

Brighton Conference Fringe

We are in the first stages of planning our fringe meeting for the autumn conference in Brighton in September. The provisional topic is the Yellow Book, and Lloyd George's programme for conquering unemployment in the 1920s. With one of the major policy paper debates at Brighton being on Employment Policy, this provides us with a chance to trace the development of Liberal/Lib Dem thought on this important topic.

Speakers have yet to be invited; any suggestions would be very welcome, and should be sent to **Duncan Brack**.

Mediawatch

Richard Grayson is responsible for maintaining and updating a bibliography of articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers and some magazines and journals (all those listed in the *British Humanities Index*, published by Bowker-Saur). Starting in 1988, this list now extends to six pages, and should be of use to any serious student of the Party. Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy free of charge; send a large (at least A5) SSAE to **Duncan Brack**. The current issue extends to 30 June 1993.

Book Review

John Stevenson: Third Party Politics Since 1945: Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats
(Blackwell, 1993, pbk, £9.99)

Reviewed by James Lund

The author is a Fellow and Tutor in History at Worcester College, Oxford. His book is a contribution to a series entitled 'Making Contemporary Britain'. This suggests that the continuum of human transaction which gives rise to history through the study of evidences is a proceeding of fabrication and not an enactment. The series may have set its mark on the book,

which is a short historical handbook, briskly, clearly and competently written, seemingly intended for party activists. Its title states its scope, the fortunes of the third party in British politics from the end of the Second World War to the present day, and its metamorphoses as a party in that period. This story is preceded by an account of the decline of the Liberal Party during and after the First World War.

Between 1945 and the present day we proceed from general election to general election with intervening analyses of the results and summaries of changes in the political situation in the in-between years. What the story ultimately shows at the parliamentary level is that the fortunes of the Liberal Party, the Alliance and the Liberal Democrats "can be shown to have been dependent in large part upon the state of the other parties". Stevenson carefully qualifies this conclusion in a number of directions, notably the establishment of the third-party presence in local government as creating "an apparently permanent power base in local government in both rural and urban areas". At parliamentary level, however, an increasingly volatile electorate has steadily shown that the cause of Liberal Democracy, as it has become, cannot, as things are, muster more than 25% at best of the votes cast; and that those votes are spread so evenly through the constituencies that they produce a very limited return in seats. In 1992 it took "almost 300,000 votes to elect each Liberal Democrat MP compared with just over 40,000 for each Labour and Conservative member".

In these circumstances, the Liberal Democrats look to both electoral reform and the recovery of major party status. Stevenson's review of Liberal decline from 1906 to 1955 is in a way a reminder of the latter possibility. But his book is so conceived and structured that it does not allow for any developed historical understanding of that decline and of what has happened since then which would explain the failure of the Party to establish a strong, distinct and sufficiently attractive identity at Parliamentary level to convert protest votes against the government of the day into a more enduring following. History proper ought to afford more perspective than this book does. The point involved is too large a one to

develop here, but two important omissions indicate what is meant. Nothing is said about what Liberalism and the Liberal Party came to represent in its short Parliamentary heyday from 1859 to 1916, so that in the end the book leaves the subject obscure. And reference to the wider world in which all this took place is quite minimal. Nothing is said, for instance, about the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 on Liberal political opinion in Britain after the First World War, and the retreat which this great event stimulated in the politics of defensive class interest as represented both by Conservatives and Labour. A further consequence was to leave the conversion of the Liberal Party to social reform before 1914 incomplete. Arguably, among a significant minority of Liberal Democrats today, that conversion is still incomplete, and the Party has limited appeal among the industrial working class.

Book Review

H.C.G. Matthew: Gladstone 1809 - 1874
(OUP 1988 pbk £12.95)

Reviewed by Tony Little

Was Gladstone the Thatcher of the 19th century? Both came from commercial families whose fathers were active politicians and both went to Oxford. After a flirtation with the law, they chose politics as a career, joining the Conservative party. Their strong emotional links with sections of the working population, through their mastery of the press, intensified the distrust and loathing with which they were regarded by the Establishment including many of their own party, even cabinet colleagues. Retrenchment of government spending to cut income tax and allow wealth to fructify in the pockets of the population was their key economic policy. Free trade and nationalism were articles of faith and both acted as if they alone pursued the moral course which served to infuriate their opponents. They were masters of detail which allowed them to dominate cabinet and set the agenda for their generation. Gladstone was undoubtedly the better European and his trade union reforms were aimed at increasing rather than

reducing the power of the working class. Above all he trusted the people and that is perhaps why he created the Liberal Party and she led the Tories.

Matthew's book surveys only the period up to the end of the first premiership. Gladstone first accepted political office in the 1830s; he was in Peel's cabinet which repealed the Corn Law. Although he thought he had retired in 1874, Gladstone won his last election in 1892. The essay also betrays its origins as introductory remarks to the Gladstone Diaries which Matthew edited for publication. Yet this is what gives the volume its greatest strength. It presents Gladstone the human, rather than Gladstone the superman. He even opens up the secrets of Gladstone's sexual life in a way which almost, if not quite, strengthens our admiration. The 'Sun' would not have let The People's Willy get away with such innocent but doubtful self torture today.

Matthew brings out clearly the influence of Peel on Gladstone the Chancellor but underplays that of Aberdeen who prevented him rejoining the Tories. Gladstone's work at the Exchequer was crucial to the adaptation of the British political system to the realities of the Industrial Revolution. In making Britain a free trade nation, he completed Peel's work and constructed a tax system which removed the grievances of the working and commercial classes but which was acceptable to the aristocrats who controlled Parliament. He eliminated the obstacles to a cheap press and benefited from its hunger for news. He was the first senior politician to use the large, and reported, public meeting which, like Reagan, allowed him to appeal to the people over the head of the legislature.

Religion is the key to Gladstone. From an evangelical background, he was caught up in Oxford's attempt to revive the Church of England. He saw the state as an arm of the church but the failure of the Church and State to meet his ideals generated the tensions which drove him into the Exchequer, disestablished the Church of Ireland and created the misunderstanding between Gladstone and his non-conformist followers over education, condemning the Liberals to electoral defeat in 1874. Matthew's extensive coverage of religious issues may deter some readers. If so,