

# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## Social reformers and Liberals

Ian Packer

**Joseph and Seebohm Rowntree** Biography

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Stephen Barber

**The flawed strategy of the SDP**

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Simon Morgan

**Richard Cobden and British imperialism**

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Michael Wickham

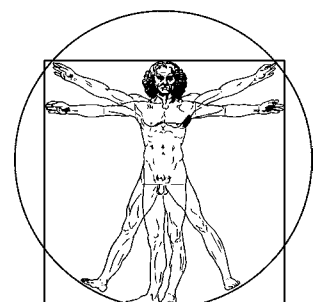
**Religion and politics** The Bradlaugh case and the Berwick by-elections 1880–81

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Adrian Slade

**From angry young man to simmering old guru** Interview with Tony Greaves

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The Liberal Democrat History Group acknowledges with appreciation the financial assistance kindly provided by the **Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd** for the development of the *Liberal History Online* project, a comprehensive series of articles, biographies and extracts of original publications and speeches covering all aspects of Liberal history (see [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk)). The biography of Joseph and Seebohm Rowntree contained in this issue is the *Journal's* contribution to the centenary commemoration of the Rowntree Trusts, established in 1904.

### Liberal Democrat History Group

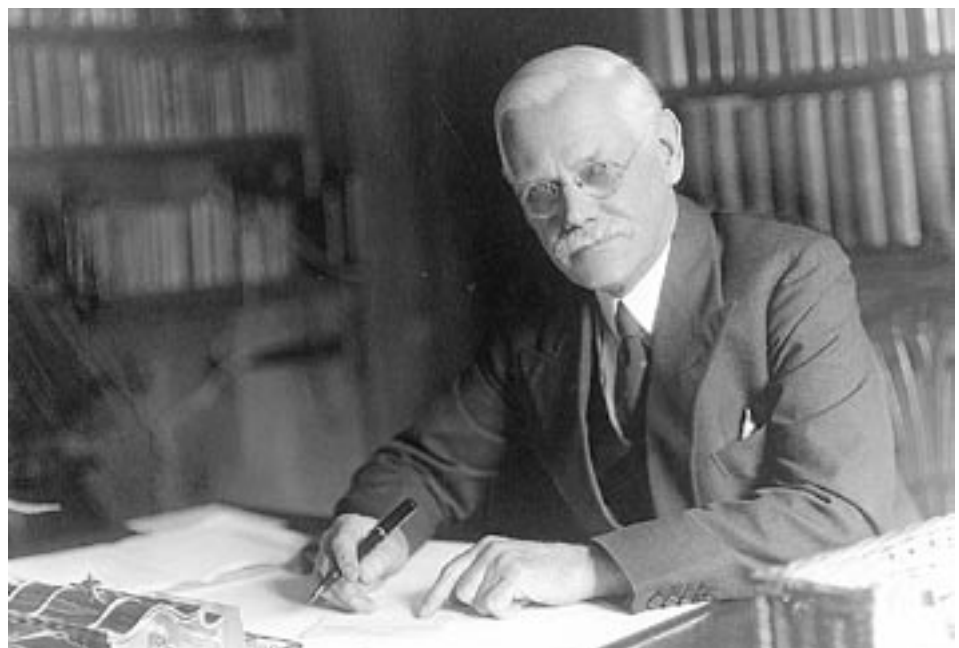
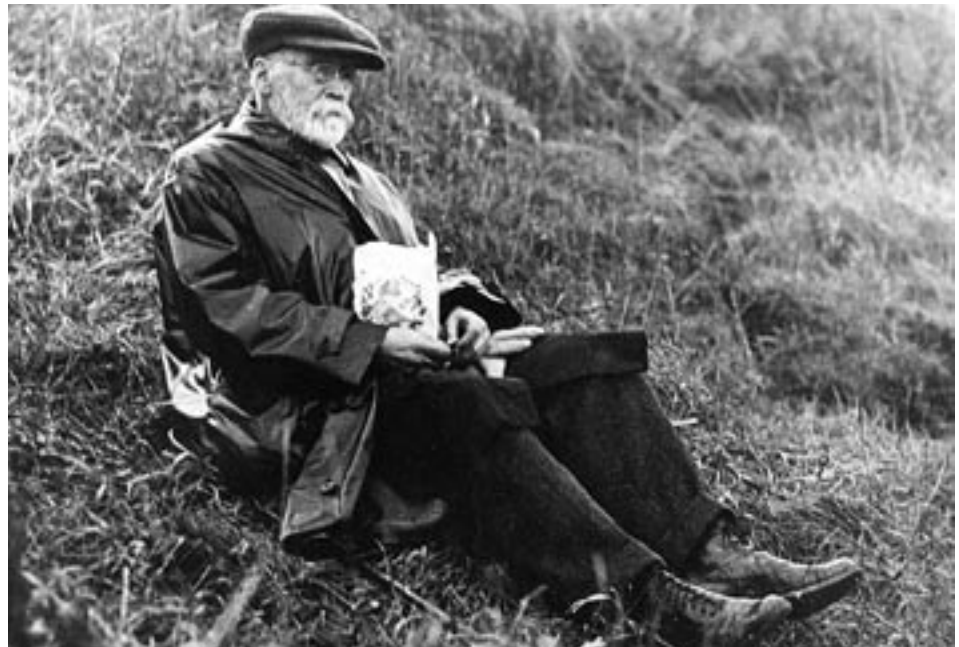
The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of historical topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal* and other occasional publications.

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](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk)**.

Chair: **Tony Little**

# JOSEPH AND SEEBOHM

**Ian Packer** analyses the interwoven careers of two committed Liberals: Joseph Rowntree (1836–1925), founder of the family confectionary firm and the Trusts that still bear his name; and his son, Seebohm Rowntree (1871–1954), the businessman and social investigator, best known as the author of *Poverty: a Study of Town Life* (Macmillan, 1901). Unique and many-sided individuals, there was nobody else quite like them – though their enthusiasm for the collection and analysis of statistics helped to usher in a time when social investigation would be professionalised and impossible to combine with running a major industrial enterprise.



