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The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party

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## *The franchise factor in the rise of the Labour Party*

THE literature on the rise and fall of the Liberal Party is voluminous and inconclusive. We believe it is inconclusive because it usually assumes British politics to be structurally static. We wish to suggest that changes in the structure of British politics are at least as significant as chronological developments: in other words, that the changes in the franchise are at least as significant as the effects of the First World War.<sup>1</sup> On the evidence presented to date, after all, the post-war difficulties of the Liberal Party are paradoxical and difficult to explain. In practice, the problems are such that nearly all historians are forced to argue that the First World War was decisive in fragmenting the Liberal Party's support and in leaving the way clear for Labour. But the 'war' argument has never been satisfactorily demonstrated. Undoubtedly it is not methodologically easy to compare the pre- and post-war electoral situations, but it will not do to fail to attempt such a comparison. To argue that, since comparison is difficult, historians must resort to secondary arguments, is clearly absurd. In this article we will suggest that too little attention has been given to the size of the Edwardian electorate, and the effect which it had on the form and nature of Edwardian politics. Furthermore, this electorate, created in two stages by the Reform and Redistribution Acts of 1867-8 and 1884-5 and by a number of ancillary minor acts, has not adequately been compared with its successor, a product of the 'fourth' Reform Act of 1918.<sup>2</sup> Such a comparison may provide the necessary data to explain the Liberal Party's decline. We will also suggest that the Liberals were wedded to the forms of the 1867-1914 political community as their opponents were not, that the ideologies of both the Labour and Conservative parties made them better able to exploit a fully democratic franchise, and that these things were true before 1914 as well as after the war.

Of all countries with a more or less representative system of government in 1914, the United Kingdom and the kingdom of

1. The authors would like warmly to acknowledge the research assistance of Miss Sue Curry, and the help of the Board of the Faculty of Modern History of Oxford University, which made a grant towards her efforts.

2. We have excluded Ireland from our discussion as far as possible.

Hungary alone did not have manhood suffrage.<sup>1</sup> Yet with one of the most limited electorates in Europe, this country was widely regarded by contemporaries (or, at least, by British contemporaries) as a mature democracy – and this was even true of some well-known progressive politicians who failed to recognize that while the expectation of what ‘democracy’ meant had changed, the system remained the same. In July 1885 Chamberlain wrote that ‘government of the people by the people . . . has at last been effectively secured by the two measures which together constitute the great achievement of Mr. Gladstone’s second administration’.<sup>2</sup> Sir Henry Maine agreed: 1884 had begun an era of ‘unmoderated democracy’.<sup>3</sup> But this was not merely a Liberal delusion. Ten years after this another democratic paladin, Keir Hardie, a man in many ways a Liberal in Labour dress, stated flatly that ‘there is no need now to fight the battle of the franchise. Our fathers did that, and today only the details remain to be adjusted.’<sup>4</sup> In Robert Tressall’s novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, a work often regarded as an accurate portrayal of Edwardian working-class life, the following exchange is recorded.

‘Presently when there is an election, you will go and vote in favour of a policy of which you know nothing . . . You are not fit to vote’.

Crass was by this time very angry.

‘I pays my rates and taxes’, he shouted, ‘an’ I’ve got as much right to express an opinion as you ’ave. . . .’<sup>5</sup>

But Tressall’s ‘philanthropists’ were all peripatetic house-painters, the majority of whom almost certainly would not have been able to vote at all: a view confirmed by the novel’s emphasis on the frequent ‘fittings’ of both lodgers and householders.<sup>6</sup> From the other – Tory – side, Reynolds and the Woolleys, in their sympathetic study of the Edwardian working class, argued that the

1. The point is made generally – not, though about Hungary – in W. L. Arnstein, ‘The Survival of the Victorian Aristocracy’, in F. C. Jaher (ed.) *The Rich, the Well Born and the Powerful: Elites and Upper Classes in History* (Chicago, 1973), pp. 220–1. The Hungarian aristocracy did not fail to take the point. See the comments of Count Julius Andrassy during the Hungarian suffrage crisis of 1905–6 (A. J. May, *The Hapsburg Monarchy, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 359).

2. In the preface to *The Radical Programme* (London, 1885), p.v. Gladstone, typically, was more accurate and more revealing. In 1887 he wrote that the country ‘is in principle a self-governing country. This principle, indeed, though fully recognized, has until lately been only applied to practice in a manner extremely partial and fitful. Even now it is still struggling out of its swaddling clothes, and probably nothing better than a more or less effective approximation to an acknowledged law is in the nature of things attainable’. (‘Electoral Facts of 1887’, *Nineteenth Century*, Sept. 1887).

3. Sir Henry Maine, *Popular Government* (London, 2nd ed. 1886), p. 92.

4. J. Keir Hardie, ‘The Independent Labour Party’, in A. Reid (ed.), *The New Party* (London, 1895), p. 258. Hardie’s complete naivety about electoral statistics is clearly shown in A. Rosen, *Rise Up Women* (London, 1974), p. 23.

5. R. Tressall, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London, 1914), p. 9.

6. Almost certainly the only voter in that motley bunch would have been the foreman.

only objectionable feature of the structure was plural voting but that otherwise electoral access was universal.<sup>1</sup>

Memory also can play tricks, even to the sharpest observer. Thus Robert Roberts, in his reminiscences of Salford slum life, attributes to the world war significant changes in voting habits. 'Dyed in the wool Tories', he writes, 'who had voted Conservative since getting the franchise, were talking now not "Liberal" but "Labour".'<sup>2</sup> Many, no doubt, did vote Tory before 1914, but in Salford North (evidently Roberts' constituency) only 53 per cent of the adult male population was on the register, and it seems a fair assumption that the very poorest – the classic slummies, the frequent flitters – against whom the pre-1918 system most obviously discriminated – had never voted for any party.

Similar comments are legion; the point may be obvious but it is, nevertheless, one frequently ignored, even when most relevant. Dr Pelling, for example, in his *Social Geography of British Elections*, while mentioning the case of Tower Hamlets, does not discuss levels of enfranchisement elsewhere, though he provides the reader with more or less all other relevant information. Two assumptions have persisted about the post-1885 British electorate. First, that it was essentially democratic, and that, if there was injustice, it was, in Lowell's words, an injustice that 'affects individuals alone. No considerable class in the community is aggrieved'.<sup>3</sup> Second, that political parties were, *ex hypothesi*, already acting in a democratic arena and that their function was the mobilization of a mass electorate. It was, for example, Ostrogorski's aim to show how they went about it. How much working politicians followed the implications of these assumptions will be examined later.

Even a brief examination of the electoral system as it worked in 1910 shows that both of these assumptions are wrong. Rosenbaum then claimed that it was intended 'to produce a sort of electoral college . . . the members of this college are constituted not by election, but by selection; and not merely by selection, but by the elimination of those who may not be members.'<sup>4</sup> It automatically eliminated paupers, estimated by Rosenbaum as 472,000 in 1910; living-in servants (except in Scotland), 205,000; any son living with his parents who could not claim exclusive use at any time of his own room;<sup>5</sup> lodgers in rooms whose unfurnished rental was

1. S. Reynolds and B. and T. Woolley, *Seems So!* (London, 1912), p. 147. Their West Country working-class subjects, many of them fishermen, were, it is true, more likely to have been on the registers than the industrially employed.

2. R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (Manchester, 1971), p. 178 and 178 n.

3. A. L. Lowell, *The Government of England*, 2 vols. (New York, 1910), i. 214.

4. 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*, lxxiii (1910), 473. Almost all serving soldiers and sailors were also excluded.

5. This was plainly a middle-class franchise: very few working-class bachelors would have had a bedroom to themselves.

less than £10; as well as peers, lunatics, and, of course, women. The pre-1867 notion of the vote as a trust, a view shared both by J. S. Mill and Palmerston, remained. Thus the section on 'Life and duties of the citizen' in Arthur Acland's 'Evening School Code' of 1893 described 'the vote as a trust as well as a right'.<sup>1</sup> Inept citizenship led to the loss of the right, as a 1905 local government order showed: parents claiming school meals for their children under the order lost their right to vote.<sup>2</sup> That right was, in fact, still something dependent on a successful claim to possession. Conceptually, therefore, it differed little from the pre-1867 situation. This was because the nineteenth-century Reform Acts had widened the membership of the electorate, but had not fundamentally altered the nature of the franchise system: the right to vote was a privilege purchased through property, whether by its occupation, its ownership, or, in the case of the servant franchise, by an economic relationship to an owner of property. Many franchises were of great antiquity. It was not even known how many there were. But of the seven chief franchises only two, and those of little numerical significance – the freeman and the university franchise – were not directly linked to the ownership or occupation of property.<sup>3</sup> As J. R. Clynes observed, the Speaker's Conference proposals of 1917 introduced for the first time an approximation to the view that 'the right that a man has for a vote is that he is a man'.<sup>4</sup>

The system also did more than exclude specific categories, important though these exclusions were. On 1 January 1910 there were 7,659,717 men on the rolls (including Ireland).<sup>5</sup> By allowing for 450,000 plural voters, Rosenbaum calculated that the total number of men *not* on the register was 4,665,000.<sup>6</sup> Dilke, an old hand at this game since the 1884–5 conferences, thought he underestimated the number of plural voters,<sup>7</sup> and J. R. Seager, the

1. See G. Wallas, *Human nature in politics* (London, 1920), pp. 191–2.

2. Because the feeding was done by the Boards of Guardians. See Bentley B. Gilbert, *The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain* (London, 1973), pp. 108–9. Striking could also lead to disfranchisement, for a long strike often made many strikers paupers; see, e.g., Hardie on some 4000 disfranchised Merthyr miners in 1900, in K. O. Morgan, *Keir Hardie* (London, 1975), p. 114.

