Remembering Beveridge

***George Watson** remembers William Beveridge, social scientist and Liberal, whose ideas shaped British postwar politics.*

I first met William Beveridge (1879–1963) as a neighbour in north Oxford, shortly after he had retired there in 1954.

He was a peppery little man in his mid-seventies, with a formidable Scottish wife called Jessy whom he had married in his sixties. Young as I was, I found both of them slightly alarming, especially Lord Beveridge, and believe I would do so still. He was already a figure in history because of the Beveridge Report, which he would refer to unselfconsciously as 'Beveridge'; she was blunt and resolute, ruled his private life and brooked no contradiction, whether in private or in public. A widow of his cousin, she had married him in December 1942 after a long period as his secretary, and in the very month his *Social Insurance and Allied Services* appeared. When he was elected Liberal MP for Berwick-on-Tweed in 1944, she is reputed to have told an eve-of-poll meeting: 'You have your chance of Willum. Take it. When I had my chance of Willum I never hesitated for a moment.' It was easy to imagine her saying it, and the natural eagerness of the Oxford University Liberal Club of those days to invite him to speak, it may now be revealed, was tempered by the consideration that he might send his wife instead.

His return to Oxford in old age, after nearly twenty years as Director of the London School of Economics and, after 1937, a time as Master of University College, Oxford, was partly dictated by climate. When Attlee sent him to the Lords in 1946, after losing Berwick, he offered him a post directing a new town in Northumberland. 'I believe in new towns,' I remember his saying in highly characteristic vein, since right conduct was always a matter of duty rather than inclination; so he went. There followed retirement to Edinburgh, out of deference, he implied, to his wife's wishes. But he found both places oppressively cold – not surprisingly, perhaps, since he had spent the first five years of his life in Bengal, where his father was a judge. So he asked the Oxford college he had once headed to find him a flat, and they found him one that happened to be near mine.

To visit him there was to listen. I had nothing to say that would have interested him, in any case, and knew it, while he had a lifetime of achievement to talk about and few enough audiences to tell it to. His reputation for vanity was not wholly undeserved, but it was amusing rather than offensive and far too innocent, in any case, to offend. Besides, he had a lot to be vain about. He was the prime instance, with Maynard Keynes, of a truth which he was fond of enunciating and which became the title of his autobiography: that influence can count for more than power, and that Liberals can decisively change the course of history without a seat in the cabinet room. He effected more from outside parliament, he would often say, than in it.

He did not welcome the title of the founder of the welfare state, which in any case was founded by Asquith in 1908, with state pensions, before he was thirty. Though a brother-in-law of R. H. Tawney and a friend of Sidney Webb, who had offered him the directorship of the LSE in 1919, he always rejected socialism, distrusted trade union power – it was a distrust the unions ardently returned after his attempts to discipline them during the first world war – and hated the dominance of class. I seldom heard him speak of foreign affairs, but gather that, unlike many socialists and conservatives between the wars, he had opposed the appeasement of Hitler, at least after the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936. Like Keynes, he unhesitatingly took the Liberal Whip in the House of Lords. 'That is partly because I am, and have always been, a Liberal,' I recall his saying, 'and partly because only the Liberals, as a party, accepted my plans for a national health service in 1942–43.'

That is a point that needs enlarging, and it is a pity that Beveridge himself, in his autobiography *Power and Influence* (1953), did not enlarge on it. The opposition of the Labour leaders to a national health service is something he spoke of at length in his later years, and it is worth more than the sentence or two he gives it in his memoir. Nor did Michael Foot, who has spoken of it with some bitterness in public interviews, dare tell the story in his life of Aneurin Bevan. Bevan is said to have complained in later life about the hostility of cabinet colleagues to the NHS in 1947–48, but his biographer has not quoted the terms in which they objected. No doubt the myth that Labour always supported public welfare is now too crucial a fabrication to be publicly unmasked.

The doubts of the Labour leaders about the Beveridge Report in 1942–43, which were talked down by their own backbenchers and by the House of Commons itself, were individual and various. Ernest Bevin wanted the unions at the heart of any health provision; Herbert Morrison, it is said, wanted local government to be there. But behind it all, Beveridge felt, lay a profound fear of humanising capitalism. To humanise capitalism, after all, is to risk preserving it, and the Labour leaders wanted to abolish it. Events suggest that their fears were not misplaced. Much of the western industrial world was humanised, in that sense, after 1945; and though Beveridge did not live to see it,

even the communist world had come to realise by the 1980s that it takes a free market to generate the wealth needed to maintain an ever costlier programme of public welfare. So welfare needs competition and competition needs welfare. An old American Trotskyite who had worked for Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s remarked grimly, after the war: 'I guess we saved capitalism'. Socialists in that remote era had thought they were fooling the liberals. In fact it was the other way around. When I worked at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in the 1950s, I recall the amazement and consternation with which Labour MPs discovered that our continental neighbours, without socialist governments, already offered greater welfare provision than Britain after six years of Labour; and when the two Germanies united in 1990, the welfare provision of the capitalist West was more than twice that of the socialist East. The contrast between mainland China and Taiwan is even greater. Socialism has been a stingy provider of welfare, on a long view, and those who assume a connection between socialism and social welfare should think again.

It was the link between welfare and free enterprise that fascinated me in Beveridge's talk in his last years. He rejected all socialist suspicion of a voluntary contribution; he resented the exclusion, in 1948, of friendly societies from the newly created health service; and in letters he sent me while I was editing *The Unservile State* (1957) – letters which I wish I had preserved – he insisted he had always sought a welfare society rather than a welfare state. There is no presumption, in his view, that the state is always the best provider – an argument little heeded while he lived, but now back at the very centre of domestic policy. Odd that he should now be celebrated as one of the founders of the welfare state. In his own view, in age, he was a sceptic of statism, and I believe it was in *The Unservile State* that the phrase he was proud to have coined, the 'Welfare Society', first saw print.

Beveridge's warmth and humour have often been doubted, and his memory, though respected, is to a marked degree unloved. That is not be wondered at. Nobody, you felt when you were with him, ever better deserved the title of a social scientist. His zest was all for factual detail. Indeed he saw himself, after an arts training at Charterhouse and Balliol, followed by reading for the Bar, as something of a scientist *manqué*, and I should guess that he inherited from his Scottish ancestors a healthy distrust of easy emotion. I never heard him mention painting, fiction or music. But he was not altogether cold, and not altogether without a sense of fun.

I recall two exceptional incidents. One, when he stood admiringly in front of a well-stocked, glass-fronted bookcase in his sitting room in Oxford, packed with volumes dating from the seventeenth century, and proclaimed: 'All these books were written by members of my family.' The other was at my eve-of-poll meeting at Cheltenham town hall in October 1959, where out of great kindness he spoke for me at the age of 80. Perhaps it was the only joke I ever heard him utter, which makes it the more memorable. 'I hope,' he told a large audience, 'that I am the only person in this room who is not voting Liberal tomorrow.' There was a short, dramatic silence while the audience gasped and the platform shuddered. But the speaker had not forgotten his heritage of faith or blown his lines. 'That,' he went on triumphantly, 'is because I am a peer of the realm and do not have a vote.' It earned him a roar and a cheer, and it is good to record that Cheltenham, like his own Berwick-on-Tweed, is a Liberal seat again.

George Watson, who is a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, was the editor of the Unservile State Group from 1952 to 1990 and is the author of The Idea of Liberalism *(Macmillan, 1985).*

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 1920s and '30s; and also 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 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.

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, Flat 4, Sefton Court, 133 Otley Road, Headingley, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS6 3PX.

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.