Decline and Revival: Liberal Party and Liberalism

Sitong Zhang[1,a,†], Yaqi Yu[2,b,*,†], Huizi Yang[3,c,†]

[1]Department of Philosophy, Nanjing University, Nanjing, 210023, China
[2]Department of International Relations, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, 100081, China
[3]Department of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management, China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, 100091, China
a. zhangst2001@126.com, b. 20160073@bfsu.edu.cn, c. selmaqyang@163.com
*corresponding author
[†]These authors contributed equally.

Abstract: Among the many political parties influenced by liberalism, the British Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats are two typical examples of a lineage. In 1906, the Liberal Party won the general election with an absolute majority of the vote, which marked the culmination of the Liberal Party's development. During the following several decades, with the development of British society and politics and the blow of World War I, the Liberal Party gradually lost its political niche in party competition. After World War II, the Liberal Party, led by Thorpe, worked hard to regain its footing. On this basis, this paper focuses on two main questions. What caused the demise of British Liberal Party after the First World War and how did the merger with Social Democratic Party accelerate the revival of the Liberal Party. Using the methodological approach of literature review, this paper will analyse the decline and revival of the Liberals, combining the perspectives of political science and history. It is argued that the decline of British Liberal Party should be attributed to the changing ideology, the rise of Labour as well as the catalysis of World War I. As for the revival of Liberal Party, it is stressed that its merger with Social Democrats in 1988 has been significant in facilitating its vote-winning and transition to parliamentary strength.

Keywords: Liberal Party, liberalism, Labour, Social Democrats

1. Introduction

Liberalism is a fundamental and widely held belief in many ideologies. Today, practically all significant groups articulate and explain their positions using liberalism's rhetoric, such as rights, freedom, and equality. It may even be said that liberalism is the underlying idea of many current ideologies, particularly those embraced by nearly all Western political forces. However, in terms of the political practice of liberalism, the situation is not the same. Liberal parties are on the periphery in almost all Western European countries; the United States has never had a political party named after liberalism; and in the United Kingdom, the birthplace of liberalism, the earliest Liberal Party has even been in gradual decline and merged with the Social Democratic Party.

The history of the Liberal Party begins in 1832. After the parliamentary reform, the ideology of the Whig began to gradually shift towards liberalism, calling for free trade and free politics, and became known as the Liberal Party in 1839. The early Liberal Party adhered to the ideology of

classical liberalism, as put forward by John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and others. The theory advocated laissez-faire economics and individual liberty in politics, rejecting state intervention in the economy and arguing that individuals pursuing their own interests benefit society as a whole. During this period, the Liberal Party held a crucial place in British politics, serving as one of the two major parties in the British Parliament with the Conservative Party.

However, when the influence of liberalism weakened in the early twentieth century, the Liberal Party started its decline. In 1906 there were four hundred members from the Liberal Party in the Parliament, while in 1924 this number had fallen to forty. Despite regaining fifty-nine MPs in 1929, its parliamentary representation declined thereafter [1]. The Liberals gained fewer seats than Labour in 1923, falling to third place in Parliament. The first Labour administration was formed in the followed year, with the Conservatives and Labour alternating, while the Liberal Party remained an influential third party thereafter. Following a long period of shrinking, the Liberals and Social Democrats merged in 1988 and formed the Liberal Democratic Party. From this point of view, Liberalism has had an unusual fate. The success of liberalism as an ideology stands in stark contrast to the failure of liberal political parties.

The decline of the Liberals has always been a topic of academic interest. Scholars have thoroughly researched the British Liberal Party from the perspectives of history and political science. Research has concentrated on describing the phenomenon and analysing the causes of the Liberal Party's collapse, structuring the process along the logic of a linear narrative. The mainstream opinions can be classified into two categories. On one side is the inevitability theory, represented by George's view that the decline of the Liberals was the result of the development of class politics [2], while on the other side is Trevor Wilson's contingency theory, which believed that this was the First World War that should responsible for the Liberal Party's strange death [3].The fate of the Liberals after the merger has also excited the interest of academics, who want to figure out how to define the new party ideologically, as well as investigate the foundations of the Liberal Democrats' success and the issues they confront nowadays.

The particular concern of the discussion of these ideas in this paper is to focus on combining the inevitability and contingency theories and attempting to break through the restrictions of space and time to re-group the causes for the Liberal Party's decline. Furthermore, except of a few works on party history, the vast majority of scholars are accustomed to treating the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of the Liberal Democratic Party as two distinct research questions, with little work linking the two or conducting comparative analysis. Because of its moderate character, the merged Liberal Party has been revived in this new era. This research tries to investigate how the Liberal Democrats have used the historical legacy of liberalism to regain political influence in modern times.

