



THE LIBERAL PARTY, LIBERALISM AND TRADE UNIONS, 1906-24

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This paper examines the relationship between the Liberal Party, Liberalism and the trade unions in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The historiography of the early twentieth-century Liberal Party has been ineluctably shaped by the debate over its electoral decline. Whilst the literature on Liberals and trade unions is far from extensive, it too is dominated by the narrative of decline. Given the trajectory of Liberal electoral performance, this is scarcely surprising or indeed unreasonable. However, while recent years have seen a shift towards more contingent accounts of Liberal decline, accounts of the relationship between Liberals and trade unions often still present a rather stylised picture of Liberal inability to accommodate trade unionism that does not capture the full complexity of either the Liberal Party or the trade union movement. This in part reflects the relative lack of attention given to debates about trade unionism within the rich body of work on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Liberalism that has done much to alter our appreciation of the resources with which Liberals faced the challenges of government and opposition. This essay seeks to integrate Liberal ideas more fully into the history of relations between the Liberal Party and trade unions in the first part of the last century.

Noting the comparative paucity of work on *Liberals* and trade unions should not be taken to imply an excess of writing on *trade unions* and politics. In 1982 Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook highlighted the dearth of work on trade unions in British politics, and the intervening years have not fully rectified this lack [PIMLOTT & COOK : 1]. While some areas are now far better covered, most obviously the role of trade unions in twentieth-century Labour politics, but also the political activities of unions in mid-Victorian Britain, shortfalls remain in our understanding of trade union attitudes to and involvement in politics [REID in TANNER, THANE, TIRATSOO : 221-48; CURTHOYS] . The primary focus in what follows, in keeping with the other essays, will be on Liberals and Liberalism, but the aim is also to shed further light on the character of trade union views and actions. The increasing scale and variety of trade unionism across the period complicates efforts at generalisation, and the limited corpus of writing on white collar unionism compounds the difficulties.

The article reveals a range of views about trade unions within the early twentieth century Liberal Party, and questions efforts to portray Liberalism and trade unionism as inherently incompatible prior to 1914. It notes that trade unions raised a host of questions for Liberals, which went beyond narrowly economic considerations, and which might be answered differently with respect to different unions. Whereas historians have sometimes stressed Liberal discomfort with industrial disputes, it needs to be recognised that Liberals were often optimistic about the capacity of 'public opinion' to assuage and to curtail industrial conflict. The terms in which Liberals understood 'public opinion' could certainly be problematic for trade unionists, but Liberal belief in a fundamental social harmony did not require perpetual social peace. Liberals could differ over the preferred relationship between trade unions and the State, but disagreement was usually mild before 1914. Attitudes to trade unions embraced a variety of issues, from welfare provision to the role of associations, which intruded upon quite fundamental questions about the nature of a Liberal polity.

Liberal attitudes clearly need to be related to developments within trade unionism—especially its increasing allegiance to and centrality within the Labour Party. Care is required, however, in disentangling the relationship between individual trade unions, the TUC and the Labour Party, and in tracing change over time. The vast literature on the rise of Labour has much to say about trade unions, though the prominence of trade unions within the historiography of the Labour Party has diminished in recent years. Nonetheless, trade union views of the Liberal Party are still perhaps better covered than Liberal views of trade unions.

The article is in four parts. The first outlines the main developments within trade unionism in these years. The second provides an anatomy of Liberal arguments about the role of trade unions with politics, society and the economy. The third links these through a focus on key episodes ranging from trade disputes legislation under Campbell-Bannerman, through the industrial unrest of 1911 to 1914, through to post-war debates about economic reconstruction. The last section supplies a brief conclusion.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a significant period in the history of trade unions in Britain. Most obviously, trade union membership grew markedly from about 750,000 in 1888 to 2.6 million in 1910, reaching 4 million in 1914 before peaking in 1920 at over 8 million, and then declining to about 5,500,000 by 1924 [CLEGG, FOX, THOMPSON : 1; PIMLOTT & COOK : 79]. The overall trend was firmly upward, but the chronology is important, notably the scale of the increase from 1910-1920, and the losses thereafter. Trade union membership was concentrated in certain sectors of the economy, particularly the staple industries of coal and cotton, though the NUT supplied one example of successful white-collar recruitment. Union density was considerably higher amongst manual than non-manual workers, and amongst male as opposed to female workers. Density statistics bring out the distinctiveness of mining, with 70% unionisation in 1910, at which point the industry accounted for a quarter of all trade unionists [CLEGG : 1-2]. However, unions came in a variety of shapes and sizes, and historians have often

