majority in parliament in favour of women's suffrage, via votes received on private member bills, but the government would not take the issue further. He acknowledges that the misogyny and antipathy of Asquith and others had played a part in delaying the progress of women's suffrage, but it was not the only reason. Bogdanor argues that there were other factors in play, and these included the animosity of several prominent women who were openly opposed to women gaining the vote. These opponents included Florence Nightingale, Mrs Asquith, Lady Randolph Churchill, the archaeologist Gertrude Bell and, until November 1906, Beatrice Webb.

Bogdanor then states that the issue of granting women the vote had not only divided the leadership of the main parties but also the ordinary MPs. There was a majority in favour, as already pointed out, but on what terms should women be given the vote? Should it be on the same terms as the men currently held, which was based on property ownership, or should full adult suffrage be granted? Bogdanor also shows that the issue was further complicated by two prominent organisations whose *raison d'être* was to gain the vote for women. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) wanted women to obtain the vote on the same basis as men. Neither wanted full adult suffrage.

Bogdanor argued that it was this lack of clarity, from all sides, as to how to progress, coupled with the suffragist's militancy and a lack of political will that stymied the suffrage course before the outbreak of the war. However, women were granted limited suffrage in 1918 and full adult suffrage was granted in 1928.

Issue Two: Ireland

Bogdanor then moved on to the issue of Ireland and Ulster, noting that this was a success for the Liberals. He notes that before the outbreak of the First World War, the Liberals had accepted that there was no way to force Ulster to be part of an Irish Home Rule Parliament and Ulster was given the right to exclude itself. This had two problems, how long should Ulster exclude itself and what counted as Ulster. The first was solved when Asquith agreed that Ulster could exclude itself for an unlimited amount of time or until the Unionist opinion changed. The second problem was the demographic of the nine counties of Ulster. It was agreed that Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, with their large Catholic majorities, should join with the Dublin Parliament. Antrim, Derry, Armagh and Down had large protestant

majorities and should be excluded. But the issue would be that Fermanagh and Tyrone had small Catholic majorities and both sides would lay claim to these counties.

Bogdanor argued that had the War not intervened, then the issue of Fermanagh and Tyrone would have been settled by force and a civil war could have ensued. However, as war on the continent was looking ever more likely, Bogdanor argued that the prospect of a civil war in Ireland was less likely because Ulster would have had to look to English unionists for support. In England, the unionists were worried that any civil war could prevent Britain from entering a continental war and would play into Germany's hands. Also, Lloyd George's assertion that 'Men would die for the Empire but not for Fermanagh and Tyrone' would have added to the unionist's hesitancy to join with Ulster. Bogdanor concluded by pointing out that 'the British parties were actually much closer in Irish matters than appeared or willing to admit. Home Rule on the basis of partitions was a *fait accompli* and the years of party struggle had produced the materials for settlement by consent.' Bogdanor believed that if the war had not intervened, then a very moderate Dublin Parliament would have been placed on the statute books.

Richard Toye – The Strange Survival of George Dangerfield

Whereas Bogdanor directly engaged with Dangerfield's arguments, Toye took a different approach and fired up the PowerPoint. Instead of arguing about the merits of Dangerfield's thesis, he wanted to explore why we are still arguing about a 90-year-old book and why it is still an important work. He also asked that the audience think of his talk as him making notes on how to write a book that will not only survive but will still be debated 100 years after it was written.

Toye starts by giving a mini-biography of Dangerfield. He then moves on to ask what influenced the book and what sources were available to Dangerfield. Toye notes that

Dangerfield was born in 1904 and his recollections of the period, by his admission, 'were not very helpful.' This opened Dangerfield to resentment from those who were still alive and had 'lived it' pointing out that he had been too young to remember the events. But, as Toye points out, those who had 'lived it' do not always get it right either. Toye argued that the sources Dangerfield cited were vague, based on published materials and 'private information'. It is not clear what the 'private information' was or if it involved any interviews.

However, Toye argues that the book should be seen more as an early contribution to the field of contemporary history, a term that was not readily recognised at the time as an academic discipline. Toye also shows that the book was not only reviewed in the *Journal of Social Science* but also in the press, weeklies and quarterly journals. A substantial amount of press that an academic work would rarely get today. But, as Toye points out, Dangerfield was not looking for traditional academic acceptance and R.C.K Ensor's criticism that his book was written like a novel would not have bothered Dangerfield.

Toye noted that the book is fun to read and is written in an irreverent way, possibly influenced by Margot Asquith's autobiography and J. Maynard Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Both of them offered blunt portraits of historical figures and did not conform to the norms of how a public figure should write about others.

Toye also argued that the book and its arguments could be very incoherent, contradictory and opaque. For example, Dangerfield puts a strong emphasis on the 1910-14 period as being the point that Liberalism died, but Toye shows that he claimed the Liberal Party was doomed by events varying from the 1906 General Election to the Curragh incident in 1914 and the death of Rupert Brook in 1915. Dangerfield was undermining his thesis, not just once but on multiple occasions.

On the issue of Dangerfield's title and what exactly had died, Toye notes that those who argued that Liberalism had survived do not appear to have paid attention to Dangerfield's assertion in the preface that the 'true pre-War Liberalism – supported, as it still was in 1910 by Free Trade, a majority in Parliament, the ten commandments and the illusion of Progress – can never return. It was killed, or it killed itself, in 1913.' Toye explained that all four of these tenets of the old liberalism had passed and Dangerfield was suggesting that a kind of moral order had died with them.

Toye then quotes from some of the contemporary reviews of the book and it is obvious that, even when it was first published, Dangerfield's thesis was being questioned.

Toye then proceeds with his aforementioned notes on how to write a book that will last for 100 years. He notes that he will need a catchy title, the book must be highly readable and needs to have a plausible argument. But the argument cannot be uncontentious and needs to be something that people want to disagree with.

Toye argues that the book survived because it proved a foil for historians. 'It gave them something to argue against and sometimes, I think it's fair to say, that historians have argued against a caricatured version of the argument or a simplified version of the argument, as opposed to what Dangerfield actually said himself.'

In conclusion, Toye noted that the work '...raised important questions, even if it did not get all the answers right.'

Following the conclusion of the talks, it was obvious that the audience had been thoroughly engaged and asked many questions. One questioner focused on Campbell-Bannerman's attitude to giving women the vote, with Bogdanor mentioning that he was mildly in favour of it. Another asked if the electoral decline of the Liberals, between 1906 and the 1930s, was more a reflection of the increased size of the electorate. Bogdanor didn't think

it was, as the Liberals were not putting up enough candidates and the Liberals were seen as divided and unhelpful on women's suffrage. Toye thought it was too late for the Liberals to present themselves as being on the side of women. There were other questions, including whether the Liberals failed because they had lost their nerve and whether Dangerfield should be read as serious history or not.

In concluding this report, it has to be said that by framing their talks in two distinctive ways, the audience was treated to an interesting, entertaining and rounded example of why Dangerfield still matters. Almost 90 years after publication, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* still has the power to provoke debate amongst academics and the public alike.

Dr Nicholas K. Alderton

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