2.　Literature Review

Historians of the decline of the British Liberal Party have focused on two main questions. When did the British Liberal Party decline and what were the causes of the Liberal Party's decline? The answers and historical interpretations of these two questions are strongly correlated. On the one hand, the demise of the British Liberal Party was blamed on the First World War. In this regard, Trever Wilson and Bentley argue that the social changes caused by the First World War led to the intensification of the internal contradictions within the Liberal Party and called into doubt on the ideological legitimacy and fundamental principles of liberalism [4][5]. In addition to this, Clarke emphasises that the series of social reforms that New Liberalism led the Liberal Party to undertake had in fact helped the Liberal Party to adapt to the needs of social and political development in Britain [6]. Therefore, it was the First World War that made the Liberal Party less resilient.

On the other hand, some scholars believe that the downfall of the British Liberal Party was inevitable and not associated with the First World War. Specifically, George Dangerfield insists that

the decline of the Liberal Party was a result of the development of class politics [7]. Paul Thompson endorsed this view by claiming that the Liberal Party had been in a series of troubles such as social problems, economic crisis before 1914, so that it would be difficult for the Liberal Party to go for a revival regardless of whether the First World War came or not [8]. Ross McKibbin and Henry Pelling stressed the important influence of trade union support on the fortunes and development of both parties [9]. Moreover, they also argued that, unlike the loose internal structure of the Liberal Party, the Labour Party was not founded on the basis of some broad principles but was formed out of a highly developed class consciousness and was therefore of a united nature and class loyal [9]. Further, some Labour scholars criticised Trever Wilson and Peter Clarke by arguing that it was only by chance that the Liberals were able to gain Labour support in 1906 and adding to that Labour had already risen to power.

As for the revival of Liberal Party and its merger with the Democrats, Morgan looks at the New Liberal Party's emergence and decline from 1906 and 1924. It explores the party's internal dynamics, political stance, and difficulties it is facing at this pivotal time. The study offers insightful information about the Liberal Party's historical context and key influences during this time [10]. Grayson discusses the book *Third Force Politics*, which examines the Liberal Democrats' grassroots efforts. The party's organizational structure, political campaigns, and voter engagement tactics are all examined. The significance of the book's findings for comprehending the Lib Dems' grassroots strategy and its influence on election outcomes is highlighted by Grayson's remarks [11]. Rallings and Thrasher examine local elections in the United Kingdom, much as the 2013 study listed above, although no precise publishing date is given. In-depth examination of the dynamics, trends, and outcomes of local elections is provided by Rallings and Thrasher, who also discuss the role and effectiveness of the Liberal Party in this setting [12]. Scholars represented by Salmon focus on the liberal party under Thorpe's leadership and emphasis how its efforts become important legacy for today's liberal democratic party, especially in the realm of ideology and vote funds [13]. Leach emphasises the party's heritage of both economic liberalism and social liberalism, but also mentioned that it was ideology implicated rather than driven [14].

3. What caused the decline of British Liberal Party?

3.1. From Liberalism to New Liberalism

The early success the British Liberal Party was made possible by its members uniting together in the name of liberalism. It can be said that liberalism was the cornerstone of the Liberal Party and was a significant element in the formation of party loyalty. However, this benign coherence began to weaken at the end of the nineteenth century, due to differentiation among ideologies inside the British Liberal Party. In 1884, Hebert Spencer declared that 'Most of those who now pass as Liberals, are Tories of a new type', denouncing the party for abandoning Liberalism in favour of New Toryism or New Socialism [15].

The early British Liberal Party was the practitioner of classical liberalism, the ideology founded by Locke, Adam Smith and others. John Locke espoused his opinion about society and government in his work *Second Treatise of Government*, subtitled 'An essay concerning the origin, extent, and end of civil government'. In this book, Locke wrote:

The end of civil society [is] to avoid, and remedy those inconveniences of the state of nature... The only way whereby anyone divests himself of his natural liberty and puts on the bonds of civil society is by agreeing with other men to join together and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceful living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any that are not of it.... The legislative power of every commonwealth in all forms of government... are to govern by promulgated established laws... [which] ought to be designed for no

other end but the good of the people [16].

Nearly a century later, the same position was endorsed by Adam Smith, who observed that all constitutions of government are valued only in proportion to how well they promote the happiness of those who live under them, and this is their entire purpose and goal [17]. Views such as those described above form the basis of classical liberalism: advocating an emphasis on the interests of the people and limits on government and constitutions.

