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Khaki Election 1918

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The "khaki" general election of 1918 was held in Great Britain almost immediately after the Armistice. It was the first held under what was almost universal adult suffrage. The result was a crushing victory for a coalition comprised of Liberals supporting Prime Minister Lloyd George, and the Conservatives.

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Introduction

The British General Election on the 14 December 1918 was held just a month after the Armistice. Under the terms of the new Representation of the People Act, the electorate now included most women aged over thirty and all men over twenty-one. A special provision also lowered the voting age to nineteen for those who had served in the war. The new electorate, at 21,392,322, was nearly triple what it had been in the previous election of December 1910 (7,709,981). This was a larger expansion – both proportionately and absolutely – than delivered by any previous reform act.

Controversy

The election, and the three-week campaign which preceded it, was marred by ill-feeling and

controversy. In part, this was because many contemporaries felt it had been rushed upon the people, with voting occurring before many troops had returned home. It was also felt that voter registration had been hurried. In addition, the election was held during an influenza epidemic, and ill candidates as well as cancelled meetings were common.

The principal controversy, however, was the muddled condition of the parties, especially the Liberals, who had effectively split in December 1916. Disaffected Members of Parliament (MPs) – backed by Conservatives in the wartime coalition – had ejected Herbert Henry Asquith (1852-1928) from the Premiership, criticising his war leadership, and replaced him with David Lloyd George (1863-1945). The acrimony between the two factions divided the Liberal candidates into supporters of one, the other, neither, or both. The Conservatives for the most part saw Lloyd George as indispensable as Prime Minister, and most (but not all) agreed to fight the election as part of a coalition with other Lloyd George supporters. Even Labour supporters were not universally committed to fighting as an independent party.

When the campaign began, it was thus often ambiguous which candidates supported and opposed the coalition. Given the widely presumed ignorance of the new electorate (the majority of whom had never before voted) the call to create a system for clearly demarcating coalition supporters grew irresistible. As Lord George Riddell (1865-1934) wrote: "you will have to badge the Lloyd George candidates or people will not know for whom to vote".[1]

This led to the creation of the notorious "coupon", which was, in effect, a seal of approval signed by Lloyd George and Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law (1858-1923). It ran: "We have much pleasure in recognising you as the Coalition candidate for. ...We have every hope that the electors will return you as their representative in Parliament to support the Government in the great task which lies before it."[2]

	Total Votes	%	Candidates	Unopposed	Elected
Co. Conservative	3,472,738	32.5	362	41	332
Conservative	671,454	6.2	83	0	50
Co. Liberal	1,396,590	12.6	145	23	127
Liberal	1,388,784	13	276	4	36
Co. Labour	53,962	0.4	5	1	4
Labour	2,245,777	20.8	361	11	57
Co. National Democratic and Labour	156,834	1.5	18	0	9
National Democratic and Labour	24,497	0.2	8	0	0
Sinn Fein	497,107	4.6	102	25	73

Party	Votes	%			
Irish Nationalist	238,197	2.2	60	1	7
Others	640,878	6	202	1	12
TOTAL	**10,786,818**	**100**	**1622**	**107**	**707**

Table 1: Election Result, 1918[3]

As Table 1 shows, the vast majority of candidates who were given the coupon were Conservatives, with Lloyd George's Liberals receiving less than half the number. Most Liberals (the majority of them supporters of Asquith) and almost all Labour candidates, were uncouponed. Unsurprisingly, there were numerous compromises, deals, and pacts at a constituency level along both coupon and ideological lines. Sometimes these resulted in a single couponed candidate fighting a single uncouponed candidate, but more often the latter failed to unite behind a single leader, which naturally split the anti-coalition vote.

In such rushed and confused political circumstances, 1918 was unsurprisingly not an election of great issues, arguments, or programmes. The substance of the campaign mainly revolved around reparations, punishing the *Kaiser*, and excluding and repatriating enemy aliens. Despite Lloyd George's support for Colonial Preference, the Asquithians, who were weakly led and cash-strapped, failed to make Free Trade a particular election issue, or advance a social programme that could rival Labour's plan. Austen Chamberlain (1863-1937) wrote of the campaign: "I have never hated [one] so much. The voters are apathetic, the dividing lines of the parties obscure and uncertain, the issues ill-defined."[4]

Outcome of the Election

When the results were declared, the coalition triumphed, with 472 out of 530 candidates returned. It remains debatable whether this was on account of the coupon itself, or should instead be understood as a victory for the political right, which successfully exploited patriotic feeling in the exceptional circumstances of a khaki election. Amongst opposition parties, the Asquithian Liberals were devastated and reduced to a rump of just thirty-six MPs, with almost all their leaders, including Asquith himself, defeated. Labour polled impressively, but won only fifty-seven seats (just fifteen more than in December 1910). Ramsay MacDonald (1866-1937) and Philip Snowden (1864-1937) were both defeated, seemingly on account of their outspoken pacifism. In Ireland, the radical Sinn Fein almost entirely overturned the moderate Irish Parliamentary Party, a result which hastened Irish independence and partition. Across the country, just 57.2 percent of eligible electors actually voted. This was twenty-four percentage points lower than it had been in the previous election, and represented the lowest turnout in British electoral history since 1868. Despite plenty of pre-election speculation, it did not appear that women, as a group, had voted particularly differently to men: they had been no more likely to turn out, back different parties, or support female candidates in the small number of constituencies where they stood.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the 1918 election could have been the bold symbol of a newly forged democracy rising to meet the political challenges of a world turned upside down. Instead, it was a messy, squalid, and wholly unloved affair. Its chief legacy was that it destabilised the Liberal party's historic status as the primary progressive and anti-Conservative force in British politics. As well as being, *prima facie*, a very poor result for the party, the split ceded a huge opportunity to Labour, and made most of the remaining Liberals dependent on future Conservative favour to retain their electoral footing. While the Liberals managed to tread water in 1922 and managed a modest recovery in 1923, the weak foundations established in 1918 collapsed almost entirely in 1924, where the Liberals were reduced to forty seats, and doomed forever to be the third party of British politics.

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Notes

1. ↑ Cited in Farr, Martin: 'Waging Democracy: the British General Election of 1918 Reconsidered', Cercles, 21 (2011), p. 71.
2. ↑ The Times, 28 November 1918, p. 7.
3. ↑ Craig, F.W.S: British Electoral Facts 1832-1918, Chichester 1981, pp. 21-23.
4. ↑ Self, Robert (ed.): The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters, vol.5, Cambridge 1995, p. 100.

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