



# Liberal Democrat History Group

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*The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.*

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ed. by T Bartlett & K Jeffrey

PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.—PUBLISHED 7, 1891.



“RETIRE!—WHAT DO YOU THINK?”

Gladstone formed his fourth and final government at the age of 83, a year after Punch printed this cartoon. In our leading article this issue, Roy Jenkins uses Gladstone's life and career to illustrate the differences in political life then and now. See pages 2–5.

**A Liberal Democrat History Group Fringe Meeting**

## **Landslide for the Left**

**8.00pm Sunday 22 September (Brighton); for full details see back page**

# Gladstone: The Colossus of the Nineteenth Century

## - Politics Then and Now

*Roy Jenkins, giving the Guildhall Lecture to an invited audience in June, took the contrast between the patterns of political life in the nineteenth century and the late twentieth century as his central theme.*

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Gladstone is a wonderful vehicle for such comparisons because of the meticulousness of his diary. It was not a journal, but a calendar, an engagement diary – ‘*an account book to God for the all-precious gift of time*’, as he put it. And as he assumed that God was interested not merely in how he spent his days but in how he spent each quarter of an hour of them, the diaries are an exceptional source book for patterns of life.

The main myth that they kill is that the House of Commons in the second half of the nineteenth century was an undemanding occupation for gentlemen of leisure. So far as ministers and leading members of the opposition were concerned Parliament, as distinct from Whitehall departmental routine, was more onerous *during the session* in the second half of the nineteenth century than it is today. And even in the case of the much larger number of MPs who saw their duties as being to listen and to vote rather than to speak, their assiduity in providing an attentive audience throughout mammoth orations was far greater than is the case with the perfunctory speeches and empty benches of today.

The key phrase in the preceding paragraph is however ‘*during the session*’. Nineteenth century parliaments normally spent half the year in session and half the year in recess. The recesses were long but the sessions were very strenuous, and if anything they were slightly longer than the recesses. It could be 6½ or even 7 months as against 5½ or 5 but it was practically never more. The essential basis of this almost even divide was the avoidance of autumn sessions. And this was nearly always achieved. Between 1855 and 1870 there was only one very brief exception. That was in 1867 when there was a ten days’ reassembly to vote credits for an expedition against the Emperor of Ethiopia. After the July election of 1865 the House did not meet, even to choose a Speaker, until February 1866, although Palmerston, Prime Minister and a member since 1807, had died suddenly in October. He had to wait four months for his tributes.

This habit of relaxed autumns was violently broken in 1893, Gladstone’s last year in office, when the second Home Rule Bill and its consequences caused Parliament to sit with only an October break from the end of January 1893, to March 1894, with no summer recess and only four days off for Christmas. Although these horrors were never exactly to be repeated, the old habits broadly died with the turn of the century. 1907 and 1913 were the only twentieth century

years ever to be without an autumn session.

While these habits persisted, however, the parliamentary year, like the parliamentary day, was slung late. The English pattern was for the summer, despite the Thames often stinking in July, to be for London and the autumn and early winter for the country. Parliament did not even aim to rise before the symbolic 12th August, and quite often missed that target by a week or two. The new session typically began in the first week of February.

For the next 25 weeks or so, with short Easter and Whitsun breaks, the programme was strenuous. Mondays, Tuesday, Thursday and Fridays were full parliamentary days. Wednesdays were the equivalent of modern Fridays, when major government business was not taken and the House adjourned early – but early should be interpreted as in time to dine out in London and not to get away for the weekend just after lunch. ‘The weekend’, a term which has since invaded French but was then many decades short of establishing itself in English, was accorded little protection. Saturday sittings were not regular, but not very exceptional either. I experienced two in my 39-year span in the House of Commons, one for the Suez expedition in 1956 and one for the Falklands War in 1982. A mid-nineteenth century politician would have experienced twice as many in the course of an average session. Furthermore, even if the House was not sitting, Saturday was then the regular Cabinet day. Palmerston habitually summoned his for 1.00pm on that day, thereby killing at one blow both the possibility of lunch (of which more later) as well as of the weekend. And Gladstone, in his first government (1868–74) continued the practice.

Nevertheless the habit of going away for brief ‘Saturdays to Mondays’ (there was no other phrase for them) did develop quite strongly in the 1850s and 1860s. It could not be very far, but in the Thames Valley and other parts of the Home Counties the improvement in the speed and reliability of the railways from about the mid-century point meant that a journey like that to Taplow for Cliveden (then owned by the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland), where Gladstone was a frequent guest, took very little longer than it would today. On the other hand, long journeys would not have made sense. There were a lot of smuts and no restaurant cars. It was the 1880s before meals on wheels became at all widespread. And the great houses of the North and Scotland were reserved for the recess, with visits then more on a weekly than a weekend basis.

A short Home Counties jaunt, however, particularly if it could start off after a Saturday afternoon Cabinet, was much facilitated by the fact that it was rarely thought necessary to get back before midday on the Monday. Indeed a balancing feature with Victorian politicians for their willingness to sit in the House of Commons late at night was their reluctance to do much serious work not merely on Monday but on any other morning. Gladstone's favourite form of entertaining – and he was far from alone in this – was the breakfast party. He habitually gave about a dozen a session, with about the same number of guests. They bore no relation to the modern American-influenced business breakfast with orange juice and yoghurt and not much else at 8.00 or even earlier.

