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HISTORY



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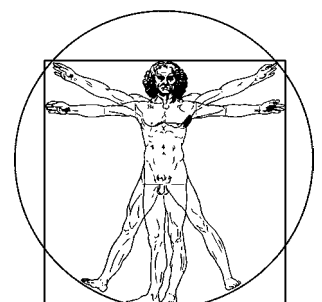
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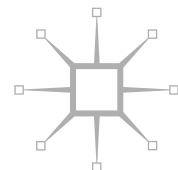
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Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of historical topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal* and other occasional publications.

For more information, including details of publications, back issues of the *Journal*, tape records of meetings and archive and other research sources, see our website at: www.liberalhistory.org.uk.

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SPECTACULA

Jaime Reynolds examines Liberal wins against the odds at general elections.

In June 2001 Liberal Democrats celebrated the capture of Guildford, a seat that had been in Conservative possession for more than ninety years. It was the party's first win in Surrey since 1906. But, although it was a remarkable result, it was not an entirely unexpected one. The party had come to within 8.3 per cent of victory in 1997 and, with a strong local government base and local issues working in their favour, a win was definitely on the cards in 2001; it duly came with a swing of 4.8 per cent. Guildford was an impressive Lib Dem victory, but not by historical standards a spectacular one.



AR VICTORIES

What should count as a *spectacular victory*? A good working definition would be a seat that is won against the odds and beyond normal psephological expectations: in other words those cases where the Liberal vote leaps 10 or 15 per cent and the opponent's vote plunges dramatically. To qualify, the Liberal should come from at least 10 per cent behind, and in the really spectacular cases 20 per cent or more.

Over the years the Liberals have made a speciality of such wins in by-elections. The first modern one was in 1958 at Torrington when they won a seat that they had not even contested at the previous two general elections. The most famous and sensational victory was at Orpington in 1962, a rock-solid Tory seat (majority 34.4 per cent), which Eric Lubbock won with a massive swing of 26.8 per cent. Many other by-election triumphs have followed: Sutton & Cheam in 1972, Bermondsey in 1983, Eastbourne in 1990, Newbury and Christchurch in 1993, Romsey in 2000 and most recently Brent East and Leicester South, to name but a few. The special circumstances of by-elections – the media attention, the opportunity to concentrate resources, and the availability of large numbers of protest votes – all make for excitement and unpredictability. In fact, by-election upsets have become a regular feature in recent decades,

although lately there has been a sharp decline in their frequency as the average age and mortality rate of MPs fall and party managers strive to avoid resignations and departures from politics between general elections.

Spectacular victories in general elections are less common and, with the focus on the national contest between the parties, usually attract less attention. They are, however, important – especially for the Liberals who in all general elections since the 1920s have fought on a narrower front than the other two parties, in the sense that there have been relatively few marginal seats where the Liberals have been an obvious challenger to the incumbent party. Following the general election of 2001, for example, there are just fifteen Conservative and four Labour seats with a majority of less than 10 per cent over a Liberal Democrat. This means that, to advance significantly at the next general election, the party needs to win not only its target seats but also some others that appear to be 'off the map'. By-elections and the defections of Labour and Conservative MPs are only likely to help at the margins. For the Liberal Democrats to break through from their present fifty-five MPs to, say, a hundred, they would have to win all the marginals within their range and some thirty more in seats where they are currently over 10 per cent behind the incumbent. In short they need to win spectacular victories; Guildford-type victories,

To advance significantly at the next general election, the party needs to win not only its target seats but also some others that appear to be 'off the map'.

Photos kindly supplied by Liberal Democrats Campaigns & Elections Department; third one: Alex Folkes

however welcome and creditable, will not be enough.

Historically – as one might expect – such spectacular victories by Liberals at general elections are uncommon. Looking back into electoral pre-history as it were, before universal suffrage, when the Liberals were competing for government, it was not unusual for large numbers of seats to change hands at general elections on swings of more than 5 per cent. The Liberals won a host of them from the Tories in their triumph at the 1906 general election. However, in more modern times and in the context of the three-party contests that are now the norm, the numbers drop dramatically.

The elections of the inter-war period were complicated by both volatility in voting patterns and by shifting pacts and alliances between the parties at local and national level. Most of them were, in any case, disastrous for the Liberals, and victories, let alone spectacular victories, were few and far between. Nevertheless the two best Liberal general election performances of the period, 1923 and 1929, provide some examples that are worth a closer look.

At the general election of 1923 the Liberals gained eighty seats.¹ Some of their wins were regarded at the time as freakish. In Hemel Hempstead, a Liberal, nominated at the last moment, ousted Baldwin's chief lieutenant, J. C. C. Davidson, overturning a Conservative majority of 34.8 per cent in a seat that the

SPECTACULAR VICTORIES

Liberals had not contested since 1910 and where they had no constituency organisation.² Liverpool Wavertree, which the Liberals had not contested in 1922 and where they had to contend with strong Labour opposition in 1923, was an even more extraordinary gain from the Tories.³

However, nine Liberal gains in 1923, in seats that were fought by all three parties in both 1922 and 1923 and where the Liberal overturned a majority of over 10 per cent, are more comparable with modern elections. The most impressive was perhaps Manchester Rusholme where Charles Masterman⁴ finally re-entered parliament with a 15 per cent swing, overturning a Tory majority of 21.8 per cent to defeat Jeremy Thorpe's father, the Conservative incumbent. Masterman, whose ministerial career had been wrecked in 1914 by his defeat in a by-election and failure in several subsequent attempts to re-enter the Commons, exclaimed to his wife as they heard the result: 'We've won, my dear, and I thought we were never going to again.'⁵ A slightly larger Conservative majority (23.2 per cent) was demolished by a Liberal in the Isle of Ely with a 12.5 per cent swing. Among the more amazing victories was Gateshead, where the Liberal jumped from third place, 18.9 per cent behind Labour, to win the seat; the Liberal vote increased from 25 per cent to 43 per cent. Victories from third place were also won in Middlesbrough East, Bosworth and Nuneaton.

Of course the key factor in these seismic electoral shifts was the potency of the free trade cause at the 1923 election. It is clear that free-trade Conservatives abstained or transferred *en masse* to the Liberals in many commercial constituencies. In Wavertree and Gateshead the Tory vote almost halved. Elsewhere, such as in Luton, the Labour vote collapsed as free traders rallied behind the Liberals.

In the 1924 election these Liberal gains were reversed in simi-

larly spectacular fashion as the voters polarised between the outgoing Labour Government and the Conservative Opposition. All the spectacular gains of 1923 were lost. In Rusholme, Masterman was ousted with a 14.6 per cent swing to the Tories. In Wavertree and Gateshead the Liberals fell back to third place, losing more than half of their 1923 votes.

The 1929 general election brought a new crop of spectacular wins, mostly in rural constituencies. The most sensational was Ashford, a seat that had remained Tory even in 1906. The Liberal candidate, a Nonconformist minister and campaigner against tithe collection, the Reverend Roderick Kedward, overturned a Conservative majority of 38.6 per cent with a swing of 21 per cent, increasing the Liberal vote from 22 per cent to 46 per cent. This was a victory almost on the scale of that in nearby Orpington three decades later. The seat returned to the Conservative fold in 1931 and has remained a Tory seat ever since. It is unclear how far the tithe issue helped Kedward's victory in 1929, though the Tories certainly tried to use his support for non-payment against him in 1931.⁶

Other spectacular Liberal victories were secured at Eye, Dorset East and Hereford, where Conservative majorities above 20 per cent were overturned. In all three the popularity of the candidate seems to have played a part. Edgar Granville⁷ won Eye in Suffolk with a swing of 13.7 per cent and was to hold the seat until 1951. Alec Glassey⁸ gained Dorset East with a 10.6 per cent swing. In Hereford, despite the intervention of a Labour candidate, the 23-year-old Frank Owen⁹ won with a 12.6 per cent swing.

Luton, which had been a spectacular gain in 1923 and a bad defeat in 1924, was again won in spectacular style in 1929 by Leslie Burgin with a 9.8 per cent swing. Two safe Tory seats were gained in Manchester with swings of 8 per cent. There were also wins in Dumfriesshire (Conservative majority 15.4 per cent, swing

The Liberal candidate overturned a Conservative majority of 38.6 per cent with a swing of 21 per cent, increasing the Liberal vote from 22 per cent to 46 per cent. This was a victory almost on the scale of that in nearby Orpington three decades later.

12.2 per cent), Flintshire (Conservative majority 11.9 per cent, swing 10 per cent) and Huntingdonshire (Conservative majority 13.8 per cent, swing 8.7 per cent, Labour intervention).

Such dramatic surges in the Liberal vote show clearly that there was still considerable vitality in the party in the 1920s, particularly in commercial and exporting seats loyal to free trade and in rural seats hit by the agricultural depression. The force with which the Liberals were able to bounce back in these areas suggests that the party was perhaps not as doomed electorally after the First World War as many historians have concluded.

The Liberals' definitive electoral collapse occurred after 1929, and it was to be thirty years before the Liberals even came close to another spectacular gain at a general election.¹⁰ That was in 1959 when Jeremy Thorpe toppled a Conservative majority of 14.6 per cent to win North Devon with a swing of 7.8 per cent. He had raised the Liberal vote from 19 per cent in 1951, to 32 per cent in 1955 and to 43 per cent in 1959.

In 1964 Peter Bessell achieved a near-spectacular success in Bodmin, having raised the Liberal vote by 10.3 per cent between 1955 and 1959 and a further 10.3 per cent between 1959 and 1964. However, the Tory majority had been eroded to 7.7 per cent by the time of Bessell's breakthrough. Like North Devon, this gain owed much to a charismatic candidate, highly professional Liberal organisation and effective campaigning on local issues.¹¹

Effective targeting of seats in the Scottish Highlands produced several spectacular gains in the mid-1960s. In 1964 Alastair Mackenzie¹² defeated the National Liberal and Conservative MP who had represented Ross & Cromarty since 1945. Mackenzie jumped from third place, making up a 23.5 per cent deficit to win with a 13.1 per cent swing. In neighbouring Inverness, Russell Johnston overturned a Conservative majority of 11.9 per cent with an 8.7 per

cent swing, while George Mackie captured Caithness & Sutherland, a seat that the Liberals had last fought in 1955 when they had gathered only 14.5 per cent of the vote.¹³ At the 1966 general election in Aberdeenshire West, James Davidson¹⁴ overcame a 13.2 per cent Conservative majority, winning with a 8.4 per cent swing. Davidson had laid the foundation for this victory in 1964 when he won 33 per cent of the votes in a seat that the Liberals had not contested in 1959.

The other spectacular win in 1966 was suburban Cheadle, captured from the Conservatives (majority 11.9 per cent) by Dr Michael Winstanley with a swing of 6.4 per cent. Like North Devon, Bodmin and Aberdeenshire West, the relentless build-up was as spectacular as the victory itself. The Liberals got 15.6 per cent of the votes in 1955, 25.9 per cent in 1959, 34.8 per cent in 1964 and 42.3 per cent in 1966. This was the only seat faintly resembling Orpington that the Liberals picked up during the 1960s 'Orpington revival'. Winstanley actually pushed his vote up further to 44.3 per cent in 1970, when he lost the seat.

The next spectacular Liberal victory was one of the most stunning ever. Stephen Ross's win in the Isle of Wight in February 1974 was in the same league as Ashford in 1929 and Orpington in 1962. With a swing of 20.6 per cent he overcame a deficit of more than 30 per cent from third place to win. The Liberal vote jumped from just under 13,000 (22.2 per cent) in 1970 to nearly 35,000 (50.2 per cent) in 1974. The involvement of the Conservative incumbent in a local development scandal was believed to have influenced the result, but Ross had increased his vote against the trend in 1966 and 1970 and clearly had a large personal vote.¹⁵

The next crop of spectacular gains came at the general election of 1983.¹⁶ The youthful Charles Kennedy defeated a Tory minister to gain Ross, Cromarty & Skye for the SDP, overturning a defi-

cit of 28.5 per cent with a swing of 16.7 per cent. The comparison here is with the Liberal who stood in 1979 and came fourth. This win was a unique example of a gain from fourth place at the previous election, although, as we have seen, there was a significant Liberal tradition in the seat. In Yeovil Paddy Ashdown overturned a Conservative majority of 17.4 per cent with an 11.8 per cent swing. The third gain that year was exceptional. Michael Meadowcroft demolished a Labour majority of 22.5 per cent to win Leeds West with a 13.5 per cent swing. This was one of the very rare spectacular Liberal gains from Labour, comparable only with Gateshead in 1923 and Chesterfield in 2001.

1987 saw another spectacular Scottish Highland gain in Argyll. Ray Michie gained the seat with a swing of 7.5 per cent, overcoming a Conservative majority of 11.1 per cent.

There were no big wins in 1992, but a bumper harvest of fourteen in the Tory debacle of 1997. In three seats in south-west London, Lib Dems overtook Conservative majorities of more than 20 per cent: Kingston & Surbiton (27.1 per cent), Sutton & Cheam (21.3 per cent), and Twickenham (20.3 per cent). Sheffield Hallam (Conservative majority 19 per cent) was captured with a massive 18.6 per cent swing, to become the first seat held by the Liberals in South Yorkshire since the early 1920s.¹⁷ Other historically remarkable gains in this group were Harrogate & Knaresborough, Winchester, and Lewes – all almost unbrokenly Tory since the 1880s.¹⁸ The five Lib Dem gains in south-west London were also a historical breakthrough in an area which had been securely Tory since the 1880s and where, until the 1970s, the Liberals had always been very weak.¹⁹ Malcolm Bruce's retention of Gordon by nearly 7000 votes surprised some commentators, as boundary changes had given the Tories an advantage estimated at well over 20 per cent

there, although this estimate has been questioned.²⁰

There are some obvious common factors in these wins. Clearly the quality of candidates, both in terms of charisma and organisational ability, has often been a key factor in these victories. It is no accident that later leaders of the party – Jeremy Thorpe, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy – started their Commons careers with spectacular gains. Many other victors – from Alec Glassey, Edgar Granville and Frank Owen in the 1920s to Michael Winstanley, Stephen Ross and Michael Meadowcroft more recently – built their victories on significant personal votes.

Secondly, many of the victories have been in areas of traditional Liberal strength, notably the Scottish Highlands where electoral volatility is greater and personalities count for more than in most parts of the country. Liberal successes in local government elections have also paved the way for wins in a number of cases. Stephen Ross's win in Isle of Wight undoubtedly owed something to this, and Michael Meadowcroft's victory in Leeds West in 1983 was preceded by fifteen years of build-up in local elections.²¹ This was clearly also a factor in a number of the 1997 gains.

Liberal breakthroughs on anything like a broad front have been limited to landslide elections such as 1923, 1929 and 1997 (but not 1945) when there has been a major collapse in the Conservative vote. Collapses in the Labour vote have not benefited the Liberal cause. Even in 1983, when the Alliance achieved its best general election performance and the Labour Party its worst since 1931, only one spectacular gain (Leeds West) was made from Labour. Indeed most Liberal gains of any kind have been made in elections when the pendulum has swung away from the Conservatives.

Even in landslide elections the number of such results is not great. At more normal general elections there have only been a handful. Voting patterns in Britain

It is no accident that later leaders of the party – Jeremy Thorpe, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy – started their Commons careers with spectacular gains.

SPECTACULAR VICTORIES

have been remarkably constant most of the time; it is very exceptional for seats with a majority of over 20 per cent to change hands.

Large swings might become more common if traditional party allegiances continue to weaken and changes in turnout impact differentially on the parties. Party splits and pacts could also result in big voting shifts. All these factors were evident in the volatile elections of the interwar period. In 1923 the Liberals undoubtedly benefited from large-scale abstention by the Tories and from local alliances with Labour in some areas and the Tories in others. In 1924 and 1931 the Liberals were devastated as the Tories voted in force and many Liberal supporters voted tactically for the Conservatives to keep Labour out. It is conceivable that strong performances at the next election by fringe parties such as UKIP or Respect might damage Conservative and Labour prospects, but as the example of the Birmingham Hodge Hill by-election showed it is far from clear that the Lib Dems would necessarily be the beneficiary. A big swing to the Lib Dems in seats with large numbers of student or Moslem voters could also produce some unexpected wins, but the numbers of such seats are limited.

The lesson of history points up the dilemma for the Liberal Democrats noted in much of the comment on the Brent East and Leicester South by-election results. They are in clear striking distance of further gains in a relatively small number of seats, the great majority of which are Conservative-held. It would take a disintegration of the Tories' heartland to deliver many more of these seats to the Lib Dems, and of course the Tory heartland is already much eroded.

Labour will be defending more than twice as many seats as the Conservatives at the next election and will be hard pressed to hold on to the sweeping gains they made in 1997. Yet there are no historical precedents for the Liberals prospering in such a

The most important result for the Lib Dems at the next election will not only be how many seats they gain, but how many marginals they create.

situation. Hence the Lib Dem dilemma. Should they focus on continuing to erode what remains of Tory England, should they aim to break through into the Labour heartlands, or can they find a way to advance on both fronts?

History warns that spectacular wins are likely to play only a small part in resolving this dilemma. The key to the advance of the Lib Dems in the next decade will be how far they can establish themselves as serious contenders in a much broader range of constituencies, including in currently Labour-held seats. The most important result for the Lib Dems at the next election will not only be how many seats they gain, but how many marginals they create. It is in this way that they will alter the electoral arithmetic and start to win large numbers of seats without having to rely on spectacular gains.²²

Dr Jaime Reynolds studied at the LSE and has worked for the UK government and the European Commission on international environmental policy.

- 1 They also lost thirty-eight, making a net gain of forty-two.
- 2 In fact there was clearly a substantial latent Liberal vote in the constituency (the Liberal almost won in 1929 as well). See C. Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain 1922–29* (Macmillan London 1975), p. 172–73.
- 3 The Liberals also gained Liverpool West Derby from the Conservatives, a seat they had not fought since before 1918 in a straight fight. Other remarkable straight-fight gains included Edinburgh North (swing 17.5 per cent), Stoke Newington (swing 16.5 per cent), Hackney North (swing 14.8 per cent), Nottingham East (swing 13.1 per cent), Manchester Exchange (swing 11.8 per cent) and Devizes (swing 11.1 per cent).
- 4 Charles Masterman (1873–1927): writer and politician; an Anglo-Catholic; Financial Secretary to the Treasury 1912–14, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 1914–15.
- 5 T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (Collins London 1966), pp. 258–59.
- 6 Rev. R. M. Kedward (1881–1937): a Kent farmer and Wesleyan minister, superintendent of the South London Mission 1918–37; MP for West Bermondsey 1923–24 and Ashford 1929–

31. Kedward stood in 1931 as a Liberal National, one of only three Liberal National MPs to face Tory opposition. He later rejoined the Liberals and contested Ashford at a by-election in 1933. He was president of the National Tithe-payers' Association, 1932–37; see Carol Twinch, *Tithe War: 1918–39 The Countryside in Revolt* (Media Associates Norwich 2001)

- 7 Edgar Granville (1898–1998): Liberal MP for Eye 1929–51 (sat as National Liberal/Independent 1931–45); joined Labour Party 1952 and stood as Labour candidate for Eye in 1955 and 1959, gathering most of ex-Liberal vote; Labour peer 1967.
- 8 Alec Glassey (1887–1970): a leading Congregationalist figure and active West Country Liberal.
- 9 Frank Owen (1905–75): journalist and biographer of Lloyd George; stood as anti-National (Lloyd George) Liberal 1931; narrowly defeated as Liberal candidate in Hereford in mid-1950s.
- 10 Colne Valley in 1931 is a partial exception to this. E. L. Mallalieu gained the seat from Labour in a three-cornered contest with a swing of 16.2 per cent. Mallalieu had been third in 1929, 24.6 per cent behind the Labour candidate, Philip Snowden. However the result in this constituency was complicated by Snowden's rejection of the Labour Party and retirement as MP and a dispute over the succession between a Conservative and National Labour candidate. Mallalieu emerged as the main beneficiary of the huge national swing to the National Government.
- 11 G. Tregida, *The Liberal Party in South-west Britain since 1918* (University of Exeter Press Exeter 2000), p. 190; D. Brack (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (1998) – 'Peter Bessell'.
- 12 Alastair MacKenzie (1903–70): farmer; member Ross-shire County Council 1935–55; MP for Ross & Cromarty 1964–70.
- 13 Mackie was assisted in 1964 by a split in the Conservative vote. In 1964 he lost to a new Labour candidate, Robert MacLennan.
- 14 James Davidson (1927–): farmer, Russian interpreter, assistant naval attaché Moscow and Helsinki 1952–54; retired as MP 1970.
- 15 D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974* (Macmillan London 1974), p. 334.
- 16 Boundary changes between 1979–83.
- 17 The last Liberal seat in Sheffield was lost in 1923. Penistone was held from 1922–24.
- 18 Winchester had been Tory since the 1880s, apart from a Labour win in 1945. Harrogate also except for a single Liberal win in 1906. Part of Lewes, in the pre-1918 Eastbourne constituency, had gone Liberal in 1906, but the rest had been Tory since the 1880s.
- 19 Sutton & Cheam was Liberal from 1972–74. Twickenham partly corre-

sponds to the pre-1918 Brentford constituency won by the Liberals in 1906. Labour won Spelthorne, Wimbledon and Mitcham in 1945, including parts of the modern Twickenham, Sutton & Cheam and Carshalton & Wallingford constituencies.

