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Hugh W. Stephens

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Partisan Realignment and Electoral Arrangement in Britain: The MacDonald-Gladstone Pact of 1903

HUGH W. STEPHENS
University of Houston

Introduction

Elections have been much investigated, and we are well aware that changes in partisan loyalties of major social groups have systemic effects upon the distribution of party power as well as upon other parts of the political system. More especially, we also know that the structure of electoral arrangements, that is, the rules governing how popular votes are translated into legislative representation, can have an independent effect upon the outcome of elections in these same terms. This is apparent in Douglas Rae's comprehensive examination of the various ramifications of electoral laws, such as the ballot form, size of electoral districts, and formulae for distributing legislative seats, in Maurice Duverger's discussion of the effects of proportional representation upon election of Deputies to the French National Assembly, and in the debate between Jerrold Rusk, Philip Converse, and Walter D. Burnham concerning the effects of changes in registration requirements, women's suffrage, and the introduction of the Australian ballot upon electoral outcomes in the United States.¹ The impact of informal arrangements between parties such as sharing candidates or dividing legislative contests is more difficult to assess, however. Such devices have not been absent in American politics, as indicated by cooperation between Populists and Republicans in North Carolina and Democrats and Populists in other states during the 1880s, or between Democrats and the Farmer Labor Party in Minnesota. These can also be found in Great Britain's political history as well; one such was the agreement of the Conservatives not to oppose some 148 Liberal Unionist candidates at the election of 1886 who had broken with the parent Liberal Party over Irish Home Rule. The overwhelming victory of the Unionists (Conservatives and Liberal Unionists) at this election established a dominance in parliamentary politics which lasted for most of the next twenty years.²

A second instance was the no-contest agreement made in 1903 between the Labor Representation Committee (LRC) and the Liberal Party. This was of major and direct importance to displacement of the Liberals by Labor as the

¹ Douglas Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Law* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971); Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties* (New York: John Wiley, 1966, p. 357); Walter D. Burnham, "Theory and Voting Research: Some Reflections on Converse's 'Change in the American Electorate'", comments by P.E. Converse and J. Rusk, and rejoinder by Burnham, *American Political Science Review*, 63:2 (1974) pp. 1002-58.

² See Hugh W. Stephens, "The Changing Context of British Politics in the 1880s: The Reform Acts and the Formation of the Liberal Unionist Party", *Social Science History*, 1:3 (1977) pp. 486-501.

largest party of the Left during the relatively brief sixteen-year period from 1906 to 1922, described by the noted historian Henry Pelling as the most remarkable transformation in British political history.³ This change in the party system was also a key element in a series of other changes occurring during the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, including a large and permanent increase in the level of voter turnout, development of a new electoral cleavage based on socioeconomic class, expansion in the scope of government as the foundations of the social welfare state were begun, and alteration in the legislative system when the House of Lords was deprived of the right to permanently veto bills passed by the Commons. The displacement of an historic party by a new one was obviously the product both of fundamental changes at work in British society, particularly the growing power of trade unions and enhancement of working class political consciousness, as well as of more immediate influences, such as the actions of political leaders and articulation of new issues. This examination is directed toward alleviating a serious gap in our understanding of the origins of the modern British party system and suggests a method which may be useful in analyzing similar situations in other democratically governed countries. Its purpose is to demonstrate that the 1903 electoral pact between the Labor Representation Committee and the Liberal Party played a crucial role in the success and survival of Labor during its early, pre-war period of development when a major electoral realignment began. Specifically, the agreement allowed the fledgling party to avoid some of the disadvantages of the largely single-member, first-past-the-post electoral system and an electorate which was predominantly middle class in social composition, and to establish a limited but distinctive constituency base of parliamentary representation from which it subsequently grew and displaced the Liberals as the major party of the Left in the more propitious conditions of post-World War One politics. The results of the analysis therefore tend to confirm the assertion of many political analysts that while shifts in voter opinion and support are important in determining the outcome of elections with respect to legislative and executive power of parties, arrangements between them affecting voter choice may also significantly affect the results.