Nor indeed were they much more similar to Lloyd George's famous persuasive breakfasts at first 11 and then 10 Downing Street half a century later. These were a little but not much later than 8.00, and were a matter of bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade and ear-bending. Gladstone's took place in his own grand house at 11 Carlton House Terrace and not in the liver-coloured and unesteemed Downing Street, were at 10.30am, were mixed and essentially social in purpose, and involved entrées and wine. They were not all that different from the *déjeuners* at the Café Anglais in Paris, of which the Prince of Wales was so fond at that time. Moreover they did not end until noon, and even after that Gladstone at least was very inclined to go on a picture-viewing or porcelain-buying expedition.

The great time-saving, however, was that luncheon as either a nutritional or a social occasion did not effectively exist until the last twenty, almost the last ten, years of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s Gladstone's diaries only mention two luncheons, one in 1863 and one in 1867, and both of them on a Sunday and therefore a bit outside the pattern. The hours between one and three, in complete contrast with Churchill's habits, even under the worst stresses of World War II, were free for ministerial meetings or other business.

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*The hours kept by the Commons in its period of classical glory were still more bizarre and irrational than those which evoke much criticism in its present-day decline.*

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There are three further glosses to be put on this pattern for the first half of the day, that is to say before the hour of the sitting of House of Commons – which was 4.15pm.

(1) The emergence of lunch was a function of the latening of the fashionable hour of dinner. In the earlier part of the century it had been 6.00 or even 5.00pm in London, in the country sometimes as early as 3.00. By the 1860s it was 7.00 or 7.30 (in London) and then by the end of the 1870s it settled down at 8.00 or 8.30, where it has remained for nearly 120 years, in sharp contrast with the

shifting pattern of the previous decades.

(2) Ministers in those days, although they often worked very hard – Palmerston for instance conducting a large part of the diplomatic business of the Foreign Office in his own beautiful handwriting – did not work routinely in their departments in a way that is now thought natural. Gladstone was indisputably a very hard worker. In his pre-Budget periods when Chancellor he was said to average 17 hours a day, although I believe that to be an exaggeration. But he hardly ever sat in his room in the Old Treasury building at the corner of Downing Street and Whitehall, working through Exchequer papers with his civil servants on hand. Even during the London six months he did it much more from his own house, and therefore mixing it up with his own private reading and correspondence. And in the recesses he – and others – rarely thought it necessary to be in London and at the Treasury unless the Cabinet was meeting.

(3) Gladstone had the gift – although one which was not without its disadvantages – of being able to make immensely long speeches with the minimum of preparation. In the days when I delivered what I regarded as major House of Commons speeches – mostly 9.30–10.00pm wind-ups with a full house, which existed 25 years ago as it does not today – my ratio of preparation to delivery time was about 15 to 1. Gladstone's for his habitual 2½ hour orations, although they sometimes extended into the fourth and even once or twice into the fifth hour, was about 1 to 3, 1 hour of preparation to 3 of delivery. This economy of his own time, combined with profligacy of his listeners' time, tended to a perisphrastic style, although he was never just a windbag, but it gave him many hours of reading and writing time which would otherwise have been consumed by preparing reams of text.

The majority of these massive speeches were made late at night, many of them after midnight. The hours kept by the Commons in its period of classical glory were still more bizarre and irrational than those which evoke much criticism in its present-day decline. It may not have troubled members before the late afternoon, but it then proceeded to keep them there far into the night, with many of the most crucial and strongly attended divisions occurring at one or two in the morning. An early Victorian example was the Don Pacifico debate of June 1850. This was the greatest parliamentary set-piece of the nineteenth century, the equivalent of the twentieth century's Norway debate of 7th–8th May 1940. They were similar in that almost every member of note spoke on each occasion and that the phrases used by at least some of them carried a continuing resonance. They were different in that much more followed from the Norway occasion than from the Pacifico one. Pacifico was just a debate, although a great one, with few consequences except for the enhancement of the reputation of some (notably Palmerston) and the decline of that of some others. Norway changed the government from Chamberlain to

Churchill, and maybe the whole course of Britain's history.

There was another difference which is still more relevant to the purpose of the lecture. The 1940 debate lasted over only two days with a cut-off point of 11.00pm on each night. The 1850 one lasted over four with no cut-off point. Palmerston's *Civis Romanus sum* speech began just as on the second day the short summer night was falling and continued until a rosy dawn 4½ hours later. Gladstone on the next night was shorter – barely three hours – and sat down just before two o'clock. Equally, in the first great Disraeli–Gladstone duel in December 1852, when Disraeli, then a short-term Chancellor, was winding up (as he thought) the debate on his Budget with a 2 hour 40 minute speech which concluded at 1.00am, he (and the House) were amazed when Gladstone, pretending to be spontaneously outraged by Disraeli's flippancy, but in fact having devoted more than usual preparation to his words, decided to preempt the custom by which a Chancellor had the last word on his own Budget, and gave the House another two hours, finishing only just after 3.00am. Then there followed a division, with 95% of members voting, which destroyed both the Budget and the Government.

No subsequent Prime Minister, except for Baldwin, ever spent nearly so much time in the House of Commons. But Baldwin spent it mostly in the lobbies, the corridors, the smoking room and the dining room, sniffing around at the atmosphere, whereas Gladstone spent it almost entirely on the Treasury bench. He was never very good at sniffing the atmosphere, and indeed claimed that in the whole of his 62½ years in the House of Commons he only once dined there. This must have been more on the grounds of detachment than of gastronomy, for in spite or because of his reputation for chewing every morsel several times over, he did not much care what he ate, although he did it heartily and washed it down fairly copiously, with more regard for the quality of the wine than of the food.