been struck by the difficulties in generalising about their character. One useful typology of manual workers distinguishes between assembly, process and general unions, emphasising the traditional craft credentials and independence of the first of these, and greater sympathy towards State action amongst the latter two. The relative scale of these different types of unions altered over time, often in quite complex ways. Union growth might reflect the waxing of already established industries, such as mining amongst the process workers. The expansion of 1910-1920, importantly assisted by war-time developments, increased the numerical prominence of general unions within the movement [REID : 229]. The losses of 1920-24 were sharp, hitting some unions especially hard, and generating new concerns.

The pattern and causes of trade union growth has generated much discussion. Contemporaries were often struck by the emergence of new general unions at the end of the 1880s, neglecting less spectacular developments elsewhere. The employers' counter-offensive of the 1890s has its origins in efforts to limit the spread of the new unions, but broadened into a more general attack. Restrictions on picketing in the 1890s and, most infamously, the Taff Vale judgment of 1901, significantly affected the ability of trade unions to pursue their objectives. The vicissitudes of the law were accompanied by shifts in the economic climate as the deflation of the late nineteenth century was succeeded by inflation in the early twentieth century, threatening gains in real wages. Both trends provided incentives to action for trade unions, and contributed to important developments leading up to the First World War.

In the last third of the nineteenth century, trade unions had provided a significant source of support for the Liberal Party. Much recent writing on Gladstonian Liberalism has emphasised trade union support for the agenda of liberty, retrenchment and reform [BIAGINI : *passim*]. From the 1874 election onwards, Lib-Lab MPs were a presence in the House of Commons, both loyal Liberals and putative spokesmen for labour interests. The enduring attachment to radicalism evident amongst craft unionists like Alexander Wilkie and Robert Knight was a powerful current [BIAGINI & REID : 214-44]. The legal challenges of the 1890s, allied to the inhospitable political climate, encouraged the TUC to work with Socialist societies at the founding conference of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. After the Taff Vale decision, and particularly following the revelation of the scale of damages involved, the rate of trade union affiliation to the LRC increased, and the perceived value of labour representation in Parliament grew. Crucially aided by the Gladstone-MacDonald electoral pact, the twenty-nine LRC candidates entered the Commons following the 1906 General Election. Most of these MPs were union-sponsored, and many were sympathetic to much of the programme of the Liberal Party. At the start of our period, the Progressive Alliance was highly functional both electorally and in Parliament.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw the extension of collective bargaining machinery through much of British industry. Whilst individual unions and employers questioned some of these arrangements, it was commonly argued that the advent of collective bargaining between

larger-scale, better-organised forces would reduce industrial friction. Contemporaries were often more struck by particular disputes that secured newspaper coverage than by larger trends in industrial relations, but a number of commentators noted the relatively low stoppage levels in the first years of the twentieth century. While the statistical picture had been less rosy in the 1890s, the prevalent sentiment—in spite of instances like the engineers' lockout in 1897—was reasonably sanguine in its expectation for industrial relations, and, perhaps more importantly, inclined, as Churchill did in 1908, to present trade union organisation as a moderating force that could make for greater stability in industrial life [Cited in WRIGLEY : 145].

Novel developments from 1906 in trade unionism were to challenge Liberal understandings forged in an earlier era. A very sizeable increase in union membership, the enhanced role of trade unions within the Labour Party, periods of significant industrial unrest, the demands of wartime, economic disruption: all had important implications for Liberal evaluations of the proper role of and attitudes to trade unionism. We turn now to an examination of the varieties of Liberal thinking on trade unions in early twentieth-century Britain.

While late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Liberals debated a range of questions related to trade unions, shared assumptions were often apparent in their discussions. Liberals commonly regarded trade unions as part of civil society and upheld a largely voluntarist conception of industrial relations as collective bargaining between organisations of workers and employers. Liberals appreciated the welfare function of trade unions as an embodiment of working class thrift and collective self-help. Trade unions were widely valued as expressions of the associational spirit, and as pluralist bulwarks against centralising forces. Moderate unions of the skilled fitted the Liberal template best, but organisation of the unskilled, exemplified by the London dockers in the late 1880s, could be greeted as welcome evidence of the spread of discipline and forethought into unpromising sections of the population.