3. The five franchises important for registration levels were: Property (40s. freeholders, etc.); Occupation (property of £10 yearly value); Householder (occupier as owner or tenant of a separate dwelling, the landlord not being resident); Service (occupier of a separate dwelling by virtue of office or employment); and £10 Lodgers. For these, and an elegant exposition of the complexities of franchises and registration, see Neal Blewett, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885–1918', *Past and Present*, xxxi (Dec. 1965); much illuminating detail will be found in P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), ch. 5, pp. 427–9, and P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberal and Labour: The Struggle for London 1885–1914* (London, 1967), pp. 68–72.

4. *Hansard*, 5th Series, xcii. 530 (28 Mar. 1917).

5. Rosenbaum, p. 473.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 475.

7. Discussion of Rosenbaum's paper, *ubi supra*, pp. 520–2.

Liberal national agent, privately estimated them in 1912 at 520,000.<sup>1</sup> Professor Blewett, whose work has done so much to draw our attention to this question, concludes that there were 'at least half a million plural voters'.<sup>2</sup> A figure of 500,000 would, therefore, probably not be an exaggeration. This means that J. A. Pease's guess, made when drafting the 1912 bill, that there were in that year 4.6 million voteless men, is probably an underestimate, and the figure is probably closer to 4.8 million.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the exact number, it seems likely that at least 4.5 million men who would have been enfranchised had the 1918 terms applied were not eligible in 1910.

Who were these men? Certain specifically excluded categories, such as those on outdoor relief, can be calculated with some certainty. For the mass, however, it is difficult to be at all specific in the post-poll book era. Few works on individual constituencies make even tentative estimates,<sup>4</sup> while other area studies or trade union histories hardly seem aware of the problem, though Clegg, Fox and Thompson were the first historians to draw attention to it at a national level.<sup>5</sup>

A geographical analysis of levels of enfranchisement in 1911 immediately reveals a pattern.<sup>6</sup> England and Wales, nationally, show an obvious difference between boroughs and counties – a level of 59.8 per cent for the boroughs, 69.9 per cent for the counties. In Scotland the levels are both lower and closer: 57.3 per cent and 62.5 per cent. But the national figures conceal important differentials. In the towns the scale runs from 79.7 per cent in Inverness Burghs, 78.6 per cent in Montgomery Boroughs,<sup>7</sup> 75.3 per cent in Birmingham Central to 40.6 per cent in Glasgow, Bridgeton, 39.3 per cent in Liverpool, Everton, and 20.5 per cent in Whitechapel. These are extremes, but at neither end are they isolated anomalies. Whitechapel is often assumed to be freakish, but the working-class areas of London, comprising a large number of seats, had the lowest levels of enfranchisement in the country, and the figures for seats within the conurbations generally were very low. In

1. Memorandum by J. A. Pease, MSS, Gainford [64], Nuffield College, Oxford.

2. N. Blewett, *ubi supra*, p. 31.

3. Memorandum by J. A. Pease, MSS, Gainford [64].

4. A partial exception is Roy Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics* (Oxford, 1968). See Appendix A (pp. 192–7) for an attempted electoral breakdown of mining constituencies, finding about 55% of adult miners enfranchised in the North East. See also P. Thompson *ubi supra*, and C. Wrigley on Battersea in *Essays in Anti-Labour History*, ed. K. D. Brown (London, 1974).

5. H. Clegg, A. Fox and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 269–70.

6. 1911 has been used as the basis for comparison since the *Census of England and Wales, 1911*, PP 1912–13 cxii. 13, Table 3, 'Parliamentary Counties and Boroughs' supplies electoral and male population figures. Scottish figures are taken from PP 1912–13 lxvii. 495, PP 1913 lxxx. 361 and tables on the cities in PP 1912–13 cxix.

7. Most of the amalgamated district burgh and borough seats in Scotland and Wales have high levels.

England and Wales, 32.6 per cent of borough seats (70, of which 34 were in London) had an adult male enfranchisement level of 57 per cent or less, while only 22 out of the 215 English and Welsh boroughs (most of them county towns like Taunton and Oxford) had an adult male level of 70 per cent or over. A very few industrial towns, for example Rochdale (71.1 per cent) and Halifax (70.6 per cent) have levels characteristic of the county towns, but they are exceptional. In London, socially superior divisions are markedly high. The average for Clapham, Dulwich, Croydon, Hampstead, South Kensington, Norwood and Strand is 66.1 per cent.

TABLE I<sup>1</sup>

*Examples of low enfranchisement in urban areas, 1911*

		<i>% of adult males enfranchised</i>
Tower Hamlets	7 seats	35.7
Bethnal Green	2 seats	42.6
Devonport	1 seat	47.9
Dundee	2 members	48.1
Southwark	3 seats	49.4
Islington	4 seats	49.4
Liverpool	9 seats	49.8
Glasgow	7 seats	52.4
Birkenhead	1 seat	52.8
Manchester	6 seats	53.1 <sup>2</sup>
Middlesborough	1 seat	53.6
Warrington	1 seat	53.6
Salford	3 seats	53.9
Swansea district	1 seat	54.7
Portsmouth	2 members	54.9
Southampton	2 members	55.6
Merthyr	2 members	55.7
Barrow	1 seat	56.1
Cardiff	1 seat	56.4
Morpeth	1 seat	56.4
Stockton	1 seat	56.4
Stoke	1 seat	57.0
Hanley	1 seat	58.3
Sheffield	5 seats	58.5

*Examples of urban areas with higher levels are:*

Kingston-upon-Hull	3 seats	61.9
Birmingham	7 seats	62.0
Wolverhampton	3 seats	63.0
Oldham	1 seat	63.1

1. None of these tables makes allowance for plural voters.

2. The figure for Manchester is 51.0% if suburban North-West is excluded.



TABLE I—*continued*

Newcastle-upon-Tyne	2 members	63.4
Leeds	5 seats	64.2
Bristol	4 seats	67.4
Nottingham	3 seats	67.4
Bradford	3 seats	67.9
Edinburgh	4 seats	69.1

It will be noticed that these figures, high though they are, are still below those of prosperous county boroughs.

TABLE II

Bath	68.6
King's Lynn	68.7
Cheltenham	70.7
Warwick and Leamington	73.1
Scarborough	73.1
Cambridge	73.6
Exeter	74.2
Oxford	75.0

Yet even these levels are still only reaching the *average* for the rural districts. Some examples of enfranchisement in agricultural county seats will show how wide was the overall differential.

TABLE III

Somerset	7 seats	79.4
Cornwall	6 seats	80.7
Devon	6 seats, incl. Ashburton	81.3
Lincolnshire	7 seats	84.1

Characteristic of the levels in mixed rural and suburban county divisions are, for example, Warwickshire (4 seats) – 71.3 per cent and Surrey (6 seats) – 69.4 per cent. We may here notice that the English national record holder (apart from the obvious exception of the 548.0 per cent of the City of London)<sup>1</sup> was Pudsey, where 112.1 per cent of males over 21 were enfranchised. The relationship between such levels was not uniform: a number of these county seats (including Pudsey) were Liberal, although the majority were Tory, and, despite the work of Dr Clarke, it cannot be concluded that there is a general relationship between high enfranchisement

1. In 1911 the City had a total residential male population of 10,080, but 30,988 electors, the great majority of whom lived outside the constituency.



and Liberal parliamentary representation.<sup>1</sup> The mining divisions, traditionally the safest of the Liberal county seats, nearly all had well below average levels of enfranchisement. In County Durham (8 seats), for example, the figure was 65.4 per cent. This differential was especially marked in Wales. In the five mining and steel divisions of Glamorgan<sup>2</sup> the figure was 55.6 per cent, but in 12 other predominantly rural Welsh county seats<sup>3</sup> it was 76.2 per cent.