Mostly he walked across the park to his house at 6 Carlton Gardens or later 11 Carlton House Terrace for a brief dinner. The House normally adjourned, but only between 7.30 and 8.30, and even if he were dining out,

except on a Wednesday, he was normally back by ten o'clock. This raises a mystery about reconciling the great number of courses which were offered and sometimes consumed in the nineteenth century with the speed with which they must have been served. As an example, when Speaker Denison dined with Palmerston in 1865, which was the 81st and last year of his (Palmerston's) life, he (Denison) was much struck by the Prime Minister consuming two plates of turtle soup, a dish of cod with oyster sauce, a paté, two entrées, a plate of mutton, a slice of ham and a portion of pheasant.

A counterbalancing factor to the long hours was the almost complete freedom, in session and recess alike, from constituency duties. Elections could be rough, rumbustious, and above all expensive affairs. The expenditure of the equivalent of £¼ or even £½ million in today's money was by no means unusual. They were also uncertain affairs, with the added hazard that, after each general election there were always quite a lot – a dozen or 20 would be typical – unseatings on petition for corrupt practices. There was a delicate balance to be struck. If you did not spend enough, particularly in a constituency with an 'Eatanswill' tradition, you did not get elected. If you spent too much you got unseated on petition. This happened to

quite a lot of respectable people: it was what their agents did, as well as themselves. Gladstone never had such trouble, but his father and two of his brothers did.

Such hazards and expenses apart, however, constituencies were remarkably undemanding. Gladstone sat for Greenwich – his fourth constituency – from 1868 to 1880. He never liked the borough and they never showed vast enthusiasm for him, electing him in 1874 only in second place to 'a gin distiller'. Despite it being only seven miles from Westminster he visited it only twice in the 6-year Parliament of 1868–74. Then he did three vast open-air meetings in the '74 general election. Then he did another such meeting in September 1876 and pouring rain. That was it. He never went there again, even to say goodbye.

PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.—March 19, 1881.



#### A DIFFICULT PART.

W. E. G. (as Hamlet). "THE TIME IS OUT OF JOINT:—O CURSED SPITE,  
THAT EVER I WAS BORN TO SET IT RIGHT!"—Act I., Sc. 5.

The Queen in 1872 played a rather good joke on him (although ironical teasing was not exactly her style) by offering him a grace-and-favour house in Greenwich Park to 'ease the discharge of his constituency duties'. He declined, courteously but firmly.

After Greenwich he went to Midlothian and was elected there in 1880 following one of the most famous barn-storming campaigns in history. The election over, however, he did not return for three years. And this remained his pattern to the end. He treated constituencies like an exigent hunting man (which he was not) treated his horses. He called for a new one whenever he felt the old one was tiring. Nor was he wholly exceptional in this respect. Until Joseph Chamberlain, with his special identification with Birmingham, no major nineteenth century politician remained faithful to one constituency throughout his political life. Peel sat for Cashel (an unreformed Co. Tipperary borough), Oxford University, Westbury and Tamworth; Palmerston for Newport (Isle of Wight), Cambridge University, Bletchingley, South Hampshire and Tiverton. Disraeli sat for Maidstone and Shrewsbury before settling down in Buckinghamshire. Chamberlain, with his 38 years as member for Birmingham, set an uxorious pattern which was taken up by Lloyd George with his 52 years as member for Caernarvon Boroughs, and then followed by such diverse figures as Anthony Eden, R. A. Butler, Harold Wilson, James Callaghan and Margaret Thatcher.

So long, however, as constituencies were treated as (maybe expensive) conveniences rather than as marriages made in heaven or even as serious obligations, this was a major counterbalancing relief to the strenuousness of the session and only a small or non-existent interruption to the broad acres of leisure time in the recesses. What did politicians mostly do during this six months? Some, perhaps the majority, retired to their own broad acres, or those of their friends and passed the autumn and most of the winter in estate management and country pursuits, intermingled for a few with serious intellectual pursuits. In those pre-skiing and pre-beach life days (Gladstone liked invigorating sea-bathing but was quite willing to do it in the autumn) the sporting recreations of the British ruling classes made the country more attractive in the shortening days than in the spring and summer. Even Gladstone's tree-felling, which was his substitute for shooting and hunting, could not be done for silvicultural reasons until August.

They also travelled. In office they hardly moved outside Britain (which did not include Ireland) unless it was to go to a French or German spa for a cure. Castlereagh had been quite exceptional in going to Vienna in 1815 and to the subsequent mini-congresses which followed in the wake of Vienna. Canning, when he called the new world into existence to redress the balance of the old, certainly did not do so from the soil of South America. Indian Secretaries did not go to India, Foreign Secretaries did not cross the

Channel on business, and Colonial Secretaries did not go to the colonies. Joseph Chamberlain in this last category again broke new ground when he spent the winter of 1902–03 on 'the illimitable veldt' – and came home to destroy the Unionist Government by his conversion to imperial preference.

When they did travel, however, which was mostly in opposition and in the autumn and winter, they still did so on an ample scale. The spirit of the grand tour lingered into at any rate the third quarter of the nineteenth century, even though railways had then transformed the actual journeys. Thus Gladstone, after his longest continuous period in office, which was as Chancellor in the Palmerston government and its brief Russell epilogue from 1859 to 1866, celebrated his release by going for four months to Rome. It was the sixth of his nine long visits to Italy.