Joseph Rowntree, on the cliffs at Scarborough, c. 1918; Seebohm Rowntree in his study, 1930s. All pictures accompanying this article kindly supplied by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

# BOHM ROWNTREE

**T**he name Rowntree was familiar in two contrasting places for much of the twentieth century. The first was as the manufacturer's name on some of Britain's best-selling sweets and drinks, such as Elect cocoa, Rowntree's pastilles and fruit gums and, from the 1930s, well-known chocolates like Kit Kat, Aero and Smarties. The second place was on the covers of serious-minded investigations of social conditions in weighty books and reports. The two were linked together by the remarkable figures of Joseph Rowntree and his son, Seebohm. Joseph was the effective founder of the family firm of cocoa, chocolate and sweet manufacturers and of the Joseph Rowntree Trusts that have become well known for their charitable and political donations and contributions to social policy and research. His son, Seebohm, succeeded him as chairman of the firm and became one of the most famous pioneers of social investigation, particularly in the field of poverty. Lady Megan Lloyd George even called him 'the Einstein of the Welfare State' in a broadcast on 3 March 1955. But these are only the best known of the two men's multi-sided activities, which touched some of the most important areas of twentieth-century life and thought and intersected closely with developments in Liberalism.

## **A family firm**

Joseph Rowntree was born at York on 24 May 1836.<sup>1</sup> He was the second son of another Joseph Rowntree, a relatively wealthy and well-respected wholesale grocer in the city, and Sarah Stephenson, whose family came from Manchester. Both of young Joseph's parents were Quakers and he was brought up in their faith, attending the Quaker institution, Bootham School in York, until he was fifteen, when he became an apprentice in his father's business. Joseph and his elder brother inherited this concern on their father's death in 1859, but Joseph left ten years later to go into business with his younger brother Henry, who had bought the cocoa and chocolate manufacturing side of another firm of York Quakers, Tuke & Co., in 1862.

Henry's business was small-scale and concentrated on making Rowntree's Prize Medal Rock Cocoa. He employed only a dozen or so workers, plus a temperamental donkey for deliveries and a parrot, whose duties were unspecified. Henry also seems to have been in some financial trouble when Joseph agreed to sink his capital in the firm and become a partner. Joseph was soon the driving force in the business, even before the easy-going Henry's death in 1883. He gradually built the firm up, relying on his formidable accounting skills to control costs and slowly

learning to master and refine the production process.

Joseph was obsessive about the quality of his products, urging his office staff to 'Have a nibble, now and again' to test them. The turning point for the firm was the decision to manufacture fruit pastilles in 1881 – then a novelty in Britain. By the late 1880s the business was expanding rapidly and a new site on the outskirts of York was purchased in 1890. The 1890s proved to be boom years for Joseph, and his business started to compete in some of the biggest consumer markets, especially through its promotion of Elect cocoa as a quality product for the masses. In 1902 the firm had over two thousand workers and was becoming a well-known brand name throughout Britain.

By this time Joseph was sharing the control of the business with a younger generation of Rowntrees. He had married twice. His first marriage, on 15 August 1862, was to Julia Seebohm, the daughter of a German Quaker who had settled in England. She died in 1863, leaving a daughter who did not survive childhood. When Joseph married again, on 14 November 1867, it was to Julia's cousin, Emma Antoinette Seebohm (1846–1924). In contrast to her cousin, Emma only became a Quaker on her marriage and was entirely German by birth and upbringing. She and Joseph had four sons and two daughters.

**The two men's multi-sided activities touched some of the most important areas of twentieth-century life and thought and intersected closely with developments in Liberalism.**

## JOSEPH AND SEEBOHM ROWNTREE



Joseph Rowntree  
in 1862 and 1878

All four sons eventually joined their father in the business, as did three of Joseph's nephews and both his sons-in-law, allowing him to keep its expanding operations strictly under family control. When Joseph turned his firm into a limited company in 1897, Rowntree & Co. had only one non-family director. Joseph's heir was expected to be his eldest son, John Wilhelm Rowntree (1868–1905), but ill-health forced his retirement in 1899, leaving his second son, Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, as his father's deputy and heir-apparent – though Joseph did not finally retire until 1923, at the age of eighty-seven. He died two years later, on 24 February 1925, at his home in York.

Seebohm (as he was always known) was born in York on 7 July 1871.<sup>2</sup> He followed his father to Bootham School between 1882 and 1887, and then spent five terms (though he did not take a degree) studying chemistry at Owen's College, the forerunner of Manchester University. Joseph

tended to assign the younger Rowntrees to particular areas of the business and he intended Seebohm to take charge of research and development. Seebohm started work for his father in this capacity in 1889 and became a director in 1897 when the firm became a limited company. In the latter year he married Lydia Potter (1870–1944), a member of a well-known family of Middlesbrough Quakers. She and Seebohm had four sons and a daughter, though only the eldest son, Peter (1904–85), followed the family tradition and became a director of Rowntree & Co.

Joseph was always known as an employer whose deeply felt Quaker faith motivated him to show a genuine concern for his employees and their welfare. As the firm grew he could no longer maintain a personal interest in all his workers and his beliefs were translated into an early form of corporate welfare. An eight-hour day was introduced in 1896, a works doctor in 1904 and a pension scheme in 1906.<sup>3</sup> Seebohm

shared his father's unobtrusive Quaker commitment and, as the first head of the firm's labour department, a post he kept until his retirement, he was closely involved in all these developments. In themselves they were not unique. Many confectionary manufacturers in Europe and North America (like the Rowntrees' rivals and fellow-Quakers, the Cadburys) had reputations as 'good' employers because it made economic sense to develop an experienced and committed workforce in a consumer industry that produced for the domestic market and was not subject to violent fluctuations of demand.

Joseph and Seebohm continued to develop their welfare policies to adapt to changing times. Works councils were introduced in 1916, a form of unemployment insurance in 1921 and profit-sharing in 1923. These policies were maintained despite increasing financial difficulties for Rowntree & Co. in the depression of the 1920s. The company did not turn the corner until the development

of new lines of chocolate bars in the next decade.

Seebohm did not keep developments in the firm's welfare policies to himself. During the inter-war period, as well as running Rowntree & Co. from 1923 until his retirement as managing director in 1936, he became one of the first and foremost exponents of theories of management and labour relations.<sup>4</sup> His most important publication in this field was *The Human Factor in Business* (Longmans, 1921), which urged the importance not just of good wages and conditions, but attention to the aspirations and status of a firm's workers in promoting efficiency and industrial conciliation. Seebohm tirelessly propagandised against wage cuts as the response to depression and in favour of a more 'scientific' approach to management which concentrated on lowering other costs of production, through cost accounting, business research and forward planning. This work effectively updated and generalised his father's approach to business and proved one of the first major contributions to management studies in Britain. His emphasis on labour-management co-operation gained Seebohm a widely respected reputation as a conciliator in industrial relations, and he played a part behind the scenes in trying to end such major disputes as the 1919 railway strike and the 1926 coal strike.