20 Local Liberal Democrats disputed the calculation by Thrasher and Rallings based on vote shares in council elections. Their ballot box tallies suggested that at least one ward provided more Lib Dem voters to Gordon than the

Thrasher and Rallings split assumed. See further <http://www.electiondata.telegraph.co.uk/pcon276.htm>

21 M. Meadowcroft, 'The Alliance: Parties and Leaders', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 18, Spring 1998, p. 22.

22 I recommend Martin Baxter's general election predictor (<http://www.financialcalculus.co.uk/election/index.html>) for any readers who want to explore the current electoral arithmetic further.

NEWS

Jo Grimond honoured in St Andrews

On 27 July 2004, Jim Wallace MSP, Deputy First Minister and Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, unveiled a memorial plaque at the birthplace of Jo Grimond, the former Liberal Party Leader and Mr Wallace's predecessor as MP for Orkney and Shetland, Jo Grimond was born at No. 8 Abbotsford Crescent, St Andrews (now part of the University of St Andrews), almost ninety-one years before, on 29 July 1913.

As Jim Wallace said, 'Jo Grimond was the Leader of the Liberal Party between 1956 and 1976, a period of sweeping changes in British society and in the world at large. Jo's intelligent, eloquent and good-humoured contributions to the big debates of these times earned him an immense public respect among people of all political opinions.

His passionate advocacy of many progressive ideas – Scottish Home Rule, international-

ism, of individual freedom and empowerment, to name but a few – earned him the well-deserved sobriquet of 'Radical Jo'. He succeeded in reviving the intellectual basis and the electoral prospects of a much-weakened post-war Liberal Party. Attracted by the persuasive force of his personality and arguments, very many talented new supporters rallied to the cause of modern Liberalism.

The Liberal Democrats and the country owe much to Jo Grimond, who sadly did not live to see the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament for which he had campaigned for so long, and the return of his party to government. The major shift in the party's fortunes over recent years is down to the hard work and commitment of the many, but no-one should doubt that the catalyst for the enduring revival of the party's fortunes was the energetic and inspiring leadership of Jo Grimond.'

The cost of the memorial plaque was met by generous donations from a number of Jo Grimond's friends, colleagues and contemporaries from across the United Kingdom, and also from a younger generation to whom he remains an inspiration.

From left: Iain Smith MSP ; Jo Grimond's children, Magnus, Johnny and Grizelda; Dr Brian Lang, Principal of St Andrews University; and Jim Wallace MSP.



PHILOSOPHER

WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT AND

Dr Detmar Doering examines the thinking of Wilhelm von Humboldt, perhaps Germany's most famous and quintessential liberal thinker, whose treatise *The Limits of State Action* is a radical defence of a minimal state. Humboldt combined his radicalism with pragmatic reformism – which is why today he is better known as the statesman who reformed the educational system of his native Prussia. What held his liberal radicalism and political pragmatism together was an elaborate theory of 'self-education', which later inspired John Stuart Mill and his book *On Liberty*.



R OF FREEDOM

D EARLY GERMAN LIBERALISM

It is difficult to say when liberalism as a genuine political philosophy came into being. In England, one usually thinks of John Locke and his *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) as the starting point. In Germany, however, the question cannot be answered so easily, although there is one top candidate: Wilhelm von Humboldt's famous treatise *The Limits of State Action*, written in 1792 at the time of the French Revolution, would unquestionably be considered by most Germans as the equivalent to Locke's *Two Treatises*. At the very least, it is difficult to find another work of such outstanding relevance and quality within the German liberal tradition.

Of course, liberal ideas had already made some advance within the various German principalities, but the French Revolution inspired the first wave of strict liberalism in the political world of the Old Empire. German thinkers like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) or Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) began to speak out for the rights of man and for absolute freedom of opinion and press. Fichte (who during the Napoleonic Wars changed his views toward a nationalistic type of socialism) in particular radicalised the then fashionable idea of a 'social contract' to a point where every citizen could nullify his obligation toward the state. His book *Contribution to the Recti-*

Wilhelm von
Humboldt (1767–
1835)

fication of the Public's Judgment of the French Revolution (1792) predated much of today's anarcho-capitalist version of libertarianism.

As in most European countries, the French Revolution sparked a heated debate between its radical advocates and its more conservative critics, which influenced much of nineteenth-century political thought. Humboldt's *Limits of State Action* has a special – perhaps the foremost – place on the liberal side of this debate. Firstly, it is based on a very sober and non-polarising analysis. Secondly, it became perhaps the greatest classic from among the writings on political philosophy of that age. Thirdly, it became so despite the fact that it was virtually unknown among his contemporaries. The reason for this last was that Humboldt – expecting problems with Prussian censorship, which had become more rigorous during the Revolution – published only a few sections of the book in two journals, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* and Friedrich Schiller's *Neue Thalia*. Only in 1851 – sixteen years after Humboldt's death – was the complete book published.

Conservative or liberal?

Wilhelm von Humboldt was born in Potsdam on 22 June 1767 into a family of the lower aristocracy. He was brought up with his equally famous brother, the

explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt, in the tolerant environment of enlightened absolutism. In 1788 he started his study of law and classical literature at Göttingen University. Here he found favourable conditions for the further development of his enlightened and liberal mind. Göttingen was part of the principality of Hanover, which was governed by the British King George III (a Hanoverian) in personal union. This meant that Göttingen University allowed very much the same degree of intellectual freedom that one could find in Britain. Politically, a moderate 'Whiggism' seemed to be prevalent in most faculties.

When, in 1789, the French Revolution broke out, Humboldt undertook a journey to Paris on the invitation of Mirabeau. This he did, together with his tutor Joachim Heinrich Campe, in order to watch the 'funeral ceremony of French despotism'. He came back somewhat disillusioned, but from then on was captivated by the subject of the French Revolution and its consequences.

His first work, the *Thoughts on Constitutions, Suggested by the New French Constitution*, published in 1791, never became a classic like *The Limits of State Action*, but was still quite original in its own way. In this essay, Humboldt declared some sympathy with the ideals of the Revolution, but did not

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believe that these ideals could be sustained throughout its course. Thus he wrote: 'Mankind had suffered under one extreme; it had to seek deliverance in another extreme. Will this constitution last? As far as analogy with history is concerned, no!' The ahistorical and inorganic approach of the Revolution, Humboldt argued, could never work. A more gradualist approach might have produced a more harmonious development. He felt strongly that revolutionary force impeded individual self-development, retarded natural social evolution, and rewarded only conformity to the imposed order.

Many observers have noted that, in this, Humboldt echoed many of the ideas of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which became the bible of all anti-revolutionary writings in Europe. There is, however, absolutely no evidence that Humboldt had read Burke at the time. The best explanation for the similarity with Burke could simply be that Humboldt had studied in Göttingen, where a moderate reformist type of liberalism flourished that was strongly influenced by Burkean concepts.

In England there had been a debate from the very beginning as to whether Burke – who had supported the American revolutionaries in 1776 – was more a conservative or a liberal thinker. As a consequence of this ambiguity in Burke's work there were both conservative and (moderate) liberals to be found among his philosophical followers in Germany.

Both Georg Friedrich Brandes (1758–1810) and August Wilhelm Rehberg (1757–1836) – two of the leading critics of the French Revolution, but ones who never lapsed into an outright reactionary direction like many others – came from Göttingen University and considered themselves to be Burkeans. Rehberg became famous mainly as a leading critic of Kant's rigorous moral philosophy, which he found potentially dangerous when applied to politics. Another example of the

'Göttingen spirit' was the Baron vom Stein (1757–1831) who, like Humboldt, became politically influential during the short-lived Prussian reform era at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and who was the founding father of local self-administration in Prussia. He, too, considered himself a Burkean. For a while, the 'Göttingen School' exercised, due to its pragmatic reformism, an enormous influence over Prussian politics.

Immediately after Humboldt had completed the *Thoughts on Constitutions* he began to write his *Limits of State Action*. Philosophically the book was not in line with the writings of the 'Göttingen School', as it did not base its arguments on the empiricism and utilitarianism that prevailed among the members of that school. He should not, therefore, be counted as a representative of that school in any strict sense. Yet, despite the fact that Humboldt's ideas about the state were fairly radical (especially in the German context), like most members of the 'Göttingen School' he still clung to the principle of reform as opposed to revolution.

German liberalism

More than previous German writings on political philosophy, Humboldt's treatise on *The Limits of State Action* was the embodiment of genuine liberalism. Others may have inserted liberal elements in their thought, but Humboldt's book perhaps is the most quintessential work of German liberalism.

Of course, the old proponents of natural law, such as Pufendorf and others, had always thought about the political order – the state – as something that should be restrained by law. But what makes a liberal a liberal is that he believes the individual and the personal sphere to be the basic moral axiom from which the ideal social and political order is deduced and out of which it is legitimised. John Locke did this when he made life and property – the principle of self-ownership

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– the basis for his theory of government. This is what made the *Treatises of Government* a specifically liberal classic. Humboldt, in his *Limits of State Action*, further gave this type of individualistic approach its own distinct 'flavour'. In the most famous passage of the work, Humboldt writes:

The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes; but there is, besides, another essential – intimately connected with freedom, it is true – a variety of situations. Even the most free and self-reliant of men is hindered in his development when set in a monotonous situation.

This passage contains some very complex and perhaps contradictory philosophical assumptions. Some scholars try to make Humboldt look like a romantic critic of the enlightenment frame of thought. And, indeed, there are elements of romanticism to be found in his thought. But Humboldt tries to reconcile both strands. The passage makes it clear that the 'harmonious development' of the individual should happen under the precondition of freedom – and that is what reason dictates.

This first assumption is almost certainly inspired by Kant, whom Humboldt had studied intensively in Göttingen, and of whom he writes, in *The Limits of State Action*, that he 'has never been surpassed in profundity'. Yet there is a clearly non-Kantian streak in his thought when he speaks about the 'most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole'. In modern (Kantian) terms this would make Humboldt suspected of being an Aristotelian essentialist and metaphysician.

This, of course, would be slightly unfair and, above all, would lead to a severe misunderstanding of Humboldt's achievement. Even assuming that Humboldt was an essentialist, it cannot be denied that his is a vastly different form of essentialism from the Aristotelian one. In fact, the difference is revolutionary.

While Aristotle and his philosophical descendants put the general before the individual – the perfection of a given individual entity was to be achieved by approaching closer to its general 'essence' or a general definition – Humboldt never did so. The 'harmonious development' is not one of man or mankind in general, but one of an individual as an individual. It is all about individuality. Humboldt is clearly influenced here by the romanticism of Rousseau, Goethe and, above all, Friedrich Schiller, whose *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man* of 1795 were, conversely, inspired by Humboldt.

The 'harmonious development' is achieved by what Humboldt calls *Bildung*. This German word is almost impossible to translate. In Humboldt's context it is usually rendered as 'self-education', but that – although it is the best we have – does not fully capture all the connotations of the German word, especially the aesthetic dimension. Humboldt took his very subjectivist approach from Rousseau, whom he admired as an educational writer, but obviously disliked as a political philosopher. Hence he asked in his *Limits of State Action*:

When shall we learn, moreover, to set less value on the outward result of actions than on the inner temper and disposition from which they flow? When will the man arise to do for legislation what Rousseau did for education, and draw our attention from mere external, physical results to the internal self-education of mankind?

All this sets Humboldt apart from previous liberal educational

thinkers, such as John Locke, who still believed in the 'external' ends of education, namely the ideal of a gentleman who was prepared to assume his public duties. In this respect, and more so than Locke, Humboldt broke with Aristotle and his definition of the purpose of man as that of a 'political animal'. Political engagement to Humboldt was part of individual development and subordinated to it, but not a higher purpose above individuality. Potentially this pure romanticist individualism could have been as brutally revolutionary as that of Rousseau himself, but Humboldt, who, as we saw, was rather fearful of revolutions, managed to escape these dangerous consequences.

For Humboldt, *Bildung* aims at internal development and harmony, but this end defies any clear definition. This is why Humboldt in this sense is not an 'essentialist' – an Aristotelian turned individualist – at all. What Humboldt is speaking about is an open process in time and space. As Clemens Menze, one of Germany's leading scholars on Humboldt, says: 'Self-education ... does not pursue a specific goal (*Zweck*), but a complete man's own peculiar goal-orientation without any concrete goal (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne bestimmten Zweck*).' *Bildung* can never, by its nature, be completed. It approaches an end that will always remain undefined and unreachable. It therefore can only develop continuously in unity with the existing state of the process and then try to proceed further. In interaction and inter-thinking with the world, a person's development can find its concrete expression, whereas every utopian vision that radically transcends reality can only deliver empty abstractions. On the other hand, this process must mean improvement beyond the status quo, since surrendering oneself to the concrete world without seeking to use the widest possible experience as material for self-education will only lead to self-alienation. This, for instance, is the case if education is reduced to mere vocational training for one's job.

Education and reformism

From this it follows that true *Bildung* can never be revolutionary but, if properly understood, will always be evolutionary. In many ways Humboldt here argues in a very modern, Hayekian way. One must not forget that Humboldt's academic interests beyond political philosophy all pointed in this direction. Learning was about understanding and finding rules. This idea is quite apparent in Humboldt's linguistic writings, which contributed considerably to his lasting fame. He was one of the foremost linguists of his age, and not merely well acquainted – as his classical studies would have suggested – with ancient European languages. In 1828, for instance, he wrote a book on *The Languages of the South Sea Islands*. His linguistic work is still revered and often quoted by linguists, such as Noam Chomsky. Humboldt is credited with being the first linguist to identify human language as a rule-governed system, rather than just a collection of words and phrases paired with meanings. In other words, it is a process that is both like and interwoven with education. 'Man is only man through his language', he later said. Language, or better, the capacity for language, is not an invention, but is given to man by nature. The evolution of a concrete language, however, is not entirely pre-determined by this, because it will always be the product of tradition and individual evolution intertwined.

Here it becomes apparent why politically Humboldt is also a reformer rather than a revolutionary. Just as mankind could not have invented or deliberately designed a highly cultivated language out of nothing, i.e. without any cultural evolution in time, so it could not have invented or deliberately designed a civilised free society and polity. In both cases, primitivism and over-simplification would prevail, whatever the highfalutin claims of the designers were.

Such an evolutionism certainly frustrates the revolutionary

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energies of the disciples of Rousseau, but will it not lead to mere conservatism? Humboldt's reconciliation of evolutionary reformism with the radicalism of his views on the state may be surprising, but is the result of a consistent theory.

Man, argues Humboldt, cannot live alone. In order to maintain and develop his 'self' he has to engage himself with and within this world; his improvement cannot come out of nothing, but from coming to terms with the world. On the other hand, the 'purpose of mankind', which is individuality as an open process, presupposes the very possibility of pursuing one's self-education. This self-education or *Bildung* ought to end as a 'harmonious development'. This per se means that it should be a process without force, and instead one of mutual voluntary self-organisation.

Humboldt was an individualist, but by no means an 'atomist'. In the process of self-education one learns and rises to the level where such cultivated voluntary self-organisation is possible. To impose a new 'free' state-organised order on a people not culturally mature enough usually makes things worse and thwarts further self-education. The enforcement of that cultural maturity by law necessarily means uniformity – the very thing Humboldt wants to avoid. Humboldt's self-educated man has nothing to do with the 'new man' imagined by Marxists and other political utopians who believe that a perfectly designed revolutionary state is the necessary precondition for the enforcement of the perfectly self-educated human being. The state not only has to preserve the precondition of *Bildung* – the open process of freedom – but also in itself develop in an open process corresponding with the internal 'harmonious development' of the individuals of which it is composed.

Essentially, Humboldt comes to the conclusion that a minimal state, that guarantees personal freedom against aggression, is the only form of government

that allows self-education to its fullest extent. Ideally, the state should not be involved in positive welfare, but leave it to natural and spontaneous benevolence. It should not meddle with education, because states love conformity, which would be the death of education. People should create their own institutions to organise themselves, whereas every 'top-down' organisation is an evil. Humboldt himself practised what he preached. His own self-education after his studies in Göttingen took place as he had advocated in *The Limits of State Action* – and as, according to him, all education should take place – through a series of voluntary associations. He became a regular member of the 'salon' of Henriette Herz, a leading Jewish intellectual. Through his future wife Caroline von Dacheroden, whom he married in 1791, Humboldt met Friedrich Schiller, Goethe and other important authors of German romanticism.

It cannot be left unremarked, however, that, although Humboldt agreed with Rousseau's view that education should be aimed at the individual and their particular talents rather than at rank and status, his concrete description of the actual content of such an education (such as classical language and educated conversation) was very aristocratic indeed. It was an education for a wealthy man of leisure.

This, however, is not essential to his work. The idea of voluntary self-education is universal and it could – and should – begin where it is most needed, that is with the uneducated classes. John Stuart Mill, who was – as we shall see – influenced by Humboldt, saw this with great clarity. In his classic *On Liberty*, Mill argues that where there is no aristocracy, but where public opinion rules instead, there is a constant danger of 'collective mediocrity' becoming the dominant force – a force that must be countered by education.

This plea for voluntary self-organisation was successfully practised and encouraged by German

liberals in the course of the nineteenth century – especially after the belated, but sensational publication of *The Limits of State Action*. The co-operative movement (*Genossenschaften*) founded by the radical liberal Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch is a good example – just like the many ‘Working Men’s Learning Societies’ that sprang up from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This is why it would be quite wrong to associate Humboldt entirely with his activities as a reformer in the *state’s* educational system.

Those who were around at the time of the first publication of the book comprehended the radicalism of Humboldt. While it might have been expected that a book written roughly sixty years before would not have been of much interest to the people of 1851, they were in fact excited by it. One of the authors who was most influenced was the English philosopher John Stuart Mill. His famous essay *On Liberty* (1859) is probably one of the best known classics of liberalism ever published. Mill’s defence of freedom of thought, speech, and action is widely acknowledged. Less known is that he constantly refers to Humboldt as his intellectual precursor and inspiration.

Mill began *On Liberty* around 1854, when Humboldt’s work was first published in English and had caused some sensation. The question of whether Humboldt stimulated Mill to write his famous essay is open to debate, yet Mill’s frequent references to Humboldt in the text suggest a very strong connection. In his autobiography Mill writes: ‘The only author who had preceded me ... of whom I thought it appropriate to say anything, was Humboldt.’ Mill cites Humboldt as a formative influence, quoting him both directly and in paraphrase throughout his books. To be sure, Mill interpreted Humboldt within his own utilitarian framework of thought – individuality was an ‘element of well-being’ and was useful to the progress of society as diversity in excellence. He did not embrace

the more metaphysical aspects of Humboldt’s neo-humanistic teleology. While Humboldt had somehow developed an aesthetic theory of politics, Mill did not. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Humboldt’s book enhanced the tendency in Mill’s intellectual development to create a less mechanistic type of utilitarianism than the one he had learned from his father James Mill or from Jeremy Bentham.

Humboldt the reformer

After the discovery of his *Limits of State Action* in 1851, Humboldt was clearly perceived outside Germany as the country’s quintessential and most radical proponent of early liberalism; however, his reputation within Germany was somewhat different. There are probably two reasons for this: one has something to do with his active role in politics; the other is connected with his political writings themselves.

It might be startling to some to hear that the author of such an anti-statist treatise as *The Limits of State Action* actually spent most of his career in the service of the Prussian government. For instance, from 1810 to 1813 Humboldt was the chief Prussian diplomat in Vienna. He acted as a chief negotiator both before and after Napoleon’s defeat, and served in London for the Prussian crown. In 1819 he again became a minister, this time for Estate Affairs (Diet affairs). However, in Germany today he is better known for his brief engagement as Minister of Public Instruction, a post he took over in 1809.

Next to Stein, Humboldt was perhaps the leading representative of the reform government during the Napoleonic Wars. Prussia’s failure to defeat Napoleon made it necessary to carry out long-needed and thoroughgoing reform within the state. A peculiar brand of liberalism came into existence that was very typical of Prussia: *Beamten-Liberalismus* (‘civil servant’s liberalism’). Enlightened persons from the top

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of the Prussian bureaucracy tried to introduce liberal and modernising reform ‘top-down’. Humboldt was in charge of education and he began with reforms that proved to be outstandingly efficient and durable.