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*He treated constituencies like an exigent hunting man treated his horses. He called for a new one whenever he felt the old one was tiring.*

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These, then, are some of the main differences between the patterns of political life in the second halves of the last two centuries. Politics has become much more professional for the great mass of members, but the calling has become less respected. Parliament has become less demanding for the leading participants, except that the rigid division of the halves of the years, like one side of the moon and the other, has ceased. The hours have become a good deal less bizarre, although still striking most people and other countries as distinctly eccentric. Speeches have become much shorter, but paradoxically, the numbers willing to sit and listen to them, both in Parliament and in the country, much smaller. Politicians have become intellectually narrower. Now they nearly all write (or at least publish) their memoirs, but few write anything else. In the nineteenth century political autobiographies published during the author's lifetime were effectively non-existent, but quite a high proportion of the leading figures wrote works of scholarship, as Gladstone did on Homer, on the odes of Horace, and on theology.

Was the country then better governed? Instinctively we probably all think 'yes'. but that is too big a subject for this lecture. The country's position in the world was certainly stronger and the national mood was more self-confident, but there are issues much wider than political habits here involved.

*Lord Jenkins of Hillhead is leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords. His biography of Gladstone was published by Macmillan in 1995. This lecture is reprinted (in an edited form, omitting some preliminary remarks) with the kind permission of the Corporation of London, and with particular thanks to Tony Halmos, Director of Public Relations.*

# The Repeal of the Corn Laws

*A report of the History Group discussion meeting in February, where Professor John Vincent described the background to Peel's abolition of the protectionist Corn Laws 150 years ago; by Duncan Brack*

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In fact, as Professor Vincent reminded us, Peel did not in fact completely abolish the Corn Laws; the reduction of tariffs to zero had to wait for Gladstone's budget in 1870. But of such myths is history made – and given that Peel's action split the Conservative Party and ushered in almost ninety years of free trade orthodoxy, it is right to remember 1846 as the year of decision.

The Corn Laws, imposed after the Napoleonic wars, were designed to protect British agriculture from continental European competition. Although the tariffs applied to wheat and other grains raised prices, British farmers were able, by and large, to keep pace with the growth in population, so in fact wheat prices rarely exceeded 70 shillings per imperial quarter (the level at which food riots could be expected; 50 shillings was thought to be a reasonably affordable level). But the possibility of an election coinciding with a bad harvest meant that the issue of how to justify raising the price of bread was never far away – particularly for the 50% of the population who were then rural.

Foreign policy also had its impact. Britain was not entirely self-sufficient in food, and the main source of grain imports for much of the nineteenth century was the cornfields of the Ukraine and Poland, then part of Tsarist Russia. The maintenance of the Russian alliance was therefore an important object of British foreign policy, and when it failed – as it did during the Crimean War of 1853–56 – wheat prices increased to dangerous levels.

In terms of politics, the Great Reform Act of 1832 had marked an important stage in the decline of aristocratic power in Britain. The new participants in the administrative elite were the urban middle classes, who, while still not large enough in numbers to take over completely, continued their pressure on the political and economic levers of power. Richard Cobden's Anti-Corn Law League, one of the most effective pressure groups in British history, should be seen in this light. It championed the cause of free trade, drawing its supporters from commerce and manufacturing, who wanted open export markets and cheap labour (which would follow from cheap food). It was naturally opposed by the aristocratic land-owning classes.

It was against this background that Peel came to see repeal as the best way to ensure social cohesion, knitting together the best aspects of the approaches of both parties: the liberal society created by the Whigs in the 1830s and the liberal economy being constructed by the Tories in the 1840s. The fact that this largely destroyed the Conservative Party in the process was not foreseen, but may not have troubled Peel unduly.

Educated and trained entirely as a statesman, enjoying an unorthodox background as a competent Irish administrator and cold and aloof in manner, he was hardly a party man. Indeed, he had already alienated a substantial proportion of his own supporters (and helped revive the Whig/Liberal coalition) by appearing too sympathetic to Catholics in the Maynooth College issue of 1845. Failing to obtain the united support of his Cabinet, Peel effectively abandoned his own party, striking deals with the Irish and Russell's Whigs in the Commons, and Wellington's peers in the Lords, to force through repeal. But this was not an alliance which could sustain him in office; although the legislation passed through Parliament with relative ease, Peel himself was overthrown on a snap vote on Irish coercion on the very day of repeal in 1846. The Party which he had led was not to recover from this split for fifty years, while the cause of free trade became in due course the reigning orthodoxy of Victorian economics.

Professor Vincent's comprehensive talk, ranging from Disraeli's literary career to the constituency backgrounds of opponents of repeal (they were county seat holders) to Peel's political psychology, could have carried on much longer. Aably chaired by James Cameron (chair of the Party's working group on trade policy), this must rank as one of the most entertaining History Group discussion meetings.

*Duncan Brack is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group. His article tracing the development of Liberal policy on free trade appeared in Newsletter 9 (December 1995).*

## Membership Services

*The History Group is pleased to make the following listings available to its members:*

**Mediawatch:** a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers, major magazines and academic journals from 1988; plus articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals from 1995.