### Drink and poverty

Joseph Rowntree, like his son, was a man whose interests ranged far beyond his firm. His Quakerism led him into various forms of social service and contact with York's poor, especially through teaching in the Society's adult schools, but his flair for accountancy was part of a passion for statistics and he also began to collect figures about the wider context of social conditions. In 1864–65 he wrote two lengthy unpublished papers which gathered together and analysed existing statistics on pauperism, illiteracy

and crime.<sup>5</sup> At this time Joseph got no further than blaming the Established Church for social ills, but he returned to the questions he had raised when he had more time on his hands in the 1890s.

Joseph, like many late Victorian Nonconformists, had gradually become a total abstainer from alcohol (probably in the 1870s) and a passionate believer that drink was an important cause of poverty and misery. This opinion was widely shared in the late nineteenth century Liberal Party, which became closely associated with the attempt to impose legislative restrictions on drinking. To propagate his views, Joseph embarked on a programme of research with a well-known social investigator called Arthur Sherwell (later Liberal MP for Huddersfield) and together they produced *The Temperance Problem and Social Reform* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1899), the first of five books they co-wrote in seven years on the drink issue. Joseph argued against prohibition and in favour of restricting alcohol sales to a state-run monopoly (the 'Gothenburg system'), together with the creation of alcohol-free 'people's palaces' as alternatives to pubs. These plans contradicted the more common views in temperance and Liberal circles that local authorities should be able to ban alcohol sales in their area, or that magistrates should concentrate on reducing the number of public houses.

This strain of puritanism was reflected in policies at Rowntree & Co., which severely discouraged drinking, gambling and illicit sex among employees.<sup>6</sup> This was not entirely successful, though, and Joseph discontinued the firm's outing to Whitby for some years, after an incident when many of his workers became incapable with drink and had to be escorted to the train by the police at the end of the day.

Seebohm, too, was a campaigner against alcohol, though he was better known as an opponent of gambling – he edited a book on the subject in 1905

and was a leading light of the National Anti-Gambling League. In one of his later publications he inveighed against the cinema and the dance hall as part of 'a new social problem which urgently calls for solution'.

Both Joseph and Seebohm believed, in a way typical of Nonconformists of their era, that leisure should be used for moral and practical improvement, not wasted on harmful self-indulgence. Joseph's home contained a great many books, but very few pictures, and he had no interest in music. His only known recreation was to take a walk along the coast at Scarborough on Saturday afternoons, with some apples and ginger biscuits for his lunch. Seebohm only relaxed his father's austere standards to the extent of taking an active interest in the theatre in later life.

But Joseph's temperance views also contained the seeds of Seebohm's work on poverty, first and most famously demonstrated in his book, *Poverty: a Study of Town Life* (Macmillan, 1901). This struck out in a new direction by analysing the extent and some of the causes of poverty in York. Seebohm often said that he was inspired by Charles Booth's survey of poverty in London, but the research for the book overlapped with the writing of Joseph's work on temperance, and Seebohm and Joseph probably influenced each other's work profoundly.<sup>7</sup> One of Joseph's arguments in *The Temperance Problem* was that drinking was the result of the narrowness and deprivations of urban living and that policies were needed to 'dry up the springs from which intemperance flows', as well as to control the drink trade.<sup>8</sup>

The public needed to be impressed with a 'vivid realisation of these conditions', and this is just what Seebohm's book did, demonstrating that he was quite as obsessed with the meticulous presentation of statistics as his father. *Poverty* estimated how many people in York were in want on the basis of a visit to every working-class household

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in the city by one of Seebohm's researchers. Seebohm then calculated wage levels throughout York for every working-class occupation and compared these with his own tabulation of the cost of food, rent and clothing needed to keep a family in what he described as 'physical efficiency'. His conclusions were startling – 10 per cent of York's population were in 'primary poverty', receiving inadequate incomes to maintain themselves, and a further 17.84 per cent were in 'secondary poverty', theoretically able to avoid want on the basis of their income, but unable to do so (possibly, Seebohm suggested, through drink and gambling).

Joseph's work foreshadowed these conclusions. He had used Charles Booth's figures on London, together with his own work on expenditure on alcohol and calculations of the minimum necessary weekly budget, to conclude that 'a large proportion of the working class do not receive sufficient nourishment for efficient subsistence; and secondly, that a much larger proportion have absolutely *no margin in their weekly incomes for expenditure upon alcoholic drinks*'.

Both Joseph's and Seebohm's books sold very well and associated the Rowntree name with major controversies. When Seebohm's older brother, John Wilhelm, was asked 'Which Rowntree are *you*?' he was able to reply unhesitatingly, 'Oh, the brother of Poverty and the son of Drink.'<sup>9</sup> But while any need for a state monopoly of alcohol sales was bypassed by the restrictions on licensing laws that were introduced during the First World War, Seebohm's work was an important contribution to the growing climate of opinion that a good deal of poverty was as much structural as the fault of individuals and required state action to remedy – a conclusion that Seebohm argued extensively in pamphlets, speeches and letters to the press in the 1900s.<sup>10</sup>

Not all of the ideas in *Poverty* were new, but their presentation

**Both were committed Liberals, with an intense loyalty to the party as the representative of Nonconformity, temperance and social reform, and they were important background figures in Liberalism.**

in the form of a 'scientific' large-scale survey that was accessible to the non-specialist made an impact on public debate and on rising young politicians like Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George. Above all, the book made Seebohm's reputation as a social investigator and analyst. But while he continued to publish extensively in this field he never repeated the impact of *Poverty*. Further surveys of poverty in York which he published in 1941 and 1951 only confirmed social changes that were already being widely reported and discussed.<sup>11</sup> But Seebohm remained fascinated by all aspects of society and had interesting things to say in many of his later reports, especially *Old People* (Oxford University Press, 1947) and *English Life and Leisure* (Longmans, 1951). However, while Seebohm lost his uniqueness, he retained his reputation as a pioneer and his name is still commonly linked with Charles Booth's as the men who 'proved' the extent of poverty in Edwardian England and so laid the foundations of the welfare state.

