

Reports

Liberalism and Nationalism: Allies or Enemies?

Fringe meeting, 5 March,
with Donald Gorrie MP and Gordon Lishman
Report by Duncan Brack

Speaking in Edinburgh two months before elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly saw nationalist parties take leading opposition roles, our two speakers tried to identify the compatibilities, and the conflicts, between liberalism and nationalism. Each saw very different aspects.

Donald Gorrie, MP and now MSP, differentiated between the nationalism that sprang from love of nation and support for its self-determination, and the imperialism of large countries aiming to conquer their neighbours. 'On the whole', he stated, 'the nationalism of small and self-contained nations has not been harmful and, at its best, has been one of the most creative forces in history'. Our heroes out of history are nationalists fighting imperialists – Wallace, Bruce, William Tell, national resistance movements, and so on.

Liberals have frequently found themselves expressing support for nationalist movements, from Fox and his advocacy of the American revolutionaries, through the enthusiasm for Italian nationhood which brought the Liberal Party, in its modern form, together, to Gladstone's championing of 'the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan', the rights of the Bulgarians against the Turks, and of the Irish against the British. Asquith's aims in 1914 included war 'until the rights of the small nationalities of Europe are placed upon an unassailable foundation'.

Turning to more local history, Mr Gorrie looked at the relationship be-

tween Liberals and Scottish nationalism. Nineteenth-century Scottish Liberals often supported the idea of Scottish nationhood, and many saw a Scottish Parliament as an inevitable successor to Irish home rule. Jo Grimond in particular put home rule at the forefront of the Liberal platform, and favoured cooperation with the SNP.¹ Many Scottish Liberal Democrats were disappointed that the SNP withdrew from the Scottish Constitutional Convention – but despite the clear policy difference between the parties over independence versus federalism, Mr Gorrie argued for accepting the Nationalists as potential allies in the new Scottish Parliament. 'Responsible nationalism is a legitimate political philosophy, and responsible nationalists are normal flawed human beings who can be respectable allies with whom Liberal Democrats can cooperate on the right terms in promoting our agenda for Scotland, just as we could cooperate with Labour or with both or neither.'

Gordon Lishman took a very different view. He saw Liberalism and Nationalism as two wholly antithetical traditions, in the final analysis fundamentally incompatible. He

viewed the 'good side' of nationalism, including the examples cited by Donald Gorrie, as essentially being arguments about the abuse of power. Gladstone campaigned for Bulgarian independence, for instance, because he saw it as the best way to end Turkish atrocities, not because he supported Bulgarian nationhood *per se*.

All political philosophies rest on a conception of human nature: on views of generosity of spirit versus selfishness, of rationality versus a belief in myths (of race, or blood, or nation), of inclusiveness versus exclusivity. In Britain, Liberalism is clearly associated with the first terms in each of these three pairs, whereas Conservatism is equally clearly associated with the second (and New Labour is all over the place). Nationalists can fall within either, or between them. It is important to know what their views are on other issues – for a Liberal, the structure of government is not the only matter of concern.

Mr Lishman did not disagree with Mr Gorrie over the possibility of working together with Nationalists, where the conditions were right – a common agenda which could be delivered, clear political advantages, and the right personal chemistry. And historically, Liberals and nationalists had often cooperated advantageously. But a core part of Liberalism is about the creation of institutions, and governmental structures, to which people can best relate. There is no reason why these should be nations (which themselves are relatively recent developments in many parts of the world). In his own case, his home county of Lancashire had a clear cultural identity with which he identified, and he also saw himself as a citizen of Europe, and of the world. But there was no logical reason why any of these units should be the same as those over which governments should be organised. That should derive instead from structures which best enabled decisions to be made which advanced more important goals, such as participation, or human rights, or rational decision-making.

John Stuart Mill advanced a similar argument in *Representative Gov-*

ernment. 'Nobody can suppose', wrote Mill, 'that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilised and cultivated people – to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantages of French protection, and the dignity and prestige of French power – than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander, as members of the British nation.'

The argument would hardly be

put in the same terms today, but it illustrates the general point – and in this context it is interesting to note how the Spanish regions have come to terms with their current status, how they are building relationships with EU structures, how regional government has diminished, not increased, the pressures for independence – and how some regionalist parties (e.g. *Convergencia i Unia* in Catalonia) are becoming more liberal. But more nationalists tended to lean in the direction of rhetoric over blood and race – a simplistic and illiberal answer to the problems of a complex world.

Notes:

- 1 See Graham Watson, 'Scottish Liberals, Scottish Nationalists and Dreams of a Common Front', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 22 (Spring 1999).

early days in Australia were marred by a series of gaffes and misunderstandings, but his patronage of local writers and artists and his readiness, on occasion, to defy protocol won the admiration of some. As governor and commander-in-chief his real power was limited, though the position was not entirely ceremonial. He helped arrange for the participation of New South Wales contingents in the Boer War and calmly dealt with an outbreak of bubonic plague in the colony in 1900. His most significant political act was to refuse, with Chamberlain's backing, a dissolution of the state parliament in 1899 in the knowledge that William Lyne was in a position to form a government. The creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1900 left Beauchamp in a difficult position. He went on leave in October on half-pay and did not return.

In 1902 Beauchamp married Lady Lettice Grosvenor, sister of the Duke Westminster, and prepared to throw himself into British politics. But the Unionists' move after 1903 towards the policy of tariff reform alienated a life-long free trader. Not surprisingly, he was received with enthusiasm into the Liberal ranks. He was known to be wealthy and influential and had the reputation of being a model landlord. Beauchamp soon became renowned for his hospitality. His receptions at Halkyn House in Belgrave Square became a highlight of the social season for Edwardian Liberals.

Beauchamp was Captain of the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms in 1906–07 and His Majesty's Steward, 1907–10. But his promotion to Asquith's cabinet in June 1910 as Lord President of the Council came as a surprise. 'Beauchamp a cabinet minister!' proclaimed a Tory who had known him well at Oxford. 'I don't know why, but this strikes me as inexpressibly funny.'¹

In the absence, before December 1916, of cabinet minutes, it is not easy to determine the nature of Beauchamp's contribution to the turbulent political years before the outbreak of the First World War.

Biographies

William Lygon, 7th Earl Beauchamp (1872–1938)

David Dutton

Though he has not left an enormous mark upon the historical record, William Lygon, Earl Beauchamp, occupied an important position in Liberal politics for more than two decades. For much of his career he was obliged to grapple with the intractable problems of Liberal decline.

Lygon was born in London on 20 February 1872, the elder son of Frederick Lygon, sixth Earl Beauchamp, and his first wife, Mary, daughter of the fifth Earl Stanhope. Educated at Eton, he succeeded his father as Earl Beauchamp on the day before his nineteenth birthday in 1891, and shortly after going up to Christ Church, Oxford. He thereby inherited 5,000 acres in Worcestershire.

His interest in public affairs quickly became apparent and he be-

came Mayor of Worcester in 1895, at the age of just twenty-three. With his high Anglican background he was a natural adherent of the Unionist party. Even so, most observers – and Beauchamp himself – were surprised when the Unionist Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, offered him the governorship of New South Wales in 1899. He was still only twenty-seven years of age. This rather imaginative appointment proved only partially successful. His