Analytical Design

This examination relies upon partisan realignment as the method of analysis because the concept is particularly well suited for demonstrating the interactive effects of changes in the character of party support and electoral arrangements upon the outcome of elections in the terms just noted. As developed by students of American electoral and party history, realignments designate widespread, profound alterations in levels of voter turnout, electoral partisanship, party strength in legislatures, and in turn, the character of

³ *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), p. 101.

government policy, which are of sufficient abruptness and strength to set one period of political life off from another.⁴ Many changes in politics found in American party realignments, including fundamental adjustments in power relations among social groups, redefinition of political conflict, and expansion of the scope and intensity of party competition, have their equivalents in Britain's political history during the first quarter of this century. Because the realignment concept has seldom been applied to Britain, important questions do remain about the validity of the American model, but given the presence of responsible government in Britain, at least three aspects derived from the American experience are appropriate and can be used for this inquiry. These are as follows: the onset of a new phase in the electoral cycle, when electoral majorities and minorities break up and re-form; marked change in the level of electoral participation or voter turnout; and the creation of new, durable coalitions of partisan support, including the possible emergence of a new, "third" party. In order to lend the analysis the necessary dynamic quality and permit changes in variables to be measured over time, they can be represented by indices amenable to quantification and measurement. The first realignment feature, change in the electoral cycle, is designated by the number of seats held by each party in the House of Commons during a given parliament, that is, multi-year sessions between general elections, and the second, electoral participation, is represented by the total popular vote and average constituency turnout at general elections. The third variable, electoral partisanship, is somewhat more complex, for it is represented by the aggregate character of parliamentary constituencies controlled by each party during the respective parliaments, using the following indices:⁵

characteristic

size or scale
urbanization
electoral participation

measure

total population
population per square mile
turnout as a percent of
registered voters

⁴ There is a large and varied literature on American realignments. See, for instance, V.O. Key, "Secular Realignment and the Party System" *Journal of Politics*, 21:1 (1959) pp. 198-210; James Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1973); Walter D. Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W. Norton, 1970); David W. Brady, *Congressional Voting in a Partisan Era* (University of Kansas Press, 1973), and Bruce Campbell and Richard Trillings, eds., *Realignment in American Politics: Toward a Theory* (University of Texas Press, 1980).

⁵ Explanation of computation and data sources: a) Party identification of Members of Parliament: *Constitutional Yearbook 1901, 1907, 1912* (Brighton, England: Harvester Press, reprinted, 1973); (b) Constituency population, voter turnout, *ibid.*; (c) Density of population: computed on the basis of population per square mile. The land areas of constituencies used for this purpose is found in the following: H.C. *Parliamentary Paper*, "Census of England and Wales, 1911", vol. III (CVII, 1912-13); "Census of Scotland, 1891 (cmd 6755). Figures for Members representing the twenty-five double member constituencies were calculated on the basis of the entire constituency, that is, as two single member seats.

These indices were selected with consideration of their political significance as well as data availability. Total population serves as a surrogate for the size or scale of parliamentary constituencies, for theories of political modernization strongly suggest that increasing scale of social interaction is highly significant to the growth of impersonality and hence, the importance of formal organization and ideology in party affairs.⁶ Urbanization designates complexity of social structure which is usually associated in a positive way with electoral competitiveness and in Britain at this time, with the social composition of some constituencies as well, since the larger, heavily urbanized seats were usually dominated by manual workers.⁷ Voter turnout as a percentage of registered voters in each constituency, hereafter referred to as proportionate or percentage turnout, is used because it shows effective electoral activity in the sense of party control of seats in the Commons.

Data on these measures were collected for all 560 English, Welsh, and Scottish seats, excepting the Universities, for the parliaments of 1900-06, 1906-10, and January-December, 1910, the first being included in order to show changes in the variables at the 1906 election. The aggregate character of constituency support for the parties at each parliament is delineated by classifying constituencies according to their quartile rankings on the measures and cross-tabulating by the party identity of their Members, the results being expressed as the percentage of seats each party held in the quartiles. For instance, if the reader will refer to Table 1, it shows that the Unionists held 70 percent of all seats ranked in the highest quartile of population size in the 1900-06 parliament, but only 21 percent of the same type in the next. Table 2, which contains mean averages for those constituencies controlled by the respective parties, provides additional perspective by showing the absolute changes in electoral support from one parliament to the next. Admittedly, these indices do not measure partisanship as aggregates of individuals since we lack the necessary survey data to link social and economic circumstances of voters directly to their partisan choices, but this is at least partially offset by the fact that they do reflect the local milieu which has a more powerful influence upon constituency partisanship as a whole than differences among individuals.⁸ At this relatively early stage in our analysis and understanding of party realignment in early Twentieth Century Britain, quartile rankings therefore provide a sufficiently