### Politics and the Rowntree Trusts

Neither Joseph nor Seebohm ever considered entering politics – after all, they had enough to do running Rowntree & Co. and pursuing their many other interests. But both were committed Liberals, with an intense loyalty to the party as the representative of Nonconformity, temperance and social reform, and they were important background figures in Liberalism. They were especially influential in their home city, where Joseph was a sometime president of, and major donor to, the York Liberal Association and his nephew, Arnold Rowntree, was Liberal MP for York 1910–18.<sup>12</sup> Various members of the extended Rowntree clan and their friends and associates effectively controlled the local association and the Liberal group on York council in the Edwardian era, as well as

being influential in the nearby Thirsk & Malton, Scarborough and Darlington Liberal associations. Several Edwardian Liberal MPs, including James Hogge and Hamar Greenwood, owed their start in politics to Joseph and Seebohm's patronage. It was not unusual for constituency Liberal parties to be dominated by important local businessmen at this time, but Rowntree influence was more widespread than most before 1914.

However, unlike many other wealthy Liberal businessmen, Joseph did not give large sums to the party's central organisation – probably because he was not interested in securing any honours for himself or his family. Joseph's most substantial political donations were at one remove, through the three trusts he set up in 1904 to administer his wealth, in the firm belief that this should be spent on projects of social use, rather than for one man's benefit. And, initially, the trustees were Joseph's family and friends, who could be relied on to follow his lead.

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust was the most traditional of the three, and mainly concerned itself with grants to various Quaker activities. But the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust was explicitly designed to buy up and support ailing Liberal newspapers – it was deliberately not made into a charity so it could pursue this goal.<sup>13</sup> Joseph was especially grieved by the way popular Tory papers, especially the *Daily Mail*, had whipped up jingoistic fervour during the Boer War of 1899–1902 – a conflict he, as a Quaker, had heartily disliked. He was determined that the high-minded Liberal press should not be squeezed out by its Tory rivals. This attitude was shared by Joseph's fellow Liberal, Quaker and chocolate manufacturer, George Cadbury, who bought the *Daily News* in 1901. It was also welcome news to the Liberal Whips' Office, which still attached great importance to trying to persuade wealthy Liberals to support the Liberal press.



Joseph's trust made an important contribution to promoting not just Liberalism in the press, but the New Liberal reorientation towards social reform in the Edwardian period that Joseph and Seebohm supported. Its most famous acquisition was the weekly, the *Nation*, which it owned from 1907 to 1923.<sup>14</sup> Under H.W. Massingham, the editor the Trust recruited, it became the house journal of New Liberal intellectuals such as L.T. Hobhouse and J.A. Hobson something that was only possible because of the substantial subsidies which the Trust poured into the paper to cover its losses. The Trust also bought and supported regional Liberal newspapers, such as the *Northern Echo* and *Yorkshire Gazette*, though a foray into Fleet Street was less happy.

In 1909 Joseph reluctantly acquired joint ownership with the Cadbury family of the *Morning Leader* and evening *Star* papers to save them from the Tories, only to find himself horrified by the costs and by the controversy caused by the racing tips in papers owned by staunch opponents of gambling. He turned the papers over to the Cadburys in 1912 with some relief. This episode was a harbinger of trouble ahead in World War One. The *Nation* became a bone of contention when Massingham fell out with Seebohm over the editor's continual criticism of the Lloyd George coalition and the regional press empire started to rack up heavy losses. Joseph agreed to merge the Trust's newspapers into the Westminster group, headed by Lord Cowdray, in 1921 and disposed of the *Nation* in 1923 after further rows with Massingham. The Social Service Trust remained a major shareholder in the Westminster group, but after Seebohm became chairman of the Trust in 1938, he scaled down its subsidies to the papers and initiated direct grants to the ailing Liberal Party, starting a tradition that



Poverty in the York slums, c. 1900;  
Carnival at New Earswick, c. 1907;  
Chestnut Grove, New Earswick

## JOSEPH AND SEEBOHM ROWNTREE

continues to this day and making the Trust the Party's largest long-term benefactor in the post-Second World War era.

The final trust, the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust, took over a plot of land at New Earswick that Joseph had bought near his factory and had been developing since 1901.<sup>15</sup> He intended it to be an ideal community of all classes and proof that high-standard housing could be built cheaply and let at a rent that would allow a return on the capital invested, but also which the poor could afford. In this Joseph was following the example already set by Liberal entrepreneurs such as William Lever at Port Sunlight and George Cadbury at Bournville in providing 'model' housing, but New Earswick was never meant to be just for Joseph's employees. By the 1950s it had grown into an attractive estate of over six hundred houses, but the idea of providing houses the poorest could afford to rent was abandoned in the 1920s as being impossible without a subsidy.

Joseph's New Earswick experiment was also a reflection of his anti-landowner views and his belief that their refusal to provide enough reasonably priced land for development was behind housing shortages and slum conditions. Seebohm shared this animus and took up his father's suggestion to investigate land reform as his next major topic after *Poverty*. The result was *Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium* (Macmillan, 1910), an exhaustive, if one-sided, demonstration that Belgian agriculture was more productive than that of Britain and its town rents lower because that fortunate country was a land without great aristocrats. Much to Seebohm's later embarrassment, one of his main researchers on this project was an extraordinary man called (among many other subsequent aliases) Ignatius Trebitsch Lincoln. Lincoln already had an interesting background as a Hungarian Jew who had become an Anglican curate and he was to go on to be, variously, Liberal MP for Darlington, a

bankrupt sentenced to three years' imprisonment for forgery, a self-proclaimed German agent during the First World War, a participant in the proto-Nazi Kapp putsch in Germany in 1920, an arms salesman in China and finally a self-styled Buddhist abbot with the name Chao Kung.<sup>16</sup>

Seebohm was not the only person to be taken in by Lincoln. Certainly, their association did not prevent Seebohm's interest in land reform catapulting him to the centre of politics when Lloyd George persuaded him to oversee his land enquiry of 1912–14, which was entrusted with preparing a programme of land reform to sweep the Liberals to victory at the next election.<sup>17</sup> Seebohm was the main figure behind two weighty Land Reports produced by the enquiry in 1913–14. His belief in the importance of low wages in producing poverty led him to support Lloyd George's initial idea for a minimum wage for agricultural labourers, but also to persuade him to extend it to the towns. Seebohm also drew on his experience of New Earswick to produce a massive scheme of town planning and high-quality suburban development that was meant to transform Britain's housing stock. These plans were being accepted by the cabinet when they were abandoned with the onset of World War One. This destroyed Seebohm's one chance to make a major direct impact on national politics. Though he remained one of Lloyd George's favourite advisers, his later roles in the Welshman's schemes were much less central.

