

The political identities so characterised may be both crude and minimal, but they are instantly recognisable as grounded in the remembered past, the actual present, and the possibilities for the future. The proposed 'core message', by contrast, refers only to the possibilities of the future and is not grounded in a story concerning the past, leading into the present.

The above characterisation of the Tory identity serves as a reminder, however, of how quickly political identities can change. And be reborn. Who would recognise traditional conservatism and its limited sense of social responsibility in the above characterisation, which resurrects something of the perceived identity of mid-Victorian Liberalism?

No wonder a Thatcher administration in 1981 revived the practice, which had its heyday in Gladstone's earlier administrations, of going down to Greenwich as the end of the summer session to eat a whitebait dinner in the Nelson Room of the Trafalgar Tavern.

No wonder also, perhaps, that the Campaigns & Communications Committee was inclined to dodge the very real difficulties raised by the past for the present in Liberal politics which seek to be democratic. Again, the Tory and Labour, Conservative and Socialist identities are grounded in the economic struggle between capital and labour, which spilled over into the political realm. Most people's sense of identity for general social purposes is economic rather than political. 'What does she do?' not 'how does she vote?' is the common, almost compulsory, question in this way of characterising social identity.

Liberal Democracy is apolitical, not an economic identity, primarily. How can this identity be turned to political advantage in a positive way, and not the negative one of 'compromise' and 'neither one thing nor the other'?

A sense of history may afford the requisite vision. Liberal Democrats ought not to forget that erstwhile Liberal of Whig descent, Winston Spencer Churchill, whose portrait as a young man is still hung in the conservative precincts of the National Liberal Club, and who once remarked that "*the nations stand at this hour of human history before the portals of supreme catastrophe and measureless reward.*"

More than an educational policy is wanted to meet the present crux in British political affairs, the most important since the Glorious Revolution.

What this political vision might include, I hope to consider on a subsequent occasion.

Whither Today's History, Tomorrow?

by Cllr Devin Scobie

As a founder member of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I first stood for election seven weeks after our party was born. I wonder now what will survive from those many elections contested during the early years of the Liberal Democrats?

The Liberal Party was a spent force in British politics by 1981

and I genuinely believe that the SDP, as was, was destined to be never more than a footnote in post-war British history.

What will matter to future generations is the Liberal Democrats (can I still call us 'new'?). I firmly believe Shirley Williams' 1981 prediction that, within 20 years, 'we' will be in power. Almost a century after the Liberals' decisive victory in 1906, the Lib Dems will, I hope, storm to victory. Then, and only then, historians and scribes of the time will take us seriously.

But who will have charted the difficult years from 1988? Am I the only Party member who, as early as August 1988, wrote to an otherwise unknown Stratford-upon-Avon councillor called Cyril Bennis and asked him for copies of his election leaflets? Am I the only History Group member who could even tell you - I think - that Councillor Bennis was the first ever person elected as a Lib Dem (or 'Social Liberal Democrat' as he had on his ballot paper on March 3 1988)?

When I am old and grey I will donate his letter and leaflets to the first Lib Dem National Archive, along with the hundreds of election leaflets which I have gathered and collected since then.

I sincerely hope that every other History Group member is gathering their own mini archive with each election that passes.

Let's face it, if we don't, who will?

(Cllr Scobie was elected as a Liberal Democrat Councillor on Edinburgh City Council in May 1992. Currently a member of the Scottish Party Executive, he contested the Edinburgh East Parliamentary seat in 1992 and is a compulsive collector of political autograph material and election leaflets.)

Responses to either of the above articles are very welcome - see front page for information on submissions.

Book Reviews

Mervyn Jones:

A Radical Life:

The Biography of Megan Lloyd George
(Hutchison 1991)

Reviewed by Malcolm Baines

This book marries a potted history of the twentieth century with the story of the life of Megan Lloyd George. It is worth remembering that she never held great office and was an M.P. for a party that was continually dwindling in numbers throughout the period. Much of the interest lies in the contrast with her father; sharing his charm, she lacked his energy and capacity for hard work. Grimond's apt comment on Megan was, "perpetually young, perpetually unfulfilled."

Another major strand is Megan's affair with Philip Noel-Baker, the disarmament campaigner and Labour M.P. His failure to commit himself to her adds to the underlying poignancy and sadness of her life.