It cannot be argued that substantial improvement in national enfranchisement levels could be achieved by registration drives, though this could help in certain constituencies. The levels of the January 1915 register – the last made up under the pre-1918 franchise and registration Acts – show only a marginal improvement on those of 1892, and if figures for the 1914 county and borough populations were available, even this change would probably

TABLE IV

*Percentage of adult males enfranchised in England and Wales<sup>4</sup>*

	England and Wales	Counties	Boroughs
1892	66.9	73.2	59.7
1901	63.0	68.1	56.9
1911	65.6	69.9	59.9
1915	68.1	72.8	61.9

disappear. The register of January 1915, compiled from the overseers' lists of July 1914, may well have represented as high an enfranchisement level as could be achieved under the old franchise and registration system; the war had begun before the revision courts began to sit, and the lists consequently went through the revising barristers' courts for the most part uncontested by the party organizations.<sup>5</sup>

1. See Appendix at the end of this article.

2. East, Rhondda, Gower, Mid and Southern.

3. Anglesey, Brecknock, Cardigan, Camarthen East and West, Denbigh East and West, Flint, Merioneth, Montgomery, Pembrokeshire, Radnor.

4. Made up from the 1891, 1901, 1911 census tables, *PP* 1893-4 xx. 675, which allows comparison of the 1892 electorate with the 1891 population, and *PP* 1914-16 lii. 596. The England and Wales column includes university voters. The 1915 figure is calculated on the basis of the 1911 census using an adult male percentage of 57%. On the basis of the 1914 male population estimate of Mitchell and Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (1962), p. 10, the England and Wales figure is 66.4% (*i.e.* below the 1892 figure); no estimates for the 1914 borough and county populations have been found. Because of the rapidly declining birth rate throughout this period, it is important to calculate the *adult* male percentage; comparison on the basis of the all-male population is misleading. The following have been taken in this article as the percentages of males aged 21 and over: 1891, 51.7%, 1901, 54.4%, 1911, 56.0%, 1915, 57.0%, 1921, 59.5%.

5. See W. E. Hume-Williams in *Hansard*, 5th series, lxxiii. 1857 (23 July 1915).

After the 1918 Act enfranchisement levels quickly rose very high.<sup>1</sup> The preponderance of men as plural voters and the fact that women's enfranchisement depended upon a property qualification, nevertheless ensured that almost everywhere female enfranchisement was markedly lower than male. By the autumn register of 1921,<sup>2</sup> the English adult male enfranchisement level was 94.9 per cent and only 39 out of the 509 constituencies in England and Wales had levels of less than 85 per cent for males over 21. Eight of these were in London (Chelsea (82.4), Hammersmith North and South (77.7, 84.4), Paddington South (80.6), St Pancras SE. and SW. (79.0, 74.7), Mile End (59.1), Whitechapel (57.1). A surprising number of the rest were in those country towns previously noted for high levels, but some of these are to be explained by such local anomalies as university terms or military and boarding-house absences: Oxford (82.4), Weston-super-Mare (84.7), Bourne-mouth (78.4), Aldershot (66.0), Epsom (82.5), Brighton (82.9), Hastings (82.2), Eastbourne (80.6), Salisbury (80.6), Carnarvon Boroughs (74.4). One, Cardiff, had a higher female than male percentage level (84.1 male, 85.0 female). Because plural voting continued, these figures do not give one man-one vote levels; 76 seats in England and Wales in 1921 had an adult male registration percentage of 100 or over.

The national increase was dramatic enough – from 68.0 per cent to 94.9 per cent in England and Wales – but for the urban areas of previous low enfranchisement the increase was in many cases spectacular, with the adult male level of enfranchisement being in some great cities almost doubled, Glasgow for example increasing from 52.4 per cent to 101.3 per cent. The extensive redistribution of 1918 means that the 1921 constituencies of Table V cannot exactly be compared with those of Tables I and III, but even allowing for the alteration in boundaries, the effect of the 1918 Act on urban and industrial areas is plain.

The geographical pattern of pre-1918 enfranchisement – and lack of it – is, therefore, fairly clear. It was high in rural areas, county boroughs, suburban divisions, spas and watering places. It was particularly low in the cities, in constituencies of high mobility,

1. Under this Act there were three franchises for men: one dependent on six months residence, another dependent on occupation of business premises of £10 yearly value, and the university franchise. The first enfranchised almost all adult men, the others allowed a plural vote, which could only be cast once. A proportion of females was also enfranchised, a woman over 30 being registered if a local government elector occupying property of £5 yearly value, or if occupying (in the pre-1918 sense) a dwelling house, or if married to a man similarly entitled to be registered. Since the register was now compiled twice yearly, the post-1918 local government register cannot be regarded as even an approximate indicator of how the old system would have been post-1918 had it not been reformed. See G. P. W. Terry, *The Representation of the People Act*, (London, 1919).

2. Taken from the 1921 Census, England and Wales, table 16.

and low generally in industrial seats. Although there are a few anomalies, these generalizations hold true for the vast majority of seats. As for its social characteristics, the old electoral system discriminated in the first place by sex: all women were excluded<sup>1</sup>;

TABLE V

*Examples of enfranchisements on autumn register 1921*

	Number of constituencies	% of adult males enfranchised	% of females aged 30 and over enfranchised
England	474	94.9	79.5
Wales (including Monmouthshire)	35	95.3	84.1
Scotland	70	94.1	79.2
<i>Boroughs</i>			
Glasgow	15	101.3	85.5
Sheffield	7	99.3	85.2
Merthyr and Rhondda	4	99.4	91.6
Birmingham	12	99.0	81.7
Edinburgh	5	99.0	87.0
Bristol	5	98.7	84.4
Leeds	6	97.5	82.8
Dundee	1	97.1	82.8
Liverpool	11	95.9	82.4
Salford	3	94.2	78.1
Manchester	10	93.8	81.7
London	61	93.4	79.9
Islington	4	92.1	81.0
Southwark	3	91.1	87.1
Bethnal Green	2	90.9	84.3
Stepney	3	66.9	64.7
<i>Counties</i>			
Durham	11	98.9	87.2
Cornwall	5	97.3	77.7
Warwickshire	4	95.1	76.5
Devon	7	94.8	73.4
Somerset	6	94.6	75.4
Lincolnshire	4	93.7	79.2
Surrey	7	90.1	70.4

it discriminated by class, through plural voting on the one hand, and statutory and *de facto* disfranchisement on the other; it discriminated against the poorest; it discriminated against the most

1. Though under certain conditions they had the vote in local elections.

mobile; it discriminated against the youngest; it excluded between 40 and 45 per cent of the Edwardian adult male population and in terms of the 1921 electorate this meant about 65 per cent of possible voters.

Is it now possible to analyse the Edwardian electorate further? Few national or local studies have tried, and those that do are not very reliable. Dr Russell estimates that in 1906 75–80 per cent of the electorate were members of the working class,<sup>1</sup> but even a superficial glance suggests that this is a serious overestimate. According to Routh, the *whole* of the Edwardian working class made up 79.67 per cent of the population.<sup>2</sup> But for Dr Russell's calculation to be accurate there would have to be an absolute identity between the structure of the population and that of the electorate. Plainly this was not so. Professor Blewett – on the basis of Routh's figures – judges that about 38 per cent of the electorate belonged to the middle class.<sup>3</sup> But given the high enfranchisement levels of suburban seats the registration of middle-class voters was perhaps greater than he allows for and the figure is probably more like 40 per cent or even higher: that is exactly twice the proportion the middle class bore in the electorate after 1918 when the structure of the male electorate and the structure of the male population largely conformed. Since, however, agricultural labourers are included in Routh's category of 'manual workers', even this must be a chancy sum. Dr Pelling, for example, concludes that before 1914 only 89 constituencies (electing 95 members) were 'predominantly working-class in character'.<sup>4</sup> On redistribution the number of such seats would presumably have increased substantially, but in the Edwardian electoral system the industrial working class was probably not a preponderant element.

How was such a large proportion of the male working class excluded from the registers? Most observers persist in regarding such exclusion as merely the anomalous working of laws which in principle permitted universal access.<sup>5</sup> But access was in principle already denied to four categories of people: paupers, living-in servants, most of the military, and many sons living with parents. And while it is true that the very rigorous registration requirements attached both to the occupation and lodger franchises<sup>6</sup> denied the vote to millions who might in theory have claimed it, this was anticipated when the requirements were formulated in the first

1. A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide* (London, 1973), pp. 19–21.

2. G. Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain, 1900–1960* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 4–5.

3. N. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People* (London, 1972), pp. 363–4.

4. H. M. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections* (London, 1967), pp. 419–20.

5. This is the implication of Blewett's argument in 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885–1918', *ubi supra*; and *The Peers, the Parties and the People*, pp. 358–64. See also Richard Rose, *Electoral Behaviour* (London, 1974), p. 482.

6. For details, see Blewett, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom', pp. 34–43.

place.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to disagree with the Liberal agents when they told Pease that mass disqualification was inherent in the occupation franchise.<sup>2</sup> It is hard, also, to avoid the conclusion that is precisely why it was there.<sup>3</sup>

The complexities of registration were considerable, none more so than for the £10 lodger franchise, 'a mere agent's franchise' as Professor Blewett has called it,<sup>4</sup> and in the large boroughs only 127,360 men were registered under it. Even more than the occupation franchise, it put a premium on registration and an effective constituency agent.<sup>5</sup> A successfully registered lodger was usually a small-scale triumph, and who after 1918 would have apostrophized his vote as Richard Le Gallienne, decadent friend of Wilde and Beardsley, did in 1895?