⁶ See for instance, G. and M. Wilson, *The Analysis of Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945); Lucy Mair, "Social Change in Africa", *International Affairs*, 36 (1960) pp. 447-56; David Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

⁷ This point is made by several students of British psephology, including Peter F. Clarke, "Electoral Sociology of Modern Britain" *History*, 57 (1972), pp. 31-55. See also, Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties, and the People: The British General Elections of 1910*. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1972) especially Appendix II.

⁸ Wm L. Miller, *Electoral Dynamics in Britain since 1918* (New York: Macmillan, 1977) p. xiv and Jorgen Rasmussen, "The Impact of Constituency Structural Characteristics upon Political Preferences in Britain", *Comparative Politics*, 6:1 (October, 1973), p. 142. Denominational religious affiliation and region are among the likely influences upon voter preference prior to World War One not considered here, but there is a lack of sufficiently detailed data which precludes their consideration here.

valid and detailed description of changes in those aspects of electoral support selected for this study.

The impact of the electoral agreement of 1903 upon the outcome of the elections of 1906 and January, 1910 will be assessed within the context of changes in the three aspects of realignment set forth above, most particularly, constituency support. At each election, the character of those constituencies contested by Labor and its success in seats covered by the agreement, where Labor candidates confronted only Unionist opponents, will be compared to the character and success of those seats not included, that is, where a Liberal as well as a Unionist opponent was present. The results demonstrate that realignment trends provide a valuable means of analyzing the impact of informal arrangements for constituency contests upon the results of elections, and in this particular case show that the MacDonald-Gladstone pact was vital to Labor's success in gaining access to parliament during its early, formative years before the war.

The General Elections of 1906 and January, 1910

The agreement between Ramsay MacDonald, Secretary of the Labor Representation Committee, and Herbert Gladstone, chief Liberal Whip, originated in the electoral situation which confronted the new party after its formation in 1900. MacDonald and the LRC leadership were committed to maintaining a separate political identity and to placing working class candidates in parliament outside of Liberal sponsorship as was the case in the past, but they were acutely aware of the disadvantages imposed by the largely single-member, winner-take-all electoral system and extensive prejudice against working class candidacies among the largely middle class electorate.⁹ MacDonald was therefore anxious to obtain Liberal cooperation at future elections and in 1903 made an informal and confidential understanding with Gladstone that at the next general election, Liberal leaders would try to persuade their constituency associations in about fifty specified seats onto to put up candidates, in return for which Labor leaders would encourage supporters of their party to support Liberals in the remaining seats.¹⁰ The fact that only thirty-one of forty-five Labor candidates in England had straight fight opportunities at the next election in 1906 shows that Gladstone was not entirely successful in keeping his end of the bargain, but to this extent at least, Labor avoided some of the institutional disabilities electoral rules imposed upon a new party.¹¹

In terms of realignment theory, the 1906 general election exhibited several features usually associated with a "critical" election, although party trends did

⁹ There were twenty-five double member constituencies during the period, all located in relatively large towns or cities.

¹⁰ For a list of the constituencies, see F. Bealey and H. Pelling, *Labor and Politics, 1900-1906* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), Appendix A.

¹¹ Twenty-one were single member seats and ten double member constituencies where only one Liberal candidate was put up for election. There were also four Labor candidacies in Scotland not covered by the agreement.

not complete a reorientation until 1910. Most important of the changes was an abrupt replacement of the majority party in the House of Commons, together with an end to the extensive voter apathy characteristic of the past several elections; the return of 401 Liberals, 157 Unionists, and twenty-nine Laborites compared to 402 Unionists and 187 Liberals in 1900 marked one of the most stunning reversals of party fortunes in British history.¹² Voter turnout increased from a total of 3.9 million, averaging 8,700 votes per seat to 5.8 million and 10,300, respectively. Comparison of quartile distributions for the parties shown

¹² Actually, two Laborities were elected in 1900 and three more returned at by-elections during the 1900-06 parliament.