**Thesiswatch:** all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats!)

*Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy of either of these free of charge; send an A4 SSAE to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.*

# Education and the Liberal Rank and File in Edwardian England: The Case of Sir George White

Barry M Doyle reviews the political career and beliefs of one of the major proponents of Liberal education policy in the Edwardian period

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A contribution to Newsletter 8 (September 1995) on the roots of Liberal education policy mentioned Sir George White and the passive resistance campaign against the Balfour Education Act of 1902. This gave the impression that Liberal education policy in the Edwardian period was fundamentally negative, concerned only with religious issues and divorced from the requirements of a modern industrial nation. The aim of this paper is to redress the balance by showing that George White's ideas on education were positive, radical and *very* modern, shaped by his experience as both an employer in a rapidly modernising city and a lay educationalist with forty years experience of the state and voluntary sector.

Born in Lincolnshire in 1840, Sir George White, Liberal MP for North-West Norfolk (1900–1912) was chairman and managing director of Howlett and White, the largest firm of boot and shoe manufacturers in Norwich. A devoted Baptist, he held the Presidency of the Baptist Union in 1903, and though he never achieved ministerial rank he was knighted in 1907 and served as chairman of the Nonconformist Members of Parliament from 1907–12. Described by the *British Weekly* as 'the leader of nonconformity', White's biography would lead one to expect an orthodox nonconformist Radical and certainly his most prominent campaigning was on the sectarian issues. His famous address on the 'Nonconformist Conscience in its relation to our National Life' reiterated the canon of dissenting politics – temperance, non-sectarian education, housing, land reform, and the iniquities of the Anglican church and the House of Lords – whilst his parliamentary interventions were overwhelmingly concerned with education, licensing, and the Congo.

However, if one looks more closely at what he was saying in these speeches modernity and not morality emerges as the driving force behind his political views. He supported labour exchanges, old age pensions and unemployment insurance, criticising the government on the latter two for not being radical enough, and he was very capable of providing a modern spin on traditional issues, like education.

White was active in education for most of his life. He joined Chamberlain's National Education League in 1868, and was a member of the Norwich School Board from 1874, controlling the city's education for twenty-five years until his death in 1912. As the *Eastern Daily Press* noted, he achieved '*perhaps his best and most enduring work*' by making

*'the education of the children of the working classes possible, and even popular'* and was closely involved with the development of the Technical Institute, higher grade schools and the expansion of municipal secondary education. His activities in voluntary education included Sunday Schools, the YMCA and the foundation and superintendence of an Adult School with 250 members by 1900.

Sir George attained national prominence through his role in the resistance to the 1902 Education Act and is credited with first recommending the policy of passive resistance which, '*coming from a man of such sound judgement and quiet temper .... was at once accepted by a very large number of representative Nonconformists*'. Such was his reputation within the nonconformist community that the Rev. J. H. Shakespeare (Secretary of the Baptist Union) named him the most prominent Baptist elected in 1906, *ahead* of Lloyd George, and he was hotly tipped to succeed Birrell as Education Secretary in 1907. However, to the surprise and anger of many free churchmen, the post went to Reginald McKenna and it seems likely that, despite his insider's knowledge, both his age (he was 67 at the time) and his association with the radical nonconformists counted against him.

Yet, contrary to his diehard image, from the earliest days of the controversy White sought every opportunity to avert confrontation and secure a peaceful compromise. He took a considerable part in the negotiations leading to both the Birrell Bill of 1906 and the abortive Runciman Compromise of 1908, noting in the latter case that he had, '*risked the educational reputation of a lifetime in the belief that this compromise will bring us considerably nearer to the national ideal than we are today*'. But though he was willing to make certain compromises, he opposed the secular solution suggested in 1908, and remained a passive resister until his death.

But passive resistance was, to some extent, a distraction, diverting White from his real enthusiasm – post-elementary education. He spoke regularly on education and, whether addressing the Commons, the business community or the free churches, he consistently combined his well known criticisms of all sectarian regulation with general statements on the importance of post-elementary education in creating a flexible workforce, increasing efficiency and reducing unemployment. In his Commons maiden speech in 1901, he attacked the confused and inadequate organisation of

higher elementary, secondary, continuation and technical education, demanding, instead, a complete system, managed by a 'democratically' elected local education board 'administering the Education Acts in an enlightened spirit to the advantage of the community at large'.

White's views on vocational education were rooted in his experience as a major employer in a rapidly modernising city. The Norwich shoe trade underwent a radical transformation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, much of this modernisation being led by White's firm. With the introduction of machinery, the production process was broken down and skilled craftsmen were replaced by younger, semi-skilled and unskilled operatives working in bigger and more complex factories. Though increased demand did regularise wages and employment patterns, it did not eradicate unemployment completely, whilst the city's position as a trade and communications centre meant that the economy was characterised by a low paid, low skilled and underemployed casual labour market.

As a result, White strongly supported municipal secondary schools – with low fees and ample scholarships – as sites for the promotion of a practical, vocational education for the 'poorer children,' thousands of whom could 'be passed on to the secondary schools with great advantage to themselves; and to the nation'. Furthermore, he demanded a curriculum free of the classics, popular and 'serviceable for the boys and girls, who mainly come from elementary schools, and who otherwise would not be able to get that secondary education which they will find so valuable in after life'.

Nonetheless, he did acknowledge that even the municipal secondary was not entirely appropriate for all children and that some form of intermediate educational provision was necessary to provide a combination of academic and vocational study for the future worker. These schools should articulate with the technical schools 'which

were being established with such great advantage throughout the country' to provide the working class with 'practically their only chance of securing that education which was necessary to fit them to take their fair position in life'.