There, in my mind's eye, pure it lay,  
My lodger's votel 'Twas mine today.  
It seemed a sort of maidenhood,  
My little power for public good,  
Oh, keep it uncorrupted, pray.<sup>6</sup>

1. A. Jones, *The Politics of Reform, 1884* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 133-5. See also Joseph Chamberlain's speech 'The Fruits of the Franchise', 29 Jan. 1885, *Mr. Chamberlain's Speeches* (London, 1914), i. 152. The long process of drawing up the register meant that it was very stale when it came into operation. This did not affect the enfranchisement levels, but it did affect a party's ability to mobilize its vote, if, as in Dec. 1910, a substantial proportion of its voters might have removed; see, e.g., Clarke, *op. cit.* ch. 5.

2. 'Memorandum by A. K. Durham (Southport) on Behalf of Liberal Agents.' MS. Gainford [67], (?) June 1912.

3. One of the sharpest critics of the registration laws was Sir Charles Dilke's former secretary and a student of a genuinely democratic electorate, J. E. C. Bodley. He made the interesting point that 'the granting of the vote to women in municipal and other elections [perpetuated] the possession of property as the basis for electoral suffrage' and postponed the enactment of a uniform and 'unencumbered' franchise 'to the distant period looked forward to by politicians whose ideals need the genius of Swift or Aristophanes to do them justice', J. E. C. Bodley, *France* (London, 1898) ii. 63-4.

4. Blewett, 'Franchise in the United Kingdom', p. 41.

5. For the significance of registration, see M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (London, 1902), i. 373-82; H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Gladstone and Disraeli* (London, 1964), pp. 394-403; Grace A. Jones, 'Further Thoughts on the Franchise', *Past and Present*, xxxiv (July, 1966), pp. 134-8, emphasizes the importance of the registration agent by the end of the nineteenth century. For the work of the agent see particularly Arthur Henderson to J. R. MacDonald, 6 June, 1903, *Labour Party Letter Files LRC 9/11*; and more generally, A. Henderson and J. R. MacDonald, *Notes on Organization* (London, 1903).

Despite Henderson's assertion that it was not the function of the registration agent merely 'to keep voters off the register' (Henderson and MacDonald, p. 17), it was in practice one of his main duties. Challenging the register before a revising barrister led to much ill-will, and was an inevitable consequence of laws both complex and obscure. But it also led to considerable ingenuity. Ostrogorski records the following exchange in the Islington Registration Court:

'The Revising Barrister: A wise man would send his claim through both parties -

The Vestry Clerk: or claim through his political opponents -

The Revising Barrister: and give notice to his friends -

The Vestry Clerk: and use his opponents' conveyances at elections'. (Ostrogorski, i. 379 n.)

6. A. Reid (ed.), *The New Party*, p. 275.

Whether or not this system was deliberately so that it was class-exclusive is unquestionable, and its effect was to disfranchise almost half the industrial working class.

This may not have had consequences either for the sociology or the history of British political parties, but it is reasonable to suppose that it did. Yet until very recently this phenomenon went almost unnoticed. Ostrogorski, despite much on the absurdities of the registration requirements, never actually examined their effect, beyond concluding that 1829, 1832 and 1867 more or less completed the triumph of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Seymour at least assumed that democracy did not triumph until 1885.<sup>2</sup> These weighty, but erroneous, judgments have found their way into the conventional wisdom. Thus Dr Butler tells us that the 1884 Act 'went almost all the way to universal male suffrage',<sup>3</sup> while he and Professor Stokes assumed that the parents of their oldest cohort – the 'Pre-1918' cohort – were enfranchised.<sup>4</sup> Professors McKenzie and Silver are more directly inaccurate: they argue that the working class 'constituted a majority of the total electorate' after 1867, and that the last impediments were removed in 1884.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Clegg, Mr Fox and Mr Thompson drew attention to the national figures, and subsequently Professor Blewett, and Dr Clarke,<sup>6</sup> have tried to come to terms with the implications of a limited electorate – however, in a restricted way. But only Dr Clarke has inserted the consequences of franchise reform within his argument, and the success of this assertion is dependent, as we shall see, upon an assumption that is arguable and not proven when tested.<sup>7</sup> So far as we know, only Mr Crewe, in a long review of Butler and Stokes, and Mr Chamberlain, try to tackle the consequences of the 1918 franchise changes, but in the first case only

1. Ostrogorski, pp. 125–30, 578. But see Bagehot, who (in 1872) argued that the only question was how 'the few nominal electors – the £10 borough renters, and the £50 county renters' were able to suborn the masses. (W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (Fontana edn., London, 1973), p. 249.) Ostrogorski, Cadet deputy in the first Duma and a doctrinaire Russian liberal, would never have asked himself such a question.

2. Charles Seymour, *Electoral Reform in England and Wales* (New Haven and Oxford, 1915), p. 523.

3. D. E. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain since 1918* (Oxford, 1963), p. 5.

4. D. E. Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain* (Pelican edn., Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 66–73. The Butler-Stokes questionnaire contained no item on either enfranchisement or registration, and the historical dimension is perhaps the weakest part of this otherwise most important book.

5. Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver, *Angels in Marble* (London, 1968), pp. 9–10. It is unlikely, though, that this affects their conclusions which stand or fall on other grounds.

6. Clegg, Fox and Thompson, pp. 269–70; Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People*, pp. 358–64; P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* pp. 103–29. Roy Douglas, 'Labour in Decline, 1910–1914', in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History* (London, 1974), mentions the problem but ignores its implications.

7. See Appendix at end of article.



*en passant*, and in the second, by using national figures which are misleading and somewhat inaccurate.<sup>1</sup>

This survey of the nature and historiography of the pre-1918 electorate leads to the hypothesis which seems to us central: that it was the 1918 Representation of the People Act – the ‘Fourth’ Reform Act – that was of first importance in Labour’s replacing the Liberal Party as the principal party of progress. Such a hypothesis must argue that the events of the war were only subordinate factors in this change, and that under a genuinely democratic pre-war franchise Labour would have been a more effective rival of the other two parties than it actually was. But we do not suggest that the Labour Party would necessarily have superseded the Liberals before 1914 – it only *just* did so in the early 1920s and to ignore chronological developments would be absurd – but it is to suggest that the disproportion between their strengths would have been significantly less, and diminishing.

There is a negative and a positive reason for supposing that such a hypothesis might be true. The negative one is that the ‘war’ argument, though frequently embraced, has never been properly demonstrated, and in some cases not demonstrated at all.<sup>2</sup> It is easy to see why this should be so. It would have to be shown that the war so significantly altered the structure of the British economy and habits of thought and expectation that the social basis of the pre-war party system no longer existed, or that the divisions within the Liberal Party themselves determined the post-war successes of Labour. Finally, such an argument must assume that in the event of manhood suffrage coming before 1914 the newly enfranchised would have voted for the same political parties in the same proportion as the existing electorate, even though the mass of the new voters came from different social classes or sub-classes. However, this assumption is not argued in any of the literature, let alone proved.

But the war was not responsible for any major structural changes in the economy, and it is hard to show that it altered popular attitudes.<sup>3</sup> This is true even of franchise reform itself, as is shown below. Furthermore, those who argue for the war’s importance have also to argue that mass political behaviour is largely conditioned by the actions of a number of political élites – by events at Westminster – and indeed Dr Clarke, who believes that the mass of the potential working-class electorate was Liberal and who

1. Ivor Crewe, ‘Do Butler and Stokes Really Explain Political Change in Britain?’ *European Journal of Political Research*, ii (1974), pp. 49–72; Chris Chamberlain, ‘The Growth in Support for the Labour Party’, *British Journal of Sociology*, (1973), pp. 474–8.

2. For a discussion of this, see H. M. Pelling, *Britain and the Second World War* (London, 1970), pp. 298–9.

3. Philip Abrams, ‘The Failure of Social Reform: 1918–1920’, *Past and Present*, xxiv (1963), pp. 59–62.



explicitly asserts the crucial significance of the war, is nevertheless anxious to show that political behaviour is not conditioned by élites.

Yet we know that in 1914 this was the most industrialized country in Europe, with the largest hereditary working class, much of which was organized by a powerful and rapidly growing trade-union movement. It is hard to disagree with Sombart that growing division between capital and labour transformed the patterns of politics in Great Britain, as in western Europe, by creating social classes that could not be contained within its traditional political organizations.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, though western European working-class parties had grown rapidly since 1890, there were important national differences, and Great Britain already had a Labour Party, the agency of a trade union movement absolutely and relatively more numerous than any on the continent.

It is hardly unreasonable, therefore, at least to examine the hypothesis that the growth of the Labour Party before 1914 was limited not by 'natural' social and political restrictions, but by an artificial one: a franchise and registration system that excluded the greater part of its likely support.

