

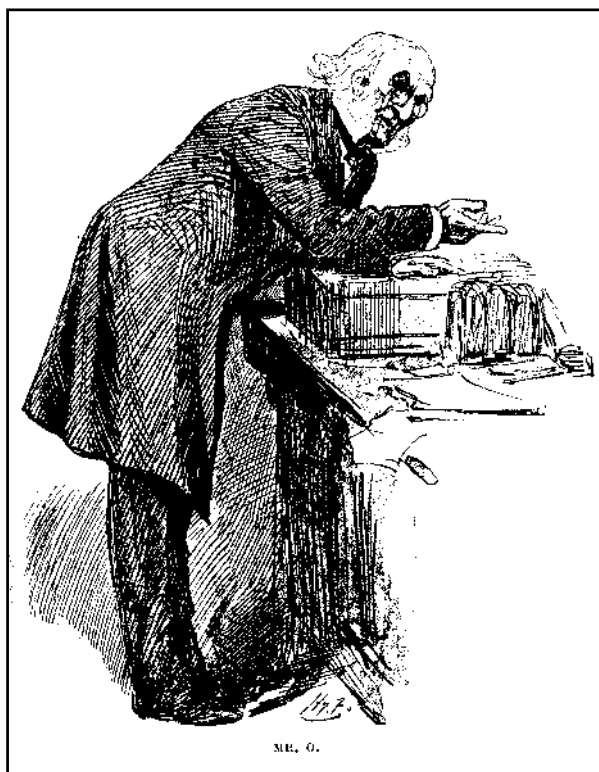
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# His Manner of Speech

From *A Diary of the Unionist Parliament 1895–1900* by Henry W Lucy

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Mr Gladstone lived through a gradual, now finally established, change in the course of Parliamentary debate. Whilst he and



Mr Disraeli sat facing each other, it was the custom for the Leaders on either side to speak late in set debate.

One would rise about eleven o'clock, making way for the other between half-past twelve and one in the morning. With the meeting of the House earlier in the afternoon, and the establishment of the twelve o'clock rule, it has come to pass that, with rare ex-

ceptions, all the important speaking is done before dinner.

Mr. Gladstone was equal to either contingency. For his great speeches he carefully prepared, bringing down his notes and turning them over as he proceeded. As he often showed, preparation and attendant notes were superfluities. Some of his most powerful and effective speeches were delivered on the spur of the moment, called forth by an incident or argument of current debate. Even at times when party passion ran riot, the House delighted in his lapses into conversation on some topic brought forward by a private member on a Tuesday or a Friday night. He did not in these circumstances make a speech. He just chatted, and those privileged to meet him in private life know how delightful was his conversation.

Brought up in the Parliamentary school of Canning and Peel, he preserved to the last something of the old-fashioned manner. His courtesy was unailing, his manner dignified, his eloquence pitched on a lofty plane unattainable by men of modern birth. His place in the House of Commons remains empty, and to the furthest horizon there is no promise of its being filled.

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## Gladstone and Ireland

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achieve it. But this is a weakness as well as a strength, for it means that changes with major implications are made without those implications being fully or consistently thought through.

The Blair Government's approach has been thoroughly Gladstonian. Problems are identified and picked off one by one. Home rule for Scotland and Wales, a settlement for Ireland, reform of the House of Lords, reform of the executive, reform of local government through the introduction of

powerful mayors, possible reform of the monarchy, reform of the relationship of the citizen to the state in terms of information and privacy, and a variety of other reforms: each of these is desirable in itself, but the aggregated result is to leave us with a shell of a constitution. To continue to work, the constitution will need to refer to an historic version of itself, but one which no longer in fact fully exists.

The upshot of this is, that while the Gladstonian constitutional approach has an honourable history in the Liberal Party and in the British political tradition, it may now be getting in the way of the fuller reconsideration which our constitution surely requires and deserves.

We need a Constitutional Convention to consider all the various elements of constitutional inadequacy and reform which face the United Kingdom, both centrally and with respect to its constituent parts, and to produce proposals for a new constitution.

*This paper was delivered originally at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting in the National Liberal Club in July.*

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