However, the adherents of classical liberalism did not always hold a monopoly on power in the British Liberals. By the end of the nineteenth century, the composition of the British Liberal Party was not same as it was in the Gladstone's day. The proportion of members of the landed aristocracy in the Liberal House of Commons had dropped dramatically, from nearly half in the 1860s to six per cent in 1914. MPs from the industrial, commercial, lawyers, teachers, journalists, and others replaced the nobility, with representatives from the working class even entering the Cabinet [2]. But the improvements of the party's membership structure did not alleviate the disadvantage of the Liberals in the face of the Conservatives, and the British Liberal Party was forced to cater the working class that was growing in political and economic power. This necessity led them to social liberalism, which is referred to as new liberalism in the United Kingdom.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, a group of researchers led by John Stuart Miller advanced several perspectives on the classical liberalism theory, progressively forming social liberalism. The pioneers advocated new ideology include Thomas Green, Leonard Hobhouse, John Hobson and others. These great political thinkers, who had influenced by Marx's theories and the labour movements in Europe, turned to a more positive view of freedom, redefined the conceptions of "society" and calling for the state and government to play an active role and interfere in social life.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the new claims of social liberalism became the guiding ideology of the British Liberal Party, providing the theoretical basis for a series of social changes performed by the Liberals once they came to power in 1906. This series of reforms included the introduction of the *Trade Union and Dispute Act*, making local governments to provide free meals to poor students, and the implementation of a pension as well as insurance system, and so on. After several decades of hard work, the British Liberal Party has effectively laid the groundwork for the 'welfare state,' earning a solid reputation and widespread public support. At the moment, the party's transition from classical liberalism to social liberalism has been beneficial but not damaging. However, this shift has generated ideological disarray inside the party, which is two sides of the same coin. The prevalence of different ideologies in the Liberal Party has resulted in the division of its members into factions based on their different views toward liberalism, causing the departure of a number of members, as well as shaking the party's formerly strong beliefs and eroding party loyalty and cohesion to some extent.

After the ideology of the Liberals turned out to be the doctrine of an active government, a number of political dissidents, mainly classical liberals and Whigs, chose to leave the Liberal Party. Some research has attributed the wave of departures from the Liberal Party during this period to the issue of Irish Home Rule. While acknowledging that this was one of the factors, it is important to note that the growing unease about the future of the Liberal Party was often an overlooked reason. On the one hand, During the second Gladstone administration, Liberal policy shifted towards so-called "constructive legislation", or positive government action. This break from the Liberal Party's long-held position resulted in the departure of several elder generations of radicals, including Albert Venn Dicey [18]. On the other hand, the shift to social liberalism transformed the Liberal Party from a bourgeoisie-oriented party to one more concerned with defending the interests of the working class. This change was sure to irritate some party members, forcing them to leave in pursuit of organizations that would better serve their own interests.

What needs to be clarified is that not all of the social liberalism opponents in the British Liberal

Party have opted to depart. On the contrary, some of them remained in the party and continue to play a active role. This has resulted in ideological disarray inside the Liberals, and the splitting of the factions has exacerbated internal conflict and damaged party solidarity. At the same time, the Liberal Party's image has grown unclear as a result of the lack of coherence between classical liberalism and new liberalism. The public, unable to sense the Liberal Party's distinct approach, would naturally question any future shifting and worried about potential risks. The erosion of public trust to the Liberal Party was not surprising.

Furthermore, politicians who have left the Liberal Party tend to go in the opposite direction, which is the Conservative Party. This movement of members allowed liberalism to infiltrate the Liberal Party's competitor parties. After the Liberal switchers were absorbed, although the Conservative labels and organization remained, the Conservative Party's ideas and beliefs trended to shift in a classical liberalism direction, so that the Conservative Party became identified with economic liberalism and free markets, commerce and urbanism, while the Tory Party's hierarchical, rural, protectionist, and traditionalist identities gradually faded [18]. However, the spread of ideas did not lead to an extension of the Liberal Party's power，rather, the British Liberal Party's uniqueness was undermined and its attraction to voters was weakened when its rival parties adopted a liberal flavour. This, once again, sowed the seeds of the British Liberal Party's long-term downfall.

In the short term, the British Liberal Party's shift from classical liberalism to social liberalism was immensely expedient. Social reforms based on social liberalism theory gained the Liberal Party support from the working class and wider public trust and were required for the Liberal Party's rise to power at the end of the nineteenth century. This change, however, had a severe influence, as the ideological split caused confusion inside the party. The departure of members, the clash of different political viewpoints within the party, and the loss of liberalism's uniqueness were all unavoidable challenges for the then-thriving British Liberal Party.

3.2. Class politics and the rise of Labour

The economic changes in Britain from the late 19th century to the 20th century as well as the rise of the Labour resulted in the Liberal Party gradually losing its appeal and a shift of working-class support. This trend can be reflected in the parliamentary performance of the Liberal Party in the first half of the 20th century. Specifically, in the 1906 British general election, the Liberals won an overwhelming victory with the advantage of over 400MPs. However, although the number of members of Parliament experienced a brief recovery in 1929, its parliamentary representation continued to decline until it reached 40MPs with the portion of only 17.6% in 1924 [1]. Such condition is related to both economic changes in Britain during that period and the rise of the Labour.