This is only amplified by her unsuccessful struggle to keep the Liberal Party in the radical camp. The steady drift to the right after 1948 proved unavailing. Particularly interesting, is Megan's slow move into the Labour Party and her ultimate inability to be comfortable in it.

Overall, the book is a useful biography of a minor Liberal figure, whose main appeal is to those enamoured of the Lloyd George mystique. Copious information is provided of Megan's radical concerns, such as equal pay for women and a parliament for Wales, many still unrealised today. More interesting are details of life in the Lloyd George household and the relationships of the various parties within it, and that is why all those interested in Lloyd George will find it a worthwhile read.

Jonathan Parry: *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain*
(Yale University Press 1993; £30)

Reviewed by Tony Little

The Liberal Party was formed at a meeting in Willis' Tea Rooms in 1859. It reached a full flowering under the masterly leadership of Gladstone only to be broken by the traitorous desertion of the Whigs who revealed their true propertied interest in the 1886 Home Rule crisis. No? This is the straw man that Parry seeks to demolish in his book on parliamentary Liberalism up to 1886.

He argues, successfully, that the Liberals were a British party committed to the different national, economic and religious elements in the community rather than an English, Anglican and landed interest like the Tories. The Liberal leadership needed to respond to and manage social change rather than just resist or yield in the last ditch. Their skills were primarily administrative, despite their reforming legislative achievements, checking sectional lobbying and corruption in favour of firm economy. In spite, or perhaps because, of Palmerston's belligerence, Liberals really were the party of peace, retrenchment and reform.

Parry traces the roots of the party back to the 'country party' tradition of the eighteenth century Whigs enhanced by their digestion of the lessons of the post Napoleonic war period. Of particular importance was Canning's responsiveness to public opinion and his use of public opinion, rather than the monarchy, as the main support for policy. By the 1830s, the essential elements of Liberalism were in place. He plays down the strength and the ideological vanguard role of the Radicals and suggests that the 'advanced' elements of the party were unable to rouse the enthusiasm of the then restricted electorate for comprehensive radical legislative programmes. This failing damned the party to the wilderness for twenty years after 1886 and damned the Liberal revival under Asquith. The same lesson might also be applied to the radical governments of Attlee and Thatcher.

Since Parry equates Liberalism with what others would define as moderate progressive Whiggery, he is almost bound to

identify the 1885/6 Home Rule crisis as the end of his Liberalism because that is when many of the aristocratic Whigs deserted the party. It also leads him to denigrating Gladstone and the Peelite contribution to Liberalism while promoting the leadership qualities of Lord John Russell. Lord John's reputation was dealt a severe blow during the Crimean War and has never since fully recovered. Hartington was less laid back than he pretended but he failed to head off Gladstone in 1880 or carry the majority of the party with him in 1885/6. Gladstone's faults and failings were obvious even before his first premiership - his temper and messianic tendencies especially. They were outweighed by his virtues - his oratory, his vision, his drive and above all his administrative skills. While the immediate cause of the 1885/6 crisis was Gladstone's sudden and bungled conversion to Home Rule, the origins of Whig unease ran much deeper. The 1880-1885 government was an unhappy experience for its members, frustrated at home by Irish obstruction and almost broken up by foreign policy disputes. From the beginning some Whigs were worried that the government was not sufficiently responsive to property rights.

The real failing of the book is in its unwillingness to recognise the changing context in which the Liberal party operated. Parry has deliberately focused on parliamentary leadership but the leaders were responding to a changing electorate 'out of doors' and to real world problems. The post 1860s electorate had different social characteristics and posed new problems of party organisation and programmes. Churchill's Tory Democracy was as much a recognition of this as Chamberlain's radical programmes and Jingoism. Salisbury, for all his reactionary pessimism, catered to the new voters. If Gladstone and the Radicals failed in 1886 what alternative did Hartington offer that was not more readily available from the Tories?

In summary, Parry's work is well worth reading. He sets out his thesis clearly and argues his case cogently. He scores at least two out of three hits on the straw man.

Membership Services

The History Group (with thanks to Richard Grayson for the work) 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 and some magazines and journals (all those listed in the British Humanities Index, published by Bowker-Saur). Starting in 1988, this now extends to August 1993.

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.