

Book Review: Defectors and the Liberal Party 1910-2010

by Blog Admin

May 31, 2013

*This book investigates all the Liberal/Liberal Democrat MPs and former MPs who defected from the party between the elections of December 1910 and May 2010 – around one sixth of all those elected – as well as the smaller number of inward defectors. The research investigates the timing and reasons for all the defections and aims to reveal long-term trends and underlying causes and apports responsibility between leaders for them. Students of British political history will find much to enjoy here, writes **Nicholas Thomason**.*

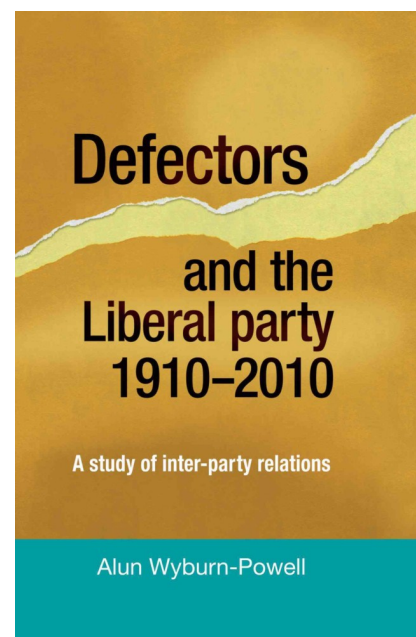


Defectors and the Liberal Party 1910-2010. Alun Wyburn-Powell. Manchester University Press. October 2012.

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The general election of May 2010 was the first time in over three decades a single party had failed to win a clear majority at the ballot box. In the seven heady days that followed, as the phrases 'hung parliament' and 'coalition government' re-entered the popular lexicon, the Liberal Democrats found themselves elevated to power-brokers as Labour and the Conservatives vied for their embrace. Yet to the surprise of many it was the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives – not Labour – who emerged as coalition partners.

In *Defectors and the Liberal party 1910-2010*, [Alun Wyburn-Powell](#), a research fellow at the University of Leicester and lecturer at City University, London, sheds light on an enduring cultural affinity between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats; one that can offer the reader a new historical perspective on the 'Con-Lib' coalition. The first analysis of its kind, this is a meticulously researched and sharp work which investigates all defections to, from, and within the Liberal/Liberal Democrat Party over one hundred years, almost one sixth of all those elected.



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The author sets himself no mean feat in undertaking such a work. Whilst this is a book about individual defectors – their career motivations, personal politics, family background and allegiances – the importance of the party and the historical context must all be teased out without swamping the reader. Thankfully this is largely achieved and the book rattles off one hundred years of tumultuous history in two hundred short pages.

First off are Liberal defectors to Labour: over 40% of all defectors and the largest single party drift. At the beginning of the twentieth century, allied under the Gladstone-MacDonald pact of 1903, the two parties exhibited a largely harmonious relationship. If a few isolated by-election altercations were to portend things to come, this was entirely overshadowed by the outbreak of war in 1914. Whereas the war caused 'a split down from top to bottom in the Labour Party' the Liberals fractured across multiple dimensions. War Policy Objectors, Idealists, Disillusioned Progressives, Lloyd George Objectors, MacDonald Careerists, and Rightward Drift Objectors all eventually defected to Labour, and the author tackles each individually and in great detail. Ironically perhaps, it is these details which save the reader's mind from drifting. From the Idealist Cecil L'Estrange

Malone, the UK's first Communist MP (this after being a member of the anti-communist Reconstruction Society), to the would-be polar explorer turned naval officer Joseph Kenworthy, modern MPs seem appear rather bland.

More importantly, the author is able to meaningfully contribute to the question of why the Liberal Party has declined so spectacularly over the last one hundred years. Whereas Dangerfield (see *The Strange Death of Liberal England*) argued the Liberal Party was in serious decline before the war, net inward migration of defectors and the election results of 1906 and 1910 suggest otherwise. Wilson (see *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-35*) and Dutton (see *A History of the Liberal Party*) consider the war as pivotal in the decline of the Liberals yet there is again little evidence for this in the book. Of the War Policy Objectors, the author shows 80% continued their careers within the Liberal Party without any serious barriers. Their ultimate defections to Labour are shown to have occurred much later and for reasons other than the war. Indeed, of all the groups it is the Disillusioned Progressives, those eager for social progress, who were the most numerous and significant of the defectors to Labour. After the 1918 election the gradual drift of these MPs, largely uncoordinated or overly influenced by any one member, coincided with the eventual rise to prominence of Labour over the Liberals.

By 1922, Labour was contesting more seats, winning more votes and showing the very party cohesion the Liberals were so badly lacking. The author defines the Liberal's failure as '...essentially a mechanical breakdown' rather than a failing of Liberalism itself, while the split between Asquith and Lloyd George weighed heavy on the Liberal's ability to re-group after the war and to stem the oncoming Labour tide.

For the majority of Liberal MPs who joined Labour, there was to be no happy ending however. Over half of the forty-seven defectors found their move to be unsuccessful. Confronted with a tight-knit culture of trade unionism, strict party discipline and often poverty; the largely wealthy, professional Liberals struggled to integrate. Friendships were difficult to forge and the lament of Scott, one of the Disillusioned Progressives, summed up the feelings of many: "...I have joined the Labour Party – but I have found few friends there + [sic] am looked upon with suspicious eyes. It is a poor result...'

In sharp contrast, Liberal defectors to the Conservatives found a more welcoming home. Of the thirty-four defectors who joined the Conservative Party, all remained. Unlike the gradual attrition to Labour, defections to the Conservatives were almost exclusively between 1922 and 1931. Led initially by supporters of Bonar Law but predominantly propelled by Fusionists and Constitutionalists – intellectual disciples of Locke who fretted about an unregulated and over-burdensome state – the author paints an almost frenetic picture of individual political maneuvering, again lacking any group coordination. Churchill, who "tried on party names as others try on clothes", looms large throughout the period. Whilst unable to truly leave the Liberal party spiritually and politically (what else really matters for a politician?), he flirted, wooed and teased the Conservatives before his defection.

Like his cousins the Guest brothers, Churchill epitomized this type of Liberal defector: of military background, Eton educated and richer than the non-defectors. Culturally this meant they found assimilation to the Conservative Party much easier than to Labour.

Defectors doesn't try to offer any great insight to the future of coalition governments, the future of the Liberal Party, or party cohesion in general. Although this is a shame, students of British political history will find much to enjoy here. The author's rich research pays dividends in contextualising each defection and it gives a valuable new perspective on the decline of the Liberal Party over the past one hundred years and their oft-overlooked cultural ties with the Conservatives.

Nicholas Thomason currently works as an Analyst for an Alternative Investment firm. He completed his MSc in Political Science and Political Economy at the London School of Economics in 2011. Prior to this he received a BSc in Economics from the University of Bristol. [Read more reviews by Nicholas.](#)