His approach to these reforms could be considered as ‘organic’. A multi-tiered system of educational institutions was introduced throughout the land. Each of the tiers was designed to make it possible for everyone, independent of status, to develop himself and to come closer to the ideal of the ‘highest and most harmonious development’. The system began with an elementary school for the basic schooling, and continued into the *Gymnasium* (the central element of the school system) that prepared for the university. The university, finally, was conceived of as allowing something close to human perfection. It was not supposed to be a kind of higher vocational training, but was meant to promote universal intellectual education beyond any narrow subject. Essentially this system remained intact until the 1960s, when much of it was dismantled by the ‘68 rebellion and its aftermath.

This – undoubtedly great – achievement almost completely defined Humboldt’s reputation and posthumous fame in Germany. However, this narrow interpretation does not place Humboldt in the context of his early works. In fact, *The Limits of State Action* has, in particular, often been interpreted as a youthful aberration.

Hence the question arises whether Humboldt changed his mind over the time. In other words, was the later Humboldt, the reformer of 1809, still a classical liberal? Many authors have denied Humboldt’s consistency. They may well be wrong. Much of his conduct within the bureaucracy and during his time as minister speaks of quite strong liberal convictions. He kept in contact with liberals – especially in France (which he visited again in 1797 and 1800) – throughout

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his life. The 'Ideologues', such as Constant or Madame de Staël, always remained politically close to him. Although he never again engaged in purely philosophical works on politics, he launched several memoranda in favour of a new constitution for Prussia and Germany. Most noteworthy is his *Memorandum on the German Constitution* (*Denkschrift über die Deutsche Verfassung*) of 1813, in which he tried to design safeguards against both the arbitrariness of monarchical rule and the instability of democracy, and which he had discussed intensively with his liberal friends, among them the Abbé Sieyès and Baron vom Stein. In this memorandum he maintained that in a future united Germany 'freedom is the basis of all the advantages which, for his individual existence, the German may draw out of an association of Germany to a whole.' Freedom was still his top priority and, again, it was embedded in an evolutionary framework. The almost logical consequence was that a unified German state had to be decentralised as much as possible. Humboldt advocated a confederation (as opposed to a consolidated federal government) which could take into account the cultural and political diversity of Germany. 'Such a diversity alone is not only harmless, but is necessary in order to reconnect the constitution of each *land* (state) strictly with the peculiarity of its national character.'

The project for the German constitution was rejected by the conservative monarchists who had won the upper hand in Prussia after 1810, and consequently was never realised. The future struggle for unification was left to liberals of a far more centralist type.

As regards reform, Humboldt was able to tolerate slow and incomplete success, but he never tolerated regress or any deviation from the ultimate liberal goal. For that reason his relationship with the governments he served in was always a strained one. Humboldt left his post as Minister for Instruction in 1810 after only six-

teen months, because he was not allowed to carry out more drastic reforms. In 1819 he finally quit public life (and remained outside politics until his death in 1835) in protest against Metternich's Karlsberg Decrees, which introduced more censorship of the press. These are not the actions of a believer in the infallibility of state authority, but that of a liberal critic of state authority.

Much of his reformism after 1809 was already anticipated in his *Limits of State Action*. As has been said, the anti-revolutionary dimension of this otherwise very radical work is often overlooked. Reform in accordance with the state of cultural development, but with a clear liberal perspective in mind, was the strategy recommended in the book, and this is exactly what Humboldt did. One has to keep in mind the state of education before his reforms. When Humboldt joined the liberal reform government in 1809, he advocated the abolition of military schools (*Kadettenhäuser*) and the closing of schools reserved for the nobility, and he opposed the creation of special middle schools for adolescents either uninterested or financially unable to undertake university studies. Humboldt wanted German schools to be places where students would study together free of state-imposed barriers.

Most of all, while he was not able to privatise universities, he at least managed to give them academic autonomy and independence. The state's chief task, he wrote in 1810, was to preserve the universities' 'freedom of activity'. He thus tried to find a way to ensure that, while government may have some influence over the establishment of universities, it could not control their curriculums or the direction of their research activities. Therefore, in 1809 he could still write, very much in a similar tone to his earlier years, that 'the state was not an institute for education, but one of law'. One of the causes for the decline of the universities before Humboldt's reforms was the con-

stant intervention of the King in academic affairs, usually on behalf of favoured religious or philosophical factions. In 1809 Prussian universities were in a rotten state. Autonomy and decentralisation were not the perfect solutions, but – even by the anti-statist logic of *The Limits of State Action* – were certainly a huge step in the right direction. The reforms also never created and never were intended to create a state monopoly in education. Home schooling was still allowed (it was abolished only in the 1920s), and Humboldt always maintained that most of a person's education should take place outside the school system, in the private sphere and in voluntary associations.

Individualism and nationalism

All in all, the reforms of 1809 can hardly be held against his liberal creed or his consistency. However, since they were so relevant to the future of Germany, it is easy to understand why Humboldt in Germany was always seen as a state reformer and not as an anti-statist liberal.

However, there might also be another reason for that, and one which is inherent to his work. *The Limits of State Action* is not easy reading and the arguments are both complex and balanced. If taken out of its complex context, the basic axiom of *The Limits of State Action* is open to misuse and was, indeed, quite often misused. In theory, Humboldt's concept of self-realisation can be separated from freedom. Most neo-Marxist policies today interpret the concept as being connected with 'positive' welfare rights. The state, it is argued, has to provide the material means for that very self-realisation.

The same is true with the second precondition for self-realisation, the 'variety of situations', which can also be disconnected from freedom. Cultural 'diversity' today has, as a consequence of the downfall of Soviet communism, taken the place once held

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by egalitarianism in most statist's thinking. The anti-globalisation movement takes it as a battle-cry against free trade. There is, indeed, a legitimate question as to whether the 'variety of situations' is really so 'intimately connected' with freedom. Did not the dreadful experience of slavery in the Gulag make a great writer out of Solzhenitsyn, while working under free contract on an assembly line can drive all excellence from one's brain?

Humboldt here comes close to views that could be quite frightening. Although in his *Limits of State Action* he does not in any way legitimise war (still less wars of conquest!), he nevertheless is able to hold an astonishingly positive view of war as something beneficial to his educational ideal, because, as he writes:

Now, regarded in this light, war seems to be one of the most salutary phenomena for the culture of human nature; and it is not without regret that I see it disappearing more and more from the scene. It is the fearful extremity through which all that active courage – all that endurance and fortitude – are steeled and tested, which afterwards achieve such varied results in the ordinary conduct of life, and which alone give it that strength and diversity, without which facility is weakness, and unity is inanity.

Put in its proper context, this quotation loses much of its brutality. Humboldt was against standing armies, because even in military affairs the educational ideal could only be reached via voluntary co-operation. It seems that Humboldt, when he wrote this, had not the reality of a modern national state's army in mind, but was somewhat carried away by his enthusiasm for the ancient Greek world, where the *polis* ideally was a community of small elites with little separation between the public and private sphere, and with little distinction between civil and military affairs. In this idealised view, such a *polis* was less a state

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than a voluntary association. This, however, was not as fantastically unrealistic as one might suppose. Until the mid-nineteenth century it was a common assumption of constitutional lawyers in Germany that local communities did not have the legal character of a lower tier of the state. In fact, lawyers like Johann Caspar Bluntschli, a Swiss-born liberal from south-west Germany, maintained that small country villages were no genuine subdivisions of the state. They were based, rather, on the 'principle of co-operative association', as Bluntschli wrote in his book *General Public Law (Allgemeines Statsrecht)* of 1851. This view was shared by many. In the earlier world of the Old Empire, which still existed in 1792 when Humboldt wrote his *Limits of State Action*, local defence was quite often self-organised by the citizens. Therefore in 1792 it was still possible to consider the necessary task of defence against foreign aggressors as a matter of personal responsibility and, therefore, as an essential element of personal development.

However, in an extended national state with a centralised army based on conscription, passages such as the one quoted above could only serve to support the militaristic tendencies within the state, which Humboldt would surely have rejected clearly and with vigour. Later, when during the 'War of Liberation' against Napoleon an aggressive nationalism emerged in Germany, a bellicose rhetoric like the one used by Humboldt here was misused and abused by many romantic writers – such as by the poet Theodor Körner, who fell in battle against Napoleon in 1813, and whose book *Lyre and Sword* was published posthumously, or by Fichte in his *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1808.

In fact, around that time there was a broad shift of opinion within the romantic movement from individualism to nationalistic collectivism. The enthusiastic language of romanticism was still retained, but the meaning of

the basic concepts had changed. Liberty, once hailed as personal freedom, became more and more identified with the collectivist notion of 'national freedom'. It has to be noted, however, that Humboldt never went this way and remained an individualist throughout his life. In 1819 he could still write in a memorandum to vom Stein that it was the ultimate task of every constitution to protect 'the individual personal security of being treated according to the law, of property, of the freedom of conscience, of the press' – which was essentially what he had demanded in his *Limits of State Action*.

Philosopher of freedom

In the context of the later perception of Humboldt, his romantic views on war – like his reform of state education – could only further distort and transform his image within Germany. It is therefore time to put things right. By stressing his consistency and by placing the Humboldt of *The Limits of State Action* together with the Humboldt of the great educational reforms of 1809, one may reach a more fair and balanced view. Humboldt, then, can be clearly recognised as an author and a statesman whose basic ideas of political thought had been formed under the influence of enlightenment humanism and the debate on the French Revolution and who tried to put his ideas into practice as much as possible. The later view of his work in Germany should not blind us to the indisputable fact that Humboldt was Germany's chief representative of early liberalism and perhaps, as Friedrich August von Hayek once put it, even Germany's 'greatest philosopher of freedom'.

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SIR ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, THE LIBERAL PARTY AND THE

How close were the Liberals to backing the King's cause during the abdication crisis in December 1936? **Dr Martin Pugh** assesses the role of Liberal Leader Sir Archibald Sinclair, in his attempt to develop a distinctive and radical Liberal position by giving a lead to the popular support for the King.



ABDICATION OF EDWARD VIII

Well before the death of King George V in January 1936 the accession of his eldest son was viewed with dismay by the leaders of the National Government. The immediate explanation for this centred on the new King's relationship with Mrs Wallis Simpson and in particular his determination to marry her.¹ However, ministers also recognised an important underlying problem: Edward VIII showed himself congenitally incapable of sticking to his constitutional role. In particular, he had made it clear before succeeding to the throne that he intended to promote improved relations between Britain and Nazi Germany without reference to his ministers. He had also developed an embarrassing habit of visiting areas of high unemployment where he expressed sympathy with the workers and, by implication, criticised the government for not doing enough.² Not surprisingly, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, looked appreciatively at Edward's brother, the Duke of York, who, he thought, would

Sir Archibald Sinclair; King Edward VIII

take the same, proper view of his duties as the old King had done.³ The accepted wisdom is that Baldwin handled the subsequent crisis most skilfully, manoeuvring Edward into abdication and getting the replacement he wanted. However, this is essentially a propagandist view, narrowly based on Baldwinian sources.

What is clear is that the Prime Minister prepared the ground for the crisis carefully by trying to ensure that it would be impossible for the King to reject the advice of his ministers on the subject of his marriage. On 17 November 1936 he arranged a consultation with a group of senior figures, including the former Liberal Leader, Herbert Samuel. In the course of an hour's discussion they agreed not to ask parliament to enact legislation to allow the King a morganatic marriage.⁴ The next step, on 27 November, was a meeting with Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill and Sir Archibald Sinclair. Baldwin had certainly judged Attlee correctly. His generation of Labour leaders were highly conservative in constitutional matters and anxious to conform. Attlee assured Baldwin that he would refuse to

form a government in the event of the King insisting on remaining on the throne and marrying Mrs Simpson.⁵ The Labour leaders took the view that the royal marriage was a public and political matter, not a personal one; the monarch must therefore accept the advice of his ministers. The facts that there was support for the King within the Labour movement, and that the breakdown between Edward VIII and Baldwin offered Attlee his best chance of dislodging the National Government from power, were irrelevant.⁶

Despite this, Baldwin had miscalculated. For one thing he got a shock when the crisis finally became public knowledge on 3 December, immediately provoking strong expressions of popular support for the King.⁷ Even the Conservatives were more divided than is usually recognised. On 4 December an all-party group of MPs wrote to the King offering support, while on 6 December forty Tory members met to announce their resistance to abdication. Lord Lymington, the former MP for Basingstoke, told the King he could raise north Hampshire on his behalf,

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while the 'Imperial Group' of MPs reportedly offered to take up arms.⁸

Above all, Baldwin had included Churchill in his consultation. This was odd since he was not the leader of a party; but Baldwin presumably hoped to silence him by securing his acceptance of Cabinet policy. This was obviously risky and the tactic backfired. Churchill became rather angry; he sympathised with the King and believed that the Prime Minister was trying to stampede him into abdicating. 'I will defend him. I think it is my duty,' he insisted.⁹ The cabinet did not yet realise that a 'King's Party' was already forming in late November based around Churchill, Lord Rothermere and Lord Beaverbrook.¹⁰ Subsequently several ministers realised that Baldwin had made another mistake in agreeing to allow the King to see Churchill, who gave the King shrewd advice; consequently they urged the Prime Minister to insist on an immediate decision from the King.¹¹

Of course, Churchill, Rothermere and Beaverbrook were regarded as the usual suspects – troublemakers who were perennially trying to destabilise the National Government. But Sir Archibald Sinclair was not in the same camp; and he was, moreover, the leader of a political party, albeit a small one. Although Sinclair was understood to have adopted the same position as Attlee when they were originally consulted, he had said little. However, when the cabinet met on 4 December they found the Prime Minister's strategy unravelling. Baldwin, understandably miffed, admitted it looked as though the Liberal Leader had changed his mind. When asked whether Sinclair agreed with the '*News Chronicle* view', he commented that he was 'not a person who made very definite statements and he did not know the exact position. He had seemed to agree with the Prime Minister when they talked.'¹²

What had happened in the intervening period? On 3

He went on to praise the King and urged: 'Let no man summon him to make so great a renunciation as he was asked to make unless that man himself was prepared for any renunciation which might be necessary in the interests of this country.'

December Sinclair had appeared on the platform at the Albert Hall with Churchill, Walter Citrine and eighteen MPs for an 'Arms and the Covenant' rally. Unfortunately for the organisers, this coincided with the first public revelations about the King and Mrs Simpson, which marginalised their campaign, at least temporarily. But the importance of the meeting should not be overlooked. The 5,000-strong audience began to sing 'God Save the King' spontaneously, and they cheered when a lady on the platform called out 'Long Live the King'.¹³ This proved to be an early symptom of the upsurge in popular support for the King and hostility towards the government over the next few days. But, although it derailed the rally, it may have left an impression on Sinclair.

At all events, when he spoke to Liberals at Surbiton the following day he referred to 'an unfortunate difference of opinion which has occurred between the King and his ministers', an unhelpful way of putting it from Baldwin's point of view. Sir Archibald contended that there was no serious objection to the King marrying an American or a commoner: 'I do not believe that in these days anybody would feel anything but happiness and joy if the King's choice fell upon a commoner'.¹⁴ He insisted that the only issue to be resolved was 'whether an Act can be passed to give the lady whom the King desires to marry status other than that of a Queen'.¹⁵ Noting that Baldwin had rejected this, Sinclair pointedly failed to express any support for him.

He went on to praise the King and urged: 'Let no man summon him to make so great a renunciation as he was asked to make unless that man himself was prepared for any renunciation which might be necessary in the interests of this country.' This sounds like a veiled invitation to Baldwin to resign. In his speech Sir Archibald did not spell out his views on the royal marriage in great detail, but this was hardly surprising if he

was in the process of shifting his position, and had not, presumably, consulted his colleagues in the Liberal Party; but the overall message of detachment from the government was clear enough.

Part of the explanation for this lay in the fact that during the abdication crisis Sinclair was actually staying with Churchill.¹⁶ The two men had been close since the First World War when Sinclair had served as Churchill's second-in-command in the 6th Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers. Churchill took a fond and protective attitude towards Sinclair and had encouraged him to enter parliament.¹⁷ During the 1930s they found themselves on the same side as critics of appeasement. It would not therefore be surprising if Sinclair was influenced by Churchill, who doubtless talked continuously about the royal marriage while they were together. On Sunday 6 December Sinclair was present at Chartwell when Churchill convened a meeting of King's supporters including Robert Boothby, to concert plans. Their tactics were to advise the King that, as Mrs Simpson would not be free to marry until next April, he should postpone any decision about abdication; meanwhile tempers would subside, the King could proceed to his coronation and his position would be much stronger by 1937.¹⁸ A letter to this effect was sent to the King carrying Sinclair's name, thereby implicating him publicly with the King's Party.

The importance of the Liberal Leader's action can hardly be overstated. If, as appeared likely at this point, the King had resisted the pressure from Baldwin a little longer, the Prime Minister would have felt obliged to resign. The King's only option would then have been to invite Churchill to form a minority government which would have included Sinclair and, presumably, the Liberal Party itself. In the absence of evidence about consultation, the party's response must be uncertain, though it would probably have been divided; Samuel, for

example, had aligned himself with Baldwin. His biographer records Samuel's 'lifelong horror of sexual deviation', which suggests that he probably shared the upper-class disapproval of the lax conduct of the Prince of Wales and Mrs Simpson and saw her as an immoral influence.¹⁹

Some colleagues doubtless thought that by associating with Rothermere and Beaverbrook, Sinclair had put himself in dubious company for a Liberal. On the other hand, in the ensuing general election Liberal candidates would presumably have enjoyed the backing of the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily Mirror* as well as the *News Chronicle*, a novel experience to say the least. Among prominent Liberals, Lord Lothian reportedly favoured a morganatic marriage.²⁰ More significantly, Lloyd George, who was in Jamaica during the crisis, adopted the same view as Churchill on tactics. He told Megan: 'if he wished to marry her it could have been arranged quietly after the Coronation ... If the King wants to marry his American friend – why not?'²¹ Characteristically, Lloyd George saw the issue in populist terms rather than constitutional ones: 'I cannot help thinking the Govt. would not have dealt so brusquely with him had it not been for his popular sympathies. The Tories never cared for the little man. Labour have as usual played a cowardly part.' From this one may conclude that Lloyd George would have been another powerful voice in the King's Party in an election.

It is also important to recognise that Sinclair's position was much less eccentric than it appears in the context of the traditional view of the abdication. Contrary to the assumption that Baldwin enjoyed public backing, he became the target of angry crowds and his policy was attacked by the newspapers that commanded a large majority of press circulation: the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror* and *News Chronicle*. Sinclair was in tune with rank-and-file Liberal

opinion as vigorously expressed in the pages of the *News Chronicle*. Editorially the paper pointed out how far the moral and constitutional notions upheld by Baldwin and the upper-middle class had become anachronistic. It argued that:

The King is a bachelor. A true love match – and a democratic one at that – would be popular. Now that Kingship is no longer endowed with the qualities of semi-divinity, but has in effect become a hereditary Presidency, the public is little disposed to interfere with the King's personal affairs.²²

The *News Chronicle* therefore made a distinction between the King's free choice of wife and Parliament's right to determine who should be Queen. Over successive days the paper urged Baldwin to modify the law to allow marriage with Wallis Simpson without her becoming Queen.²³ This view elicited many supportive letters from readers showing marked resentment towards the Prime Minister for trying to impose his ideas without consulting the people.²⁴ The *News Chronicle* attributed popular reactions partly to the King's earlier record of service and partly to the honesty he had shown in wanting to marry Mrs Simpson, in contrast to the hypocrisy shown by the government and the upper class who preferred him to keep a mistress but be discreet about it.²⁵

In the event Sinclair found his strategy collapsing beneath him when the King suddenly gave way. By 8 December he had decided to quit and on 10 December he signed the Declaration of Abdication. This left the King's Party in a rather exposed position. In the debate in the Commons on 10 December, Sinclair beat a hasty retreat; referring to the morganatic marriage he declared, 'it is only right to tell the House that I could not have supported it', which seems inconsistent with his earlier comments.²⁶ His biographer suggests

that his role in the crisis damaged him, though there seems to be little to substantiate this.²⁷ No doubt Sinclair's association with Churchill, whose reputation certainly suffered, offended some people. It is also clear that if he had joined a Churchill administration he would have been part of an ill-assorted group including some extreme right-wing elements that had backed the King out of contempt for parliamentary democracy. Edward VIII's own Nazi sympathies were scarcely consistent with the hostility of both Churchill and Sinclair towards appeasement and Hitler.

Above all, the whole episode throws an interesting light on Sinclair's approach to the leadership of the party, which he had assumed after the 1935 election. Under his predecessor, Herbert Samuel, the Liberal Party had been made ridiculous, becoming for a time an adjunct to Conservatism. Samuel had inspired the idea of a National Government in 1931 and took the Liberal Party in and out of it in a short space of time. Sinclair showed himself willing to take some risks with the party in order to put it back at the centre of radical politics. This was to become clearer during 1937–39 when he gave his backing to the Popular Front strategy even though this involved withdrawing some Liberal candidates.²⁸ His instincts in the abdication crisis were similar. Samuel, who had started out as an outsider in politics and worked his way into the heart of the Establishment, emerged as a supporter of Baldwin during the abdication crisis and of Chamberlain over appeasement. By contrast, Sinclair was securely within the system and thus felt less inhibited about rebelling against it by giving a lead to populist causes. With the National Liberals now blurring the distinction between Liberalism and Conservatism, it was all the more important to recreate the party's distinctive radical credentials. In this respect

Sinclair showed himself willing to take some risks with the party in order to put it back at the centre of radical politics.