In face of economic changes and a series of social issues, the negative response of Liberal Party and its failure in dealing with sectional interest was gradually changing the political sentiment of many electorates. In the 19th century, with the transformation of Britain from a traditional to a modern society, the importance and concern over land questions had diminished considerably. Instead, the industrial bourgeoisie and the working class were gaining ground in the social structure, thus the contradiction between capital and labour became a primary issue for the Liberal Party to address in that period [10]. For instance, the Taff Vale verdict in 1901, which was decided in favour of the local railway company, seriously undermined the right of railway workers to strike and was strongly protested and condemned by the working class as a result. In addition, Britain's export industries, including coal and cotton, were declining, and the ensuing reduction in exports took the free trade and related policies advocated by the Liberal Party all along away from the central theme of economic development, which triggered a public suspicion of the Liberal government. On this basis, the Liberals indeed had realised the importance of mitigating class conflict and promoting harmony between labour and capitalists, as Lloyd George mentioned in 1914 that it was time for a party to

synthesise and unite the views from all classes of the community and Liberals stood against 'anything in the nature of class representation'. Meanwhile, this statement also demonstrated his suppression and fear of Labour's attempt to be independent [19]. In order to resolve these long-standing problems and tensions as well as maintain its reputation and status, the Liberals undertook wide-ranging social reforms addressing responses to the economic crisis, labour rights and foreign policy. In this regard, the *People's Budget* proposed by Lloyd George in 1909, which required Britain's wealthy to pay unpredicted increment tax on land value in support of British welfare system, can be considered as one of the Liberal Party's most significant reform policies in narrowing the wealth gap [20]. Therefore, in terms of the results of the 1906 election and the policy changes made by the Liberal government, the Liberals to some extent accommodated the demand of labour and the poor. Clarke agrees with this by arguing that ideologically the Liberals had adapted to the emergence of class politics by virtue of New Liberalism before the First World War [6].

However, because of the reliance on both capital and industrial wealth, it was difficult for the Liberal Party to balance the interests and demands of the two well. In other words, the Liberal Party itself was in lack of a stable political structure and thus unable to well represent the interests of a particular class or people who supported it. Consequently, the Conservative Party absorbed liberal ideas and became the defender of the interests of the proletariat, the Labour Party defended its rights by uniting the working class, while the Liberal Party lost its social base amidst partisan rivalry. This is also why Thompson argues that the Liberal victory in 1906 was a coincidental event and that the support it gained was merely a temporary reorganisation of working class and Liberal votes [8]. In this regard, positional theories such as the directional model can well explain the Liberals' behaviours. It was adjusting its policy positions to the preferences of the electorate (the working class) on issues of labour rights and social welfare to realise the maximization of the number of votes or parliamentary representation, rather than reforming the inherent distribution of wealth [21]. Furthermore, the influence of liberal government social reforms among the working class is also questionable. According to Pat Thane, Labour did not choose to passively support the Liberals just for some change in policies. G. R. Searle also supports this view by emphasising that the magnitude of social reform had been exaggerated [19].

It could be argued that the Liberal Party remained the dominant party in Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but the rapid rise of organised labour during this period intensified class tensions and increased the pressure on Liberal candidates. In terms of franchise, the parliamentary performance of the Labour was largely underestimated due to financial constraints and unequal opportunities for participation in the process. Historians have primarily debated on the calculation of number and proportions of voters during the pre-war years. On the one hand, it was difficult for the working-class males outside of Parliament to get involved in electoral matters, so Labour's political challenge to the Liberal Party had been seriously downplayed [22]. On the other hand, other scholars have emphasised the random nature of inequality in the pre-war franchise, with Parliament rejecting the working class while excluding some middle-class males [23]. Regardless of the number of people on both sides who turned out to vote, the Labour's efforts cannot be dismissed as a sign of its defeat in Parliament, as the results of parliamentary votes tended to reflect only temporary shifts in the fortunes of political parties. In addition to the disadvantage of franchise inequality, Labour was under political and economic pressure due to the lack of full agents and financial support. This was most clearly manifested in the Osborne judgment of 1909, where Walter Osborne, who was a staunch supporter of the Liberal Party, took various legal means to undermine the legitimacy of Labour's efforts to raise political funds from the trade unions, which resulted in the loss of a large number of votes for the Labour Party [19]. As for the party influence at the local level, it appeared that the New Liberals did not manage to penetrate the New Liberal ideology into constituencies beyond the major cities, suggesting that they had not developed a strong mass base at the local level. George Bernstein

refutes Clarke's view of a Liberal revival in 1906-1914 by arguing that New Liberalism had very limited influence outside of Manchester and London [24]. Conversely, by virtue of the organic development of local or regional politics, the Labour Party gradually established strong connection with the trade unions, especially in Crewe, Keighley and Holmfirth, which gradually changed the political mood of the electorate. As the key to creating the preliminaries for independent political action by the working class, the trade union movements helped to switch the loyalty of the working class from the Liberal Party to the Labour.

