

Churchill

Winston Churchill was one of the famous politicians to have held high office in the administrations of two different parties.

The text of this article was first delivered as a toast to the University Club of Toronto and a remembrance of the 'Other Club' in 1995 by Liberal Senator Jerry S Grafstein QC.

Winston Churchill as a Liberal

My topic for the toast to the club is Churchill: Winston Churchill as a Liberal. A strange topic for a club toast as some might suggest Churchill himself was considered by some as not exactly 'clubbable,' though he was a member of a number of clubs. Since we, in the Senate, particularly these days, get the feeling that we are not exactly 'clubbable' ourselves, Churchill as the classic irreverent outsider seems rather a kindred spirit.

In 1910 Churchill jointly founded, together with the great F. E. Smith QC, later Lord Birkenhead, one of the finest speakers of his day, yet another kind of club. They established a dining club for politicians of all stripes and outstanding non-politicians interested in ideas, served up with superb cuisine, laced with fine wine and shrouded by mellow smoke of aged cigars. One purpose of the club was to cut across party lines and create friendships to minimise political differences and partisanship. This they grandly named 'The Other Club,' and Churchill rarely missed its regular fortnightly dinners. 'Great tact will be necessary in the avoiding of bad moments,' Churchill wrote to Bonar Law about 'The Other Club's' organising idea. Churchill always believed that personal friendship and civility were more important in public life than personalised political partisanship.

I intend to give you a taste of one embattled Senator's revisionist view of history, rather than current politics. Any semblance in my remarks between today's politics and yesterday's history is therefore purely coincidental.

The year is 1903. The place is England. England stands at the very height of her imperial power. Germany plots to outstrip England's superior sea-power by secretly laying plans for the construction of mas-

sive dreadnoughts. Military strategists in England respond that Britain's control of the seas should be accelerated by enlarging her already awesome fleet to safeguard the Empire in all her majesty and maintain the balance of power in Europe.

Meanwhile, on the domestic front, a number of young sparkling political stars are emerging. Winston Spencer Churchill, first elected to Parliament as a Tory in the 1900 election for the constituency of Oldham, is bent on following in the illustrious, if ill-fated, steps of his late father, Lord Randolph Churchill, who was a leading member of the Tory establishment. Lord Randolph was a friend of the Prince of Wales and inheritor, so young Churchill believed, of the great social policies of Benjamin Disraeli, called by all 'Tory Democracy.'

Unfortunately, Lord Randolph Churchill's meteoric career, aimed right at the Prime Minister's office, was cut down by a serious disease, upsetting his rationality, causing him slowly to slide into a tormented and deranged death.

After his father's unhappy demise, young Churchill, already a soldier, became a notorious columnist and respected author, whose sensational escape from a Boer gaol in South Africa was widely publicised in all the London papers. He has returned to England to pursue his fame and fortune in print and politics.

England finds herself embroiled in a divisive national debate, splitting the coalition government led by the Conservative Party and its alliance with Liberals and others who call themselves Unionists. Suddenly, the Tory prime minister, Arthur Balfour, reverses fifty years of traditional Tory Free Trade policy and supports higher tariffs for the first time. Churchill, an unabashed Free Trader, uncomfortable with this sudden departure from the traditional policies of



Winston Churchill with David Lloyd George, when both were cabinet members.

the Tory Party, seeks new friends and alliances to maintain his principled philosophy. At the same time, Churchill is also becoming increasingly disenchanted with the elitism of Tory social policies that protected the prerogatives of the upper classes at the numbing disadvantage of the poor. Churchill meets and quickly becomes enamoured with another rising political star, David Lloyd George, destined to become the greatest Liberal of his age. They seem to share more things in common than set them apart. Lloyd George, a Welsh lawyer rising from humble origins by his lyrical gift of tongue, is a mesmerising and charming personality. Churchill is duly mesmerised and charmed. Churchill writes and speaks in favour of Free Trade in the run-up to the coming election, antagonising Tory loyalists on all sides, including Prime Minister Balfour and Churchill's own Tory Association in Oldham. Conspiring with the Tory whips in London, in his absence, his association passes a resolution suggesting Churchill seek another constituency, since he so disagrees with party trade policy.

from the same defect that doomed his father decades before.