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Sinclair's instincts were sound, even if he never quite succeeded in imposing his strategy.

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1. See Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* (London: Collins, 1990); Frances Donaldson, *Edward VIII* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974); a revisionist approach is Susan Williams, *The People's King: the True Story of the Abdication* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).
2. For some indiscretions see Cambridge University Library: Templewood Papers RF3, p. 16; Ziegler, *King Edward VIII*, p. 209; Barnes and Middlemas, *Baldwin*, p. 979.
3. Churchill College Cambridge: Duff Cooper Papers 2/26, Abdication Diary, 16 November 1936.
4. House of Lords Record Office: Samuel Papers A/101, Lord Salisbury to Herbert Samuel, 16 November 1936; Samuel to Salisbury, 16 September 1943.
5. Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 132–33.
6. *Daily Worker*, 4 December 1936; *Los Angeles Times*, 18 November 1936.
7. *Daily Mail*, 4, 5, 7 December 1937; *Daily Express*, 4, 7 December 1936.
8. *Times*, 5 December 1936; Barnes and Middlemas, *Baldwin*, p. 1011; Lymington to the King (draft), 7 December 1936, Hampshire CRO, Lymington

- Papers F250; Philip Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd: A Biography* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p. 48.
9. Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill Vol. V 1922–1939* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 812–16.
 10. PRO CAB127/157/18–19, 'King Edward VIII Notes by Sir Horace Wilson'.
 11. PRO PREM 1/457, Cabinet meeting Notes, 4 and 5 December 1936.
 12. PRO PREM 1/457, Cabinet meeting Notes, 4 December 1936.
 13. *Daily Express*, 4 December 1936.
 14. *Times*, 5 December 1936.
 15. *Times*, 5 December 1936; *Daily Express*, 5 December 1936.
 16. PRO CAB127/157.
 17. Gerrard De Groot, *Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair* (London: Hurst and Company, 1993), pp. 11–22.
 18. Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, pp. 820–21; Michael Bloch, *The Reign and Abdication of Edward VIII* (London: Cape, 1990), p. 181.
 19. Bernard Wasserstein, *Herbert Samuel: A Political Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 80, 185, 397–98.
 20. Bloch, *The Reign and Abdication of Edward VIII*, p. 109.
 21. Lloyd George to Megan Lloyd George, 9 December 1936, in K. O. Morgan ed., *Lloyd George: Family Letters, 1885–1936* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), p. 213.
 22. *News Chronicle*, 3 December 1936.
 23. *News Chronicle*, 5 December 1936.
 24. *News Chronicle*, 7 December 1936.
 25. *News Chronicle*, editorial 7 December 1936.
 26. *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, 318, 10 December 1936, c.2188–89.
 27. De Groot, *Liberal Crusader*, 124.
 28. Notably in December 1938 at the Duchess of Atholl's by-election in West Perth and Kinross.

in February 2003 he was interviewed in the House of Lords by Dr Russell Deacon.

How did you come to fight Cardigan?

I had been a Cardiganshire Liberal for a long time before I went into national politics. I'd won a council seat in 1952 and got really active with the Welsh Liberals in the mid-1960s. In 1966 Roderic Bowen lost the seat and so I stood in the selection contest to become the next Liberal candidate. I only received four votes; the executive who voted for Huw Lloyd Williams was also full of his friends and relatives. Later on I also went for the Meirionnydd seat, which was then a Labour–Liberal marginal. Once again I lost. This was a real pity as I felt that I could have won that seat back for the Liberals. Instead they chose I. E. Thomas who put us into third position behind the Nationalists. I ended up fighting Brecon & Radnor. The seat was almost derelict in terms of Liberal supporters: they hadn't had a candidate there for twenty years. It was there that I helped build up the constituency and won almost 20 per cent of the vote. This planted the seeds for Richard Livsey's victory fifteen years later.

Huw Lloyd Williams lost Cardigan for the Liberals in 1970, and in 1972 I stood again for selection and was not opposed. I made sure that time that my friends were on the executive to support me. I was determined to rebuilt Cardigan as a Liberal seat. In 1973 I persuaded a large number of Independents to stand as Liberals. They took nine seats. Although the Independents still had the largest majority the Liberals were by far the largest political group in the county. They were the largest Liberal group in Wales at the time. We remained the largest political group on the council until I was defeated in 1992 – perhaps also the largest Liberal group in Wales for that period.

I was a Welsh nationalist and a Liberal as well. There was no need to join Plaid Cymru with those credentials.

INTERVIEW

Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd

Interview by **Russell Deacon**

Geraint Howells (1925–2004) was Liberal and Liberal Democrat MP for Cardiganshire (1974–83) and

Ceredigion & Pembrokeshire North (1983–92) from February 1974 to 1992. Ennobled as Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd in 1992,

How did you defeat Labour in the seat?

Cardigan is naturally a Liberal seat. It has an Independent tradition which means that the people there don't readily support either Labour or the Tories. In 1974 Elystan Morgan (the sitting Labour MP) was unpopular: he was seen as a traitor because he had moved away from Plaid Cymru (he'd left them in 1965). He was also against the Welsh School in Aberystwyth. I therefore got the Plaid Cymru supporters to back me in order to get him out. This pushed down the vote of the Plaid Cymru candidate, Clifford Davies, but gave me enough support to win the seat. The Cardigan Liberal campaign team also worked very hard to bring a Liberal back into the seat.

Why were you a Liberal and not a Welsh Nationalist?

I was a Welsh nationalist and a Liberal as well. There was no need to join Plaid Cymru with those credentials. Liberalism was in my blood and that of my family. My grandmother was nearly thrown off her farm for voting Liberal in the 1880s by the Conservative landlord. I never thought of being in any other party.

What happened after you were elected, in the 1970s?

In October 1974 Elystan Morgan tried to regain his seat but failed, and I increased my percentage of the vote. I could then concentrate on being an MP. One of the best things of the 1970s was the 1977 Lib-Lab Pact. I always supported the Pact, even though Emllyn [Hooson] was later in favour of ending it. I took up the agricultural spokespersonship partnering Labour's John Silkin, whom I got on really well with. I was able to persuade him to get the government to recognise the Farmers Union of Wales (FUW), which I had been a founder of. Roderic Bowen had always been against this idea – something that helped him lose the seat in 1966.

Although many in Ceredigion said they wouldn't vote Liberal

again, because we had supported Labour, they changed their mind in time for the 1979 general election, when I kept the seat with a smaller majority. In that election Emllyn Thomas, the Conservative candidate, came second with almost 30 per cent of the vote. Thomas had been general secretary of the Welsh Liberals in 1969, based in Aberystwyth, and was someone who I'd known well. He operated an office with a staff of two. The office flopped and Thomas lost his enthusiasm after a year. The result was that he later defected to the Conservatives and fought against me in 1979.

Also in 1979 we fought the devolution referendum. We worked very hard but knew that it was lost as the Conservatives had been using it to attack the government and we couldn't fight against that. We were too closely linked to them.

What happened in the 1980s?

In 1979, as a result of the fall-out from the Lib-Lab Pact and the referendum result, Emllyn [Hooson] lost his seat. I was then the sole Liberal MP in Wales. I was both the leader of the Welsh party and agriculture spokesman. It was very hard: you ended up speaking everywhere. I was glad, therefore, when Alex [Carlile] won Montgomeryshire back in 1983. It got even better in 1985 when Richard [Livsey] won Brecon & Radnor and there were then three Liberal MPs in Wales.

After the election had ended I pushed for the establishment of S4C (Welsh Channel 4). The Conservatives had gone back on an earlier promise to set it up. We put a lot of political pressure on them but it was Cledwyn Hughes (former Labour Welsh Secretary) who had the most influence.

The 1980s saw the arrival of the SDP in Wales. I was always a Liberal and I was keen that SDP members became Liberals. I therefore wanted the merged party to be called after its Liberal name but I lost when they called



Geraint Howells
(Lord Geraint
of Ponterwyd)
(1925–2004)

it the Social and Liberal Democrats. I was proved right, however, when the following year, 1989, we changed our name again to Liberal Democrats.

Why did you lose Cardigan?

I knew I had lost my seat, because my campaign team was weak. They thought that they'd win but I knew that in my heart that this wasn't going to be the case. Everyone seemed convinced we'd win except me. Cynog Dafis (Plaid Cymru) was able to more than double his vote from the previous election. My key supporters who had won the seat for me in 1974 had by then died off. The seat is winnable again for us though. Mark Williams has brought the vote back up; we'll get the seat back again.

What did you do then?

After going into the Lords I became Lord-in-Waiting to Her Majesty the Queen – the first Liberal to hold the position for a century. I am the Queen's representative for foreign heads of state. I have met President Moi of Nigeria and the Sultan of Brunei.

Dr Russell Deacon is a lecturer at the Centre for Humanities at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff.

KEEPER OF

Dr J. Graham Jones

looks at the life and career of Albert James Sylvester CBE (1889–1989), the champion shorthand typist who became Principal Private Secretary to David Lloyd George from 1923 until his death in March 1945. The first ever shorthand-writer to take notes of the proceedings of a Cabinet committee, Sylvester gained the trust of Lloyd George and served him for over two decades, running his private office, acting as his eyes and ears at Westminster and playing the role of go-between him and his mistress, Frances Stevenson.



F SECRETS

Albert James Sylvester was born at Harlaston, Staffordshire, on 24 November 1889, the son of a tenant farmer of relatively modest means. He attended Guild Street School, Burton-on-Trent, where he became conversant with the basic elements of Pitman's shorthand, and then, compelled to abandon his full-time education at the age of fourteen, secured employment as a clerk at Charrington's brewery. During this period, aided by the unstinting support of his two sisters, he attained champion speeds in both shorthand and typing and gained qualifications as a teacher of these subjects.

In 1910, like so many of his generation, Sylvester moved to London to seek his fortune, and held a variety of jobs including a position as the compiler of the official record of the proceedings of the House of Lords. He was a member of the British 'speed-writing' (fast typewriting) team that competed at Olympia in 1910 and 1911 and, having spent a short period in India and Burma, established his own business as a freelance shorthand-writer based at Chancery Lane in the heart of the metropolis.

The outbreak of the First World War saw Sylvester undertake some temporary work for the Admiralty. He soon became a stenographer in the office of M. P. A. Hankey (later Lord Hankey), at the time Secre-

tary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, and was in December 1915 the first ever shorthand-writer to take notes of the proceedings of a Cabinet committee. This was a truly pioneering task as previously no written record of discussions taken at Cabinet level had been kept. When Lloyd George succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, the secretariat to the Committee of Imperial Defence at once became the War Cabinet secretariat. (There had previously been no Cabinet secretariat at all.) Rejected for military service on account of his official position, Sylvester now became Hankey's private secretary. When hostilities ceased, he at once became a high-grade career civil servant sharing the status of university graduates who had entered the civil service through competitive examination. Lloyd George by now knew him well and had grown to trust him.

In 1918 Sylvester was awarded the OBE and in 1920 the CBE. In 1921 he left Hankey to serve as Lloyd George's private secretary, based at 10 Downing Street. He had by then long experience of working alongside the Prime Minister's personal staff, which included Thomas Jones and J. T. Davies, both Welshmen and both established civil servants. All three knew of the continuing secret relationship between Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson which had existed since 1913, but

few others then shared the secret. It was during this year – 1921 – that Sylvester found himself privy to the intricate and highly confidential negotiations that eventually led to the celebrated Anglo-Irish treaty.

The following autumn Lloyd George fell from power (permanently as it so happened), and initially Sylvester remained at 10 Downing Street as a member of the secretariat of his successor as prime minister, the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law. During this brief interlude he retained his responsibility for matters relating to church patronage. In the autumn of 1923, however, as Lloyd George prepared to depart on a potentially lengthy speaking tour of the United States and Canada, to be accompanied by Dame Margaret and their daughter Megan, the need for a responsible, devoted and hard-working personal secretary was pressing. Frances Stevenson could not now possibly accompany Lloyd George as she had done in his days of power. At a stroke Sylvester was enlisted from the Cabinet secretariat and became Lloyd George's private secretary for the rest of his days.

Sylvester was probably glad to rejoin his old chief. As the sole member of Lloyd George's entourage to have remained, he would have felt out of place at 10 Downing Street under Bonar Law and Baldwin. His background was

**Sylvester and
Lloyd George
at the Genoa
Conference, 1922**

KEEPER OF SECRETS

highly unorthodox and he shared little rapport with the ex-public school, Oxbridge-educated élite which then dominated the higher ranks of the civil service. He insisted that LG pay him a one-off lump sum of £4,500 as compensation for forfeited civil service pension rights and demanded the substantial annual salary of £1,000. In 1926 this was further increased to £1,500, although in the exceptionally difficult economic circumstances of the summer of 1931 he had to accept a pay cut of 10 per cent.

From the outset Sylvester's duties were onerous and wide-ranging. First and foremost he was responsible for the day-to-day running of Lloyd George's London office, which at one time had a staff of more than twenty, including numerous researchers, shorthand typists and messengers. He also dealt, often on his own initiative, with his employer's massive postbag at a time when Lloyd George probably received more letters and telegrams than any other British politician. He acted, too, as LG's press officer and often handled many of the cases that came from Lloyd George's constituency, Caernarfon Boroughs. He made the practical arrangements for Lloyd George's numerous trips both within the United Kingdom and overseas.

As the 1930s ran their course, and his employer grew less and less inclined to make the tiring return journey from his Churt home to Westminster, Sylvester acted increasingly as his 'eyes and ears' in the House of Commons, even occupying his own seat in the officials' box beneath the public gallery. When political and diplomatic crises arose, he furnished Lloyd George with notably detailed memoranda that outlined the course of events as they unfolded. (These analyses, preserved among the Lloyd George Papers at the House of Lords, are a valuable resource for students of the inter-war years.) At the same time Sylvester was personally responsible for undertaking much of the research

Sylvester acted increasingly as his 'eyes and ears' in the House of Commons, even occupying his own seat in the officials' box beneath the public gallery.

amongst original sources in preparation for the writing of the *War Memoirs* and for interviewing many former ministers of the crown and public servants. Many of these tasks were much facilitated by his fluent shorthand.

Sylvester was also responsible for making the arrangements for a large number of trips and voyages abroad during the 1920s and 1930s. There was regular motor-ing across Europe, there were cruises in the Mediterranean in a hired yacht, there were visits to Ceylon in 1931 and to South America. Lloyd George invariably insisted on luxurious arrangements for himself, his family, his guests and his servants. Poor Sylvester was always on the receiving end of his imperious employer's demands, at a mere whim, for a sudden departure, for a lightning reversal of well-laid plans (to go perhaps east rather than west), and to receive detailed news reports at every stage of the journey. These were the demands of an ageing autocrat whose whim was his command.

Although the relationship between Sylvester and Frances Stevenson was inevitably fraught with tension and unease from the outset, when Lloyd George was struck down by serious illness at the height of the political and constitutional crisis of the summer of 1931, it was he who was charged to telephone Frances with news of LG's condition whenever possible. He even succeeded in arranging a secret meeting between the two lovers on 4 August, only six days after Lloyd George's major surgery. In November he accompanied his employer on a recuperative voyage to Ceylon, when he was again entrusted with posting LG's letters to Frances and secretly buying presents for her and her little daughter Jennifer, who had been born in October 1929.

Sylvester inevitably became fully involved in Lloyd George's 'New Deal' campaign, launched in January 1935, and its propaganda body, the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction. The

following autumn – September 1936 – he was one of the small party that accompanied Lloyd George (the other members were his two politician children Gwilym and Megan, Thomas Jones CH, his doctor Lord Dawson of Penn, and the interpreter Dr T. P. Conwell-Evans) on his famous visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden. The course of the visit and the discussions have been chronicled many times over. 'L. G.', wrote Sylvester, 'returned to the Grand Hotel in a state of great elation. It was clear to us all that he had been tremendously impressed by Hitler and to me, at all events, it seemed that he was spell-bound by Hitler's astonishing personality and manner. "He is indeed a great man", were his first words in describing Hitler. "Fuehrer is the proper name for him, for he is a born leader ... yes, a statesman".'

It was on this occasion that Sylvester took the famous film which underlined the cordiality of Hitler's welcome to Lloyd George, with the latter positively revelling in the warmth of the reception accorded him. Much of the film is also devoted to the extensive miles of motorway and other public works at the time under construction in Hitler's Germany. Sylvester also took a number of fascinating photographs, and a further film, probably taken by Major Gwilym Lloyd-George, showed a totally uninhibited Sylvester taking close-up shots of Hitler and Ribbentrop, placing his personal camera almost in their faces. For the duration of this historic trip, Sylvester, a committed photographer, had been entrusted with the custody of Lloyd George's new toy, a home movie camera. Sylvester was no respecter of persons, and the film taken by Gwilym shows him moving Hitler about from place to place, barking orders at him (to the utter amazement of SS guards and ministers alike) as he methodically shot his sequences to produce a striking film which had the added novelty of colour.'

During November 1936 Sylvester again accompanied Lloyd

George on a vacation to Jamaica, and in January 1938 he went to Antibes for the celebration of Lloyd George and Dame Margaret's golden wedding anniversary. He remained a first-hand witness to the strange, highly ambivalent, triangular relationship between Lloyd George, Frances and Dame Margaret. It is probably true that by this time Dame Margaret generally felt some relief at being saved from the onerous task of supporting and caring for a highly demanding, increasingly difficult, rapidly ageing seventy-five year-old man.

By the late 1930s Lloyd George had become ever more reluctant to leave his Churt estate. Sylvester provided him with a steady stream of reliable information on the course of political life and often prepared detailed memoranda or reports on key issues and events. Both Gwilym and Megan Lloyd George remained in the House of Commons representing Welsh constituencies, and also acted as sources of inside information for their father.

Sylvester's supporting role was of immense importance in the relationship between LG and Frances. He knew all the leading actors in the drama and kept their secrets. It was he who was responsible for co-ordinating the arrival of Dame Margaret and the Lloyd George children through the front door of their Surrey home – Bron-y-de, Churt – and the simultaneous departure of Frances through the back entrance. A similar bizarre course of events had happened at 11 and later 10 Downing Street almost a generation earlier. Sylvester was indeed the only individual who spanned both sides of Lloyd George's complex personal and family life. It is to his credit that he remained on good terms with each member of Lloyd George's immediate family while at the same time generally preserving the peace with Frances – at least until after Lloyd George's death.

He was also to play a vital role in the preparation and writing of the mammoth *War Memoirs*.

Together with another secretary Malcolm Thomson (who years later was to write the 'official biography' of Lloyd George, in collaboration with Frances), Sylvester, with extraordinary diligence and patience, located the necessary source materials, facts and figures demanded constantly by Lloyd George. He personally saw to it that the substantial archive of official papers retained (unofficially) by Lloyd George was competently collated and indexed by two clerks in the employ of the Cabinet Office. As the Second World War loomed, he provided Lloyd George with detailed memoranda outlining the diplomatic moves of the summer and early autumn of 1939. Once war had broken out in September, Sylvester remained LG's eyes and ears at Westminster and Whitehall, regularly preparing detailed reports on the course of political life in the face of his employer's reluctance to venture far from his home. As Lloyd George, panic-stricken by the activities of the Nazi bombers, retreated to his second home at Criccieth in north Wales, Sylvester bombarded him with a regular avalanche of alarmist reports designed deliberately to exaggerate the array of difficulties facing Churchill's government, in the hope that they might persuade LG to return to London to participate actively in the course of political debate. But to no avail: Lloyd George preferred to devote his now rapidly dwindling energies to the construction of air-raid shelters at Criccieth. Westminster politics held but little appeal.²

It was again Sylvester who was responsible for informing Lloyd George of the deterioration in the health of his wife Dame Margaret in the early days of 1941, and he, too, accompanied by Lord Dawson of Penn, made the long journey to Criccieth in appalling weather to attend the funeral. He was fully sensitive to the manifold tensions and frictions within the Lloyd George family, eventually serving as Lloyd George's best man when, at long last, he

married Frances Stevenson at a civil ceremony at Guildford Registry Office in October 1943. Sylvester had even pleaded with Lloyd George's youngest daughter Megan to accept the union for the sake of her father's happiness in his twilight years, but to no avail. Loyally, he remained in LG's employ until the end, long after it was to his personal advantage to do so.

He accompanied Lloyd George and Frances on their return to Criccieth in September 1944, and, having failed to secure a 'walkover' for his employer in the Caernarfon Boroughs at the next general election (widely expected to take place at the conclusion of hostilities), he set in motion the chain of events which eventually led to Lloyd George's acceptance of an earldom on 1 January 1945. So well known was he in the constituency that some local Liberal activists pressed for Sylvester's nomination for the impending vacancy in the Boroughs, but he was not adopted.³ It is very likely that his lack of Welsh roots and associations militated against his prospects of selection.