The most effective test of the impact of the franchise changes on party strength would be to refight the 1922 election on the 1910 franchise.<sup>2</sup> This objective is frustrated by a combination of two factors – the major redistribution of constituencies in 1918 and the change in and variety of contest structures which occurred. We therefore adopt a more circumstantial approach and assess the principal alternative hypothesis of the origins of Labour support – that Labour was the major beneficiary of the Liberal decline. This argument has recently been criticized by Mr Chamberlain, who notes that the maximum Liberal vote achieved was 5.3 million in 1929. Their totals of 4.1 million in 1922 and 4.3 million in 1923 compare favourably with the pre-war maximum of 2.9 million in January 1910.<sup>3</sup> His view that 'it is very unlikely that Liberal supporters abandoned their party on any large scale' must, however, be exaggerated. When the size of the electorate is trebled, as in 1918, a party which fails to increase the number of its voters is doing

1. W. Sombart, *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*, 3 vols. (Munich and Leipzig, 1917), iii. 1093–1107. Sombart, of course, never assumed that in England such conflict would take a revolutionary form; see *Der Proletarische Sozialismus* (Jena, 1924), ii. 384.

2. The extensive redistribution of 1918 left very few boundaries unchanged, and the boundaries of and in most cities were altered drastically; we have not been able to find enough comparable constituencies to attempt to compare pre- and post-1918 election results, nor have we attempted to incorporate changes consequent on redistribution into our analysis; Labour's benefit from redistribution appears to have been slight; see M. Kinnear, *The Fall of Lloyd George* (London, 1973), p. 52.

Because of the complexity of party affiliations and cross affiliation in 1918, and the fact that in many constituencies the major parties were not in opposition, we have chosen for purposes of comparison 1922 as the first representative post-war election.

3. Chamberlain, 'The Growth of Support for the Labour Party in Britain', p. 475.

very badly indeed. It is unlikely that the political preferences of the male and female members of households in which men were enfranchised before 1918 were markedly different and the Liberals might have expected a total of 5 million votes in 1922-4 and 6 million in 1929 from this group alone. The erosion of Liberal support is perhaps most marked in London, where in straight fights between Conservatives and Labour there is an average swing to the Conservatives of 6.1 per cent between 1923 and 1924. In three-cornered contests, the Labour share of the vote rises in fourteen of fifteen constituencies, by an average of 5.8 per cent, while the Liberal share falls catastrophically from 31.8 per cent to 17.8 per cent.

There can therefore be little doubt that there were substantial Liberal defections, some from those who were deprived of a Liberal candidate to vote for (the Liberals fought 477 seats in 1922 - 339 Asquithian and 138 Lloyd George Liberals - and only 346 in 1924), others from those who chose to give their vote to another party. Who benefited from these defections? Some suggestive evidence is provided by Dr Butler and Professor Stokes, who find that of those who recall their father's preferences as Liberal, 40 per cent now see themselves as Conservatives and 34 per cent as Labour voters: while among those whose own earliest preferences were Liberal, the split is 25 per cent Conservative, 19 per cent Labour.<sup>1</sup> This pattern is confirmed by more detailed analysis of the London pattern described above. There is a (low) correlation between Liberal losses and improvement in the Conservative performance relative to Labour, and the two seats in which the Liberal vote holds up best (Mile End and Lambeth North) are the only two in which the Conservative share of the vote declines.

An alternative approach is to examine the second preferences of frustrated Liberal voters: those who did not have a Liberal candidate to support. We have examined those English constituencies in which Liberals contested one or two, but not all three of the elections in 1922, 1923 and 1924, and have estimated what the result would have been in each case had the Liberals withdrawn from an election which they did in fact contest. This enables us to estimate what the Liberal voters would have done had they not voted Liberal - how many would have stayed at home, and how the rest would have divided between the other two parties.<sup>2</sup> The results are shown in Table VI.

1. Butler and Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, pp. 307-8.

2. We have assumed that had a Liberal not intervened, the two-party swing and turnout change would have been the same as the average for seats in which there was no such intervention. This hypothetical result is compared with the actual result, and the difference between the actual and notional polls of each major party indicates the number of Liberals whose second preference was that party, while the difference in turnout indicates the number with no second preference.

It is possible that the differences we observe between different years are real ones: but it should be noted that if we have, for example, over-estimated Labour's gains between 1922 and 1923 the result will be that we understate the number of Liberals who voted Labour in 1923 and overstate the number of Liberals who voted Labour in 1922. The pattern of the data suggests that this may very well be so. But whether or not that is so, the general position is clear. There is a committed Liberal vote, unwilling to vote for either of the other two parties, which amounts to around 25-30 per cent of the total number of Liberal voters. The breakdown of the remaining Liberal vote does not markedly favour one party or the other. There is some indication that Liberals in urban areas were more Conservative in their preferences, those in rural seats being more likely to vote Labour, but the differences are not great. If our statistical explanation of the differences between years is correct, we can reasonably average the percentage figures and suggest that the Labour and Conservative parties each held about 35 per cent of Liberal voters' second preferences, with any marginal advantage going to the Conservatives.

Thus these different pieces of statistical evidence run strongly against the hypothesis of a single, progressive vote which in the 1920s switched its allegiance from the Liberals to the Labour party. The disintegration of the Liberal party did not produce large net gains for either of its rivals, and it is slightly more probable that the Conservatives were the beneficiaries. But it is easy to see why the opposite has been assumed. If the Conservative and Liberal parties are of roughly equal size, and Liberal support divides equally between the Conservatives and an emergent Labour party, then one of the parties which result will be overwhelmingly larger than the other. Yet even in 1924, before this process was complete and in a bad year for Labour, the new party won 5.5 million votes as against 7.8 million for the Conservatives. This success can only be explained by supposing that Labour was able to mobilize some latent source of support which had not been available to the other two parties.

Such potential support certainly existed in the pre-war electorate. Of the 579 mainland constituencies, Labour contested only 77 in January 1910 and 56 in December, obtaining (in January) just over half a million votes. We have undertaken an analysis of the second preferences of Labour voters in 1910, on similar lines to that described above. Here there is a marked contrast between Lancashire and Scotland in both of which a significant proportion of the Labour voters appear to see the Conservatives as an alternative, and the rest of the country, where that proportion is negligible (Table VII). There is a minority of Labour voters who are not accommodated by either of the then major parties. This is con-

firmed by the behaviour of Labour voters in the two cases where two Liberal and one Labour candidate sought election in two-member constituencies (Table VIII). (These Dundee and Portsmouth results are very different from those obtained in other two member seats, where Labour and Liberal candidates were in co-operation rather than in conflict, and the degree of loyalty to the ticket was very high).

Thus there is evidence of a latent Labour vote in the pre-war electorate, which could have been mobilized by more candidates. But it could not have been large. The greater proportion of Labour votes was obtained in seats where there was no Liberal opposition. Professor Blewett has shown that in the 35 cases where Labour candidates fought three cornered contests in 1910, Labour came bottom of the poll in 29, and obtained a median share of the vote of 22 per cent.<sup>1</sup> It is unlikely that the seats Labour contested were chosen at random, and if they had put up more candidates their share would certainly have been lower. An overall average share of 15 per cent would have given Labour less than a million votes in 1910. Further, the turnout in January 1910 (86.6 per cent) was the highest at any modern election. If the votes which were to bring Labour to power in the 1920s were not, in the main, being cast for the Liberals, there is little evidence that they were consciously withheld in the absence of an acceptable candidate.

Thus there was in the pre-war electorate no large pool of voters uncommitted to the existing major parties: nor was the subsequent weakening of those commitments a factor which gave net advantage to the Labour party. It follows that the substantial post-war growth in Labour's relative strength must in large measure be attributable to the franchise extension and registration reform of 1918. It is difficult to assess how large that measure is – indeed the question is hardly a meaningful one, since the factors involved in the rise of Labour are not independent. Labour's acquisition of a substantial new basis of support was clearly a factor promoting the defection of Liberal voters to both right and left. Had the Liberal vote not been crumbling for what were, at least in part, other reasons, a larger proportion of the newly enfranchised electorate might have given them their support. We cannot say how many votes the introduction of universal franchise was worth to Labour, but we can say that it was a critical element in the emergence of the party as a major political force.

Even the most tentative interpretations of these figures do not give much comfort to those who argue the existence of a single 'progressive' vote. Indeed, the more or less equal division of the

1. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People*, pp. 389–95.