Shortly thereafter, on May 31st, Winston Churchill, revived, re-enters the House of Commons, pauses, bows to the Speaker and crosses the floor to sit beside Lloyd George in the same seat occupied by his revered father when in opposition. The Parliamentary report in the *Manchester Guardian* of 1 June 1904, recorded how Churchill actually crossed the floor to the Liberal benches a number of times on the night of the 31 May, just to make sure no-one missed the significance of the occasion. Churchill realised he must make the move, even though his association deferred taking further punitive action against him. As a newly minted Liberal, he assays opportunities and chooses a Liberal constituency, a seat in North West Manchester, the home of Cobden and Bright, the bastion of Free Trade.

When asked why he left the Conservative Party, he retorts that he did not leave the Conservative Party or his principles. Rather, the Conservative Party deserted its principles and left him.

Churchill warms to the task, carry-

So it is in spring of 1904 that Churchill rises to speak in Parliament after Lloyd George in yet another turbulent debate on Free Trade. Churchill, a Tory still, is insulted when the Tory front bench and almost all the back bench (except a few hecklers) immediately leave the House and repair to the smoking rooms while he is speaking — a deliberate snub. Weeks later, Churchill rises in the House of Commons, loses his train of thought in mid-speech and retires embarrassed. Members murmur that he may be suffering

ing his Liberal colours, and in June 1905, at the Cobden Club, held within the auspices of the Midland Club in Manchester (the home of Free Trade) he launches a scathing attack on his former Conservative colleagues.

'We know perfectly well what to expect ... [the Tory Party] has become the party of great vested interest; corruption at home, aggression to cover it up abroad; trickery of tariff juggles, tyranny of party machine; sentiment by the bucketful, patronage by the pint; open hand at the public exchequer; open door at the public house; dear food for the millions ... and ... cheap labour by the millions ...'

In 1905, a new Liberal government forms, led by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. It is confirmed in office the following year in a landslide election victory for the Liberal Party. Winston Churchill becomes a youthful member of the outer Cabinet as Under Secretary of the Colonies under Lord Elgin, who sits in the Lords. It was at this time that Eddie Marsh, soon to become Churchill's lifelong assistant, reluctantly agreed to join Churchill as his private secretary. He was told by Lady Lytton, to assuage his fears about the mercurial Churchill, that 'the first time you meet Winston you see all of his faults and the rest of your life you spend discovering his virtues.'

My admiration for Churchill deepened even further after I happened across a speech he gave in his successful by-election in 1908 at Dundee. Asquith had brought him into the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade. At that time, Ministers on appointment were required by law to resign their seats and fight a by-election. Churchill sought re-election in Northwest Manchester but lost. He then found a new constituency in Dundee. The Dundee speech was made during Churchill's most enlightened period, when he ran flat out under Liberal colours. The speech also clarified for me my youthful confusion when I was first attracted to the siren song of Socialism. Churchill, with powerful clarity, boldly contrasted Liberalism and Socialism with these words which have echoed down through the decades, with even greater resonance.

Liberalism is not Socialism, and never will be. There is a great gulf fixed. It is not a gulf of method, it is a gulf of principle ... Socialism seeks to pull down wealth, Liberalism seeks to raise up poverty. Socialism would destroy private interests; Liberalism would preserve private interests in the only way in which they can be safely and justly preserved, namely by reconciling them with public right. Socialism would kill enterprise; Liberalism would rescue enterprise from the trammels of privilege and preference ... Socialism exalts the rule; Liberalism exalts the man. Socialism attacks capital, Liberalism attacks monopoly.