TABLE 1

Quartile Distributions of the parties on Constituency Characteristics: 1900-10

	1900-06			1906-10			1910			
	Cons	Lib	Lab	Cons	Lib	Lab	Cons	Lib	Lab	
Population	1	70	27	3	21	69	10	32	49	9
	2	64	35	1	27	65	8	38	55	7
	3	58	41	1	28	68	4	47	49	12
	4	54	46	0	30	70	0	56	43	0
Density	1	77	23	0	29	62	8	44	46	10
	2	66	32	2	30	62	8	41	50	9
	3	52	47	1	20	75	5	36	54	10
	4	60	39	1	27	72	1	53	46	1
Proportionate turnout* (seats)**	1	50	50	0	28	66	6	49	44	8
	2	54	44	2	26	67	7	39	56	5
	3	67	37	0	24	74	2	41	50	9
	4	80	19	2	28	63	9	38	48	13
	(397)	(219)	(56)	(161)	(393)	(56)	(278)	(281)	(41)	

* Uncontested seats not included

** Includes Members returned at by-elections

TABLE 2

*Constituency Characteristics of the parties
(absolute mean averages)*

	1900-06		1906-10			1910		
	Conservative	Liberal	Conservative	Liberal	Labor	Conservative	Liberal	Labor
Population	74,300	66,600	69,300	71,000	100,000	72,200	78,400	108,000
Density	16,300	8,000	15,400	14,700	17,200	13,700	13,500	14,100
Voter turnout*	8,600	8,800	9,500	10,400	12,900	9,800	11,400	13,600

* Uncontested seats excluded

in Table 1 for the parliaments of 1900-06 and 1906-10 indicates that the 1906 election results disrupted the structure of partisan support, one which had in fact sustained Unionist domination of parliament since 1886 with only one brief interruption.

Beyond extensive Liberal victories in all types of constituencies, the major alteration in partisan electoral support was the heavy loss suffered by the Unionist Party among larger-sized, urban seats having low proportionate but high absolute levels of voter turnout.¹³ This meant that the core of Unionist support shifted by default, so to speak, toward smaller, more rural types of seats having relatively high proportionate levels of voter turnout while Liberal strength moved in the opposite direction, although not as far since, as Table 1 shows, Labor successes were mostly in larger, heavily urban seats. What happened was that mobilization of new voters was concentrated in urban seats, increasing some 25 percent more than among rural ones, and was decidedly anti-Unionist. This meant that whether a Liberal or a Labor candidate stood to benefit from realignment trends depended substantially upon the presence of absence of the seat in terms of the MacDonald-Gladstone agreement.

When the incidence of the agreement is analyzed within the context of party realignment trends begun at the 1906 election, the results strongly suggest that it provided a crucial element in Labor's relatively successful initial foray into parliamentary politics. Of the forty-five English seats contested by Labor, its candidates won twenty-four of the thirty-one covered by the pact but only three of the fourteen not covered. Since a comparison of the quartile rankings of the two groups reveals very little difference, it is therefore unlikely that constituency characteristics provide a valid explanation of the disparate success rates. Absence of Liberal opposition was only one element of victory for Labor candidates however, for they still had to beat Unionist opponents in the straight fight contests, and it is here that understanding of realignment trends is particularly helpful. The quartile distribution of Labor seats in the 1906-10 parliament set forth in Table 1, as well as mean averages of all seats won by the respective parties in Table 2 indicate that Labor was fortunate to be able to confront Unionist candidates mostly in larger, heavily urban seats, for these were precisely those located on leading edge of the anti-Unionist realignment trend, that is, whose voters were those most likely to discard past loyalties and support one or another of the parties of the Left. In fact, powerful local influences were required to offset this advantage, for of the seven contests Labor lost, two were in Liverpool, a hotbed of anti-Irish sentiment among working class voters which carried over into antipathy toward the Liberals because of their support for Irish Home Rule, and two were in Birmingham, the local base of Joseph Chamberlain, long a major figure in the Unionist Party.

