The Liberal Party

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The Liberal Party provides at once the confirmation and the denial of the view that Britain naturally has a two-party system. In its period of growth and greatness from the mid-nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War, the Liberal Party functioned as the left wing of a two-party system. Breakaway parties, such as the Peelites or the Liberal Unionists, were duly absorbed into one wing or the other. Then, when the Labour Party emerged on the scene, the demise of the Liberal Party seemed to confirm the essentially dualistic character of British politics. During the 1930s, 1940s or early 1950s the persistence of the Liberal Party at a minor level was seen as the obstinate refusal of a dying party to accept that fate. The only outcome other than death allowed by the inexorable system was absorption into one of its two wings.

Yet a two-big-plus-one-small party system lasted longer than any other party system in Britain’s history – from 1924 (when, with the slump in the Liberal vote from 30 to 18 per cent, it ceased to be one of three similarly sized parties) to 1974 (when Liberals were joined in parliament by other small parties). Throughout this half-century the Liberal Party did not just survive; it recruited new supporters and provided a source of new political thinking. It never showed the characteristics one would expect to find in a dying party – an ageing electorate and core of active supporters, steady retreat to declining areas or groups, or obstinate defence of outdated policies. During the late 1950s there was a tendency, both among Liberal leaders and
among commentators who had previously written the party off, to see the Liberal revival as a new phenomenon, appropriate to present and coming times. For both, the party’s past was something of an irrelevance; the mood was caught by the titles of a book (The Liberal Future, 1959) and pamphlet (The New Liberalism, 1957) by Jo Grimond.

But the continuity was more significant than the novelty. Jo Grimond himself had fought his first election in 1945 (at the age of 32), as had the two Liberals who were managing the party with him around 1960 – Frank (now Lord) Byers (30) and Mark Bonham Carter (28). And whilst at the 1945 election the Liberal vote had been falling in rural areas (and Liberal seats were lost), the party made signal advances in its voting support in the suburban constituencies which had seen the most rapid inter-war population expansion, such as Bromley, Hendon, Ilford or Manchester Withington. The simple electoral record shows the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s as the party’s bleakest period; yet during these two decades the party was readily finding new electoral support and new activists.

Two notable Liberal recruits were the two social scientists who probably exercised most influence on public policy during this period – William Beveridge (who served briefly as a Liberal MP in 1945) and John Maynard Keynes. Liberal publications in the inter-war period had looked forward to mid or late twentieth-century ideas of management of the economy, of partnership between capital and labour and indeed to some form of industrial democracy. The striking changes in Britain’s world role during the latter part of the twentieth century were also foreseen by the party. The Liberal Party shared the vanguard with Labour in promoting decolonisation – and was indeed ahead of it by several years in realising that this meant withdrawing from the United Kingdom’s East of Suez military role. It was well ahead of both larger parties in advocating membership of the Common Market, and dealt with resistance to the European idea among its own traditional free-trading wing more easily than the two bigger parties did with their imperialists or Little Englanders. Whatever the explanation for the relative irrelevance of the Liberal Party in parliamentary or public policy terms, it is clearly not the failure to keep abreast of the times.

The perspective of this volume is one of a two-party system which, having once been dominant, is now seriously undermined. The Liberal Party occupies a very special position in this perspective. It is