When Lloyd George died on 23 March 1945, Sylvester, now fifty-five years of age, suddenly found himself unemployed for the first time in his life. His first subsequent employment was on the staff of Lord Beaverbrook at the *Daily Express* on a three-year contract. During 1948–49 he served as an unpaid assistant to the then Liberal Party leader Clement Davies, whilst actively seeking another post. During the immediate post-war period he also made use of his copious diary material to piece together the semi-biographical volume *The Real Lloyd George*, published by Cassell and Co. during the autumn of 1947. The book's rather sensational title was not reflected in its contents. Much of it consisted of trivia. The main feature of historical interest was the revealing account of Lloyd George's second meeting with Hitler in 1936. Otherwise, some observers were nonplussed at the picture of Lloyd George that emerged compellingly from

Sylvester's supporting role was of immense importance in the relationship between LG and Frances. He knew all the leading actors in the drama and kept their secrets.



the book's pages. In his old age, Sylvester's employer had become a soured, autocratic and rather peevish old man. The proposal at about this time that Sylvester should be knighted in recognition of his distinguished role as Lloyd George's principal private secretary came to nothing, apparently squashed by Prime Minister Clement Attlee.

At this time Sylvester was rather licking his wounds at the somewhat abrupt, perhaps unexpected, end of his three-year contract, in the previous September, with Express Newspapers and his old ally Lord Beaverbrook, who now spent most of his time in Canada and the West Indies and who seemed to have given up on his British interests. Many of Beaverbrook's old associates were thus compelled to seek new outlets for their time and abilities. In preparation for such an eventuality Sylvester had purchased, during the Second World War, a substantial piece of agricultural land in Wiltshire. (He never told Lloyd George of his purchase, fearing a jealous backlash.) In 1949 he then made a conscious decision to leave political life and turn to active

farming. This he continued to do for the four decades of life which still remained to him, although during the 1970s advancing old age and its attendant infirmities compelled him to let the major farm at Chippenham to a tenant, while still, however, continuing to run his own smallholding almost until the end.

Material considerations had compelled Sylvester to follow this path. He certainly savoured political life and felt a heartfelt commitment to the Liberal Party. Hence his unpaid stint as assistant to Clement Davies in 1948–49 and his subsequent wish to continue serving the party in some paid capacity. But, although Clement Davies and the party's chief whip Frank Byers struggled valiantly to create a paid position for Sylvester, their efforts floundered on the party's abysmal lack of resources. Sylvester, sorely dejected that the Liberal Party appeared either unwilling or unable to make use of his administrative acumen, approached an array of contacts in political and public life, even within Buckingham Palace, but to no avail. At sixty years of age, he was consid-

ered unemployable. Thus he and his wife Evelyn sold their home at Putney, London and moved to Chippenham in Wiltshire.

His new role as a farmer pleased Sylvester and his wife Evelyn enormously. They began to grow extensive crops and to sell eggs on a substantial scale. They spent much of 1950 constructing modest farm buildings and grew to savour the delights of rural life. But Sylvester retained his interest in Lloyd George and in contemporary political developments.

In February 1962 his wife Evelyn, whom he had married in 1917, died after a long period of ill health and several lengthy stays in hospital. Although he felt her loss deeply, he bravely soldiered on alone. Within a month of her death he himself suffered a major heart attack, but made a remarkably good recovery. In January 1966, when he was seventy-six years of age, a suspected seizure deprived him of the use of his left arm. Re-learning to make full use of his beloved manual typewriter proved an uphill struggle, but he displayed a remarkable resilience. Surgery followed twice in 1967. 'I live a very busy life', he wrote to a friend three years later, 'alone with my memories of the one I loved dearly: I appreciate solitude: work is my middle name: I have to work, I have no pension.'⁴ By this time advancing years had compelled him to stand down as a JP for Wiltshire; he had been appointed in 1953 and then elected by his fellow magistrates to be their chairman in 1962. These positions had involved him in an array of judicial and administrative tasks throughout the county.

In May 1975 there appeared *Life with Lloyd George: the Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931–45*, meticulously edited by Sylvester's friend Colin Cross. The book was certainly much more revealing than *The Real Lloyd George* back in 1947, but was not in any sense sensational or likely to cause offence. Members of the Lloyd George family greeted with relief what they regarded as a much-needed corrective to the view

Sylvester in old age, as pictured on the cover of *Life with Lloyd George*

of Lloyd George propounded by Frances in her memoirs published in 1967 and in her diaries which had seen the light of day, edited by A. J. P. Taylor, in 1971. Both of these works, they felt, had presented a somewhat sugary, romanticised, idealised view of the author's relationship with Lloyd George and had shied away from discussing the many skeletons in the family cupboard, not least the affairs in which both actors had engaged. With the publication of Sylvester's volume, Dame Margaret Lloyd George, they felt convinced, had now been restored to her rightful place in history.

Sylvester survived for another fourteen years. His plan to publish a full-length autobiography, upon which he was actively engaged almost to the end of his long life, sadly never came to fruition. During the last years of his life he still typed on the same old upright Underwood typewriter which he had used in the Cabinet Office back in 1914, more than seventy years earlier. His interest in Lloyd George never diminished, and he derived a particular pleasure from the three volumes of biography written by his friend the late John Grigg. He delighted, too, in his 'appearance' in the notable television series *The Life and Times of Lloyd George*, broadcast by the BBC in 1981, a drama which attracted a huge audience and was highly acclaimed – as indeed had been the television film *The Very Private Secretary*, shown by the BBC in 1974. Sylvester, in extreme old age, had indeed become something of a celebrity and a household name throughout the land. In December 1982, now aged ninety-three, he participated extensively in a BBC Radio 4 profile of his life and career, *Principal Private Secretary*. Other broadcasts followed.

In other ways, too, Sylvester came to prominence. Forced to retire from the bench upon attaining the mandatory retirement age of seventy-five at the end of 1964, he turned to ballroom dancing as a new hobby and challenge. His home soon sported an array of

cups and medals which he had won, and eventually, at the grand old age of eighty-six, he secured a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the oldest competitive ballroom dancer in the world. At the age of eighty-seven, in 1977, he won with his partner the top amateur award for ballroom dancing, the 'Alex Moore'. All these achievements bore witness to a quite extraordinary intellectual and physical energy and vitality. At the same time he continued his farming and other outdoor pursuits as far as his health and energy allowed.

Declining health and loneliness, together with an element of hypochondria and self-pity, to some extent marred his last years when he was prone to exaggerate his health problems. Yet on good days he was still capable of writing long, cheerful letters and entertaining guests on a fairly lavish scale. He could still cook impressive meals and was an unfailingly engaging conversationalist with sparkling reminiscences. He eventually lived to within a month of his hundredth birthday. Only in his last weeks did his positive attitude abandon him; hospital visitors were generally warmly greeted. His death on 27 October 1989 robbed students of Lloyd George and his times of a wholly unique source of dependable information and anecdotal evidence.

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- 1 National Library of Wales (NLW), A. J. Sylvester Papers C77, William Lloyd-George to Sylvester, 30 March 1977.
- 2 See J. Graham Jones, 'A Lloyd George letter', *National Library of Wales Journal*, vol. XXXII, no. 1 (Summer 2001), 95–101; A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *My Darling Pussy: the Letters of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, 1913–41* (London, 1975), 230–35.
- 3 On this theme, see J. Graham Jones, 'The Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor, A. J. Sylvester and the Caernarfon Boroughs vacancy of 1945', *Transactions of the Caernarfonshire Historical Society* 61 (2000), 111–33.

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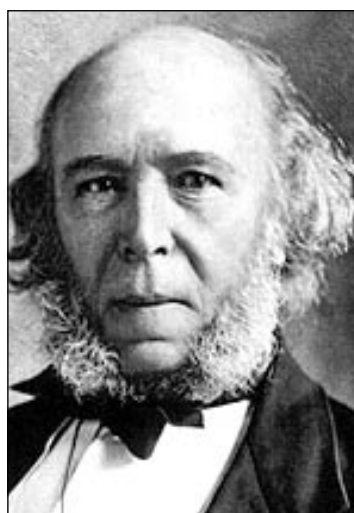
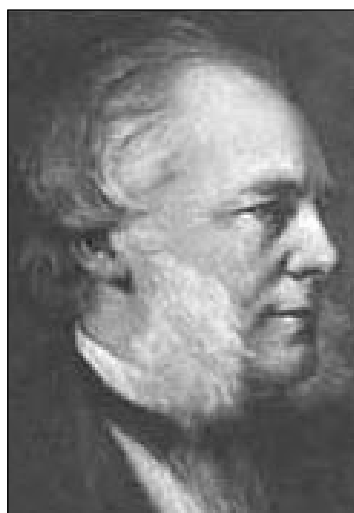
A note on sources

Much of the material on which this article is based is derived from the A. J. Sylvester Papers purchased by the National Library of Wales in 1990. Useful, too, is the smaller group of Frances Stevenson Family papers purchased by the National Library in 2000 and the massive archive of Lloyd George Papers in the custody of the Parliamentary Archive at the Record Office at the House of Lords. The seven Lloyd George archives at the Welsh Political Archive at the NLW are conveniently described in J. Graham Jones, *Lloyd George Papers at the National Library of Wales and Other Repositories* (Aberystwyth: the National Library of Wales, 2001). Sylvester's own books *The Real Lloyd George* (London, 1947) and Colin Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George: the Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931–45* (London, 1975) are essential reading. Also helpful are Thomas Jones, *Lloyd George* (London, 1951); Frances Lloyd George, *The Years that are Past* (London, 1967); Peter Rowland, *Lloyd George* (London, 1975), probably the best single-volume biography of Lloyd George; A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *My Darling Pussy: the Letters of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson, 1913–41* (London, 1975); Mervyn Jones, *A Radical Life: the Biography of Megan Lloyd George, 1902–66* (London, 1991); Ruth Longford, *Frances, Countess Lloyd George: More than a Mistress* (London, 1996); and W. R. P. George, *88 Not Out: an Autobiography* (Pen-y-groes, 2001). A characteristically stimulating essay is Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George and the historians', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 1971, pp. 55–75. Obituaries to A. J. Sylvester were published in *The Times*, 28 October 1989, the *Daily Telegraph*, 30 October 1989, *The Guardian*, 30 October 1989, and *The Independent*, 30 October 1989.

During the last years of his life he still typed on the same old upright Underwood typewriter which he had used in the Cabinet Office back in 1914, more than seventy years earlier.

Dr James Taylor explores the origins of the corporate economy and assesses the implications for government policy in the twenty-first century.

PUBLIC



Samuel Smiles (1812–1904); Robert Lowe (1811–92); Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

In recent years, we have become used to the idea that politicians should look to the private sector for inspiration for their policies. Underpinning much government behaviour in the past twenty-five years has been the profound belief in the superiority of business over state, of private over public. The Thatcher-Reagan mission of rolling back the frontiers of the state, and its continuation in barely altered form under more recent leaders, has been informed by this ideology. Streamlining government through private involvement in the provision of public services and encouraging participation by businessmen in the formation of policy are key means by which politicians have sought to infuse government with the dynamism and efficiency of the private sector.

Yet this objective is not of modern origin. Looking back 150 years, there is a striking parallel with the Liberal movement for administrative reform. The disastrous management of the Crimean War (1854–56) by Lord Aberdeen's coalition government, devastatingly exposed by William Russell's reports in *The Times*, fostered a massive outburst of public criticism of aristocratic government. Fresh from their triumph against the landowners in the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws, Liberal reformers capitalised on public sentiment to put forward

their case for reorganising the way the state operated.

Central to their argument was the introduction of 'business principles' into the conduct of public affairs. Businessmen, they reasoned, possessed a superior grasp of the organisational skills needed to manage government business. Such skills, though lacking in the public sphere, abounded in the business world. While the nation's commerce had gone from strength to strength, the government, with the power to select the best men, and with practically unlimited means, had carried on the war effort in a disgracefully inept manner. The *Daily News*, a Liberal newspaper prominent in the campaign for administrative reform, asserted: 'every Englishman knows well enough that in most things which it undertakes Government is beaten by private enterprise.'¹

The movement had its successes: the government began to rely upon the contract system for aspects of the war effort, culminating in the employment of the contractor Samuel Morton Peto to construct the Balaklava railway. Sir Charles Wood, First Lord of the Admiralty, seemed sympathetic to the reformist ideology, conceding that 'You cannot find any adequate substitutes for the stimulus of private and individual interest.'²

But of more interest than the immediate impact of the move-

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ment is the insight it gives us into Victorian perceptions of private enterprise. For Victorians, it was the heroic entrepreneur, the noble industrialist, who symbolised British commerce. Illustrative of these attitudes was Samuel Smiles' famous work, *Self-Help*, first published in 1859, which offered the public inspiring pen portraits of giants of commerce, including Richard Arkwright, Josiah Wedgwood, and Robert Peel, father of the Conservative Prime Minister of the 1830s and 1840s. Such men combined energy, perseverance, and thrift, and these were the qualities that it was thought necessary to import into public life.

When Victorians thought of businessmen, they thought of men of this sort: rugged individualists achieving greatness through strength of character. These were the men who could teach the government a thing or two about organisational competence. Yet such a view was already in danger of becoming anachronistic, for British commerce was undergoing a dramatic institutional transformation. The intensive capital requirements of modern industrial enterprise were forcing a radical change in the way in which business was organised. While the Industrial Revolution had been spearheaded by small partnerships and sole traders, the business corporation was beginning to take on an added significance. First canals, then railways

– crucial elements in fostering Britain's competitive advantage – were formed not as partnerships but as joint stock companies. The capital of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of investors was drawn together into powerful agglomerations, under the control of elected boards of directors. The story was the same in other sectors: gas, water, insurance, banking, shipping, the telegraph. Wherever large sums of capital were needed, companies began to appear.

But this was not a process that occurred in isolation from the public sphere. For companies were not wholly private enterprises. Without the state's granting of a number of legal privileges, it was impossible in law to establish a body distinct from its members, such as a company. If a company wished to sue in the courts, it could not do so as an organisation, but only as a mass of individuals, making legal action practically impossible. Additionally, a company's shareholders were subject to unlimited liability: as the law did not recognise the company as a separate entity, its debts were its members' debts, so shareholders in a bankrupt concern could be sued by creditors for every penny they possessed.

In view of these problems, the state agreed to delegate public powers to companies whose existence was judged to be in the public interest. These favoured companies were incorporated

– made into corporations with a legal identity distinct from their members – permitting them to sue in the courts, to limit the liability of their shareholders, and to exist in perpetuity. The most typical early incorporations were of large trading companies such as the East India Company (1600) and the Hudson's Bay Company (1670). But the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the incorporation of many domestic schemes.

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, these powers were granted on a case-by-case basis. Companies wishing to be incorporated would apply either to Parliament or to the Board of Trade. The privileges of incorporation were not thought to be natural or inherent; rather, they were an artificial creation, and politicians, Liberal and Conservative alike, were wary of distributing them too freely. In this, they were simply following Adam Smith's line, as set out in his *Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776, but a set text for nineteenth-century statesmen.

Smith had warned that 'to exempt a particular set of dealers from some of the general laws which take place with regard to all their neighbours' was unreasonable, and could 'scarce ever do more harm than good'. Smith made exceptions for sectors where private capital was inadequate, or where the level

For Victorians, it was the heroic entrepreneur, the noble industrialist, who symbolised British commerce.

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of risk deterred private investors, citing canals, water works, insurance, and banking as examples. But wherever private capital was sufficient, companies had no business, for they would only promote monopoly. Records of parliamentary debates in the early nineteenth century are littered with condemnations of applications by joint stock companies for corporate privileges: to accede to such demands would 'destroy all competition', establishing 'baneful' monopolies, leaving consumers at their mercy.³

It was also widely feared that companies were displacing character from its central position in the world of commerce. Before the corporate age, firms were perceived as an outgrowth of the individual businessman's personality, while the system of partnership placed entrepreneurs in such a position of mutual trust and interdependence that partnerships were frequently likened to families. 'Partners were in some senses brothers who represented each other,' believed Sir William Holdsworth, the eminent legal historian.⁴ Companies, however, were entirely different: they were, according to *The Times*, 'societies in which friendship, ability, knowledge, education, character, credit, even monied worth is in a great measure disregarded, and money, the mere amount and value of the shares standing in the name of each, is the sole bond of connexion between the proprietors.'⁵

With the dilution of the importance of character in business came a deterioration of the standards of commercial behaviour. Direction by boards diminished the sense of individual responsibility for decision-making. The result, admitted one merchant, was that 'actions from which men would shrink as individuals, they will practise with impunity, when combined with others in a corporate capacity.'⁶

For these reasons, companies generated a degree of controversy which is difficult to appreciate today, when the existence of companies is taken for granted.

To try to secure popular acceptance, companies sought to ape the characteristics and behaviour of public institutions. Company boards were usually made up of men with a high local profile: members of the local municipal corporation, local magistrates, and other office-holders. These men were well placed to ensure that their companies were incorporated into local communities. Company offices, often very grand structures, would be built in prominent positions in the high street. Shareholder meetings would be held in local municipal halls or taverns. The official emblems of the town or county would be worked into company letterheads and seals.⁷

Furthermore, it was widely accepted that, in their operation, companies functioned as public bodies – 'little republics' in the words of Robert Lowe, a Liberal minister. Directors, elected by their shareholders just as politicians were elected by the public, described their shareholders as their 'constituents'. Boards were 'executives', appointed to carry out the wishes of their constituents. Some went further still, arguing that companies were models of direct representation, a more democratic system than the virtual representation which characterised the unreformed British state. Accountability and transparency would be ensured by face-to-face relations between directors and shareholders, and the vigilance of shareholders in monitoring the actions of their directors. In this sense, joint stock companies resembled the voluntary associations that were such an important feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century middle-class life.⁸

But many were sceptical about the democratic claims of joint stock companies, among them Herbert Spencer, the influential liberal philosopher. Spencer, who had an insider's knowledge of corporate culture, having worked as a railway engineer during the investment boom, or 'railway mania', of the 1840s, argued that

'the characteristic vices of our political state' were reproduced in every business corporation.⁹ Directors overstepped their powers and ruled their companies undemocratically: shareholders were cowed, and boards became closed bodies, completely out of touch with the opinions and needs of their constituents. Company meetings were a sham: directors were adept at manufacturing consent for their motions by a mixture of dissimulation and stealth, and once these motions were passed, the shareholders had no remedy, 'for in railway government there is no "second reading", much less a third.'¹⁰ But whatever views were expressed on companies' claims to embody a form of direct democracy, all were agreed in viewing companies as *public* bodies, which faced the same issues of representation and accountability as were faced by governments.

Furthermore, by mid-century, the public utility of joint stock companies was coming to be more widely accepted. While monopolies were still contentious (indeed, nineteenth-century governments toyed with the idea of nationalising railway companies), many came to argue that companies promoted rather than restricted competition. Received wisdom was turned on its head: whereas the granting of corporate privileges had been viewed as an interference with trade, now the withholding of these privileges came to be seen as the interference. The process by which companies applied to the state for incorporation was condemned as corrupt: vested interests could exert sufficient leverage with MPs to throw out a bill, or to persuade ministers to refuse incorporation. Few considered politicians to be sound and impartial judges of the worth of commercial enterprises.

Consequently, an Act of 1844 passed during Peel's second administration, and devised by William Gladstone at the Board of Trade, allowed companies to obtain incorporation on registration with the government. The

With the dilution of the importance of character in business came a deterioration of the standards of commercial behaviour.

grant was now automatic and no longer relied on the favour of parliament or individual ministers. But the Act excluded limited liability: if companies wished to trade with this privilege, they would have to go through parliament or the Board of Trade as before.

When company law reappeared on the political agenda in the 1850s, this issue divided Liberal opinion. Some, including Gladstone, thought that limited liability would encourage immoral and irresponsible speculation and would destabilise the economy. The economist J. R. McCulloch insisted that limited liability was an unnatural privilege which ran counter to sound rules of political economy. Others disagreed, arguing that the concession of limited liability was consistent with the recent course of commercial legislation towards non-interference. Lord Palmerston, with typical forthrightness, declared it was a simple 'question of free trade against monopoly'.¹¹

What decided the argument was the widespread enthusiasm in the 1850s for downsizing the role of the state, which was given a further boost by the exposure of the government's inept conduct of the Crimean War. The press, largely in favour of limited liability, exploited the revelation of administrative shortcomings to argue that the state should be stripped of its power to decide which businesses should be incorporated. The *Daily News* stated that it was wrong for the grant of corporate privileges to be 'dependent on the caprice of Government officials', a view endorsed by prominent businessmen before a royal commission on mercantile law.¹²

Opponents of limited liability had no answer. Even the President of the Board of Trade, Edward Cardwell, who had grave doubts as to the propriety of limited liability, thought the power invested in him to accept or refuse applications for incorporation 'invidious'. He confessed to the Cabinet that 'I heartily wish that the law

was self-acting, and that the power of incorporation did not belong to the Board of Trade.'¹³ The result was an Act of 1855, drafted by Palmerston's administration, which had replaced Aberdeen's discredited coalition, allowing companies to obtain limited liability on registration.