And so, in the next two decades, from 1905 to 1923, Churchill held a dizzying array of portfolios as a Liberal minister — President of the Board of Trade; Home Secretary; First Lord of the Admiralty; Minister of Munitions; Secretary of State for War and Air; and Secretary of State for the Colonies.

His vibrating fortunes, matching his ideas, raced up and down in public opinion like a roller coaster. In each ministry he brought a volcanic energy and a visionary stream of ideas. He was, in turn, the father of the submarine, of the tank, of oil-driven warships. He created the first Anglo/Arab oil consortium to fuel and secure British naval might.

As President of the Board of Trade, he organised labour exchanges to prevent sweated labour. He first established unemployment insurance in England. He led attacks against the House of Lords when it defeated a Liberal budget — the famous ‘People’s Budget’ — which led to the first reform of the Lords.

He wrote articulate books — radical in their time — entitled *Liberalism and the Social Problem* and *The People’s Rights*, defining a sweeping social agenda of reform that only became accepted public policy decades later.

He railed against property speculation and contrasted wealth built on real estate as ‘Plunder’ compared to ‘production’ of goods as being in the public interest. He advocated public works in

times of unemployment (public jobs in reforestation and road building). He promoted legislation restricting eight-hour work days for coal miners and restrictions on child labour. He repeatedly advocated a ‘safety net’ to protect the victims from the ravages of competition. While he believed in Free Trade and competition, he also believed in offering some protection to those who simply could not compete.

He declaimed on public platforms that the biggest threat to the cause of peace came not from abroad but the crisis at home: the gap between rich and poor, obsolete laws protecting inherited property and the vested interests. He argued repeatedly for ‘minimum standards of life and work’ to attain domestic civility.

Viscount Simon, a close and lifelong contemporary, wrote after Churchill became Prime Minister again in 1951:

At the root of his many-sided nature ... remains the essence of Liberalism. His tolerance, his sympathy with the oppressed and the underdog, his courage in withstanding clamour, his belief ... in the individual ... all derive from a heart, a head [and] made him a Liberal statesman ... his Liberal views were not a mere pose, so that he has carried his Liberal temper with him throughout his life ...’

Other colleagues noted that a major theme of his life was individual rights and his unswerving belief in the liberty to work out, as one civil servant wrote, one’s own salvation, to follow one’s own

star. So Churchill wished to afford equal freedom for others to do likewise. ‘I stand for Liberty’ he proudly proclaimed more than once. This was his lifelong Liberal theme. He vehemently opposed Bolshevism and Communism because he believed each was, at its very roots, opposed to individual liberty. He carried over this belief in the essence of liberty as the foundation for relations between states that so informed all his foreign policy principles.

In 1921–22, Churchill was a player in negotiations that led to the Irish Settle-

ment. This sudden reversal in Liberal policy turned out to be a key to the fall of Lloyd George and the Liberal Party. The Irish Treaty was fatal to them, as it led not to peace but continuing civil unrest. This sudden reversal in policy was the beginning of the end for the Liberal Party in England.

In 1922 Churchill fell ill with appendicitis during an election. He wrote looking back on this period a decade later: ‘In a twinkling of an eye, I found myself without an office, without a seat, without a party, and without an appendix’. Later, in 1923, Churchill ran two more times and was defeated. He finally reverted to Conservatism again, after making his peace with Baldwin, the Leader of the Conservative Party, who, after the 1924 election immediately appointed Churchill to the Exchequer. Churchill never would return to the Liberal fold and the Liberal Party never regained its lustre. Again, Churchill believed that he had not left the Liberal Party but that the Party had deserted its own principles and lost its way.

One of the most fascinating insights into Churchill’s attraction to the Liberal Party was his lifelong helpmate, companion and wife, Clementine Churchill, born and bred a Scottish Liberal. Churchill was once asked why his marriage was so successful. He responded by saying that he had never had breakfast with his wife. Of the volumes written about his relationship with Clementine, awkward, complex and difficult at times, one note endeared me to his famous wife. Throughout their loving and illustrious relationship, spanning six decades together, she always voted Liberal.

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