At the start of the twentieth century, many Liberals argued that trade unions played a useful role in economic life. Inequalities in bargaining power between employers and the employed could be mitigated by organisations of the latter. As faith in the supposed theoretical futility of combination faltered, it became common amongst Liberals to argue that trade unions could help foster a high-wage economy in which better pay and conditions produced corresponding gains in productivity. Some worried that trade unions might impede technical innovation, or limit the productivity of the most able; but such fears did not predominate in the first years of the new century. On the left of the party, new Liberals like Leo Chiozza Money argued that under-consumption due to lack of working class purchasing power was a systemic economic problem, while Parliamentary debates over wage regulation saw Churchill borrow the Webbian language of 'parasitism' to describe the functioning of sweated industries [THOMPSON 2007: 62-88]. The behaviour of employers, judges and Conservative governments since the 1890s appeared, especially to radicals, as a backlash against trade unions that sought to deprive them of

the collective rights recognised by the Liberal, or Liberal-inspired, legislation of the previous generation. For these Liberals, the assault on trade unions was one aspect of a larger reactionary movement which attacked popular liberties at home and abroad in the interests of the plutocratic elite.

Over the first quarter of the twentieth century, developments within trade unionism asked challenging questions of Liberals. How should Liberals regard the numerical growth of trade unions? Should this be welcomed as evidence of the spread of collective self-help, or did trade union power threaten pluralism? How should Liberals respond to periods, like 1911-14 and 1919-21, of high levels of strikes and lockouts? What should Liberals say to those arguing for an enhanced role for trade unions in the functioning of industry? These questions were to prove difficult for Liberals, and the divergent answers offered reflects divisions that led some to join other political parties, while often arguing that they, not the party, remained true to Liberalism. While Liberals at the start of our period were able to collaborate effectively in producing trade union legislation, subtle differences emerge that were to become wider over time. Tracing the trajectory of Liberal views on trade unions requires the reconstruction of key moments of debate, and we begin this process with the trade disputes legislation passed soon after the Liberal landslide of 1906.

In 1906 Liberal candidates frequently raised the issue of trade union law in their election campaigns. Liberals, individually and collectively, argued for reform that would mitigate the impact of recent judicial decisions upon trade unions. They differed, however, as to their preferred approach. Some Liberals proposed to return to their reading of the situation prior to the Taff Vale judgment, when trade unions were without legal personality and thus could not be corporately liable for damages in the event of strike action. This solution was popular with traditional radicals keen to safeguard unions from 'judge-made law' and predisposed to see unions as essentially clubs, which belonged in civil society, and whose interactions with employers' associations could generally be entrusted to the informal regulation of 'public opinion'. Others, including both *Manchester Guardian* progressives and Asquithian Liberal imperialists, inclined rather towards combining recognition of the legal personality for unions upheld in the Taff Vale decision and with statutory protection for trade union funds from claims for damages resulting from industrial action. For these Liberals, trade unions were collective actors, whose corporate identity, apparent in the realities of economic and political life, ought to be acknowledged by the law. Collectivist new Liberal proponents of incorporation often saw virtue in compulsory arbitration at least as an ideal, and were interested in Fabian thinking about industrial relations. Liberal imperialists viewed incorporation as a rightful reflection of the universal reach of the law and the appropriate manifestation of the impartial State, imparting both rights and responsibilities to economic actors. Trade union opinion was neither monolithic nor invariant, but after Taff Vale it increasingly coalesced around restoration of the non-corporate status held to have been established in the 1870s, alongside hostility to the imposition of

compulsory arbitration. The passage of legislation in 1906 was a messy affair, with both Labour and the government proposing bills; but the end result was a clear victory for the ante-Taff Vale solution satisfying radical and mainstream Liberal opinion, as personified by Campbell-Bannerman, and encapsulating labour demands [THOMPSON 1998: 175-200].