As Quakers both Joseph and Seebohm were profoundly depressed by the outbreak of war in 1914, but Lloyd George was still keen to make use of Seebohm's skills. He first appointed Seebohm director of a new welfare department in the Ministry of Munitions in 1916–17.<sup>18</sup> His main task was to set standards for the employment conditions of women and boys in government-owned factories and to try to persuade the owners of firms undertaking war contracts

to adopt these measures voluntarily. The job involved considerable frustrations and bureaucratic conflicts and Seebohm was glad to move, in March 1917, to a new appointment on the government's Reconstruction Committee, which was producing ideas for the post-war world. Here Seebohm returned to land and housing issues and produced a draft report which identified the scale of the post-war housing shortage and the need for emergency subsidies to local authorities to undertake a programme of building. In effect, Seebohm recognised that the New Earswick model would no longer be sufficient in the new post-war world and his draft pointed the way to the 1919 Housing Act and the beginnings of large-scale council housing. However, when the reconstruction committee was wound up in July 1917, Seebohm was not given another major job and he drifted out of central government.

Seebohm was invited to speak to some of the Liberal Summer Schools in the 1920s and the Lloyd George–Rowntree partnership was renewed in 1926–28 when Seebohm sat on the executive committee of the Welshman's Liberal Industrial Inquiry. This body produced the 'Yellow Book', *Britain's Industrial Future* (Ernest Benn, 1928), a bold plan to solve unemployment with the aid of a national loan to finance a programme of economic development.<sup>19</sup> These ideas fitted in well with Seebohm's preference for industrial efficiency rather than wage cuts, but the plan was not his initiative. It was very much the brainchild of economists like Keynes, though Seebohm's handiwork can possibly be seen in some of the report's sections, such as those on 'Business Efficiency' and 'The Status of the Worker'. It was probably Seebohm, though, who suggested that the main ideas in the plan should be published as a sixpenny pamphlet, entitled *We Can Conquer Unemployment*, in time for the 1929 election. Lloyd George selected Seebohm as one of his team of advisers to meet representatives of

**Joseph's New Earswick experiment was also a reflection of his anti-landowner views and his belief that their refusal to provide enough reasonably priced land for development was behind housing shortages and slum conditions.**

Ramsay MacDonald's minority Labour government in 1930–31 to try, without success, to press the report's ideas on them. But the collapse of MacDonald's government in August 1931 ended this brief taste of high politics for Seebohm – though he emerged from 1931 as a Companion of Honour, the only state honour he ever accepted.

His partnership with Lloyd George finally foundered in 1934 when Seebohm collaborated with Viscount Astor on a new report on British agriculture which concluded it could not play any significant role in reducing unemployment. This was not what Lloyd George wanted to hear and the two men were never close again. Seebohm's only important reappearance in central government was when he was consulted by Beveridge in 1942 over his report on the post-war welfare state, but, once again, he was not a major influence on the final conclusions of the famous report. Seebohm remained a Liberal, though, and continued to contribute to Liberal policy discussions down to his death on 7 October 1954, ironically in a wing of Disraeli's old house at Hughenden near High Wycombe, to which he had retired.

### Liberals and reformers

The obvious thing that impresses about the careers of Joseph and Seebohm Rowntree is their unique many-sidedness. There was nobody else quite like them. But their lives are also an interesting example of how progressive Liberal thought evolved without any sharp breaks in the first half of the twentieth century. Rather than Joseph's enthusiasm for temperance being at odds with Seebohm's interest in tackling poverty, the latter grew out of the former. Joseph's hostility to land ownership proved the foundation of Seebohm's contribution to the great scheme of social reform embodied in Lloyd George's abortive land campaign of 1913–14. Joseph's paternal interest in his employees gradually became

**Their lives are an interesting example of how progressive Liberal thought evolved without any sharp breaks in the first half of the twentieth century.**

transformed into Seebohm's theorising about labour relations and industrial efficiency. The Rowntrees exhibited the same evolution of moral reform into social reform, and then an attempt to resuscitate the economy, that characterised Liberalism's changing priorities from the 1890s through to the 1920s. But they also represented a time when it was not unusual for a businessman to be interested in far more than his business. Ironically, their enthusiasm for the collection and analysis of statistics helped to usher in a time when social investigation would be professionalised and impossible to combine with running a major industrial enterprise. But Joseph's foresight in investing his wealth in the trusts that bear his name has meant that the word Rowntree has continued to be closely associated with both Liberalism and research into social policy.

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- 1 The best account of Joseph Rowntree's early life and family is Anne Vernon, *A Quaker Business Man: the Life of Joseph Rowntree, 1836–1925* (George Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 1–69. For Rowntree & Co., see Robert Fitzgerald, *Rowntree and the Marketing Revolution, 1862–1969* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 2 The classic account of Seebohm's life is Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree, 1871–1954* (Longmans, 1961).
- 3 Briggs, *Social Action*, pp. 99–105, 144–47, 236–42; William Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765–1914* (Routledge, 2000), p. 79.
- 4 Briggs, *Social Action*, pp. 158–60, 228–32, 247–68.
- 5 Vernon, *Quaker Business Man*, pp. 59–64, 130–42.