¹³ For instance, Table 2 shows that the absolute turnout average in seats held by Labor during the 1906-10 parliament was 12,900, but Table 1 shows that a majority of these seats ranked below the median average in terms of proportionate turnout.

When parliament was dissolved in January, 1910 following the refusal of the House of Lords to pass the Government's budget for 1909, Labor had increased its strength in the Commons to forty-five seats. Few of the additions had been won on the hustings, however, for thirteen of these were dominated by the miner vote, whose Members in Parliament automatically changed their party designation from Liberal to Labor when the Miners' Federation affiliated to the LRC in 1908. Liberal leaders were therefore less inclined to grant Labor's request for additional concessions for the next election and allowed only three. Nevertheless, they were willing to honor past results covered by the agreement and, with three exceptions, Labor incumbents were not challenged by Liberals, giving Labor forty-two straight sights against Unionist opponents. For its part, Labor brought forward seventy-eight candidates altogether, twenty-seven contesting "new" seats; although more ambitious than the tentative effort in 1906, this was the maximum the LRC Executive would allow its militants, and all of these were selected as potentially winnable because of social characteristics and expected trade union support.¹⁴ Similar to the situation at the 1906 election, with the partial exception of a slightly higher mean average density, the rankings and averages of the new seats on the measures of constituency character for the twenty-seven new contests closely resembled the forty-two straight fight seats where Laborites were the incumbents.

The stakes of the January, 1910 election were unusually high and it proved to be among the most partisan, closely fought in British history, setting the evolution of the party system onto a new direction. Turnout again rose substantially, this time to 6.6 million voters, a record 87 percent of those registered, average constituency turnout was up by 600 persons and reached 10,900, and only eight seats went uncontested. This additional surge in voter turnout proved favorable to the Unionists, for in returning 272 Members compared to 274 for the Liberals and forty for Labor, the election restored about half of the strength the Unionists had lost four years previously. Changes in quartile distributions of the parties on the measures in Table 1 from the second to the third parliament indicate that most of the Unionist gains came in smaller, more rural types of seats with high proportionate turnout, that is, those ranked in the lower two quartiles of size and density and the highest quartile on proportionate turnout. As Table 2 indicates, although the absolute average of voter turnout in Unionist seats in the January-December, 1910 parliament was below that of the other two parties, the rural areas experienced a much greater increase in proportionate turnout, favorable enough to the Unionists to displace many Liberals. Nevertheless, the Unionists did fail to recover many of the larger, urban seats they had lost in 1906 and were therefore denied the opportunity to reconstitute their old majority, suggesting that mobilization of new voters in these seats permanently denied the party an important segment of parliamentary representation. The net result was that the core of Unionist constituency support

¹⁴ Blewett, *op. cit.* chapter 18.

shifted still further toward the smaller, rural seats, even though some larger, urban constituencies remained under Unionist control.

Because Labor lost only five seats, Unionist gains were necessarily at Liberal expense, but the effects of these changes in partisan support and their interaction with the incidence of the agreement upon Liberal fortunes at the January, 1910 election are best understood in the context of what happened to Labor. Labor's constituency base obviously changed very little at this election; Tables 1 and 2 show that its core remained among the larger, heavily urban seats where electoral turnout percentages were relatively low, the major change being the addition of the mining seats counted as Liberal in the previous parliament, which ranked mostly in the third quartile on size and density. Although it is impossible to predict how Liberal candidates would have fared had their party repudiated the agreement and entered Unionist-Labor contests, the willingness of its leaders to abide by past results of the pact was again essential to Labor success, for not a single Laborite won where a Liberal stood in opposition. Again, the absence of marked differences in the character of seats covered and not covered by the agreement rules this out as a likely explanation for the difference. As for the Liberals, in a manner analogous to what had happened to the Unionists in 1906, the loss of so many smaller, rural seats moved their center of electoral gravity by default toward the larger, urban constituencies. Because there were no important shifts in constituency support at a second general election in December, the last prior to the outbreak of the war, continued Liberal adherence to the pact obviated any possibility that the party could compensate for its losses by contesting seats previously conceded to Labor. Although the Liberals remained the largest single party and continued to form the Government by virtue of Irish Nationalist and Labor support, the combined effect of realignment changes and their interaction with the provisions of the agreement was to reduce the differences in the constituency bases of the two parties of the Left and to throw them into potential competition for the same types of seats.