To conclude, after winning the 1906 election the Liberals were faced with a threefold dilemma of social, economic and foreign policy, which specifically were the oscillation and choice between individualism and collectivism, free trade and tariff protection, and imperialism and anti-imperialism. As the Old Liberalism declined, so did the social forces on which the Liberal Party relied, including nonconformist chapels. It undertook a variety of social reforms in an attempt to gain the support of the working class, but because of its inability to truly represent the interests of the workers and to respond adequately, Labour rose to power through New Liberalism and largely squeezed the Liberal Party's political viability.

3.3. First World War as a catalyst

The First World War acted as a catalyst for the decline of the Liberal Party, exacerbating divisions and splits within it. In the time leading up to the war, the British Liberal Party had already lost many of its allies and supporters as a result of the relatively serious divisions in decision-making and ideology over the issue of Irish self-rule and the war in South Africa. However, the internal contradictions of the pre-war Liberal Party were not sufficient to cause a split. In other words, the pre-war Liberal Party was still resilient, and it was the First World War that dealt it a devastating blow.

The internal structure and factional struggles of the Liberal Party were the organisational cause of its demise. As the First World War was about to begin, confusion arose within the Liberal government over the very act of war and the issue of conscription, which were closely related to the traditional principles and fundamental ideals of Liberalism. Since coming to power, the Liberal Party tended to remain away from any military conflicts in Europe and paid little attention to overseas affairs, so that it appeared to spawn a widespread view that the Liberal Party was a "party of peace" and that there was a high probability of not endorsing a declaration of war by the UK [25]. On this basis, a section of the Liberal Party still wanted to maintain this tradition of peace, but because of their limited influence in Parliament, their illusions of choosing not to intervene in military conflicts were dashed. While other Liberals, led by Lloyd George, realised the German threat. Hence, they wanted to follow a so-called 'patriotic line' and attained authority through the media and other political means.

With regard to conscription, its introduction represented the start of total war, and simultaneously implied a sacrifice of the individual liberties that liberalism had always valued. In this regard, Lloyd George chose to take extreme and radical approaches, such as banning the supply of alcohol, which was proposed in order to eliminate the threat of total war. These excessively collectivist management practices not only caused the Liberal Party and the public to doubt the validity of the wartime liberal morals, but also sharpened the contradictions within the Liberal Party. Finally, after the political crisis of 1916, the long-accumulated conflicts split the Liberal Party into two camps with the arms issue as the trigger. One is the Independent Liberals, and the other is the Coalition Liberals aligned with the Conservatives in support of the government. Thereafter Lloyd George in turn were gradually isolated by his colleagues for his overly extreme leadership and presidential manner, and Asquith's authority also declined due to his weak leadership and incompetent decision-making through constant compromise. As a result, the constituencies supporting the Liberals had been shrinking and it was at a chronic disadvantage against Labour and the Conservatives.

4.   How did merger with Social Democratic party accelerate the revival of the liberal party?

World War I gave the decline of the Liberal Party a final judgment, since then the party kept at a low ebb for decades. In the 1950s, the party even only struggled to maintain a single-digit number of seats. But the liberals never wait to die. Represented by radical's action and community policy, the party rebuilt its confidence and took various methods to survive. The progress was accelerated in the 1980s when the party got closer to the nascent Social Democratic Party and eventually merged with it. Regarding the merger and establishment of the Liberal Democratic Party as a milestone, this time what liberals want was not only how to survive but also how to become thrive. Under the leadership of Paddy Ashdown, Charles Peter Kennedy, Menzies Campbell and Nick Clegg, the unstoppable development between 1988 and 2010 of the Liberal Democratic Party surprised not only its supporter but also the whole country and its politic which was used to its two-party system and ignoring the rest small parties. Though failed in 2015, it's still necessary to look behind this part and probe into what path liberals revived and based on what kind of weapon to revive. Any political entity, in the process of political activities, needs to think about the two most basic questions: what kind of political resources it has and what kind of political goals it needs to achieve. In this exploration of the founding and rise of the Liberal Democratic Party, its development and challenges from the perspective of voters and ideology as the concrete content of these two fundamental issues will be discussed, with the election resource development as the clue and ideology serve as subsidiary explaining why it was appealing.

4.1.   Prelude: liberal party's new election legacy in the 1970s

One of the key pillars of Britain's politics is its election system, which is also one key aspect when discussing the revival of the liberal democratic party. The FPTP system is an electoral system used in general elections in the United Kingdom and local elections in England and Wales, where there are multiple candidates from different parties in each constituency, and the one with the highest number of votes in the constituency is elected. The characteristics of this electoral system are that there can be large differences in the number of voters in each constituency, but "winner-takes-all" means that the total number of votes cast does not represent the number of seats won by the party. Under the FPTP system, different parties with different types of voting funds may act differently. For example, when a party's support is more concentrated in a particular region, it may gain more seats with a smaller share of the vote, and conversely, if a party's support is more evenly spread across the country, then its share of the vote struggles to translate electoral potential into significant parliamentary gains.