In hindsight, the Act is best viewed as a significant step along the road to what can be termed the conceptual privatisation of the company.¹⁴ Corporate powers had traditionally been viewed as privileges, granted only to those enterprises which could demonstrate that their contribution to the public interest warranted excusing them from the normal rules of commerce. The companies so privileged did their best to present themselves as semi-public institutions. But, as the numbers of companies receiving these powers grew, and their importance to the economy increased, so the powers previously granted as privileges became taken for granted and expected as rights which it was unnatural and unjustifiable for the state to withhold.

As companies grew in confidence, they were more inclined to present themselves as private entities with no responsibilities to the public. Company directors entered both Houses of Parliament in ever increasing numbers, and did their best to thwart attempts at state intervention in their companies' affairs, painting this as an interference in *private* enterprise.

There was thus an increasing divergence between the rhetoric of commerce and the realities of modern enterprise. The idealised entrepreneur, as glorified by Smiles, became less and less typical of the British economy, and was replaced by a different kind of capitalist, who, in dealing with administrative tasks of great complexity, and with large, sometimes unruly bodies of constituents, faced challenges more familiar to politicians than the entrepreneurs of the industrial revolution. The dividing line between public and private was blurred. Yet the rheto-

The idealised entrepreneur, as glorified by Smiles, became less and less typical of the British economy, and was replaced by a different kind of capitalist.

ric insisting upon the primacy and distinctiveness of business remained constant, and the public origins of 'private' enterprise were entirely lost sight of.

Which leads us to the irony that today many are calling for the state to be modelled on institutions which themselves were originally modelled on the state. A lesson, perhaps, in the perils of forming policy in a historical vacuum.

Dr James Taylor is Research Associate on the ESRC-funded project 'Shareholder Democracies? Corporate Governance in Britain, 1720–1844'. He is author of several articles on commerce and politics in nineteenth-century Britain.

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- 2 Olive Anderson, *A Liberal State at War* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 117.
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- 11 *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, 139 (26 July 1855), col. 1390.
- 12 *Daily News*, 10 July 1855; Royal Commission on the Assimilation of Mercantile Laws in the UK, *Parliamentary Papers*, 27 (1854), pp. 138, 219.
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- 14 For an excellent study of this process in the United States, see William G. Roy, *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the*

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REPORT

Winston Churchill – Liberal politician

Evening meeting, February 2004, with Keith Robbins and Paul Addison

Report by **David Cloke**

The centenary of Churchill crossing the floor to join the Liberal Party was commemorated at the History Group's meeting in February. Chaired by the Group's Chair, Tony Little, the meeting saw consideration given to Winston Churchill as a Liberal politician. The discussion was led by Paul Addison, the Director of the Centre for Second World War Studies and author of *Churchill on the Home Front 1900–1945* and Keith Robbins, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales at Lampeter and author of *Churchill*.

Dr Addison outlined the reasons for Churchill joining the Liberal Party and his subsequent role as a minister and his relationships with fellow ministers. Professor Robbins continued with a consideration of Churchill's experience during the First World War and the reasons he left the Liberals. Before the speakers began Tony Little asked both of them also to give their view as to whether Churchill was ever a Liberal or whether he never ceased to be a Liberal.

Dr Addison began by noting that Churchill was the son and heir of the maverick Tory politician Lord Randolph Churchill. He was elected the Unionist (Conservative) MP for Old-

ham in the khaki election of 1900. Almost from the start, Dr Addison maintained, Churchill criticised his own government. And when in May 1903, Joseph Chamberlain started his campaign for tariff reform Churchill attacked not only him but also the Prime Minister, Balfour, for failing to get to grips with the issue and for proposing feeble compromises. In Addison's view, Churchill essentially talked himself out of the Conservative Party and on 31 May 1904, on entering the Commons, he sat next to David Lloyd George on the Liberal benches.

Churchill's defection brought with it handsome rewards in the following few years. Whilst, in Addison's view, the Liberals were never convinced that he was really one of them, they recognised his value and treated him generously: Campbell-Bannerman gave him his first ministerial post as Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office and Asquith subsequently brought him into the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade, making him the youngest cabinet minister since 1866. Asquith was impressed by Churchill, had faith in his political abilities and also genuinely liked him. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, in January 1910 he promoted Churchill, then

aged 35, to Home Secretary. In 1911, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he took charge of the largest navy in the world.

Nonetheless, Addison argued, in the long term Churchill's defection came with a severe penalty: the suspicion that he was motivated by personal ambition, that he was a cad and an unprincipled careerist. According to Addison the allegation that he was only in politics for his own ambition dogged and hobbled him until the Second World War.

As Churchill himself asked 'what makes one do things?', Addison felt that the limits of a historian's ability to explain anyone's motives, let alone a politician's, had to be recognised. Indeed, do politicians themselves know why they do things? Nonetheless, Addison declared that Churchill was particularly transparent: he had told his mother of his ambition. He had also stated in 1897 that, apart from the stumbling block of Home Rule, 'I am a Liberal in all but name'. In answer to questions from the floor, Professor Robbins indicated that Home Rule continued to be a stumbling block for Churchill as he felt that it was a betrayal of his father. He flirted with 'Home Rule all round' as a solution but did not follow it through. Addison added that he tried to resolve the problem by coming out in favour of special treatment for Ulster.

Addison reported that Churchill referred to himself as a Tory Democrat, thus drawing attention to the legacy of his father. He also showed independence from Tory party orthodoxy, veered from the party line and expressed sympathy for the Liberal opposition. The Liberal journalist, Massingham, said that he hoped Churchill would be Prime Minister and a Liberal one at that. Churchill was one of a group of young fractious Tory MPs led by Hugh Cecil. They maintained cordial relations with Liberals and Churchill particularly stayed in touch with Rosebery (an old

in the long term Churchill's defection came with a severe penalty: the suspicion that he was motivated by personal ambition, that he was a cad and an unprincipled careerist.

friend of his father's) and Lloyd George. Addison argued that it was clear by the end of 1901 that Churchill and Lloyd George were close.

Dr Addison also felt that Churchill's attitude to the party system was significant. He had strong reservations about it and said that it gave too much power to extremists. At this time Churchill aspired to some sort of coalition of Liberal and Tory forces which he hoped Rosebery would bring about. When Chamberlain came out in favour of protection, this encouraged him to believe that there would be a realignment of politics, as had happened in 1886. In the end, however, only he and a few of his closest parliamentary allies changed sides. In answer to a question from the floor, Professor Robbins added that he almost certainly did not bring with him to the Liberal Party any activists or sections of the electorate.

Despite his contemporaries' doubts about him, Addison argued that there was no doubt that Churchill was convinced of the merits of free trade. It was not only the Treasury orthodox but the position of all his closest political allies. He attacked protectionism because it would raise the cost of living for the poor and increase corruption as people lobbied for tariffs. Nonetheless, Addison felt that this was not a sufficient reason for Churchill to defect. After all, his closest political ally, Hugh Cecil, subordinated his belief in free trade to party loyalty. Although there was no reason why he could not both continue to support free trade and the Tory party, Churchill used the argument to justify his departure. Addison also pointed out that Cecil was a High Anglican whereas Churchill had no such attachment. In Addison's view the driving force was Churchill's ambition and free trade merely enabled him to clothe his ambition in respectability. However, Addison did not believe that he lacked convictions, but simply that they were

Churchill was never bound in his own mind to party politics: he was more interesting than that.

not decisive and were compatible with his ambition.

Professor Robbins added that he felt that it was worth reinforcing the point that in 1903–04 it looked as if the Conservative Party was falling apart and one could have supposed that it was unlikely that the Tories would regain power at the next general election. Hence, if Churchill was as ambitious as was supposed, and it looked likely that there would not be a Tory government for a decade, then this would be a good reason for leaving the party.

Dr Addison then turned to what he described as Churchill's radical phase, the period between 1905 and 1911. Addison described him as an outstandingly successful radical politician and an enthusiastic and energetic social reformer. In alliance with Lloyd George he was a leader of the radical wing of the Liberal Party. Indeed, his radicalism eclipsed that of the Labour Party. However, Addison noted that this stance lasted for a relatively brief period and was in sharp relief to the rest of his career. This deep engagement with Liberal ideology was never repeated after he moved to the Admiralty. It has, therefore, been argued that this period was merely an accidental phase in the career of a political opportunist.

Addison felt, however, that this underestimated the importance of Churchill's relationship with Lloyd George. They were in constant contact, usually in agreement and delighted in each other's company. Lloyd George was the dominant power and psychologically the master; indeed, Churchill described himself as Lloyd George's left hand. Despite this, in Addison's view, Churchill's role should not be under-estimated. He was often ahead of Lloyd George in articulating the New Liberalism, for example over unemployment insurance, labour exchanges, minimum wage legislation and penal reform. Sometimes they were working so closely that it is not possible to tell who was

leading, for example during the Agadir crisis of 1911.

Nonetheless, even in this radical phase Addison pointed out that Churchill expressed his attachment to social order and capitalism both in speeches and in private with Lloyd George and Masterman. He disapproved of socialism even more than he did of protectionism. Professor Robbins added that in his view Churchill put forward the radical solutions seen in this phase in order to avoid socialism – but that this strategy declined, or even ceased, as the Labour Party grew in strength.

The 1910 elections raised the possibility of coalition government and Churchill seemed to begin to move towards an accommodation with the Conservatives. Addison reported that the Conservatives said that Churchill was moving to the right at this time and putting out feelers to them. However, they had scores to settle and their new leader, Bonar Law, had no time for Churchill.

There did not seem to be a simple explanation for Churchill's move to the right. His relations with Labour were deteriorating, partly because of his use of the police in a number of labour disputes. He also seemed to have had an awakening sense of his military destiny. He had initially been sceptical of the idea that there would be a European war, but his connections with the intelligence services persuaded him that Germany was a threat and Agadir confirmed this. Once he became immersed at the Admiralty in the preparations for war, party politics receded and the idea of coalition government grew.

In summary, Addison argued that Churchill was never bound in his own mind to party politics: he was more interesting than that. There were 'tough' and 'tender' elements to his personality. Whilst his militaristic side perhaps veered towards the Tories, his compassion for the underdog and belief in a moral force in domestic and international affairs was congenial



**Liberal allies:
David Lloyd
George and
Winston Churchill**

to Liberalism. He was not, however, in Addison's view a Liberal. He was a hybrid, perhaps achieving a balance between the errors of the two parties. Nonetheless he was married to a Liberal and maintained a life-long affection for his Liberal friends.

Professor Robbins argued it was important to consider a number of aspects of Churchill's political character. As a 'democrat' his was the liberalism of a limited male franchise. (Dr Addison added that Churchill continued to oppose the extension of the franchise whilst in Baldwin's government.) He had no first-hand experience of poverty, and consequently his commitment to land reform did not match that of Lloyd George. He had a vision of himself as a great military thinker.

Robbins also argued that his concept of what Britain and its Empire was and its relations with Europe were also significant. Churchill did not probe the nature of continental relationships – few cabinet ministers pursued this issue – and he had no sentimental attachment to Europe or to parts of it. However, he did see the rivalry between states as a given and was aware of the struggle for mastery in Europe. There

was a particularly strong sense of this at the time of the Agadir crisis and he became more closely aligned with the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey. Robbins argued that Churchill seemed to have a facility for getting on with people and he was keen for his relations with Grey to be good; Grey eventually became the godfather to his son.

Churchill assumed the post of First Lord of the Admiralty with these issues in the background. For the Liberals his appointment was something of a double-edged sword. It caused about a third of the party (the nonconformist/pacifist wing) some anxiety. With Liberal Imperialists at the helm and Churchill at the Admiralty Robbins argued that this wing of the party feared that their leaders were taking the Liberals to places they did not want to go.

Robbins argued that Churchill's drive and determination were clear. He would bully people and sack them if they were not up to his standards. But what did he know? In fact, Robbins argued, he knew a great deal and had the capacity to absorb detail and master topics. Amongst the issues he had to consider were the Dreadnought crisis, the challenge from Germany and the maintenance of naval supremacy at almost any cost. He responded by seeking technical improvements, such as the use of oil for fuel. Robbins noted that many of the characteristics seen in World War Two were revealed at this time: prodigal talents spread widely. His career, therefore, went well, though it distanced him from the radical wing of the party.

By the summer of 1914 Churchill believed that a European war was bound to happen and that Britain had to take part. As Robbins noted, one would expect a war to be something that Churchill would do best and that he would emerge as the consummate war leader. In fact, that was not to be the case, and Churchill suffered a major political catastrophe over the Dardanelles in 1915. Robbins

questioned how much Churchill was culpable but, nonetheless, it was a disaster for his political career. Many supposed that he had had his come-uppance.

His close relationship with Lloyd George revived his career; after an interval, Lloyd George reappointed him to the Cabinet and in a context that Churchill was happy with. Coalition government and the Asquith – Lloyd George rupture in the Liberal Party had established a new context for political calculation.

Robbins also argued that an additional factor in the changing political landscape was the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. This gave added impetus to a Liberal/Conservative coalition as a way of preserving social order. Churchill had a pivotal role at the close of the war and after it became Secretary of State for the Colonies. Amongst his responsibilities was sorting out the frontiers in the Middle East.

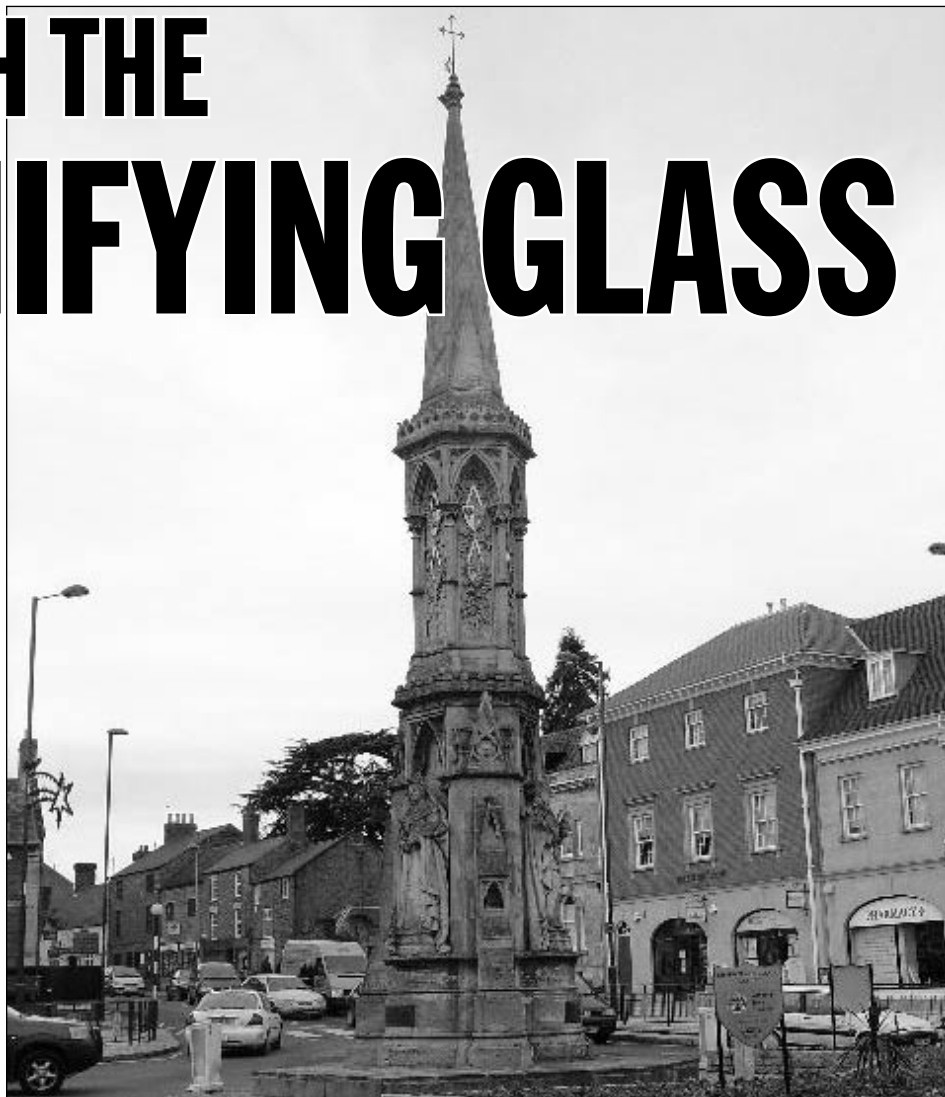
However, the political buttresses supporting Churchill were collapsing and the election defeat in 1922 made it unclear where he should turn. Could the Liberal divide be healed? Could he turn to the Conservatives whilst tariffs remained on their agenda? He could not contemplate a move to Labour and, consequently, if Labour emerged as the coming party Churchill would have to move to the right.

Robbins stated that he felt that if the Liberal divide could have been healed in 1918–22, Churchill might have stayed in the party. When it seemed that this was not going to happen, if he wanted to regain high office he would have to go back to the Tories. In Robbins' view this did not mean for Churchill a rejection of what he had said in the decade from 1904. However, the situation had changed radically after the First World War, and the Tories simply represented the safest and most plausible ticket for Churchill's own purposes.

David Cloke is the Treasurer of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

THROUGH THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

Margaret Stacey,
Banbury and the
decline of the Liberal
Party
by **Robert Ingham**



Banbury Cross

The death, in April 2004, of the eminent sociologist, Margaret Stacey, offers an opportunity to draw attention to the lessons for political historians in her seminal work *Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury* (OUP, 1960). This book, written while Stacey was working as a full-time mother, without the benefit of an academic appointment, provided new insights into the dramatic changes within the UK's party system in the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps because it is shelved in the sociology section of university libraries, it has not received due credit from students of politics for its approach to the central question of that period: how did the Liberal Party come to lose its central place in British politics to Labour?

Banbury

Rather than tackle this question head on, Stacey asked what had been the impact on the Oxfordshire town of Banbury of the establishment of a large aluminium plant there in 1933. Prior to the arrival of heavy industry, Banbury had been a sleepy market town which, like the agricultural sector in general, was slowly declining. Now, a period of rapid expansion began: Banbury's population grew by 35 per cent from 1931 to 1951, with newcomers flooding into the new housing estates built on the outskirts of the town.

Stacey focused on the contrast between the traditional social structure of pre-1933 Banbury and the values of the immigrants to the town, and on how the interaction of the two affected political contests in the area. Banbury had long

been influenced by the politics of the great men of the town. From 1859 to 1895 it was represented in Parliament by Sir Bernhard Samuelson, a Liberal and, interestingly in the light of Stacey's analysis of the later period, an immigrant to the town whose agricultural machinery works had caused the town's population to double in the 1880s. After Samuelson's retirement, the North Oxfordshire constituency in which Banbury now lay turned Tory, under the influence of the powerful local Brassey family. It swung Liberal in 1906 but was considered by Pelling to have Tory inclinations by 1910.

In traditional Banbury, everyone had their place in the social structure, and knew what it was. The local gentry and businessmen were clearly at the pinnacle of the town's hierarchy, after which came the artisans and the

THOUGH THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

rest. Political affiliation depended primarily on religious factors: Anglicans tended to be Conservative, and Methodists, of whom the town had a significant and active community, were Liberal. Personal relationships, for example connections to particular civic leaders, were also important. Trade unions were barely represented in the town, where firms were mostly small and family-run, and Labour could not gain a foothold.

The new entrants to the town from 1933 had different values and customs to the existing inhabitants and were difficult to place in Banbury's social structure. Nor did they necessarily want to 'know their place' in the town's pecking order. Most significantly, many newcomers were, or became, trade unionists, which enabled the Labour Party to make inroads into Banbury's politics for the first time.

The political contest in Banbury soon came to reflect the upheaval in the town's social structure. Traditional Banburians reacted to the emergence of a strong Labour presence in the town, especially on the borough council, by rallying behind the Conservatives, and thus the Liberals, already the smaller party in the town, were squeezed.

By 1950, politics in Banbury was oriented firmly along class lines, although with undercurrents of the previous alignment still visible. Of the Labour voters, 90 per cent were manual workers, and 58 per cent of manual workers voted Labour; but over half of the working-class heads of households surveyed by Stacey were Conservative. The Tories were strongest in the town's traditional industries and especially with older voters.

Only 8 per cent of Stacey's survey sample were Liberals, half of them being Nonconformists. Four members of the Liberal Association's executive committee also held lay positions in the Nonconformist churches. This was the only factor Stacey found to distinguish Conservative and

The value of Stacey's work to students of politics lies in its emphasis on local factors, and the importance of detailed local research, if a full understanding of the behaviour of the electorate is to be obtained.