TABLE VI

*How 1922 Liberals voted in 1923*

	Labour	Conservative	Abstention
Boroughs	9187	28541	14893
Counties	15592	17967	15747
<i>Total</i>	24779 (24%)	46508 (46%)	30640 (30%)

*How 1923 Liberals voted in 1922*

Boroughs	27811	29039	24683
Counties	71906	29056	49676
<i>Total</i>	99717 (43%)	58095 (25%)	74359 (32%)

*How 1923 Liberals voted in 1924*

Boroughs	101584	104192	49981
Counties	39671	19980	41341
<i>Total</i>	141255 (40%)	124172 (35%)	91322 (26%)

*How 1924 Liberals voted in 1923*

Boroughs	5911	8708	5146
Counties	17150	18139	8920
<i>Total</i>	23061 (36%)	26847 (42%)	14066 (22%)

TABLE VII

*Second preferences of 1910 Labour voters*

	Conservative	Liberal	Abstention
Lancashire and Scotland	30%	53%	17%
Other	5%	70%	25%

TABLE VIII

*Second preferences of Labour voters*

	Conservative	Liberal	Abstention
Dundee, 1906	14%	48%	37%
Portsmouth, 1910	8%	50%	42%

Liberals between right and left suggests that the Liberal Imperialists were probably correct in their assumption that their Party stood to lose equally in both directions.<sup>1</sup> The evidence thus suggests that the Liberals were unable to mobilize the fully enfranchised electorate as successfully as the Labour Party – or the Conservative Party. But the argument that the electorate was polarized into ‘right’ and ‘left’ and that the Liberals as the party of the centre were bound to lose is only *prima facie* true. We would certainly agree that as the cleavage between capital (or management) and labour became

1. For this, see H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 291–6.

a fundamental one, a party based upon organized labour seems likely to have emerged. As we suggested earlier, that argument is basic to our hypothesis. On the other hand, it is questionable how many of the new Labour voters saw themselves as specifically 'left', and in any case, full enfranchisement did the Conservatives – *the* party of property – only little harm.

Therefore, while we believe that many of the difficulties faced by the Liberal Party in the post-1918 era were intrinsic to the developments of British capitalism, we would argue also that its failure lay partly in its attitude to the political community and the nature of its political organization. This is seen at two levels: in the reluctance of the Liberals to take electoral organization seriously, and, more widely, in their incapacity to make the necessary 'demagogic' appeals to the mass electorate created by the 1918 act.<sup>1</sup>

Attempts to reform the Liberal organization – or rather to set one up – almost always failed. Herbert Gladstone's reforms as whip seemed far-reaching, but, in fact, they succeeded only in raising the number of candidates and improving their finances immediately before the election. His scheme to increase the number of permanent agents, and to coordinate them by fourteen district agents, was rejected.<sup>2</sup> A district agent scheme was started in 1910 by J. A. Pease, but the agents were responsible to district federations set up under the same scheme, which seem to have been chiefly interested in policy discussion rather than organizational detail. It is interesting that, on returning as party organizer in 1922, Herbert Gladstone did not blame the war for the collapse of organization, but rather the form of Pease's decentralized federations: 'if his [Pease's] scheme had had any bones in it, it should have been a virile force when the L[iberal] C[entral] A[ssociation] fell to pieces in 1918. It had no power of initiation, it did nothing to stop the rot, it did not even propose a policy.'<sup>3</sup> The Liberals never seem to have contemplated a formal party structure, and the notion of party membership would probably have been seen as illiberal. It is true that organization was taken more seriously after 1906, but then fitfully and only by part of the leadership. As Sir Robert Hudson pointed out in 1907, the Liberal habit in many places of having agents only at election time was hazardous, and he complained publicly in 1910 that the first retrenchment was always in organization.<sup>4</sup>

1. Sir Robert Hudson, the key organizational figure in any liberal revival, showed no awareness of any major change in his letter to Sir D. Maclean of 12 Jan. 1919, spelling out required changes; these amounted to a more effective N.L.F., an 'enlarged' publication department, 'special attention to be paid to (a) the women, and (b) the nonconformists' (Maclean MSS., Bodley dep. c. 465, fo. 121).

2. See T. O. Lloyd, 'The whip as paymaster: Herbert Gladstone and party organization', *E.H.R.* lxxxix. 796.

3. Gladstone to Hudson, 3 Feb. 1923, Add. MS. 46475, fo. 37.

4. J. A. Spender, *Sir Robert Hudson* (London, 1930), p. 119.



Despite the recovery after 1902, the Liberals in the boroughs still depended on the caucus system, which, as Ostrogorski pointed out, was already in decline in the 1890s, on the *ad hoc* personal and commercial relationships of local businessmen and other self-elected bourgeois notables. This system, even at its most perfect, would have had difficulty in coping with the demands of a very much larger electorate, but the old organization had decayed, and there were only a few signs by 1914 that the Liberals had devised a new one, unlike the still small Labour Party, which regarded mass organization as the indispensable preliminary to later political success,<sup>1</sup> and the Unionists, who greatly strengthened their organization in the late Edwardian period.

This ambiguous attitude to organization was in part a product of a rationalist view of politics that was unique to the Liberal Party. More than the other parties the Liberals assumed that the electorate could be organized, not by extra-parliamentary agencies, but by an appeal to issues, to good sense, to active citizenship, to intelligent political interest and to an articulate awareness of the content of legislation. It was the policy of 'filling the cup', of the Newcastle Programme, of the hunt for a New Liberalism, for an electorally successful social policy, for 'campaigns' (like the Land Campaign of 1912 onwards) that would excite the electorate. It is apparent equally in the earnestness with which the Liberal press tried to eschew 'stunts' and 'sensations' – the supposed chief characteristic of the Tory press. The remarkable thing about this anachronistic system is that it should have lasted so long. It did so partly because the Edwardian electorate was as narrow as it was and so defined that a fair part of it would respond to appeals of this sort.

The Liberal Party saw itself – and it was seen by its opponents on the right – as the party of democracy and of a democratic electorate.<sup>2</sup> Yet, consciously or not, the Liberals acted as if they were satisfied with the existing electorate, purified perhaps of some of its anomalies. In 1908 A. L. Lowell wrote that 'neither political party is now anxious to extend the franchise . . . and leading Liberals have come to realize that any further extension would be likely to benefit their opponents.'<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in

1. For this, see R. I. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 20–43. It is worth noting here that one of the principal reasons for re-organizing the Labour Party in 1917 was that the existing organization could not handle the electorate about to be created by the 1918 Act.

2. 'Democratic' in this sense implied not 'popular' politics but also politics divorced from class interest. The word is used interestingly by Herbert Gladstone in 1925. 'Conservatives', he wrote, 'continue on the old lines with modified secrecy and ample "coffers". Labour can tax its millions of members and collect without difficulty. . . . The Liberal Party cannot tax its supporters and if it could cannot collect. . . . The "democratic" appeal for many has failed. . . .' (Herbert Gladstone to Vivian Phillips, 19 Dec. 25, B.M. Herbert Gladstone MSS. 46475 fo. 279). In 1925, of course, the 'democratic' party was also the smallest, but Gladstone did not mean in this case that democracy equalled votes.

3. Lowell, i. 214.



1971 Dr P. F. Clarke concluded that 'with the advent of class politics, the Liberals could no longer afford to perpetuate a system which over-represented their natural opponents and excluded many of their potential supporters. Yet the logical strategy – a fourth Reform Bill – was confounded by the Government's irresolution. In obstructing the claim for woman suffrage the Liberal Party risked being hoist with its own petard'.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, the truth lies somewhere between these two. In the 1906 parliament Labour members sponsored several private manhood suffrage bills, but the Liberal offering was a plural voting bill rejected by the Lords. J. A. Pease's bill of 1912, the Liberal's most serious effort, would have abolished most forms of plural voting and would have greatly improved registration procedures, adding about 2.5 million men to the electorate. The bill was, of course, killed by the 'speaker's bombshell' – the ruling of January, 1913 that women's suffrage (the so-called Conciliation Bill) could not be tacked on to it. It was not again presented and the cabinet weakly brought forward no other major franchise bill.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from the evidence of Pease's papers, as well as from the general apathy in the house of commons,<sup>3</sup> that the government and the parliamentary Liberal party cared little about the bill. Pease blamed Lloyd George for the torpor: he certainly showed no interest in it.<sup>4</sup> Harcourt thought that the 'ship was simply carrying too much cargo'; the government's timetable was already so filled that it could not admit another 'big bill'.<sup>5</sup>

That was true – but the timetable showed priorities: a cabinet which in November 1912 put Welsh disestablishment far ahead of the fourth Reform Bill hardly seemed seized of any particular need to advance the constitutional pale,<sup>6</sup> particularly if they believed that franchise extensions would have benefited them. The *Morning Post's* comment on Pease's bill, that it would depreciate 'the standard of active citizenship',<sup>7</sup> though meant for the country vicarages, probably also reflected cabinet opinion, and certainly as a sentiment differed little from Grey's support in cabinet for payment of M.P.s (as it would rescue his constituents from the 'control of trade organizations'), or from Lloyd George's complaints of 'trade union dictation' in Wales.<sup>8</sup>

1. Clarke, p. 129.

2. Much the best source of the history of the suffrage bill of 1912 is to be found in the papers of J. A. Pease (MS. Gainford 85 (Diaries) and [63] to [65]).