White felt that the winding up of the higher grade schools – which had largely satisfied this demand – had led to a marked decline in the number of children in school after the age of fourteen and that 'to complete our educational system we have got to put something in the place of these higher grade schools'. As the parents of many boys and girls could not afford secondary fees, too many children were leaving school at exactly fourteen years of age – even without a job to go to – whilst others wanted to stay on for another year but their parents were not willing or able to pay for secondary schooling. His solution was to 'make our education much more practical' by schools which would:

*take the morning for literary work, and the afternoon for practical manual work or something of that kind by which the boys and the girls would have practically half their time in the last year or so spent in fitting themselves for those occupations which they intended to go to.*

White developed this theme in relation to a third strand of post-elementary education – continuation schools. He often complained that, due to the early school leaving age, most of the education imparted in elementary schools was wasted, with young adults returning to adult schools when they reached 'the love letter writing age'. Thus, although 'they have the tools put in their hands .... they have not been induced to use them for their own self-improvement'. As the individual was clearly failing himself and society the state was called on to enforce self-improvement.

*I have no hesitation in saying I strongly advocate a system of compulsion being introduced in regard to continuation*

## Research in Progress

*This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis – or if you know anyone who can – please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.*

### **The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.**

Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.

### **The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.**

Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. Ruth Fox, 9 Chapel Terrace, Headingley, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS6 3JA.

### **The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;**

the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.

### **The Lives and Political Careers of Archibald Sinclair and Clement Davies.**

Ian Hunter, 62 Rothschild Road, Chiswick, London W4 5NR.

**The Liberal Party 1945–56.** Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.



*schools. I think it will have to apply both to employers and the young people of the country alike .... In my opinion it is the most important field open to the Board of Education; it is a field in which they can do the greatest possible service to the nation.*

Finally his interest in technical education – the fourth site for further education – was closely influenced by his experience of seasonal unemployment in the shoe trade. As he told the Norwich Traders Association in 1904:

*in certain departments there was a considerable amount of depression, and .... some part of that depression might be avoided if there were a more general desire on the part of the working men to adapt themselves to existing conditions. (Hear, hear.) In connection with the boot and shoe trade there were distinct seasons, and if a great number of the younger men would learn two branches of the trade instead of one .... they would be able to carry the work on without the slightest depression for the whole of the twelve months .... at the Technical School provision was made for the teaching of both the departments.*

White did not just urge his ideas on government, but attempted to execute them either as chair of the Education Committee or as an employer. In the case of technical education for the shoe trade he encouraged the development of day courses for the workers and led the employers in

permitting day release to attend the classes. However, he met with less success on higher grade schools as Morant at the Board of Education set about the rationalisation and centralisation of education into the two streams which have characterised the twentieth century.

By the Edwardian period White saw education not just as a means to self-improvement, nor as a battlefield in the war against the established church, but as a key tool in the modernisation of society. Aware of the threat posed by Germany and the USA and conscious of the narrowing of the skills base following the move to mechanisation, he appreciated the need for practical and vocational further education to increase national efficiency and tackle the boy labour problem – the root cause of adult unemployment. He also saw further education as democratic – as part of the assault on privilege and as a way of building bridges between a classically educated elite and the ‘ignorant masses’. In all these ways White’s educational views were very modern, appropriate as much today, when government policy continues to perpetuate the divide between a poorly educated workforce and a privileged elite and all three parties struggle to produce an effective post-fourteen structure, as they were in the opening years of the twentieth century.

*Barry M. Doyle is a lecturer at Durham University. His article comparing New Liberalism and New Labour appeared in History Today in July.*

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## Letters to the Editor

Does anyone know who first used the term ‘liberal’ in its political sense?

Writing the chapter on the ‘Liberal Tradition’ for Don MacIver’s recently published book on the Liberal Democrats, I repeated what George Watson wrote in the *Unservile State* back in 1957, namely that Robert Southey the poet first used the word in an English text, borrowing it from French where it came into usage among constitutionalist opponents of the later, more dictatorial phase of Napoleonic rule. But he does not reference a French source, and I have never seen one elsewhere.

Whilst the chapter was going to press, David Buchan reviewed in the *Financial Times* a book (*Le Bonheur Français*) by Guy Sorman, stating explicitly: ‘According to Sorman, the term “liberalism” was invented by Jean-Baptiste Say in the early 19th century, but was popularised abroad and had to be reimported into France via the likes of Milton Friedman this century’. Eureka! I slipped in a late footnote, and set about tracking down both Sorman and Say. Fortunately my footnote never made it through the editing, proof-reading and publishing maze.

Beware reviewers using their hasty notes. When inter-library loans eventually supplied Sorman’s book, I discovered his clear statement about Say’s role in inventing a term which was exported into English and then imported back into French was about the word ‘entrepreneur’. Sorman refers to Say as a liberal (in the economic sense), but never suggests he invented the term.

So, if someone quotes Buchan’s howler in more permanent form (as I nearly did), expose the mistake.

And which French thinker did invent the political term ‘Liberal’?

*Michael Steed (Hon. Lecturer in Politics & International Relations, University of Kent at Canterbury)  
35 Dover St, Canterbury CT1 3HQ; M.Steed@ukc.ac.uk; phone 01227 470837.*

*Letters to the Newsletter, relating to material contained within particular issues, or on any topic of historical interest, are very welcome. Please write to the address on the back page.*

# The Liberal Party's Performance in 1945

Mark Pack continues the debate over the Liberal Party and the 1945 general election

Michael Steed has recently argued (History Group Newsletter 11, June 1996, p.9) that the 1945 Liberal election campaign has been unfairly criticised. Instead, he suggests that, 'arguably, as the only election in three decades when there was a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies, it deserves to be regarded as the Party's most successful election campaign between 1929 and 1959.'