Thus, the election is a two-step game about strategy. For any party, it should first be built to extend and consolidate its voter base, then or some time started when designing how to extend, make them into true parliamentary gains.

Back in the after-war period, what the liberals faced was a deserted ballot pool which was dried up in the world war and absorbed by the Labours and Conservation. In 1951, only 0.73 million people voted for the Liberal in the general election occupied about 2.6% of all [26]. Where was the ballot? Who could be with us? This was the question the Liberals keeps asking. The answer came out more directly in the 1970s.

During the time, the Liberals' act was described as 'Party Strategy and Tactics', which supported the idea of devolving power to regions and granting them more autonomy, including the establishment of devolved assemblies in Wales and Scotland [27]. They focused on small towns and seaside resorts to inner-city areas, particularly those where Labour's political organization is in decline due to neglect, industrial decline, or unpopular resettlement programs.

At the time, ideology worked as an attraction as usual, especially for the younger generation. To be more exact, in the late 1960s the individualism and other ideas of liberalism attracted the approval

of the left-leaning students, and in the 1970s it boosted. The result is a long-lasting one. Even today, the average age of the Liberal Democratic Party was the youngest in the major parties, and when the party came out with its '5E' policy in the 21st century, it's no wonder that tuition is one of the most significant parts and in 2015 the supporters left for the betrayal of the party.

In the end, just like what Peter Sloman mentioned, 'Thorpe's party found itself straddling the social and cultural divides which fractured late 1960s Britain, as MPs representing far-flung rural seats rubbed up against student radicals, middle-class professionals and inner-city activists [13].' It not only committed the Liberals to an approach to politics acting inside the institutions but also out of the political establishment. The community politic offered the Party a consolidated fund in the West and gradually extended to the rest of the country, which benefit both the general election and the local government election.

In 1970, the Liberals only hold 7.5% of total votes, the number doubled in February 1974 and was maintained in October. Even in 1979, when people suffered from the terrible economic crisis which brought the Conservatism stage to show and former liberal supporters turn to the right due to scandals like what happened in 1976, the Liberal party still took about 13 percent of the voters. Which brings a solid foundation for the revival of the Liberals. In general elections, what was important for the liberals now was how to make the votes into seats.

4.2. Merger with Social Democratic Party

The opportunity came in the 1980s. The Social Democratic Party was established as a result of the Labour Party's right-wing leadership's failure, the debunking of nationalization, and the worsening of ties between party officials and labour unions while they were in office. Right-wing factions left the Labour Party in 1981 to find the Social Democratic Party. In terms of class composition, the party is a reasonably equal mixture of all social classes rather than relying mostly on the middle and top echelons of society like the Conservative Party or primarily representing the interests of the middle and lower classes like the Labour Party. The upshot was that the party found itself in the middle of a two-party system that was becoming more and more polarized, supporting neither the conservative policies of Thatcher nor the left-wing policies of Foot.

When the Social Democrats were established, they absorbed 80,000 members from the Labour Party and stormed into British politics with 27 members of Parliament. But the new party quickly ran into political difficulties. The Social Democrats' major issue is that they don't have enough solid social roots because they are a party that was created from the top down. In the British electoral system, it is challenging for other parties to overturn the dominance of the two big parties and win an election if there are not enough votes. The Social Democrats, who were having a hard time surviving, observed that the ideologically identical Liberal Party, which was also having electoral problems, wanted to end the impasse by establishing an alliance.

The coalition is a moderately centrist organization that doesn't have any standout policies but refrains from extremes, which many centrists find appealing. The coalition government proposed a platform, proposing to end the situation in which two major parties, primarily representing two classes, dominate British politics in response to the widening of the north-south divide in Britain, the growth of rich and poor areas, and the swing of the Conservative and Labour parties.

The alliance's initial results have come quickly. The Alliance Party garnered close to 25 percent of the vote in the general election of 1983. Regional blocs still lack the power to split votes into smaller ones despite being more fractured.

This election result unquestionably boosts confidence in the coalition government's future development in terms of the specifics. However, the 1987 general election delivered the coalition a new setback, and the loss of seats and voters forced the leaders of both parties to re-evaluate their alliance and realize how challenging it would be to overthrow the ruling party. The failure was caused

by the two parties' differing ideologies as well as the ferocious Conservative attacks throughout the Thatcher administration. Voters are hesitant because of the perception that the two parties in the alliance are still at odds. The two parties held independent internal polls to decide whether to unite in 1988. After an internal vote, the two parties announced a merger in the same year, and the Liberal Democratic Party was formally formed.