Liberal supporters in the town. Her conclusion was that, by the 1950s, a core of mostly older Conservatives and Liberals, who mixed socially via the Rotary Club and Inner Wheel, constituted the remnants of Banbury's traditional social structure, and that they stood opposed to a younger, socially isolated but more dynamic, body of Labour supporters, based in the non-traditional industries and the housing estates around the town. The main battleground was the borough council, on which the Liberals were no longer represented and therefore looked to the Conservatives to defend their interests.

Support for Stacey?

The post-war period spawned a host of books analysing the political make-up of particular constituencies. Most were based purely on surveys of the electorate and drew few conclusions about how the position they described had been arrived at.

Birch's account of Glossop, however, offers some support for Stacey's argument. Glossop was one of the towns in which Liberal support remained significant into the 1950s. Unlike the situation in Banbury, Birch found a stable community, in which 65 per cent of electors had been born in the town, and evidence that the hierarchical social structure of the nineteenth century, although in decline, was still relevant. The Liberals there too, although more numerous, were predominantly middle-class Nonconformists, uneasy with working with Labour.

Conclusion

Stacey's account of Banbury offers a convincing analysis of how social changes between the wars drove the upheaval in the British party system. Central, although not mentioned by Stacey, was the impact of the first-past-the-post electoral system and the tradition

of parliamentary government on which it was based. Electoral choice in Banbury, and elsewhere, boiled down to being for or against one particular, overriding factor. With the influx of aluminium workers to the town, the key factor changed from the established religion to the town's traditional social structure. In making this choice, little room was afforded for nuances, and third parties were squeezed.

Of course, this leaves many questions unanswered. What happened where the Liberals were the main party and the Conservatives the junior partner in the traditional social structure? (Does Birch's survey of Glossop help answer this question?) What happened in areas where the traditional structure was not overhauled so quickly or where trade unionism did not have such an impact? Could the Liberals have done more to hold on to the support of trade unionists, or did the link between the trade union movement and the Labour Party make it inevitable that union votes would switch away from the Liberals? And what was the social basis for the Liberal revival, Stacey offering no ground for optimism in this direction?

The value of Stacey's work to students of politics lies in its emphasis on local factors, and the importance of detailed local research, if a full understanding of the behaviour of the electorate is to be obtained. While the actions of political leaders may be more exciting subjects of study, and it may be seductive to think in terms of a national swing, local factors are the mainspring of our constituency-based political system. Only with the magnifying glass can we truly discern the meaning of the bigger picture, and Margaret Stacey was both an expert student of political culture at the micro-level, and a talented communicator of her findings.

Robert Ingham is a historical writer, and Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

REVIEWS

Politics and theology

David W. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Reviewed by **Peter C. Erb**

In the early twenty-first century, when political theory is increasingly understood as the art of compromise or – perhaps, more often – of power brokerage, politicians such as Gladstone are deemed, at best, oddities or, at worst, dangerous to public life. ‘Theories of political economy, well and good,’ one might say. ‘Practical risk assessments regarding this or that right-of-way, legitimate – as long as decisions remain uncontaminated by private matters: above all by religious or philosophical pre-judgements.’ In such a setting Gladstone must appear enigmatic. Even the least cynical among us recognises that political leaders will be inconsistent and sometimes lie (or at least prevaricate); the only difficulty we have is with their rationalisations. Thus possibly the most remembered comment regarding Mr Gladstone is Henry Labouchere’s: he had no objection to Gladstone’s habit of concealing an ace up his sleeve, but he did object to the politician’s claim that the Almighty had put it there.

The problem inherent in Labouchere’s commonplace – how to separate a political ace from theological explanation – has troubled biographers of the Grand Old Man from John Morley, at the beginning of the twentieth century – who handled it by deliberately omitting reference to Gladstone’s theological and cultural analyses – to more recent writers who, with much of the rest of the century, tend to reduce religious life to psychology and either raise it in some salacious and elusive manner

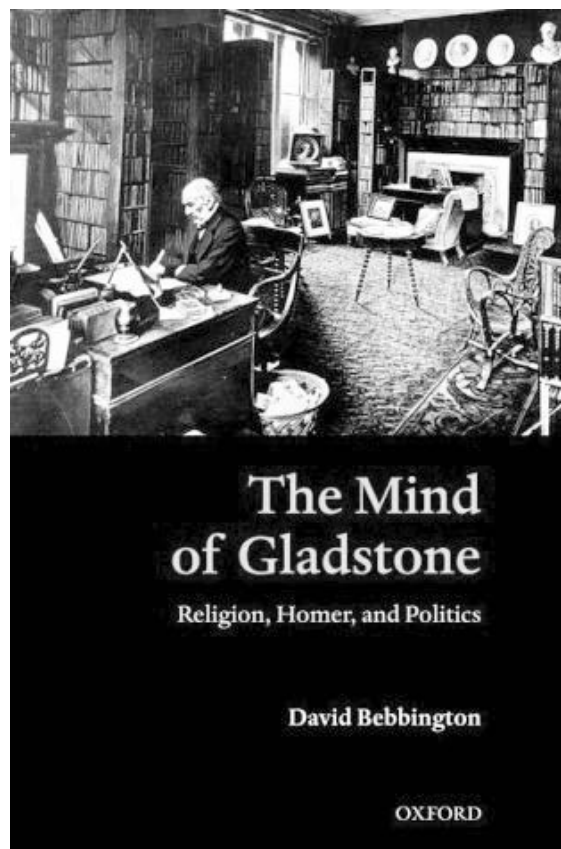
(usually with reference to Gladstone’s use of the scourge or his attention to rescuing prostitutes) or in a slightly more sophisticated fashion place the Prime Minister’s long-decayed corpse in a therapeutic session, certain they can reintegrate his broken personality.

Bebbington’s study is, as a result, exceptional, attempting to meet the criterion of Gladstone’s Anglo-Catholic contemporary and fellow-believer, Henry Parry Liddon, that ‘when a “literary statesman” with applied skills of government does arise, “it is reasonable to combine the book with the policy of ... the minister, on the grounds that both are products of a single mind”’.

To achieve this, Bebbington leads his reader through a close, gracious, and clearly written analysis of Gladstone’s major writing on political theory as an undergraduate, the young Conservative parliamentarian’s bulky volumes on Church–State relations and ‘Church Principles’, the growing and vital importance for him of Tractarian views on the Incarnation, the development of his sympathy for Broad Church ‘liberality’ from the mid-1840s, the Prime Minister as a student of Homer and Olympian religion, and his late-life battles with unbelief. Although he seldom draws direct conclusions to explain any particular political decision, Bebbington does provide the reader with a firm sense of Gladstone’s life-long developing theoretical concerns and their implication for his political life.

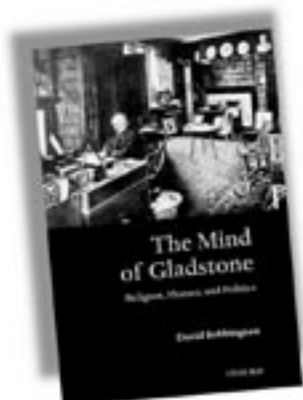
In a concluding chapter on ‘The Nature of Gladstonian Liberalism’, Bebbington offers a summary depiction of Gladstone’s conservative liberalism, noting the ways in which the central marker of his Liberalism – his ‘sublime faith in freedom’ and his willingness to use the language of rights among other Liberal principles – was mediated by an emphasis on ‘loyalty, obedience, order, and tradition’. Likewise, Gladstone’s language of equality was balanced by a strong sense of community, as reflected in the family, municipal politics, the Church, the nation, and attention to a peaceful balance of the various sectors within society as well as between nations. Interests were to be tested by duties, selfishness controlled, justice practised in law and general life.

Alongside community, Bebbington points to the concomitant principle of ‘humanity’ in Gladstone’s Liberalism. This latter he interprets as shaped initially by the politician’s appropriation of the Tractarian



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The Mind of Gladstone

Religion, Homer, and Politics

David Bebbington, Professor of History, University of Stirling

- Shows the interweaving of Gladstone's religion, Homeric studies, and political thought
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William Ewart Gladstone, four times Prime Minister of the United Kingdom under Queen Victoria, was not only the most celebrated British statesman of his day but also a respected theologian and a dedicated scholar of the ancient Greek poet Homer. By examining the development of his ideas, this book reveals that his political thought as leader of the Liberal party intertwined with his religion and classical scholarship.

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[sic] theology of the Incarnation (particularly as manifested in the work of Robert Wilberforce), and developed in Gladstone's shifting perspective on Homer from the mid-1850s on. Bebbington's point here is striking: in his early work on Homer through his *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (3 vols., 1858) Gladstone, enunciating divine grace over nature, pressed a traditional and conservative doctrine of primitive revelation as manifested among all cultures from which they later declined, and opposed the argument that the non-Jewish religions arose 'naturally,' that is as extensions of reverence for major heroes or nature worship. A decade later, however, with *Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age* (1869) the first-time Liberal Prime Minister had partially reversed himself, acknowledging human potential and allowing the possibility of progress.

In a volume attempting to outline the work of so energetic and wide-ranging a reader and writer as Gladstone, readers with different specialisations will inevitably offer readjustments to Bebbington's overall narrative. Thus, one might have wished for a more nuanced distinction between Gladstone (and Wilberforce), as an Old High Churchman, and the Tractarians and Pusey, and for a fuller explanation of Gladstone's 'catholic' (not only Tractarian) doctrines of the Incarnation and of nature and grace (against a strictly Protestant nature *against* grace), which will provide an additional and 'conservative' explanation for Gladstone's 'liberal' change of emphasis on human potential in *Juventus Mundi*.

At the conclusion of his study Bebbington offers some stimulating reflections, associating Gladstone's political (and by implication, religious) theory

with that of late twentieth century 'catholic' communitarians – above all, Alastair MacIntyre – with whom he associates, perhaps too closely, Charles Taylor. The argument will be especially interesting for readers of this journal for whom the communitarian/liberal debate continues in its 'post-liberal' form among British political theologians such as Oliver and Joan O'Donovan, John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy programme, and the American Stanley Hauerwas with his revival of interest in the work of John Howard Yoder. (For a brief review see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., 'State and Civil Society,' in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh [Oxford: Blackwell, 2004], 423–38.) What Bebbington demonstrates in these final reflections is the significance of his work not only for a fuller understanding of Gladstone, but for the challenges faced in the

deracinated and increasing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural liberal democracies of our own day.

Peter C. Erb is Professor of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier Uni-

versity, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada and is presently completing a three-volume critical edition of the correspondence of Henry Edward Manning and William E. Gladstone, 1833–90.

Former politicians remembered

Iain Dale (ed.): *The Politico's Book of the Dead*

(Politico's, 2003)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

Our debt to Politico's over recent years is enormous. Since its foundation in the late 1990s, the press has published a steady stream of political analyses, biographies and volumes of memoirs and reminiscences. Now that the company has recently joined forces with Methuen, it is to be hoped that this astonishing publication record will long continue. This recent offering, *The Politico's Book of the Dead*, is the work of the company's guiding light, Iain Dale, who has edited this work with his customary accuracy and distinction. He has previously edited a number of political works (many concerning Baroness Thatcher), is well known as a political commentator and is currently Director of the recently formed Conservative History Group.

In this work no fewer than forty-one writers have contributed to the hundred entries on a motley assortment of political figures. Some are eminent national figures; others are relative unknowns. About three-quarters of the book is devoted to people who have died since 1993. Many of the entries have appeared in print before, some in the highly acclaimed *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (1998) (including the two entries by the present reviewer: E. Clement Davies and Lady Megan Lloyd George) or in its companion volume the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (2001).

Others were originally penned as newspaper obituaries and tributes. Some were written specifically for the present volume. Inevitably, they contain several factual errors, misjudgements and minor misprints.

Equally inevitably, they vary considerably in style, slant, length and detail. By far the longest entry (over ten pages) is reserved for Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson (1916–95). The volume also has a conspicuous up-to-date air. Several of the entries are on individuals who died during the first half of 2003, among them prominent former Liberal MP Richard Wainwright, former Labour Cabinet minister Mrs Renée Short and prime ministerial consort Sir Denis Thatcher. The most recent of all is former Conservative MP Sir Gerald Vaughan, who died on 29 July 2003. The first entry in the book is devoted to the little-known Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), the black MP for the Finsbury Central division during the 1892–95 parliament and the first ever non-white to sit in the Commons – long before the much publicised election of four coloured Labour MPs in the 1987 general election.

It would be easy to cavil at the editor's choice of worthies for inclusion. Former Prime Ministers like Churchill, Attlee and Eden do not feature in this book. Nor do Liberal leaders from a bygone age like Samuel,

Simon and Grimond. Neither Aneurin Bevan nor Jennie Lee are included. Some are included who made their main contribution outside parliament, among them highly distinguished historian and writer Robert Rhodes James, NCB boss Lord Robens (both also former MPs) and trades union leader Moss Evans. Oliver Baldwin is here, but not Stanley. The Welsh are certainly under-represented: only the two entries by the present reviewer relate to Welsh people.

One feature of particular interest is the inclusion of the fictional characters Prime Minister Jim Hacker and his top civil servant sidekick Sir Humphrey Appleby – their obituaries skilfully crafted by their creators in *Yes, Minister*. There is an entry, too, for fictional Labour Prime Minister Harry Perkins, most engagingly written by Chris Mullin, author of *A Very British Coup*.

Strangely, some of the politicians listed as entries in the publishers' information sheet are not featured in the book itself! These include Jo Grimond (hailed as 'maverick Liberal leader'), Sir Gerald Nabarro ('bon viveur and



REVIEWS

multiple Rolls Royce owner') and David Penhaligon ('eccentric Liberal MP'). Doubtless, last-minute editorial revision led to their being excluded from the final published text.

Women figures are generally well represented. These include colourful individuals like Margot Asquith and her equally dynamic stepdaughter Lady Violet Bonham Carter. As noted, Lady Megan is here (but not her father, or her brother Gwilym, Viscount Tenby). Strangely, there is no entry for former cabinet ministers like Eirene White (1909–99) or her lifelong *bête noir*, Labour's famous 'Red Queen' Barbara Castle, later the Baroness Castle of Blackburn (1910–2002). The

editor had, of course, to make his choice.

The volume has an especially eye-catching dustjacket, but has no illustrations or cartoons. Their inclusion would undoubtedly have added to the appeal of the book. But this impressive tome will certainly interest, amuse, enthral and entertain a large number of readers, young and old alike. A wide readership is assured. One anticipates eagerly the appearance of further works from this enterprising publishing house.

Dr J. Graham Jones is Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

rural areas, as the qualifications for voting were harmonised with those that already existed for the urban boroughs. Large numbers of agricultural labourers now had the vote for the first time. How would they use it?

'Why should we be beggars with a ballot in our hand?'

In 1885, Liberals won 51 per cent of the 158 constituencies that Lynch defines as 'rural and semi-rural'. In 1906, they won 69 per cent. But these were the only elections at which Liberals won a rural majority. In 1895 they sank as low as 18 per cent. The trend of the rural Liberal vote reflected the national trend and, obviously, national issues, whether home rule in 1886 or the Boer War in 1900, had a significant impact. But were there other factors that had a peculiar influence on rural seats – and could Liberals have exploited them better? These are the questions at the heart of Lynch's analysis.

The major problem she faced is that Liberal Party history has focused on leadership activities and on the limited, mostly urban, archives. Her solution has been to draw on local newspapers, combined in places with the census and directory data usually exploited by social rather than political historians. Victorian journalists thought nothing of taking a full page to record a meeting that political activists would struggle to convince the local paper to report today. A comprehensive analysis of the 158 constituencies by this method would occupy a lifetime rather than the ten years taken from a 'vague proposal for a doctoral thesis' (p. v) to Lynch's published monograph. Her sample has been limited to three constituencies in North Essex, South Oxfordshire and Holmfirth in the West Riding of Yorkshire, but this is sufficient to secure different agricultural and religious circumstances as well as to include a semi-rural area with mining and industry.

'God made the land for the people'

Patricia Lynch: *The Liberal Party in Rural England 1885–1910: Radicalism and Community* (Clarendon Press, 2003)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

In the first half of the twentieth century the Liberal Party moved from winning its greatest victory to near-extinction. In the same period the Labour Party moved from insignificance to the creation of a semi-socialist state in Britain. Predictably, historians have brought these two things together and constructed theories about their inevitability: the Liberal Party was doomed once large numbers of the working class were added to the electoral roll and, if not then, once the country had become adjusted to the mass mobilisation and state direction of industry required to win the Great War. Naturally, Liberals made matters worse for themselves by their misguided policies from Gladstone and home rule onwards, and by engaging in fratricidal quarrels, but ... and here clichés about beach equipment and ocean liners begin to occur. If this is

a parody of a broadly accepted view, it is one that has not been adequately challenged. And while Patricia Lynch does not pretend to offer an alternative thesis for the twentieth century – her book does not venture even as far as the Great War – she does challenge the seeds from which the determinist view grows.

The general election of 1885 was fought under new and unprecedented conditions. Most constituencies now returned a single member, and this feature has been very carefully analysed for the benefits that it conferred on one party over another. The other, and more important, feature was the two-thirds growth in the electorate in England and Wales, which had been enfranchised by the Third Reform Act (50–60 per cent growth in Ireland and Scotland). But this increase was not spread evenly; rather, it was concentrated in

Her solution has been to draw on local newspapers, combined in places with the census and directory data usually exploited by social rather than political historians.

It has allowed her to construct a cohesive narrative and to argue that the factors discovered in the analysis of these seats are suggestive of general Liberal strengths and weaknesses which have hitherto been neglected in the twin assumptions that rural seats were Tory seats while urban politics became dominated by class.

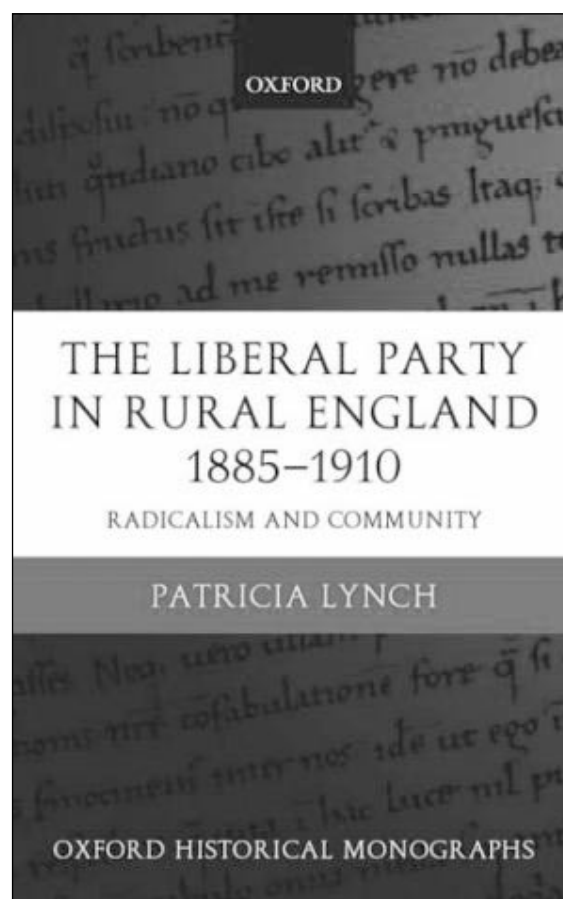
Her technique is particularly useful in analysing the social and occupational structure of the party's membership by following the names on testimonials or petitions through to local directories and the census. Unfortunately the analysis is more static than dynamic, both because it relies on inevitably limited sources of membership data and because she had access to nothing later than the 1891 census data when she carried out the analysis. Naturally, the constituency parties show an influx of new working-class members, but it seems that such members were unable to gain a proportionate share of official positions, which were largely retained by the middle classes. She is also able to demonstrate that the more densely populated constituencies found it easier to establish flourishing party branches. While this might be expected – the bigger the catchment group the more scope for recruiting enough members to form a viable group – the proof is in itself valuable, as are the arguments she advances to explain the competitive advantages that Conservatives had over the Liberals.

'Liberals will not falter from the fight'

Lynch argues that these advantages were as much cultural as political. One of the great fears of the Liberal leadership was that the agricultural labourers and the small tenants would vote for their Tory landlords out of deference or fear. Although some active party workers were evicted and a few clerics refused traditional handouts to rural radicals, particularly in 1910,

the party suffered more from the self-imposed rural discipline of community harmony. Liberal propaganda against the local aristocracy, whether from democratic, class or land-reform motives, disturbed this natural neighbourliness and was both a valuable party weapon and confusingly counterproductive, particularly during local elections. The disharmony represented by the relatively rare general election was tolerated and ritualised. Rowdy meetings and the chairing, in torchlight procession round the towns and villages, of the victorious candidate in a hand-drawn carriage draped in party colours, had allowed the participation of the poorer sections of the community before they had the vote – and this persisted after 1885. But in local elections candidates generally felt obliged to adopt a different party label, such as Progressive, or to abandon party labels altogether. Even well-recognised party activists stood as independents.