Deciding what counts as a 'successful election campaign' is not easy. One problem is an ambiguity in terminology. Michael Steed's phrase could be taken to refer to the quality of the campaign run by the Liberal party. However, given the number of other factors affecting election results (such as the quality of campaigns of other parties and the condition of the economy), using election results as the sole measure of the success of a campaign is likely to be problematic.

But, even if we take the phrase as meaning success in winning votes, matters are tricky. The greatly varying number of Liberal candidates at elections, and the various different 'Liberal' labels, make simple comparisons of vote totals inadequate. The latter problem can be largely dealt with by ignoring the troublesome 1931 election, but the former problem means a more subtle statistic is required than simple vote share.

What is needed is a measure that takes into account both how the Liberal share of the vote at one election compared to that at the previous election, but also how the number of candidates varied. This is because, for example, a doubling of the Liberal share of the vote is rather more impressive if it was accompanied by no change in the number of candidates than if it was accompanied by a doubling in their number. One such measure is to:

- 1 Work out what the Liberal share of the vote at one election was as a proportion of the share at the previous election. For example, if 10% was achieved at one election, and 12% at the next, we get 120%. This gives column [1] in the table below.
- 2 Do the same for the proportion of vacant seats contested by Liberal candidates. For example, if the number of Liberal candidates increased from 100 to 110, whilst the number of vacancies (i.e. the size of the Commons) was unchanged, we get 110%. This gives column [2] in the table below.
- 3 Divide the answer to (1) by (2). With this example we get  $120/110 = 1.09$ .

If this final number is greater than one, it means, for example, that the Liberal share of the vote increased proportionately more than the increase in the number of the candidates. Similarly, if the share of the vote fell but the number is more than one, it means that the Liberal share of the vote fell less proportionately than the fall in the number of candidates. Both of these cases would potentially indicate an increasing willingness of electors to vote Liberal. The actual calculations are shown in the table (ignoring 1931 completely).

Interpreting these figures requires some care. Consider 1945. The Liberal vote share increased, but so did the number of Liberal candidates (from 161 to 306). As the average share of the vote for opposed Liberal candidates fell from 23.9% (1935) to 18.6%, this does not look promising for a claim that 1945 was a (relatively) good Liberal result.

[concluded on page 12]

Year	Liberal vote	Liberal % share	No. of vacancies	No. of Liberal candidates	Proportionate change in Liberal vote [1]	Proportionate change in proportion of seats contested [2]	% vote per opposed Liberal candidate	[1] / [2]
1924	2,928,747	17.6	615	340			30.9	
1929	5,308,510	23.4	615	513	133.0	150.9	27.7	0.9
1935	1,422,116	6.4	615	161	27.4	31.4	23.9	0.9
1945	2,248,226	9.0	640	306	140.6	182.6	18.6	0.8
1950	2,621,548	9.1	625	475	101.1	159.0	11.8	0.6
1951	730,556	2.5	625	109	27.5	22.9	14.7	1.2
1955	722,405	2.7	630	110	108.0	100.1	15.1	1.1
1959	1,638,571	5.9	630	216	218.5	196.4	16.9	1.1
1964	3,092,878	11.2	630	365	189.8	169.0	18.5	1.1

Source: Butler and Butler, British Political Facts, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, 1994, and author's calculations.

# ‘God Gave the Land to the People!’

*A report of the History Group discussion meeting in July, with Roy Douglas; by Malcolm Baines*

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Roy Douglas, author of *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970*, treated the History Group to a dissertation on the role and significance of land value taxation to the Liberal Party in the years to 1914.

He began by placing it within the agricultural context of the late nineteenth century in the four nations of the British Isles, pointing out that due to harvest failure in 1879, the UK had started to import grain and meat from North America and New Zealand. This had led to a permanent fall in food prices. The main victims of this fall were the landowners who increasingly were seen as economic parasites rather than as pillars of the community. This made them vulnerable as a class to philosophic and economic attack.

This attack was given shape by Henry George, an American philosopher and economist, in his book *Progress and Poverty*. He concluded that the cause of poverty was lack of access to land and that the community should redress this through a land value tax.

This was enthusiastically adopted by the Liberal Party and included in the 1891 Newcastle Programme. Events then moved swiftly on to the 1906–10 Liberal government, which did make several efforts to introduce land value taxation only to see them fall in the Lords. Dr Douglas then argued that it was the inclusion of a national survey of land values in the 1909 ‘People’s Budget’ which led to its defeat by the Lords. Even though the budget ultimately became law in 1910 the actual survey was not complete at the outbreak of war, and Dr Douglas could offer no convincing explanation as to why this was so.

Politically, however, Dr Douglas argued that land value taxation was electorally very popular, citing the Liberal victory in the August 1912 Hanley byelection in a Labour seat as evidence. It would, in his opinion, have been the issue on which the 1915 election would have been won. However, the war intervened, and like all the other great Liberal issues it was swept under the carpet in the interests of national unity. The Tory dominance in the inter-war years meant that, except briefly in the 1929–31 Labour government, it never reemerged as a live political issue.

A stimulating discussion followed in which the audience focused on the popularity of land value taxation amongst the working class, the Labour Party’s toying with the policy and its significance in the Lloyd George split with Asquith. The discussion became steadily more like a revival meeting and Dr Douglas ended with a call to ensure the cause of land value taxation was communicated to the today’s electors.

