

From Whiggamore to Liberal Democrat

Whigs

The name is derived from the term Whiggamore, a Scottish Gaelic name for cattle drover, which was derisively applied to a party of Scottish Covenanters who objected to the accession of Catholics to the throne. In opposition to them were the Tories, (another derisive name, adapted from the Irish word 'Toraidhe' for outlaw), who supported the succession of James II. Thus Whigs became associated with radicalism and reform, and the Tories with conservatism and the status quo.

This struggle was resolved for a while when William and Mary took the throne in 1688, a time known as the Glorious Revolution, when a Bill of Rights was agreed, and they appointed a government from members of each party

18th century

The next monarch, Queen Anne, appointed a purely Tory government, and the Whigs moved into Opposition, until in 1714 George I of Hanover was given the British throne; then the Whigs returned to power and remained as such for most of the rest of the century. Tories were derided as Jacobites, but the designation was a loose one, and individuals could easily move between parties, and create factions within parties

It was only at the end of the century in 1783 that a genuine two party system can be seen to emerge, with Pitt the Younger and the Government on the one side (Tory), and a Fox-North coalition (Whig) on the other. Although Pitt is often referred to as a "Tory", he always considered himself to be an independent Whig, and generally opposed the development of a strictly partisan political system.

19th century

The Whigs were out of power for most of the years up to 1830 when George IV died. Led by Lord Grey they then passed a number of important reform measures - most notably the parliamentary [Reform Act 1832](#) and the [Abolition of slavery Act](#).

The other defining act of the first part of this century was the repeal of the [Corn Laws](#) in 1849; they imposed tariffs on corn imports, and were introduced in 1815 by a Tory government to protect the inland price of corn. The Whig government, from 1830 – 1841 decided not to repeal them, and they continued until 1849, when they were abolished by Sir Robert Peel leading a Tory government, with support from Lord John Russell leading the Whigs.

1859 Birth of the Liberal Party

A result of this was that the Tory party split, and in 1859 the Peelites, as they were known, (William Gladstone was among them), joined with the Whigs and another party known as the Radicals, who were also committed to a [Free Trade](#) policy, to form the Liberal party.

Major reforms were enacted during the next 27 years: the [electoral franchise](#) was extended in 1867, and in 1885, to lower income groups of the population; in 1868 the Church of Ireland was [disestablished](#); in 1870 the first [Education Act](#) was passed; and in 1872 the principle of [secret voting](#) was applied.

1885

In the period up to 1885 the Radicals led by Joseph Chamberlain were also proposing an extensive list of social reform measures, somewhat in advance of Gladstone's reforming pace. This caused dissension within the party. Finally one major issue, [Home Rule](#) for Ireland, which Gladstone promoted but the Radicals opposed, split the Liberal party: The Whig element disagreed with this policy and broke away with the Radicals to form the Liberal Unionist party ; they eventually disappeared without trace into the Conservative Tory party.

Gladstone nonetheless managed to get a [Home Rule](#) bill through the Commons, but it was finally blocked in the Lords.

After this, the [General Election](#) held in 1885 resulted in a hung Parliament; another [General Election](#) held a year later in 1886 resulted in a Liberal defeat, followed, except for 2 years, by 20 years of political impotence for the party.

Gladstone was prime minister in 1868-74, 1880-85, 1886 and 1892-94, and retired in 1894..

20th century

After 1900 the Liberal party was strengthened by the defection of Winston Churchill and others who supported a free trade policy, from the Tories to the Liberal party. This was in reaction to Joseph Chamberlain, (now with the Tory party), who was supporting imposition of trade tariffs.

1906 (399 seats)

At that time there was a burgeoning Labour organisation in the shape of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), who included Keir Hardie. With their co-operation, the Liberal party, led by Sir Arthur Campbell-Bannerman, won the 1906 [General Election](#), gaining 399 seats (2.75 million votes) against the Conservative party's 156 seats (2.42 million votes). The LRC gained 29 seats (321 thousand votes)

On the basis of this mandate the Liberal party was able to bring in a [Free Trade](#) bill, and also [Land Reform](#) measures. They also established [Labour Exchanges](#), a [National Insurance](#) scheme, and [Old Age Pensions](#).

1909 (274 seats)

In 1909 there was a serious confrontation with the Lords. They had rejected a budget presented by the Commons because it introduced a super tax on high earners, and a tax on land values. In two [Elections](#) fought in 1910 on the issue of peers versus people; the Liberals triumphed but were left with a hung Parliament, and had to rely on the support of Labour and Irish Nationalist MPs. But in 1911 the Lords capitulated and the primacy of the House of Commons was definitively established..

1914 Coalition

The Liberal party split again during the 1914-18 war. In 1915 Asquith had acceded to demands for a coalition government with the Conservatives. This lasted for a year and then Asquith was displaced by Lloyd George as Prime Minister, largely at the instigation of the Conservatives. Many of the Liberal party followed Asquith into Opposition as Independent Liberals.

1918 (133 seats)

In the 1918 [Election](#) the emerging Labour party won twice as many seats as the Liberals. The Coalition Liberals under Lloyd George took 133 seats, and became the official Opposition. Asquith's Independent Liberals were reduced to 28 seats. Labour took 40 seats.