Liberal earnestness was an even bigger drawback. Liberals saw party activity primarily as a means of education and proselytising – a common failing to this day – with lectures on home rule or temperance and a horse-drawn van touring the countryside, manned 'by several young men from Oxford University'. The Conservatives, by contrast, relied heavily on the Primrose League, whose activities were apparently social and inclusive even of supporters of another party. Conservatives were also quicker than Liberals to recruit female activists. Eventually, Liberals learnt the benefits of fêtes and 'programmes of interesting and amusing sports'. I particularly liked the Gretna Green cycle race in which 'pairs of ladies and gentlemen were required to ride hand-in-hand to a table "where both must sign name, address, and occupation, and re-mount and ride hand-in-hand to [the] winning post"'. Such fêtes could attract several thousand visitors.



'Why should we work hard and let the landlords take the best?'

Lynch argues that, in the election of 1885, Liberals had the advantage of a rural radical tradition dating back to the time of the Chartists and could draw on long-standing rural discontent over the control exercised over village lives and livelihoods by the landowner and the Anglican clergy. Liberals raised the prospect of more extensive peasant proprietorship through proposals for allotments – the famous 'three acres and a cow' – and attacked the local elite and tithes, which, though not paid by agricultural labourers, were seen as a factor behind low agricultural wages. Irish home rule dominated the elections of 1886 to 1895 and the reduced focus on domestic policy held the party back in both rural and urban areas. But the impact was more acute in rural areas, which were suffering from an agricultural depression and a decline in population.

Within this overall picture, Lynch draws some interesting distinctions between the diverse experiences of her three constituencies with different crop and pasture dependencies: the Liberal Party's promotion of temperance was never going to be a success among barley-growing farmers and their labourers in Essex, for example. She is also able to draw attention to instances where local activists took their own initiative in promoting radical campaigns more relevant to the local populace. However, while she recognises the existence of Liberal Unionists, it is disappointing that she did not directly explore the impact on local Liberal activity of the disruption caused to the party by home rule and how it was reflected in the social composition of her local parties. Almost certainly a factor in the 1886 election, the split probably still worked against the party in 1892.

The 'khaki election' of 1900 marked a Conservative high point. Rural areas were as patriotic as any city, and Liberal preaching against the Boer War did not go down well in the countryside, which had contributed disproportionately to the armed forces. Thereafter, however, the Tories slowly lost control of rural affections. The use of Chinese indentured labour on the Rand tarnished the victory in South Africa; poorly paid agricultural workers could readily identify with their wretched conditions. The Tory 1902 Education Act was very damaging in sparsely populated areas, where a government-funded Anglican village school would preclude the possibility of any non-denominational education. The Act also made education a county council responsibility, whereas women had a vote only at the district council level. Joseph Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign was not an immediate Conservative vote-loser – it offered the superficially attractive prospect of protection to agriculture – but over time

Her achievements represent a challenge, which I hope will be taken up, to build a broader picture of Liberal activity at a constituency level in this crucial period and into the second decade of the twentieth century.

the fear of higher food prices and low wages was a greater worry to rural voters and their wives. The prospect of land reform looked more attractive, and Liberal speakers were able to draw on the folk memories of the poor conditions before the abolition of the Corn Laws in the 'hungry forties'.

'Make them pay their taxes on the land just like the rest'

The People's Budget of 1909 offered rural Liberal campaigners two apparently popular rallying cries – an attack on rich aristocrats anxious to overthrow the will of the Commons just to avoid higher income tax, and the prospect of a new tax which might encourage the renting of uncultivated land. So why did the Liberals lose half their rural seats in the two elections of 1910? Apart from intimidation, Lynch suggests that the rising cost of living was a major factor militating against Liberal arguments for free trade and also that the Conservatives, with more to lose, were better motivated to mobilise their forces and attract previous abstainers.

But what about the Labour challenge? Of Lynch's three constituencies only one provided the right background for a detailed analysis. While in the most rural areas agricultural unions had gained and lost a foothold, only Holmfirth contained the textile factories and coal mines that provided a sound basis for union survival. Holmfirth's Labour movement originated among the miners, who had traditionally been strong Liberals. Difficulties for the Liberals began towards 1890 when coal prices and wages were under pressure. Unionised workers tried to make support for an Eight Hours Bill a condition of their support but the Liberal candidate, H. J. Wilson, resisted. A short-term reconciliation was followed by a break in which the miners teamed up with the

Independent Labour Party from Bradford to seek a working-class candidate. While this proved impossible in the 1892 and 1895 general elections, where policy differences between Labour and Liberal were slight, activists were determined to try again. By the 1910 election, not only had Wilson and the Liberal government alienated a section of the more socialist workers but union members had grown to represent nearly half the electorate – seemingly a good base for a new Labour candidate. The Liberals concentrated on traditional radical policies and not the politics of class. Wilson retained the seat, losing support among the textile workers but holding on to the mining vote. After Wilson retired in 1912, Labour put up a mineworker but despite an improved poll lost to an unknown Liberal stockbroker from Manchester.

Patricia Lynch has used her sources well and provides substantial evidence for the local arguments she advances. While this is clearly an academic work, which demands some familiarity with the period under consideration, it is well recommended to the attention of the general reader. Within the evidence, her work is persuasive: neither a class-based politics nor a Tory countryside was inevitable. The unanswered question is whether her small sample is representative of rural voters more generally. Her achievements represent a challenge, which I hope will be taken up, to build a broader picture of Liberal activity at a constituency level in this crucial period and into the second decade of the twentieth century. She has set a standard well worth emulating.

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group. The heading and sub-headings are from 'The Land', a song championed by the proponents of Henry George's land value tax policy and adopted by Liberals in the 1910 elections (source: Liberator Song Book, 1995 edition).

Things that never happened

Duncan Brack and Iain Dale Book (eds.): *Prime Minister Portillo and other things that never happened: A collection of political counterfactuals* (Politico's, 2003)

Reviewed by **Mark Pack**

‘What if’ histories are often disdained by those who see themselves as serious historians, but this intriguing collection – edited by the eclectic combination of the Liberal Democrats’ former Director of Policy and the Conservatives’ prospective candidate for North Norfolk¹ – does much to give counterfactuals a good name.

The range of contributions covers most of the main events of British high politics in the twentieth century, with a couple of foreign episodes – Lenin and JFK – thrown in. This plays to the editors’ strengths, as the list of contributors is impressive, with nearly every chapter being either from a recognised academic expert in the field or from a practitioner with inside experience of the events.²

Economic and social events generally feature only as a background to the political stories. There is, for example, no ‘what if’ on OPEC’s decision to hike oil prices in the 1970s, despite the oil price increase being one of the defining features of British politics in the 1970s. The range is also firmly twentieth century – there is no speculation over close nineteenth-century political events, such as the one-vote majority in the Commons for the Great Reform Bill in 1831.

Indeed, the book is a collection of political histories in the traditional story-telling sense. Most chapters include a clear exposition of the actual events leading up to the historical twist. Richard Grayson’s counterfactual, ‘What if the Liberal Party had emerged united from the First World War?’ and Helen Szamuely’s on ‘What if Lenin’s

“sealed” train had not reached Petrograd in 1917?’ in particular highlight the benefits of this approach – which makes the book a useful primer on many major events, in addition to the stimulating plots of the counterfactuals themselves.

As Szamuely suggests, without Lenin’s arrival it is difficult to see Russian history taking a course anything nearly as bloody as it did in the 1930s, yet it is also difficult to see how anything other than some alternative form of authoritarian government would have taken power. Whilst changing the names amongst the dictators may be a relatively minor matter of detail in the larger picture, even a tiny change in policy over agriculture or purges could have resulted in a huge difference to the lives of millions.

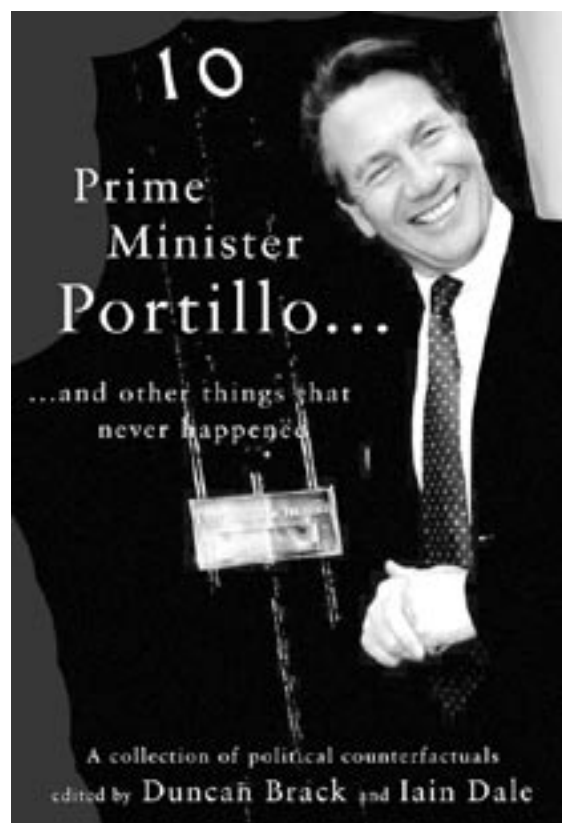
Similarly, in Britain, Grayson’s alternative history results in much the same overall outcome by 1939 – how much difference would it really have made if Churchill had been in a different party for some years in the inter-war period? But, again, even a small change in economic policy after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 could have made a big difference to the day-to-day lives of millions.

The underlying question of the extent to which big personalities can shape history is a constant one for historians. Although it is implicitly touched on by many of the chapters in the book, it is slightly disappointing that the issue is rarely covered explicitly.

Nevertheless, the clarity of the contributions provides many other interesting morsels to ponder. Michael McManus,

whilst considering the possible outcomes of the Liberal Party disappearing totally in the 1950s, throws out one of the best. He points out how thirty-four Liberal candidates missed by only 6,000 votes or less in 1945 before moving on to the grim tale of the Liberal Party’s history over the next decade. But it leaves hanging the thought of how close the Liberals came to coming out of the 1945 election with a vote share of 19 per cent in the seats it contested and with around fifty MPs, including Grimond, Sinclair and Beveridge. Would the Liberals have ended up with the balance of power in 1950? Given the ideological and personal tensions within the party, this alternative history is unlikely to have ended happily. But it would have been rather more spectacular than the dismal march to near-death that actually followed for the Liberals.

One of the other most intriguing morsels is that produced by Dianne Hayter in her chapter, ‘What if Benn had defeated Healey in 1981?’



REVIEWS

She points out that had there been a subtle difference in the way in which abstentions were counted, Benn would indeed have won the contest for Labour's deputy leader.

As to be expected in a collection of twenty-one alternative histories, there are varying degrees of plausibility. Anne Perkin's account of Gaitskell rather than Bevan dying in 1960 results in a remarkably harmonious outcome for the Labour Party overall, which, given the many vituperative personalities of the time, is a little difficult to believe. Probably the most disappointing chapter is Bernard Ingham's on Westland, which is more a justification of himself and of Mrs Thatcher than a counterfactual. An entertaining read, but not really the right chapter for this book.

Several other chapters highlight one of the conundrums of 1980s British politics. In many different ways Labour might have done better in the short term (e.g. if Scargill had called and won a strike ballot amongst the NUM) or have done worse (e.g. if the Alliance had squeaked past it in terms of vote share in 1983). But doing worse in the short run was arguably better for Labour in the long run, by providing the necessary shock behind Kinnock's modernisation programme. The counter-factuals that have Labour doing better in the short run largely also paint a worse longer-term picture for the party.

This fundamental pessimism about Labour in the 1980s contrasts with the optimism about British politics in the counter-factuals of the 1960s and 1970s, where the twists usually results in events turning out for the better rather than for the worse, from the perspective of the chapter's author. For this period, the counterfactuals are extremely positive – imagining that a few changes in events could have heralded a happy moderate government without serious economic crises. That several different authors

The collection tries to steer a careful course between academic respectability, with the serious list of contributors and defensive introduction, and playful marketability, illustrated by the quote from Chairman Mao on the cover.

– with the exception of Greg Rosen – believe their own twists could wipe away the long-term economic problems facing the country, and in particular the poisonous hostility of much of industrial relations, is as striking as it is surprising.

The collection tries to steer a careful course between academic respectability, with the serious list of contributors and defensive introduction, and playful marketability, illustrated by the quote from Chairman Mao on the cover (when asked what would have happened if Khrushchev rather than Kennedy had been assassinated, he said: 'Well, I'll tell you one thing, Aristotle Onassis wouldn't have married Mrs Khrushchev').

Some of the contributors occasionally fall prey to this lure of tweeness, as with John Charmley's reworking of the succession to Chamberlain. His account of Halifax as Prime Minister takes some of Churchill's most famous quotes and puts

them in the mouths of others with their opposite meaning in a rather groan-inducing sequence of too-clever plays on words.

But it is an all the more enjoyable read for that.

Mark Pack works in the Liberal Democrats' Campaigns & Elections Department, mainly on IT and legal matters. He has a doctorate in nineteenth-century Yorkshire elections from the University of York.

- 1 To complete the set, one of the contributors is the chair of the Labour History Group.
- 2 Though the insiders are just occasionally not as knowledgeable as perhaps they should be – as with Iain Dale's implausible account of Michael Portillo not knowing his election result until the public announcement from the Returning Officer. In reality, candidates and agents are told the figures before being put on public parade for the formal announcement.

The paperback edition of *Prime Minister Portillo* will be available from late September 2004.

LETTERS

Sir Clement Freud

As someone who was considerably involved in Sir Clement Freud's successful by-election campaign, I would like to comment on Daniel Crewe's observation that 'although he was knighted in 1987, Freud did not get a peerage' ('One of nature's Liberals', biography of Freud, *Journal of Liberal History* 43).

I regard this as a shameful blot on the party's record. Cle well deserved a peerage, having held his seat for eighteen years and having displayed conspicuous loyalty to the leaders of the party. He would have been an asset to the party and to the House if he had joined us.

As I understand it, Cle was top of the list to be nominated for a

peerage when Stephen Ross, MP for the Isle of Wight until 1987, lobbied to be given priority and was given it by the powers that be. Subsequently he slipped off the list completely as others were given more priority.

It might be suggested that Cle was a little lightweight in national policy matters, but he was considerably less lightweight, and a great deal more reliable, than Stephen who, I remember when I was Director of Policy Promotion, for his infuriating indecisiveness and futile attacks of conscience. Cle has also lived considerably longer!

Lord Beaumont of Whitley

ARCHIVES

Coventry archives

by **M.J. Hinman**

Coventry Archives' collection area covers the present city, so includes suburbs which have had their own local party and ward organisations, as in Foleshill and Earlsdon.

The Liberal Party was stronger in the city than were the Conservatives during the nineteenth century, but it declined during the 1920s to the extent that an informal electoral pact was made with them, formalised as the Progressive Party in 1936, which lasted until 1949.

Records held relate to the Coventry Liberal Association, 1895–1929 (PA68); Coventry Liberal Club, 1873–79 and 1968–70 (liquidation) (PA 1189, 1554); Coventry Progressive Party, 1941–47 (PA585, 937); Foleshill Liberal Club, 1912–14 (PA752); Liberal Party, Earlsdon branch, 1984–89 (PA1408); and Social Democratic Party, 1981–88 (PA1250, 1279, 1305). There

are also magazines for Foleshill and North-East Warwickshire Liberals, 1885–87 (PA 1749); and lecture-notes and correspondence of Alderman W.H. Grant, 1890–1931 (PA159).

All the above collections are open for immediate inspection except those of the Earlsdon branch, permission to view which must be obtained until 31 December 2009, inclusive, from the secretary of Coventry Liberal Democrats.

- Address: Mandela House, Bayley Lane, Coventry CV1 5RG
- Tel: 024 7683 2418 Fax: 024 7683 2421
- Email: archives@coventry.gov.uk
- Web: www.coventry-city.co.uk/archives/home.htm
- Open Monday 9.30 – 8; Tuesday – Friday 9.30 – 4.45

and a committee meeting attendance register 1970–75. The deposit also included minutes of the Holborn Liberal Association 1903–07, minutes of the Peckham and Camberwell Liberal Association 1947–54 and an account book of the Willesden Liberal Association 1965–66. A catalogue of these records is available at London Metropolitan Archives under reference number ACC/1446, and the records themselves are open for consultation.

An additional deposit was received on 13 September 1995, consisting of further minute books, account books and administration and correspondence files dating from 1964 to 1988. This deposit has not yet been catalogued, however, and is therefore available for consultation only with 48 hours notice.

- London Metropolitan Archives is based in Islington, at 40 Northampton Road, London, EC1R 0HB.
- Tel: 020 7332 3820
- email: ask.lma@corpoflondon.gov.uk

- Web: www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma
- Details of how to get to the record office are on our website.
- Opening hours: 9.30 – 4.45 Monday, Wednesday and Friday; 9.30 – 7.30 Tuesday and Thursday

We are also open 9.30 – 4.45 on selected Saturdays during the year. These are usually the second and fourth Saturdays in the month, but it is best either to check the website or phone in advance of a Saturday visit to confirm that we are open.

A reader's card is not required to visit the record office.

Catalogued material can be accessed via the catalogues which are all on open access in our public rooms. Original documents can be ordered from these catalogues and will be produced from our strongrooms approximately 20 minutes later.

At present there is no web access to our catalogues so remote ordering is not possible.

The London Liberal Foundation and London Liberal Party records held at London Metropolitan Archives

by **Nicola Avery**

The London Liberal Foundation was formed in 1903 to assist in maintaining Liberal Associations in the London area, to secure candidates, and to further political education. Its name was changed to the London Liberal Party during a general

reorganisation in October 1943.

Records of the London Liberal Foundation were deposited at London Metropolitan Archives on long-term loan on 26 February 1979. These consist of council and committee minutes 1920–62, accounts 1930–35

Email mailing list

If you would like to receive up-to-date information on the Liberal Democrat History Group's activities, including advance notice of meetings, and new History Group publications, you can sign up to our email mailing list: visit the History Group's website (www.liberalhistory.org.uk) and fill in the details on the 'Contact' page.

Media update: volunteer wanted

One of the services we aim to provide via the website is a guide to media sources, including:

- A bibliography of articles on the Liberal Democrats in the main newspapers and magazines
- Articles in academic journals on the Liberal Democrats
- Articles of historical interest in the main Liberal Democrat journals (*Liberal Democrat News*, *Liberator*, *Reformer*)

Unfortunately the individuals who first collected this data for us are no longer available, and the listings exist only for 1988–96 (for the first two) and 1995–98 (for the third).

Anyone who would like to volunteer to update and maintain any of these listings would be very welcome: please contact the Editor at journal@liberalhistory.org.uk.

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

ROY JENKINS – REFORMER, VISIONARY, STATESMAN

Reforming Home Secretary, successful Chancellor of the Exchequer, principled European, groundbreaking President of the European Commission and distinguished man of letters, Roy Jenkins had a deep impact on British politics and inspired generations of liberals. This meeting marks the publication of *Roy Jenkins: A Retrospective* (Oxford University Press), a collection of essays by friends and associates from every stage of his life, edited by Andrew Adonis and Keith Thomas.

Speakers: **Shirley Williams** (Leader of the Liberal Democrat peers), **Peter Riddell** (*The Times*) and **Dick Taverne** (former Home Office and Treasury minister). Chair: **Bill Rodgers**.

8.00pm Sunday 19th September 2004

Shaftesbury Room, Highcliff Marriott Hotel, Bournemouth

A Liberal Democrat History Group special event

TOUR OF THE REFORM CLUB

The Reform Club, in London's Pall Mall, was founded in 1836 and its Grade I listed Clubhouse, designed by Sir Charles Barry, opened in 1841. For much of the nineteenth century it housed the headquarters of the Liberal Party election organisation. Every Whig and Liberal Prime Minister from Melbourne to Lloyd George was a member and several Prime Ministers were elected Liberal Party leader in the Club library.

The Liberal Democrat History Group offers *Journal of Liberal History* readers the opportunity to participate in a guided tour of the Reform Club. The tour is limited to the first 18 applicants who request places from the History Group's Secretary, Graham Lippiatt, at:

enquiries@liberalhistory.org.uk; or

24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, Middlesex, HA2 8TD

5.15pm Wednesday 27th October 2004

The tour will be followed (at 6.30) by a History Group meeting, open to all – further details to follow

Journal online subscriptions now available

The Liberal Democrat History Group is pleased to announce the availability of a new subscription service: online subscriptions.

In addition to printed copies, online subscribers will be able to access pdf files of current and past *Journals* via the Group's website, www.liberalhistory.org.uk. Online subscribers will be sent a password (changed each year) for access to the protected area of the site.

Online subscriptions cost £35.00 per year. Overseas (non-UK) online subscriptions are available for £40.00 per year, or £100 for three years.

Older copies of the *Journal* will continue to be available to all visitors to the site. Issues 1–24 are currently available as pdf files.