The Liberal administrations of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith tackled a range of issues involving trade unions and a larger number upon which unions had views. As Henry Pelling and Pat Thane have argued, trade unions were not necessarily supportive of even well-meaning State intervention, with established craft unions especially inclined towards collective self-help [PELLING : 1-19; THANE : 877-900]. The broad preference of Labour politicians for better wages and more work over welfare payments as a means to raise living standards was generally shared by trade unionists, but the difficulties of unskilled workers in providing for themselves were well understood within the labour movement. Much of the social reform legislation passed by the pre-1914 Liberal governments received support from trade unionists for ameliorating, if not removing, underlying ills. Concerns were aroused when unionists feared interventions would have a negative impact on wages, with some criticising the provision of free school meals on these grounds, despite the relevant bill being introduced by the Labour MP, W.T. Wilson. Trade union MPs were wary of proposals that authorised official intrusions into working-class homes, while labour exchanges attracted suspicion as a potential source of blacklegs. National Insurance in 1911 generated protracted debate, with the labour movement divided over the comparative merits of contributory and non-contributory schemes. Trade unions were critical, as they had been in 1906, of moves to separate strike and benefit funds, and ill-disposed to limits on the range of workers eligible for unemployment payments during industrial disputes. While the social legislation of 1906-14 had important implications for trade unions, it was perhaps the industrial unrest of 1911-14 that raised the most fundamental questions for the relationship between Liberalism and trade unionism.

As Duncan Tanner has noted, the tense industrial relations of the immediate pre-war period have generally been seen as a problem for Liberals, most famously in Dangerfield's stylised portrayal [DANGERFIELD : 374-87]. There is undoubtedly some truth in this, though, as Tanner's work suggests, it is also important not to overstate the impact of industrial unrest upon the Liberal Party before 1914 [TANNER : 150]. British political culture remained importantly local before 1914, and Liberal politics was characterised by considerable regional diversity. In ideological terms, the Liberal Party remained diverse, though—not least in light of the aforementioned geographical variations—this can be seen as an asset. Unsurprisingly Liberals differed in their responses to the unrest of 1911-14. Much depended on how the intentions of employers and employees were interpreted, and how industrial unrest was explained. While the industrial unrest of these years could be seen as a general phenomenon, it was also possible to argue that the disputes differed in both character and causation. By 1914, J. A. Hobson was arguing that the number of disputes was in decline [Cited in CLARKE 1978 : 145]. For left-

wing Liberals, labour unrest demonstrated the need for further State action, including land reform and enhanced minimum wage legislation.

The disputes of 1911-14 were heterogeneous, and considerable debate surrounds their origins. In his classic history of trade unions, Hugh Clegg surveyed fourteen different disputes in search of usable generalisations about their causation [CLEGG : 26-71]. Historians, like contemporaries, have differed over the weight to attach to different factors, whether it be syndicalism, real wage decreases, or organisational imperatives. In 1912, Hobson suggested that labour unrest was a global phenomenon, driven by real wage losses resulting from capital concentration in an era of trusts. Hobson argued that underlying economic change in fact explained the loss of central authority in the trade union world, and the local dynamism behind disputes [HOBSON : 1, 9]. Most Liberals focused on economic aspects, but syndicalism also attracted much attention as a cause. Three aspects of the Liberal response to the unrest of 1911-14 need noting. The first is the use of force. While the violence of the Liverpool dock strike of August 1911 could be seen as almost traditional, that of the railway strike of the same year was more novel. Aspects of the government response, notably Churchill's enthusiasm for the deployment of troops, provoked strong feelings, especially in South Wales during the coal dispute of 1912. Secondly, the scale and intensity of conflict—involving, though not confined to, trade unions that saw a role for State intervention—drew the government into action, creating difficulties for Liberals who emphasised State neutrality, and making it difficult for the government not to disappoint one or even both protagonists. Thirdly, Liberals tended to identify the government's position with that of the consuming public. In contrast, Labour was more willing to defend producer interests, though its leaders often sought to combine this with a critique of how capitalists sweated the public. While Labour's approach could create short-term Parliamentary difficulties, as during the coal dispute of 1912, it had longer-term, extra-Parliamentary benefits, underlining the importance of political representation to trade unions, and challenging Liberal claims to represent union interests.

While the growth of trade union membership in 1910-14 is uncontroversial, its implications for party politics have proven much more controversial. Whereas McKibbin in the 1970s emphasised the scale of support for political funds in the ballots conducted under the Trade Union Act of 1913, Tanner later stressed the extent of opposition in the same ballots [MCKIBBIN : 86; TANNER : 322, 345]. This exemplifies differences over the degree of union commitment to the Labour Party before 1914, and—more broadly—contrasting approaches to the larger historical problem of explaining Labour's rise. The focus here is upon the narrower question of the relationship between Liberals and trade unions, with a particular concentration upon Liberal ideas about trade unions and industrial relations. In tracing this, the period after 1914 emerges as especially important, and it is this to which we now turn.