- 6 Fitzgerald, *Rowntree*, pp. 237–39; Seebohm Rowntree (ed.), *Betting and Gambling: A National Evil* (Macmillan, 1905); Vernon, *Quaker Business Man*, pp. 98–99, 116; Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York* (Longmans, 1941), p. 447; Briggs, *Social Action*, pp. 332–33.
- 7 These issues are convincingly explored in Alan Gillie, 'Rowntree, Poverty Lines and School Boards' in Jonathan Bradshaw and Roy Sainsbury (eds.), *Getting the Measure of Poverty: The Early Legacy of Seebohm Rowntree* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 85–108.
- 8 Joseph Rowntree and Arthur Sherwell, *The Temperance Problem and Social Reform* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1899), pp. x, ix, 36.
- 9 Vernon, *Quaker Business Man*, p. 144.
- 10 Briggs, *Social Action*, pp. 25–46, 63–64; Randolph Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, (Heinemann, 1967) vol. II, pp. 30–32.
- 11 *Poverty and Progress*; Seebohm Rowntree and G. R. Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State: A Third Social Survey of York Dealing only with Economic Questions* (Longman, 1951).
- 12 Vernon, *Quaker Business Man*, pp. 130, 151–56, 160–63; Ian Packer, 'Religion and the New Liberalism: The Rowntree Family, Quakerism and Social Reform', *Journal of British History* 42 (Spring 2003).
- 13 The Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust was renamed the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 1990.
- 14 For the Rowntrees and the *Nation*, see Alfred Havighurst, *Radical Journalist: H. W. Massingham* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 143–44, 153–55, 250–56, 294–302; Arthur Duncum, *The Westminster Press Provincial Newspapers* (Westminster Press Provincial Newspapers Ltd), pp. 3–5 for the regional papers; Vernon, *Quaker Business Man*, pp. 173–76 for Fleet Street.
- 15 The Village Trust was transformed into the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust in 1959 and became the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for research into housing, employment and social policy in 1990. Vernon, *Quaker Business Man*, pp. 145–50 for a summary of New Earswick's first fifty years.
- 16 See Bernard Wasserstein, *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln* (Yale University Press, 1988).
- 17 Briggs, *Social Action*, pp. 68–69; Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: the Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906–14* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society/Boydell & Brewer, 2001), pp. 85–86, 100–06.
- 18 Briggs, *Social Action*, pp. 112–42.
- 19 John Campbell, *Lloyd George: the Goat in the Wilderness* (Jonathan Cape, 1977), pp. 196–203, 223–25, 270–72, 280–81; Briggs, *Social Action*, pp. 215–16, 307–10.

It is easy to forget just how momentous an event was the launch of the Social Democratic Party in 1981. Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, David Owen and William Rodgers, former Labour cabinet ministers who became known as ‘the Gang of Four’, launched the most ambitious bid to break the mould of British politics since the Labour Party was created in 1900. Despite the fanfare of the launch, success in by-elections and the favourable attention of the media, the SDP ultimately failed to achieve its potential when put to the test at the 1983 general election. **Stephen Barber** examines the strategy of the SDP, what it wanted to achieve and how. He argues that one of the reasons the SDP failed to achieve its objectives was that its strategy was fundamentally flawed.

# THE FLAWED STRA

**T**here were fundamental differences amongst the Gang of Four over strategy right from the launch of the new party. Breaking the mould of British politics was a lofty ambition but one the party felt it could achieve. Academic and founder member Stephen Haseler wrote as early as 1980 that the ‘vast unanchored popular constituency that exists today not only beckons a “new” party but one that, led intelligently and sensitively, can sweep the others off the board.’<sup>1</sup> The SDP was not to be formed as a party of protest, but as a party of power.

To win the 1983 election outright was indeed a highly ambitious strategic objective and one which others saw as unrealistic. Shirley Williams viewed the prospects for office as longer term, believing it might take twenty years actually to break through but that the party’s incredible success in by-elections suggested a possibility of pushing Labour into third place. For Williams, the strategy of beating Labour in votes if not seats would force proportional representation.<sup>2</sup>

**The division between the Jenkinsites and Owenites meant the party failed to resolve how it was to achieve its strategic objectives.**

The SDP was to prosecute its strategy in alliance with the Liberals. Alliance was important to Jenkins at least, since ‘It was going to be difficult enough in any event to land on the enemy coast of the two-party system, heavily fortified as it was by the distortions of the British electoral system. To have engaged in a debilitating preliminary contest with the inhabitants of the offshore islands of the system, who in any event agreed with us on most policy objectives, would have been lunacy.’<sup>3</sup> This was in contrast to Owen, who felt that Jenkins and Williams had bounced the SDP into the Alliance.<sup>4</sup> However, for much of the SDP, the Liberal Party did not rank as a high consideration.<sup>5</sup>

This implies that the SDP may have been a threat as well as an opportunity to the Liberals. David Steel’s adviser, Richard Holme, recalls that it was the Liberals’ strategy to ‘embrace’ the Social Democrats, with the push towards Alliance coming distinctly from the Liberals.<sup>6</sup> David Steel’s instinct to encourage the split from Labour and to form an alliance with the SDP,

also demonstrates his ambitions. Steel wanted to break the mould of British politics. Although he made his infamous ‘go back to your constituencies and prepare for government’ speech in 1981, it is doubtful if Steel believed the Alliance could win outright, but he may have believed that it could break the two-party dominance.

Differences in ambitions over party objectives were not the primary flaw in the SDP’s strategy, however. It was the division between what was to become the Jenkinsites and Owenites that meant the party failed to resolve how it was to achieve these strategic objectives.

## **The SDP and Labour**

Labour suffered a destabilising defeat in the 1979 general election, providing the left with the ammunition and the opportunity to threaten the moderate leadership of the party. As the dust settled, the Labour left seized upon a simple clutch of statistics. Compared with the result of the 1974 general election, the swing from Labour to the Conservatives was around 8 per cent. The middle



# STRATEGY OF THE SDP

classes had been attracted to Labour while some of the trade union vote had shifted to Thatcher's Conservatives.

For Tony Benn and the Labour left, the statistics represented more than the failure of the Callaghan administration; it was a betrayal of the working class for whom Labour had been created. This argument was used to push the Labour Party even further left. Denis Healey was critical, suggesting that the left 'never explained how this would persuade workers who had just voted Tory to vote Labour next time, or how people who had not bothered to vote at all could be inspired to man the barricades of class war.'<sup>7</sup>

The tensions that had existed for so many years in the Labour Party gave way to infighting. The left argued about policies it would never be in a position to enact; the right split into those fighting for the moderate soul of Labour and those who were to become the social democrats. Determined to participate in national politics, the latter simply abandoned the Labour Party. Austin Mitchell, who remained, reflected sadly that the Labour Party 'was too

busy at war within itself to wave goodbye.'<sup>8</sup>

Having experienced the destructive divisions within the Labour Party, and the power enjoyed by a minority of vocal activists, the Gang of Four formed a party which was in the control of its creators. The SDP was never to reflect the culture of Labour. The '1982 constitution ... effectively concentrated power at the centre, specifically at Head Office and with the party leader.'<sup>9</sup> The only people who mattered in strategy formation were, therefore, the Gang of Four. This is evidenced by the membership of the powerful Steering Committee, which was selected personally by the Gang. 'All the major strategic decisions were made exclusively by the Steering Committee.'<sup>10</sup> That is everything from the creation of, and appointments to, other committees, to negotiations with the Liberals.