Viewed in their entirety over the period 1900 through 1910, changes in the constituency bases of the parties show that something fundamental was happening to electoral partisanship, even if only in tentative form. That is, if those constituencies ranking high on density and low on proportionate voter turnout generally reflected the presence of dominantly working class electorates, and those at the other end of these measures reflected largely agricultural, rural populations, shifts in party distributions on the measures tend to sustain the assertion of several psephologists who have studied this period that a new voter cleavage which was national in scope and rested primarily on socioeconomic class interests was beginning to intrude upon an older set of loyalties based on regionalism, localism, and religious sectarianism.¹⁵ In other words, voters in

¹⁵ Peter F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), chapter 14; Blewett, *op. cit.* chapter 18.

cities began to discard their political apathy, and perhaps much of their social deference as well and switched their loyalty to parties on the Left of the political spectrum willing to expand to range and depth of government activities in order to come to grips with the needs of less privileged social strata who lived in an increasingly impersonal and complex environment. Voters in the countryside on the other hand, and possibly to a lesser extent in dominantly middle class suburban seats as well, where social and economic relationships remained more personal and hierarchical, gravitated toward the party most supportive of the traditional order.

Conclusion

Changes in the measures of party realignment during the three parliaments elected during the 1900-10 period demonstrate that the elections of 1906 and January, 1910 set in motion a series of rapid, far-reaching changes in voter turnout, electoral partisanship, and party power which, when finally consolidated in 1924, produced the British party system in more or less its modern form. The large and permanent increase in the popular vote and expanded competition for parliamentary seats disrupted the electoral situation supporting Unionist domination of parliament for most of the twenty years before 1906, temporarily reviving Liberal fortunes and producing Labor as a viable option for at least part of the electorate. An initial surge in voter turnout at the 1906 election, particularly among the larger-sized, urban constituencies, proved favorable to the Liberals and their Labor allies, but a countermobilization among voters in smaller, rural seats in 1910 brought the Unionists back to parity of strength with the Liberals and shifted their core into these same kinds of seats. Labor's ability to retain most of the seats won from the Unionists in 1906 at subsequent elections gave it a small but distinctive base mostly among the very largest, most heavily urbanized seats while the Liberals, although still the largest party in the Commons, were without distinctive support after January, 1910, at least as indicated by these measures.

The analysis also demonstrates that within the context of realignment changes, the electoral agreement of 1903 not only affected the outcome of the 1906 and January, 1910 elections but proved of the profoundest importance in redirecting the evolution of the party system in at least two respects. First, it was vital to Labor's initial success in contesting seats because it gave the new party a limited number of chances to avoid the disabilities imposed by the electoral laws upon a new party and to take advantage of the anti-Unionist trend among voters in larger, urban seats. Labor candidates were quite successful in contests covered by the pact, winning twenty-four of thirty-one in 1906 and forty of forty-two in January, 1910, but also equally unsuccessful in contests not included, winning only three of fourteen in 1906 and none at the second election. Second, the combined effect of the loss of so many smaller, rural seats to the Unionists in 1910 and their willingness to forego the chance to seek

compensation among Labor-held seats upon the Liberals was to narrow their base and create the potential for future conflict with their allies. If the measures of population size, density, and proportionate turnout are viewed as forming a spectrum, the largest, most urban seats and those with lowest levels of proportionate turnout at one end and their opposites at the other, even through judgements about the location of parties are necessarily crude because of limited overlap of constituencies on the three measures and the small number of Labor seats, the resulting profiles of partisanship in terms of constituency support do provide at least two interesting insights about Liberal difficulties after the war. One is that differences in Liberal and Unionist support were less by 1910 than in Liberal and Labor support, suggesting that this condition may have encouraged the fissiparous tendencies which began to trouble the alliance of the latter two parties and facilitated Unionist recovery after the war. The other is that the profiles place Labor at the former extremity of the spectrum and the Unionists toward the latter, leaving the Liberals in a poorly defined middle position. While other factors certainly contributed to the Liberal split in 1916 and their failure to reunite until 1923, the absence of a distinctive, coherent electoral base certainly deprived them of an important countervailing force to disunity.