The role of trade unions in the First World War—along with most other aspects of those tumultuous years—has received considerable historical attention. Between 1914 and 1918 union membership grew

impressively from just over 4 million to more 6.5 million [PIMLOTT & COOK : 79]. The massive economic demands of the war imparted great significance to industrial relations, and led to a much closer working relationship between government and the unions. Labour movement bodies, whether it be the War Emergence Workers' National Committee formed in 1914 or the Joint Committee on After the War Problems instituted in 1916, acquired real importance. At the Treasury conference in March 1915, Lloyd George focused particularly on engineering unions in seeking to achieve changes in workshop practices, and engineering leaders served on the National Advisory Committee on Labour. Dilution agreements were abidingly controversial, with tensions spilling over into violence on Clydeside in 1915-16. Inevitably, trade unions differed in their policy towards the government, while even those who worked most closely with the State retained their independence. Industrial disputes ran at high level in the last two years of the war. At the local level, trade unionists often participated in war-time committee life. Wartime developments did not follow a neat pattern, but the net result arguably strengthened and centralised trade unions, while also often radicalising them. While trade unions continued both to vary in attitudes and generally to prefer a voluntarist approach to industrial relations, war-time experiences underlined the possibilities of collectivism. In more party political terms, the war years also consolidated the trade unions' status in Labour politics, as evidenced by the new party constitution [CLEGG : 207].

The 1918 General Election was, of course, a traumatic moment for many Liberals, and the immediate post-war years were often dominated by bitter conflicts between adherents of Lloyd George and Asquith. Whilst politically troubled, Liberals continued to be a fertile source of ideas, and trade unions did not escape their consideration. The context, however, within which Liberals examined the role of trade unions had altered fundamentally from the pre-war period. Trade union density had risen from 23% of the workforce in 1914 to 43% in 1919 [LOWE : 4]. Economic collapse from 1920 reduced trade union membership without lowering this to pre-1914 levels while significantly constraining policy choices. More broadly, politicians of all stripes struggled to come to terms with the post-war world, not least the immediate problem of how to pay for the war, and then the persistent challenge of high unemployment after 1920 [DAUNTON : 882-919]. These years of course witnessed extensive defections to both Left and Right from the Liberal Party, including some of its more creative figures. It has often been argued that leading progressives, especially, moved away from the party in these years, and this did indeed have an impact on Liberal discussions of trade unions. Perhaps the fundamental issue, however, was the way in which Liberals understood the post-war world, and the impact this had upon their attitudes to trade unionism [FREEDEN : 198-207; CLARKE 1983 : 31-7].

Some features of Liberal post-war diagnosis are familiar from pre-war debates, notably depictions of the growth of organisation in industry, but Liberals stressed the extent to which the war had accelerated such trends. There was, though, a repeated emphasis upon the war as rupture, most famously articulated by Keynes in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) with its celebrated portrait of the psychology of inequality

and accumulation, dependent upon delicate trading arrangements, now destabilised by war; and its ringing declarations that ‘the forces of the nineteenth century have run their course and are exhausted’ and ‘the economic motives and ideals of that generation no longer satisfy us’ [KEYNES (1919) : 237-38]. The theme of instability that recurs through *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* was central to Keynes’s thinking, but it resonated more broadly. In his attempt to update *The New Liberalism* in 1920, C.F.G. Masterman too noted the difficulties of dealing with ‘so rapidly changing a world’, worrying that by the time the book was printed, ‘the illusion of securing [may have] collapsed before a movement towards Direct Action, or an outbreak of unrest produced by Trade decline’ [MASTERMAN (1920) : viii].

Two common elements of Liberal accounts of post-war conditions need noting. The first was the deep concern, not restricted of course to Liberals, with the national debt. Debt did, of course, feature in Keynes’s analysis of the Versailles Treaty, where he insisted upon the unnaturalness of inter-nation debts, which did ‘not square with human nature or agree with the spirit of the age’ [KEYNES (1919) : 264]. In *The New Liberalism*, Masterman dilated upon the link between national bankruptcy and revolution [MASTERMAN (1920) : 65]. For many Liberals, the scale of national debt compelled an enhanced attention to maximising productivity, and war-time experience—as Herbert Samuel had urged in 1917—showed that restrictions on trade union practices liberated productive potential [SAMUEL : 63]. The second motif of much Liberal argument was the impact of inflation. Again, this was enunciated in Keynes’s best-selling attack on the treaty, in which the persistent inflation was portrayed as a source of instability and injustice with potentially devastating effects [KEYNES (1919) : 220]. In his speeches in Paisley in 1920, Asquith linked debt and inflation, seeing the former as a key cause of the latter [ASQUITH : 49]. Economic collapse after 1920 might have been expected to eliminate inflationary fears, but this was not always the case. In *England after War* (1922)—in which the war was described as ‘the greatest secular catastrophe... since the fall of Rome’—Masterman argued that the middle class had benefited less than the working class from the recent deflation [MASTERMAN (1922) : ix, 58].