What the merger in 1988 means to the Liberal Party for the general election is less about bringing more vote share but more about helping the party to better transfer it into parliament gains, which set a foundation for the party's role as the third force in Britain politic. The following chart shows the vote share and the seat share of the Liberal and Liberal Democratic Party from 1970 to 2019, refers that the party's vote share (in fact also vote numbers) does not increase largely and persistent after the merger, but the seat share increased. This means, with the same vote share the party was able to make more seats. This is because, in the particular region, the merger offered the party chances to compete with the two large parties. Similarly, in the local government election, the merger offered the Party to contribute more candidates in the competition, and the party's influence grew after being one. Also happened in the local government, the merger strengthens the capability of the party in the election, via the methods like offering more competitive candidates.

Table 1: Deviation from proportionality of the Liberal Democratic Party in the general election: 1970~2019 [26].

YEAR	VOTE SHARE	SEAT SHARE	DIFFERENCE
1970	7.50%	0.95%	6.55%
1974FEB	19.30%	2.20%	17.10%
1974OCT	18.30%	2.05%	16.25%
1979	13.80%	1.73%	12.07%
1983	25.40%	3.54%	21.86%
1987	22.60%	3.38%	19.22%
1992	17.85%	3.07%	14.78%
1997	16.80%	6.98%	9.82%
2001	18.30%	7.89%	10.41%
2005	22.00%	9.60%	12.40%
2010	23.00%	8.77%	14.23%
2015	7.90%	1.23%	6.67%
2017	7.40%	1.85%	5.55%
2019	11.50%	1.69%	9.81%

Yet the disproportionality between the vote share and seats in the general election, clearly indicated the different vote funds in different parties, and among them Liberal Democratic Party is absolutely not the one who benefited. In fact, as what the chart 1 tells, large gap between vote share and seat share maintained in decades and still troubled its development nowadays.

Table 2: Deviation from proportionality of major parties in the 2019 general election [26]

PARTY	VOTE SHARE	SEAT SHARE	DIFFERENCE
CONSERVATION	43.6%	56.15%	-12.55%
LABOUR	32.1%	31.08%	1.02%
LD	11.5%	1.69%	9.81%
PC/SNP	4.4%	8%	-3.6%
OTHERS	8.4%	3.08%	5.32%

The data for 2010 is very marked. After the establishment, the peak of its revival must be the alliance government in 2010, based on the transition of the party's ideology to the center-right. But as Leach mentioned in his book, due to historical conditions, the party failed to use its ideology as a driving force of the party's development but as a positive element, the development shifted its centre into election strategy [14]. In the 19th century with members turning to conservation and economic development liberalism was vastly accepted by all parties to different extend. While after the world war, social liberalism was necessary for the country's survival, the welfare state made social liberalism a consensus. Though the Liberal Democratic Party was lucky to smoothly use those two ideologies as tools and swing between different policies and parties it also left no political niche for the party as a special attraction, 'The real problem seems to be that there is no longer much distinctive ideological ground for the Liberal Democrats to occupy'. Moderation may benefit the third party, but no major party has a special ideology [14].

5.   Conclusion

The analysis above of the growth of the British Liberal Party reveals that there are similarities between the party's condition historically and now. Whether it is the decline of the Liberal Party in the nineteenth century or the revival of the Liberal Democrats nowadays, the causes are inseparable from liberalism as an ideology and class politics. Perhaps a single hypothesis of inevitability and contingency for the factors in the decline of the British Liberal Party is too simplistic for this complex period of history. This paper reorganises the Liberal Party's decline from the standpoint of political science, focusing on its changing ideology and the pressure from class politics.

The significance of the shift from classical liberalism to social liberalism cannot be emphasised, as it was a crucial factor in the Liberal Party's transformation from a party that headed only a few cities to one of the two major parties in the British Congress. However, what is often ignored by academics is that this ideological transition was also a shake-up of the Liberal Party's founding roots. This discrepancy has not only caused internal party strife owing to political differences, but it has also made the Liberal Party's political image become vague.

As for the debate on whether the decline of Liberal Party is the inevitable result of class politics, this paper adopts a balanced view which admits that the pre-war rise of the Labour Party was unstoppable and had already threatened the political niche of the Liberals as well as accepts the blow of World War I to the Liberal Party. Even though the Liberal Party once experienced a brief revival after the First World War's blow, it had lost its appeal to voters under the multiple squeezing of capital and labour, as well as the Conservatives and Labour Party.