Nevertheless, it was only natural that the new party should aim to 'take 90 per cent of the Labour vote,' in the words of Bill Rodgers.<sup>11</sup> Roy Jenkins, however, had ambitions for a grand centre alliance with David Steel's Liberals.

**'Glad confident morning' – the Gang of Four (Shirley Williams, David Owen, Roy Jenkins and Bill Rodgers) at the launch of the SDP on 26 March 1981.**

This was a tension which existed from the party's conception and was never resolved. Another founder member, Matthew Oakeshott, told the Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, on the twentieth anniversary of the birth of the SDP, that, 'on the day of the Limehouse Declaration, we were not sure if Shirley [Williams] would accept the last line.'<sup>12</sup> This line argued for 'the need for a realignment of British politics.'<sup>13</sup> Jenkins was later to describe this as one of the two 'key sentences ... This gave clear notice that we were moving outside a Labour Party laager. Realignment cannot be a purely internal or unilateral act. There must be somebody with whom to realign.'<sup>14</sup> The implication for this difference was that the SDP never decided whether it was to replace Thatcher's Tories or Foot's Labour Party. In his diary, Tony Benn reflected upon this strategic dilemma:

Those who leave the Labour Party and go with David Steel would not expect to win a majority in an election, but they might win forty or fifty seats and they would then have a choice:

## THE FLAWED STRATEGY OF THE SDP

to put a Labour government in power – in which case why had they resigned simply to put Labour in power again? – or to put the Tories in power. So actually the members who leave us are on their way to becoming backbench Tory supporters, and some of them maybe to becoming Ministers in a right-wing coalition government.<sup>15</sup>

An important question for the SDP was which party it would support in the event of the much anticipated hung parliament. Shirley Williams claims it probably would have been, reluctantly, the Conservatives.<sup>16</sup> This itself has implications for the strategy. It is difficult to oppose a competing party to the extent of attempting to replace it, while simultaneously being prepared to work with it in government. The consensual approach required in a multi-party, PR, system, needs co-operative strategies. Yet the strategy for breakthrough was diametrically opposite: it was deliberately aggressive.

These strategies are not necessarily incompatible. After all, Paddy Ashdown's post-1994 strategy was unashamedly anti-Tory while simultaneously working closely with New Labour. However, to pursue such a strategy requires the centre party to decide which of its opponents it wishes to defeat and with which it is prepared to work.

One of the reasons the SDP neglected to tackle the great strategic dilemma of who it was to replace was the level of support for the SDP-Liberal Alliance, reinforced in successive by-election victories. From the Limehouse Declaration onwards, the party enjoyed significant support in the polls and new members continued to join, many of whom had never before been involved in party politics. There were advantages in this ambiguous situation, since the party was able to change its attitude depending on whether it was challenging the Tories or Labour in each by-election.<sup>17</sup> This may be why the SDP's policy hardly

developed from its Dimpleby Lecture roots. Insufficient attention was paid to creating policy,<sup>18</sup> as Williams admitted during the Crosby by-election.<sup>19</sup> BBC Political editor John Cole went further, suggesting that since both Thatcherism and Benn represented reaction against consensus, 'I doubted whether it was possible for the Alliance to establish a new politics on the basis of a reaction against a reaction rather than on a clear programme of its own.'<sup>20</sup> Yet, as each by-election illustrated, the section of the electorate most supportive of the Alliance was not Rodgers' 90 per cent of Labour voters, but moderate Conservatives disillusioned with the right-wing Thatcher government.

### The 1983 results

The relative merits of alternative strategies open to the SDP can be illustrated with an analysis of the 1983 general election results. The results show the number of seats where the Alliance came second to the Conservatives and Labour respectively. It might reasonably be assumed that had it not been for the unifying factor of the Falklands conflict, the Alliance would have taken some of these seats from the Conservative Party. From a strategic analysis, however, the Falklands was not the sole reason for the SDP's failure to break the mould of British politics.<sup>21</sup> It was, in fact, the SDP's equivalent of Dangerfield's 'omnibus'<sup>22</sup> – the First World War – for the Liberals in the 1920s. The party's momentum had actually faltered before the outbreak of hostilities.<sup>23</sup> The Tory party had already begun to recover as the economy at last began to strengthen. Additionally, the row over seat distribution with the Liberals had taken the shine off the Alliance's reputation for unity. Nevertheless, Williams believes that had it not been for the Falklands, the Alliance would have been more electorally successful.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the then Chairman of the Conservative Party, Cecil Parkinson, still places significant emphasis on the Falklands factor

**The Alliance's strategy failed to identify how it intended to break the mould of British politics. It was never clear if it wanted substantially to replace the Labour Party or the Tories.**

as an influence on the 1983 result since it established Thatcher as a considerable political figure.<sup>25</sup>

The Falklands factor is important in explaining why the strategy of the SDP failed to break the mould, but analysis of the strategy suggests there was more to it than that. The SDP's strategy was flawed. It was insufficiently robust to handle the upset of the Falklands war because the party failed to address the fundamental strategic issue of which of its main competitors it planned substantially to replace.

Of the one hundred and ninety-one constituencies where Alliance candidates came second, one hundred and forty-seven were Conservative-held constituencies and forty-four Labour. The Alliance simply could not have broken the mould by taking only Labour seats. During the most dismal period in Labour's electoral history, the Alliance came a weak second. In twenty-two of the seats, an extra 15-per-cent-plus swing from Labour to Alliance was required. The Alliance never threatened Labour in its heartland seats, as it was not seen as the main alternative to Labour in those circumstances.

However, the Alliance was able to pose something of a threat to the Conservatives. Assuming that the seats won by the Alliance in 1983 were 'strategy-neutral' (that is they were won despite failure to resolve the strategic issue of which party it intended to replace), had the Alliance prosecuted a determined 'replace Labour' strategy, a three per cent swing from Labour to the Alliance would have gained a further two seats, a six per cent swing an extra six seats, and a ten per cent swing no more than sixteen gains. Compare this with a determined 'replace Conservatives' strategy. A further three per cent swing from Conservative to Alliance would have meant another eight seats; six per cent twenty-three seats and ten per cent fifty gains.

Furthermore, the seat distribution suggests little about the strategy of the SDP. In the twenty-five

constituencies where the Alliance came second to Labour, the Liberals were the challenger in fourteen and the SDP in eleven. In Conservative seats the Liberals were second in seventeen with the SDP trailing in eight. The distribution is relatively even when it is considered that Liberals won more seats than the SDP, that the Alliance was considerably closer in Tory-held seats and that the Liberals had a long-established reputation for grassroots campaigning in many parts of the country.