Lloyd George remained as Prime minister of the Coalition until 1922, when it was terminated by the Conservatives.

1924 (40 seats)

During the 20's and 30's the Liberal party rapidly declined: social Liberals defected to Labour, Winston Churchill returned to the Conservatives. In the 1924 [Election](#) the Liberals were reduced to 40 seats while Labour took 151, and Labour achieved the status of a party of government under Ramsay Macdonald, supported by the much reduced Liberal party under Asquith. Clearly a turning point.

1926 (59 seats)

In 1926 Lloyd George took over the leadership of the Liberals and attempted to restore the party to its former strength; he supported the new ideas proposed by J M Keynes for economic recovery. In the 1929 **Election** the party polled 5 million votes, but won only **59 seats**, because its voting strength was too evenly spread over the country. The result was a minority Labour government held in power with the support of the Liberals.

Labour did not apply Keynes's ideas to their management of the economy and in 1931 were faced with a serious financial crisis, which led to Ramsay Macdonald, forming another Coalition government, with Labour, Conservative, and Liberal participation. He called an **Election**; this resulted in a Conservative government in all but name, again under Ramsay Macdonald.

1931 (33 seats)

For the Liberals this was a disaster, because they split into three factions, led by Lloyd George, Sir Herbert Samuel, and Sir John Simon respectively. Simon's group was the only one of the three to support the Coalition unconditionally. Later they reconstituted themselves as a new party called the National Liberals, which gradually became absorbed into the Conservative party

As a result, in the 1935 **Election** the Liberal party representation was reduced to **21 seats**.

1939 (5 seats)

During the ensuing conflict of WW2 the Liberals joined the national Coalition government, and hoped for some revival at the end of the war in 1945. But the result was a further decline down to 12 seats, all rural, and half of them in Wales. This was further reduced in 1950 to nine. At that time there were less than 300 local councillors in the entire country. Finally, in 1957 Megan Lloyd George defected to Labour and the party was reduced to **five seats** in Parliament.

1956 Grimond

Jo Grimond was the MP for Orkney and Shetland, the only safe Liberal seat in the UK. He became leader in 1956, and set about defining the party policy, giving support to membership of the **European Common Market**, opposing the nuclear deterrent, and the Suez expedition of 1956. Effort was put into a number of by-elections, which garnered several seats, notably Orpington, so that by 1966 the party had 12 seats in Parliament, mostly from Scotland and the SW.

1974 Thorpe (14 seats)

Jeremy Thorpe succeeded Grimond and in the 1974 **Election** gained 14 seats. The Conservatives under Heath were returned to power but without an overall majority. Thorpe would only support the Conservatives if they would grant electoral reform, which Heath refused. The subsequent **Election** in October 1974 led to further loss of Liberal seats

1976 Steel

Thorpe resigned and David Steel was elected in his place; this was the first time any major party had used this method to select its leader. Steel instigated a LibLab pact with the Callaghan government which continued fruitfully up to 1978, although it was never popular with either of the two parties.

1981 Social Democrats

In March 1981 the Social Democratic party was founded by four defectors from the Labour party; they were led by Roy Jenkins. They went on to form an Alliance with the Liberals which proved popular. In the 1983 **Election** the Alliance won **25.4% of the vote**, against 27.6% for Labour. such is the effect of distribution however the Alliance gained only **23 seats** against 209 for Labour.

1988 (20 seats)

After a period of infighting between the two parties of the Alliance, David Steel proposed that a full merger be made. Eventually, in 1988, this was achieved and the Social & Liberal Democrat party came into being under Paddy Ashdown, MP for Yeovil. The party name was later reduced in 1989 to the more elegant one of Liberal Democrats. Under his inspiring leadership the party slowly regained strength, so that in the 1992 **Election** the party won **17.8% of the vote and 20 seats**.

1997 (46 seats)

Gradually the LibDems became the second party of local government with more than 5000 councillors. In the 1997 **Election** an unpopular Conservative government, after 12 years in power, was defeated by Labour. There was a large amount of tactical voting against the Conservatives which helped the LibDems to take 46 seats even though their share of the vote had dropped to 16.8%.

An attempt to form a LibLab pact prior to the 1997 **Election** was rejected by Labour when they came to power with 419 seats. As also was the promise to institute Proportional Representation, even though Roy Jenkins was appointed to head a commission to devise an acceptable form of PR for Westminster, and gave a report.

1999 (52 seats)

Ashdown was succeeded in 1999 by Charles Kennedy, who led the party to further success in the 2001 **Election**, when the party gained 52 seats and 18.3% of the vote. The party gained support from anti-war protesters when it became the only major party to oppose the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

2005 (62 seats)

Several seats were gained in subsequent by-elections, and in the 2005 **Election** the party gained 62 seats and 22.% of the vote.

Kennedy resigned in 2006, to be succeeded by Sir Menzies Campbell; he suffered from adverse media coverage, and after a year had to make way for the election of Nick Clegg.

Many more details can be obtained from liberalhistory.org.uk