After the first world war, the liberal struggled to survive. Thorpe as its leader, the Party rebuilt its grassroots for election in both general elections and local government. What the merger in 1988 means to the Liberal Party is less about bringing more vote share and more about helping the party to better transfer it into parliament gains, which set a foundation for the party's role as the third force in Britain's politics. The legacy of liberalism has played a positive role in the revival of the Liberal Democrats, for instance, ideology did connect the party with a younger generation. However, the point we want to emphasize is that the Liberal Democrats of today face the same dilemma as the Liberal Party of the past to some extent: with the idea of liberalism gradually becoming consensus, the ideology belonging to the party did feel at sea for a long time and left no niche for the party's further development.

Compared to the past, liberalism has practically become a global consensus idea in the twenty-first century, with almost all parties and organisations eager to represent themselves as supporters of freedom, equality, and right. As liberalism has become a term for the great majority of groups, it has might become less important. This flurry of debate is eroding the public's perception of the value of liberalism, and a wholesale endorsement of liberalism would essentially result in the ossification of

this theory. How to proceed in the present to continue to utilise the legacy of liberalism, to have an effective dialog about liberalism, and even to continue to construct the theory of liberalism is a question that needs to be addressed urgently by academics.

Today, the Liberal Democratic Party serves as the best conciliator and wins approval from the public. However, just as it was over a hundred years ago, once it wants to grow into one of two, the party is still limited by election state quo and mission to find its own proposition. When the future of liberalism becomes clear, the ideology that once anchored the British Liberal Party may provide the Liberal Democrats with a new path forward today.

Acknowledgement

References

[1]   Butler, D., Sloman, A. (1980) British political facts: 1900-1975. Macmillan, London. pp. 182

[2]   Pearce, M., Stewart, G. (1992) British Political History 1867-1995: Democracy and Decline. Routledge, London. p. 229

[3]   Wilson, T. (2011) The downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935. Faber and Fabe, London. p.20

[4]   Wilson, T. (1966) The downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935. Collins, London.

[5]   Bentley, M. (1987) The climax of liberal politics. Edward Arnold, London.

[6]   Clarke, P. F. (2007) Lancashire and the new Liberalism. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[7]   Dangerfield, G. (1966) Chapter 2 in The Strange Death of Liberal England. MacGibbon and Kee, London. pp. 22-31

[8]   Thompson, P. R. (1967) Socialists, liberals and labour: The struggle for London, 1885-1914. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London. pp. 179

[9]   Pelling, H. (1996) The Origins of the Labour Party, 1880-1900. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

[10] Morgan, K. O. (2011) The New Liberal Party from Dawn to Fall 1906-1924. Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental Contemporain, no. 7.

[11] Whiteley, P., Side, P. and Billinghurst, A. (2006) Third Force Politics: The Liberal Democrats at Grassroots Level. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[12] Rallings, C., Thrasher, M. (1997) Local elections in England. Routledge, London.

[13] Sloman, P. (2022) 'Take Power—Vote Liberal': Jeremy Thorpe, the 1974 Liberal Revival, and the Politics of 1970s Britain. The English Historical Review, 137:1462-1492.

[14] Leach, R. (2015) Political Ideology in Britain. Bloomsbury Academic, London. p. 44

[15] Noonan, L. G. (1954) The Decline of the Liberal Party in British Politics. The Journal of Politics, 16: 24-38.

[16] Locke, J. (1960) Two Treatises of Government. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[17] Smith, A. (1976) The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Liberty Classics, Indianapolis.

[18] Davies, S. (2012) Classical Liberalism in the Liberal Party since 1886. Economic Affairs, 32: 6–10.

[19] Laybourn, K. (1995) The Rise of Labour and the Decline of Liberalism: The State of the Debate. History, 80: 207-226.

[20] Murray, B. K. (1973) The Politics of the 'People's Budget.' The Historical Journal, 16: 555–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2638204.

[21] Rabinowitz, G., Stuart, E. M. (1989) A Directional Theory of Issue Voting. American Political Science Review, 83: 93–121.

[22] Matthew, H. C. G., McKibbin, R. I. and Kay, J.A. (1976) The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party. The English Historical Review XCI, CCCLXI: 723–752.

[23] Tanner, D. (1983) The Parliamentary Electoral System, the 'Fourth' Reform Act and the Rise of Labour in England and Wales. Historical Research, 56: 205–219.

[24] Bernstein, G. L. (1983) Liberalism and the Progressive Alliance in the Constituencies, 1900–1914: Three Case Studies. The Historical Journal, 26: 617–40.

[25] Morgan, K. O. (2023) The Crisis of War, 1915–18. In Age of Lloyd George: The Liberal Party and British Politics, 1890-1929. Routledge, London. pp. 55–56

[26] Cracknell, R., Uberoi, E., Burton, M. (2023) UK Election Statistics: 1918-2023: A century of elections. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7529/

[27] Pinkney, R. (1983) Nationalizing Local Politics and Localizing a National Party: The Liberal Role in Local Government. Government and Opposition, xviii: pp. 351.