Liberals, like others, differed in their interpretation of these economic developments, as they did in their thinking about trade unions. Concerns about debt and inflation could, however, foment worries about the implications of trade union activities for productivity, and intensify an existing tendency to focus especially upon consumer interests. Liberals were apt, as Masterman did, to bemoan the more bitter industrial relations they identified as a legacy of the war, apparent in the labour unrest of 1919-21 [MASTERMAN (1922) : 13]. Pre-war perceptions about sectionalism were sharpened in the post-war context. Ramsay Muir revealingly upheld Liberal resistance to the coercive power of a single section of society ‘whether it be a despot, or a priesthood, or a landed aristocracy, or the money power, or a military caste, or a group of trade unions’ [MUIR : 25].

The best guide to the complex debates within Whitehall in the immediate post-war era remains Rodney Lowe's history of the Ministry of Labour. Lowe contrasts the policies of the Ministry with the more progressive initiatives of the pre-war Labour Department of the Board of Trade. He suggests that many civil servants took the war to have shown the limitations of interventionism [LOWE : 42-43]. Liberals often made this point, arguing, as Muir did, that war demonstrated the 'wastefulness' of State control [MUIR : 31]. Lowe emphasises the retreat within the Ministry from the machinery of the Whitley councils and trade boards, in the face of the disputes of 1919-21, along with increased unemployment and price rises. For Lowe, interwar government policy sought to minimise intervention and maximise collective bargaining, but he identifies variations within from early Lloyd George radicalism to Baldwinite paternalism to later fatalism [LOWE : 95, 97, 126].

Through his close focus on the Ministry of Labour, Lowe delineates well the parameters of official thinking. Liberal activists shared many of the same attitudes, though the spectrum of debate was perhaps wider. Much post-war discussion about industrial policy concentrated on the question of nationalisation. Where some form of nationalisation was favoured, it tended to be for monopolies, with mines and railways seen as the most likely practical candidates. In formulating suggestions for the administration of any future nationalised industry, Liberals touted the primacy of the community, and tended to identify this with closely the interests of the consumer. Liberals showed considerable interest in joint councils at industry level, and in more concerted moves towards functional devolution, though reconciling voluntarism, State neutrality and the primacy of the consuming public proved difficult. Liberal thinking about industrial relations demonstrates some important continuities with pre-war debates, notably in its enthusiasm for publicity. In *Essays in Liberalism*, Walter Layton insisted upon the salutary impact of publicity upon industrial life [LAYTON : 160-62]. Keynes's suggestion in *The End of Laissez-faire* (given as a lecture in November 1924, but published in 1926) that large companies would be especially sensitive to public scrutiny needs to be understood in this context [KEYNES (1926) : 43]. The appeal to the power of 'public opinion' had been an important characteristic of earlier Liberal thinking about economic life and this endured into the post-war period [THOMPSON (2011) : 744].

The relationship between the Liberal Party and trade unions in the first quarter of the century can be seen as a simple story of the waning of the former and the waxing of the latter as part of the forward march of the labour movement. The principal focus here has been upon Liberal ideas about and policy towards trade unions as a subject in its own right, rather than merely an aspect of familiar debates about party realignment. A more comprehensive treatment of the relationship would need to reconstruct in more detail the shifting perspectives of trade unions and trade unionists, not least those with strong historic attachments to Liberalism and the Liberal Party. The narrower focus here on the views of Liberal politicians and publicists demonstrates the ways in which thinking about trade unions involved tackling fundamental questions about the nature of a Liberal polity, society and economy. The First World War and its legacies

importantly affected the answers Liberals gave to these questions, exacerbating existing tensions between pluralist and organicist impulses. These difficulties were not, however, entirely inevitable; some reflected the failure of Liberals in the immediate post-war years to make best use of the intellectual resources of their creed. In this sense, the history of Liberal thinking about trade unions illustrates the larger history of Liberals in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

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