3. See the *Manchester Guardian*, 18 June 1912: 'Time was when a Reform Bill would not only have set the roofs of Bristol ablaze but kept members from their tea. We have changed all that. Tonight in a listless and half-empty House . . . a new Reform Bill was introduced. . . .' The *Daily News* thought that 'the week-end habit was to blame' (18 June 1912).

4. MS. Gainford 85, 27 Jan. 1913.

5. Harcourt to Pease, 27 Dec. 1912, MS. Gainford [63].

6. MS. Gainford 85, report of the cabinet of 20 Nov. 1912.

7. *Morning Post*, 18 June 1912.

8. MS. Gainford 85, 6 July 1910.

As Lowell suggested, the cabinet would probably have liked a simple plural voting bill. Pease, constantly obstructed in his attempts to bring in a large bill, was under pressure to produce a quick one. The Liberals had done a good deal of research into the effects of plural voting, though characteristically without reaching unanimity: the *Westminster Gazette* calculated that the Liberals stood to gain about thirty seats;<sup>1</sup> Pease that they stood to gain about nine.<sup>2</sup> But it was agreed that a plural voting bill would remove the only known bias against the Liberals in the existing structure. It was widely assumed that there would be such a bill. The secretary of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson, told Ramsay MacDonald, on 'reliable authority', that the Liberal chief whip, Illingworth, had addressed the Liberal agents 'on the lines of "a general election next year, and certainly not without the passing of the Plural Voting Bill"'.<sup>3</sup> But the cabinet could not even manage that. Pease's cajoling – a mixture of idealism and self-interest: he told the Cabinet that the 1912 bill was the 'best method to secure Liberals in power and safeguard Peace of World, Free Trade – trusts of which we are custodians'<sup>4</sup> – came to nothing.

There is, of course, a danger of overinterpreting evidence. Cabinet apathy towards reform may only indicate that its importance was misunderstood or that the problem of the women's vote was genuinely felt to be insuperable. There is little *direct* evidence to show that the cabinet shrank from electoral reform because of fear of its electoral consequences. As is plain from J. R. Seager's well-known report to Elibank in November, 1911, the secretaries of the Liberal federations were, on the whole, in favour of manhood suffrage: only the Western federation said that it would add to the rolls 'the loafer and the wastrel'.<sup>5</sup> But all to some degree recognized that there was an element of leaping in the dark: the Yorkshire Federation thought that the 'extensive enfranchisement' of young workers would benefit Labour and hurt the Liberals in industrial Yorkshire; the Scottish Federation argued that the enfranchisement of young men 'with no votes at present would give the Labour Party an enormous addition of strength'. Press reports suggest some Liberal anxieties.<sup>6</sup>

1. *Westminster Gazette*, 30 Dec. 1910.

2. Memorandum by J. A. Pease, 17 Jun. 1912; MS. Gainford [111].

3. Henderson to MacDonald, 29 May 1914, *Labour Party Letter Files*, 'LP/MAC/09/1/73'.

4. 'Notes for Cabinet on Franchise Bill, ? Jan. 1912', MS. Gainford [68].

5. Report filed as P.R.O., Cab. 37/108/148, 16 Nov. 1911.

6. See the report of the London commentator of the *Yorkshire Post*, 19 June 1912. 'Even in the Liberal clubs' he detected no 'enthusiasm' for the bill. The Party agents, he said, in 'the Metropolitan divisions, as in other constituencies' feared the influx of new voters. 'In every London constituency, I am informed, men qualified by the Bill can be found in thousands who have not hitherto aspired to a Parliamentary vote. . . . Whether the change would favour the Radicals or the Unionists in London is a moot point, on which expert opinion is divided. . . .'

Action and priorities in politics are what in the long run matter; on this test the Liberals were not a franchise reforming party. On the contrary, there was constant slackness and dragging of feet. Typically, only the Labour Party turned up in force to vote for the bill in 1912, since it alone supported it in practice.<sup>1</sup>

Nor did the Liberals necessarily become enthusiastic or willing franchise reformers during the war itself. The huge numbers of men displaced by military and naval service, and by temporary changes in place of employment, meant that the franchise and registration system, based predominantly on property occupation and stability of domicile, very quickly broke down, as one of the first Acts of the war anticipated – the Electoral Disabilities (Naval and Military Service) Removal Act of 7 August 1914. Was a £10 lodger still a £10 lodger at Mons? Yes, because the war was expected to be short: but what once he had survived to Gallipoli? The lists for the 1916 register were compiled in the summer of 1915, but the process was stopped before the stage of the autumnal revising barristers' courts was reached.<sup>2</sup> Politicians thus faced a situation either of continuing to use the January 1915 register, based on the lists of July 1914, or of attempting a war-time register, or of starting afresh on a new franchise and registration basis. The Asquith coalition went to very considerable lengths to avoid a fresh start, attempting unsuccessfully 'the creation of some form of *ad hoc* temporary or special register', but on the premise of 'no alteration in the franchise itself'.<sup>3</sup> Lloyd George in the debate in March 1917 on the Speaker's conference proposals, observed in 'a plain little talk' that in the period 1914–16 'every effort was made to eliminate anything in the nature of a franchise proposal' and to arrange a temporary register, until 'we were driven – absolutely driven, perforce, by circumstances which were irresistible – to appeal to you, Mr Speaker, to preside over a Conference . . .'<sup>4</sup> It had proved impossible to unravel the tangled skein of the nineteenth century registration and franchise acts. Registration could not be dealt with separately from the franchises, and consideration of the franchises necessarily raised the question of whether the registration procedure was not in itself an agent of disfranchisement. Thus the twin guardians of the limited electorate of the nineteenth century perished together. But it must be noted that the old system was replaced only when it was broken beyond repair: in that sense, the war undoubtedly did precipitate change.

'The new Act makes Great Britain one of the completest democracies

1. Henderson and MacDonald, *Notes on Organization*, p. 17.

2. Elections and Registration Act 1915; see *Hansard*, 5th series, lxxiii. 1833.

3. Asquith in *Hansard*, 5th series, xcii. 463 (28 Mar. 1917) and *ibid.* lxxxv. 1453 (14 Aug. 1916).

4. *Hansard*, 5th series, xcii. 488, 490 (28 Mar. 1917).

in the world'.<sup>1</sup> All three parties had to confront this 'complete democracy'; why did the Liberals lose most by it? In part, as we have argued, the answer lies in the developments of the British economy and of the social classes produced by it. In this case the new electorate was probably less antipathetic to the Liberals than indifferent to them, and there was probably little that the Liberals could do about that. The Liberal Party was not the party of organized labour, and even if there had been an opportunity for them to become such a party in the late nineteenth century, they had missed it. The refusal of local Liberal associations to adopt working-class candidates on a wide scale went far beyond mere tactical failure; it was a necessary consequence of the social structure of the Liberal party and of its caucuses. Similarly, it seems fairly clear that the polarization of the electorate between right and left after 1918 was difficult to reverse, and the Liberal vote thus slowly disintegrated in the period under study here.

Yet, as we suggested, it is unlikely that the new Labour voting electorate thought itself as being particularly 'socialist', and we know also that much of the working class was deeply Tory, both by instinct and allegiance. Thus, although the Tory Party probably suffered absolutely by the franchise changes, it did not do so relatively, and, indeed, for much of the inter-war period it was the working class party *par excellence*. We would suggest that the survival of the Conservative Party probably had something in common with the growth of the Labour Party under universal franchise. The question then becomes how far both these parties differed in their techniques from the Liberals.

The Labour Party, particularly its leadership, had inherited much from its Liberal past: democracy, progress, rationality, education, information. As much as any Liberal, MacDonald, Hardie or Snowden believed that these ingredients, suitably mixed, would produce political success. In practice, however, the Labour Party never believed that the electorate could be mobilized by democratic rationalism. While the Liberals devolved organization to their Federations (to Herbert Gladstone's later chagrin)<sup>2</sup>, the Labour Party developed an authoritarian mass organization which drew its strength primarily from non-parliamentary and quasi-political organizations, the trade unions. 'Policy' never stood in the way of exploiting the diffuse, but intense, social consciousness of its adherents. In fact, its publicly stated policy was not much more than a collection of shrewdly contrived slogans attached to deeper and more subtle calls upon class loyalty. Despite the traditions and

1. Terry, *op. cit.* p. xxi.

2. See particularly, Gladstone to Sir Robert Hudson, 3 Feb. 1923, B. M. Herbert Gladstone MSS. 46475 fo. 37; also to Vivian Phillips, 26 Mar. 1924, 46475 fo. 261. Gladstone noted the N.L.F. was 'almost useless for any sort of electoral organization', Mem. of July 1925, Maclean MSS., Bodley dep. c. 468, fo. 26.

aspirations of its leadership, Labour's politics were conducted in a pretty vulgar way. But, of course, the Tories conducted theirs in a vulgar way as well. From Disraeli's Crystal Palace speech onwards, the Tories had made a clear distinction between the rhetoric of electioneering and the construction of policy. Like the Labour Party, the Conservatives had it both ways. They were the party of those who wished to preserve property. But they were also the party of hierarchy and respectability: as such they won the support of much of the working class by powerful appeals to deference and existing cultural relationships. Both parties combined, on the one hand, a precise class self-interest, with, on the other, a less sharply defined and thus more compelling appearance.