A lively and interesting meeting, Dr Douglas provided a basic grounding in the history of Liberals and land value taxation up to 1914 but did not develop for the sceptical sufficiently the economic justification for the tax. As a result the meeting suffered from being hijacked by enthusiasts towards the end, leaving the more historical members of the audience – including myself – rather bemused as to the relative strengths of the case for and against land value taxation in either the Edwardian period or modern times.

*Malcolm Baines is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.*

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## Keeping the Peace?

*Book Review: A Military History of Ireland, edited by T Bartlett & K Jeffrey (Cambridge University Press, 1996; £45). Reviewed by Tony Little*

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No doubt, it is an unspoken tradition of reviewers to skip parts of books but I want to admit honestly that I only read around half of this heavyweight (in the literal sense) tome. The book is a series of essays which covers the interaction of armies and government from Celtic through to modern times. It is not limited to a detailed description of the bloody battles and atrocities which continue to breed mistrust between England and Ireland. In fact battles are, if anything, under-represented. Rather it shows the way in which armies developed and their equally tense relations with the civil powers and the local population.

I picked up the fascinating story with the Tudors, when determined efforts were made to conquer Ireland, and

followed the progress up to 1922 when the Free State came into being. England did not set out to secure full central control over Ireland until the scale of rebellions around the Pale demanded a reaction. Religious elements compounded local squabbles among powerful war lords until William III’s defeat of Jacobite forces secured a Protestant domination. The spirit of the native Irish was never fully conquered and there was never an entirely trusting relationship between the British government and the Irish Protestants – the 1798 rebellion and the Irish Home Rule Party were both Protestant-led.

From the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries,

*[concluded on page 12]*

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

## Landslide for the Left

Speakers: Andrew Adonis; John Grigg

Chair: Earl Russell

Massive Tory defeat ....sweeping opposition landslide victory .... major gains by small third party .... but what does the new government stand for other than opposition to unpopular Conservative policies?

The outcome of the next general election? No – it happened in 1906, when Campbell-Bannerman led the Liberal Party to a crushing victory over Balfour's Unionists, with the newly-formed Labour Party making important gains on the back of an electoral pact with the Liberals. And despite the lack of any clear Liberal election programme other than reversal of unpopular Tory policies, the following eight years were to see one of the most sustained periods of political and social reform of the twentieth century, as the Government put into practice the thinking and policies of the New Liberalism.

Nine decades later, are similar ingredients in place once again? Discuss the topic with **Andrew Adonis**, Political Editor of the *Observer*; **John Grigg**, biographer of Lloyd George; and **Earl Russell**, historian and Lords spokesman on social security.

Sunday 22 September, 8.00 – 9.30pm  
Norfolk Room, Metropole Hotel, Brighton

### The Liberal Party's Performance in 1945

*[continued from p. 10]*

However, the increasing number of Liberal candidates probably meant that the party was moving out from its strongest areas and contesting weaker areas. This would explain a drop in the average vote per opposed candidate and also allow one to praise 1945.

This is where the ratio in the last column comes in. That the ratio comes out at only 0.7 severely restrains the scope there is for, to quote Steed, 'a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies.' First, there was clearly not such a great increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal as to completely overcome the depressive effect of more Liberal candidates meaning less promising places were contested (this would give a ratio greater than 1.0). Second, it either means the increase was not great, or that the number of constituencies in which it occurred was very limited. Both a deep narrow advance, and a broad shallow one are consistent with the numbers, but neither really chime with Steed's claim.

Either way, the case for praising the 1945 Liberal result still very much remains to be proven.

Mark Pack currently works at Exeter University, helping to support computing in the Arts faculty, but will shortly become an IT Support Specialist at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

### Special issue, December 1996

Following the success of our last special issue (*The Liberal Party and the Great War*, Newsletter 10, March 1996), our next scheduled theme issue will cover the Liberal Revival of the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Ideas for articles, and offers of contributions, are very welcome; contact Mark Egan (University College, Oxford OX1 4BH; email uv94003@sable.ox.ac.uk). The deadline for articles is **15 October 1996**.

### Keeping the Peace?

*[continued from p. 11]*

the army's main concern in Ireland was the risk of involvement in wider European wars with our enemies, predominantly France, invading Ireland to stir up difficulties for England. The government's main concern was generally with maintaining peace among a population which often needed little encouragement to riot or worse. The army always wished to concentrate its forces within easy reach of likely invasion sites while Dublin Castle wished to see it dispersed among the more troublesome population centres. The army's main need was always to hold up its manpower which could most easily be recruited from among the majority of Catholics. The government always worried that it would be training likely rebels. Great efforts were made to move Catholic soldiers out of Ireland while English officers regarded Ireland as a poor posting. Interestingly, Catholic units generally remained loyal but in the end the government was right. The main fighting in the successful Irish rebellion of 1916–22 came after 1918, when there were large numbers of recently demobbed and unemployed soldiers available.

For anyone looking for fresh insights on Irish history this thoughtful but non-partisan book is a worthwhile read even to those whose eyes glaze over at the sight of a uniform.

*Tony Little is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. His article tracing the evolution of Gladstone's Home Rule policy appeared in Liberal Democrat News in August.*

Membership of the Liberal Democrat History Group costs £7.50 (£4.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

Contributions to the Newsletter – letters, articles, and book reviews – are invited. Please type them and if possible enclose a computer file on 3.5 inch disc. The deadlines for the next two issues are **15 October** and **7 January**; contributions should be sent to the Editor, Duncan Brack, at the address below.

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