But the Liberal Party was by its nature almost incapable of such a combination after 1918. This is not to say that the Liberals were never up to the kind of 'demagogic' appeals that its competitors were making. The Party that had in the past denounced Bulgarian Atrocities, Established Churches, Landlords, Randalords, Dear Food and Big Navies, was clearly not above sloganeering. It was widely believed, however, that the old cries were being used to less and less effect, and the so-called new Liberals were probably – though not certainly – right to believe that they should be replaced. But they proposed to replace them with a style of politics that demanded an informed and intelligent electorate. They proposed to base their appeal on a programme of parliamentary legislation whose chief content would be specific items of social reform. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that this was not as much a break with the past as it seemed. At least ideally, the Liberal leadership had always believed that Liberalism was a rational doctrine adhered to by rational men: in no other way can the eclectic Newcastle Programme or the policy of 'filling the cup' be understood. Thus a man like Asquith, who had no special interest in social reform as such, could, as R. B. McCallum noted, 'only calculate what men ought reasonably to think'.<sup>1</sup> However much the Liberal leadership differed over particulars they all believed that calculation and good sense would move men, and they despised Toryism, not so much because it was conservative, but because it pandered to the lowest appetites of the electorate.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, even those Liberals favourable to mass enfranchisement understood the possibly debilitating effect of manhood suffrage on the calculation and good sense of the electorate. Thus, as one way out, the possibility was aired of raising the age of voting eligibility. Herbert Samuel in *Liberalism, its Principles and*

1. R. B. McCallum, *Asquith* (London, 1936), pp. 128–9. See also Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists*, pp. 289–92.

2. See, e.g., Asquith's private view of Chamberlain in 1900, when publicly supporting the substance of his policy; Matthew, *op. cit.* p. 192.

*Proposals*, the Koran of the advanced Liberals, noted nervously that the abolition of the lodger franchise would admit to the registers young men whose judgment was 'immature' and whose 'influence would be dangerous'. He suggested that the 'question of raising the age of citizenship at the same time that the other qualifications are lowered is perhaps worth more attention than it has yet received.'<sup>1</sup> We have seen that several of the Liberal federation secretaries also feared the consequences of giving the vote to large numbers of young men,<sup>2</sup> and J. A. Pease, when drafting the 1912 Bill, declared himself in favour of twenty-three or twenty-five as a minimum age, and hoped that the cabinet might follow him.<sup>3</sup> That, of course, was a political impossibility, and the trend of the times was utterly against such proposals. The Liberals were left, therefore, either with the apparently-failed Liberalism of the old style, or with the new social policy.

Yet it is doubtful if social policy, however well-conceived, was likely to be more successful with a mass electorate than the old catchphrases. For such a programme expected in democracy just those qualities most conspicuously absent from it – knowledge and a well-developed political intelligence. But to that there is one caveat. A progressive Liberalism might have survived if the electorate had possessed at least some of these qualities – that is, if it had remained as limited as it was in 1910. If the Liberals were to pass successfully from one Liberalism to another – assuming that a transition was both happening and necessary – it could only be with *that* electorate, one large enough to be responsive to particular legislative proposals, but not yet swamped by Bright's 'residuum'. The 1918 Act, however, did more than just treble the electorate: it transformed its character by significantly lowering its political awareness. Not only was the new electorate divided by class in a way that increasingly excluded the Liberals, but it was less likely to respond to policies that demanded a comparatively high level of political intelligence. In these circumstances it was by no means clear that the new Liberalism would excite the electorate to enthusiasm any more than the old.<sup>4</sup> Thus, if the pre-war Liberal government instinctively or privately feared the consequences of franchise changes, they probably had reason to do so, and this makes their nervousness more explicable. After 1918 the future

1. H. Samuel, *Liberalism* (London, 1902), p. 242, n. 3.

2. See above, p. 745.

3. Undated memorandum. (?), 1912, MS. Gainford [67].

4. Elibank, one of the Liberals most experienced in party organization, thought it would not, telling Maclean on 10 June 1919: 'Your Federations in the country should likewise be dissolved, and be revived as Free Trade organizations. Many a malcontent will join the Free Trade Cause, but not the Old Liberal Party. . . . The Free Trade Group should be made all powerful. Let the dividing line in future be Tariff. The old party cries [*i.e.*, those of Edwardian Liberalism] are out-of-date and only confusing and embarrassing'. (Maclean MSS., Bodley dep. c. 465, fo. 184.)



lay between two distinctly popular parties; Labour increasingly competed for the new democracy, not with the Liberals, but with the Conservatives.

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APPENDIX

*Lancashire and the Franchise*

Dr P. F. Clarke suggests that the Liberal performance is positively related to the level of enfranchisement. He very properly notes that this does not imply a causal relationship, so that it is not possible to draw the inference that those who were disenfranchised were predominantly Liberal: though he does suggest that the evidence points in that direction.<sup>1</sup> The correlation certainly exists: we find that in seats with a high degree of enfranchisement,<sup>2</sup> the Liberals obtain 53.2 per cent of the total vote in January 1910, as against 50.6 per cent in seats with medium enfranchisement and 46.7 per cent where enfranchisement is low. This correlation is however quite spurious, and disappears when proper account is taken of the dominant religious influence on Lancashire politics.

Table IX shows that a high degree of enfranchisement was associated with a low Catholic population. (Figures in brackets include seats in Liverpool and Manchester, which Dr Clarke excludes: we see little justification for this, but the results we give are not

TABLE IX

		No. of seats		
		Degree of enfranchisement		
		High	Medium	Low
% of population	High	0	2	4 (13)
	Catholic	Medium	1	7 (8)
	Low	8	13	1

materially affected by their inclusion or exclusion.) Clearly there is no simple causal connection between these variables, but it seems likely that where there was a high Catholic population there was usually also a mobile working-class element who were relatively unlikely to be enfranchised. The relationship between the size of

1. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, pp. 112-13. 'High' enfranchisement implies more than 38% of all males on the register in 1911: medium 34-38%, low less than 34%.

2. Catholic population categories are derived from Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.



the Catholic population and the political complexion of the constituency is even more marked: in December 1910 the Conservatives won fourteen of the fifteen seats in our 'high Catholic population' category (the other was Liverpool Scotland, held by an Irish Nationalist), eight of those in the 'medium' group and only two of the twenty-two with few Catholics.<sup>1</sup> Thus Catholicism, low enfranchisement, and a poor Liberal vote are all closely associated, and we must consider whether the main causal link is from Catholicism to Conservative strength or from low enfranchisement to Liberal weakness. There are two tests we can apply. We can categorize Lancashire seats according to both enfranchisement and religious complexion. If enfranchisement is critical, we shall expect to see higher enfranchisement implying a higher Liberal vote in each category of Catholic affiliation, while if religion is the major determinant there will be an association between it and the Liberal vote in each category of enfranchisement. The evidence is displayed in Table X and it is clear that there is no indication of the first tendency and a very marked relationship of the second type. Once the influence of religion is noted, there is little association between the Liberal vote and enfranchisement: and any that exists is negative rather than positive.

TABLE X

*Liberal % share of two-party vote (January 1910) in Lancashire*

		Enfranchisement		
		High	Medium	Low
% of population	High	no seats	40.2 (1)	44.7 (8)
	Catholic	Medium	50.6 (1)	52.4 (10)
	Low	54.8 (8)	56.9 (11)	no seats

(Figures in brackets give the number of constituencies on which the proportions are based.)

The other test we can apply is to compare 1910 and 1922. The impact of differing degrees of enfranchisement is removed by 1922: if categorization by religious characteristics continues to explain political behaviour it is clear that it is a major determinant in its own right, and not merely a proxy for enfranchisement. We cannot compare the Liberal performances, since there are many seats they do not contest and others where strong Labour votes erode their support. But we can examine the Conservative vote, with the results shown in Table XI. The differentials are slightly reduced, which is hardly surprising given the facts of redistribution, the First World War, the rise of the Labour party (to a position of

1. Totals differ from those of Dr Clarke because we have included only seats in Lancashire proper (see Clarke, pp. 112-13).

strength in a number of the 'high Catholic population' areas) and the use of data on religious affiliation which is by then some forty years old: but they are still marked. (There were six unopposed returns in 1922, five of them Conservative: these seats have been excluded in column A while column B includes estimated results for them.) There can be little doubt that religion was a dominant factor in Lancashire politics, before and after the first war, and there is no evidence from Lancashire to support the view that high levels of enfranchisement conferred any benefit on the Liberals.

TABLE XI

*Conservative % share of poll in Lancashire*

		January 1910	1922(A)	1922(B)
% of population Catholic	High	52.1	54.7	54.8
	Medium	46.5	48.8	50.0
	Low	41.9	47.0	47.0