By the time of the 1983 general election the Alliance had not only failed to resolve the strategic issue which was of such crucial importance but, unlike the situation in by-elections when its stance could be altered depending on its opponent, in the national campaign the party could not benefit from ambiguity. Furthermore, by the time of Jenkins' return to the Commons at the Hillhead by-election shortly before the Falklands conflict, it was becoming clear that the party's support was beginning to wane. War made that a certainty. The Alliance was not going to win the 1983 election. Yet the strategy of the SDP specifically, and of the Alliance generally, did not adapt to reflect this more realistic situation. Jenkins' 'prime minister-designate' title illustrates that the party entered the election without a realistic strategic aim of achieving realignment. 'There must be somebody with whom to realign' – it was necessary to have a party

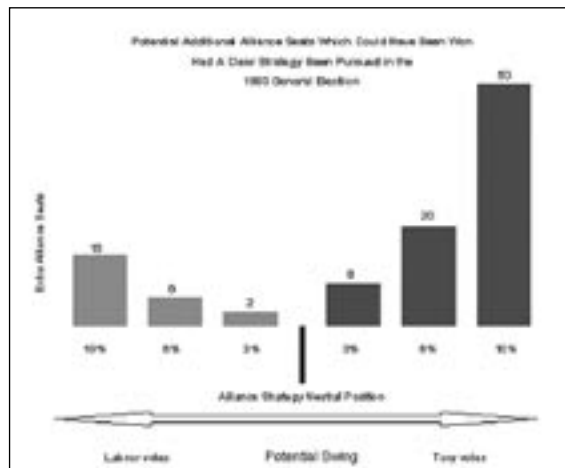
with whom the Alliance could comfortably form a government. The strategy of the SDP failed to consider this because internally the fundamental strategic issue of which of its main competitors it wanted to replace was never resolved.

**Conclusion**

The 1983 general election produced the best centre party vote since before the Second World War, with the Alliance coming within a whisker of Labour's vote. However, the 25.4 per cent of the vote achieved meant only twenty-three Alliance seats, just six of which went to the SDP. The electoral system effectively saved Labour, which won 209 seats on 27.6 per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party was returned to office with an increased majority of 144.

The Alliance's strategy failed to identify how it intended to break the mould of British politics. It was never clear if it wanted substantially to replace the Labour Party or the Tories. While the Alliance may have challenged Labour on percentage of the vote, it was incapable of challenging the party in its heartland seats. The 1983 election demonstrated that Labour was not the electoral enemy of the political centre in Britain. Subsequent history suggests that the Tories, whether in the debilitated post-1992 environment or in the post-conflict rejuvenation of 1983, were then and remain the natural electoral enemy. Roy Jenkins accepted this; later Paddy Ashdown understood it. Strategy was flawed in 1983, however, because the SDP could not resolve this fundamental issue.

*Stephen Barber recently completed a Ph.D. examining party strategy in British politics.*

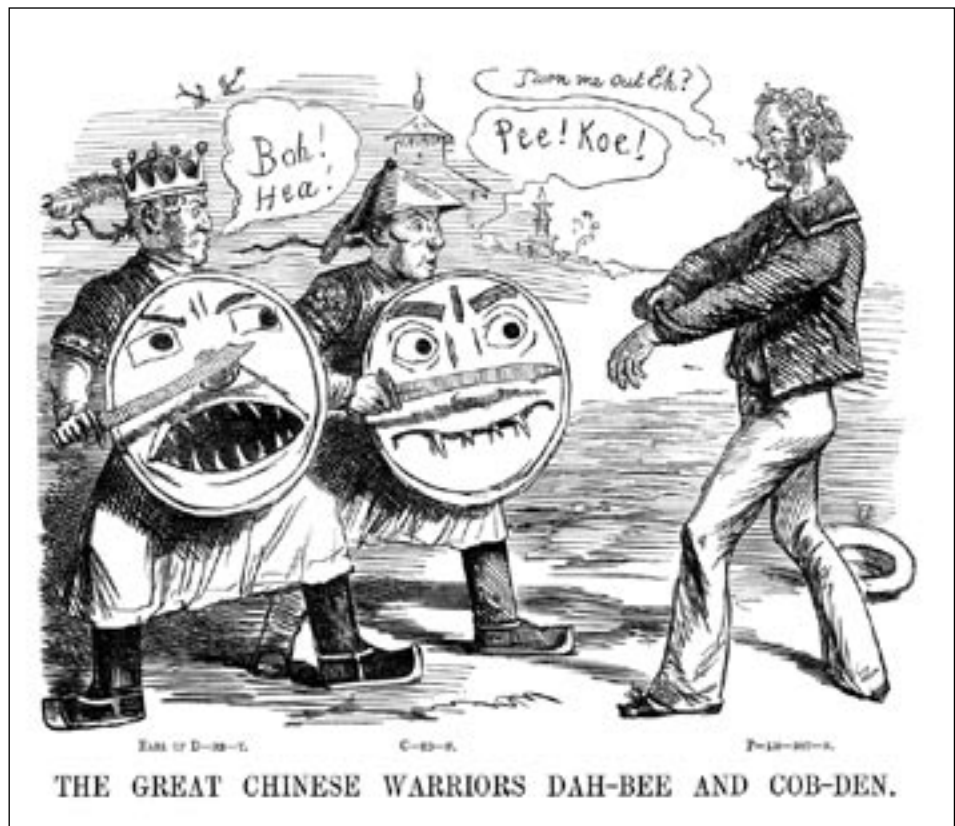


- 1 Stephen Haseler, *The Tragedy of Labour* (Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 227.
- 2 Interview with Shirley Williams, House of Lords, 10/7/02.
- 3 Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (Papermac, 1991), p. 513.

- 4 David Owen, *Time to Declare* (Michael Joseph, 1991), Chapter 23.
- 5 Ian Wrigglesworth, speaking at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, 29/1/01.
- 6 Interview with Richard Holme, St James Square, 27/11/02.
- 7 Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (Penguin, 1990), p. 467.
- 8 Austin Mitchell, *Four Years in the Death of the Labour Party* (Methuen, 1983), p. 79.
- 9 Vincent McKee, *Factionalism in the SDP* (unpublished PhD thesis, London Guildhall University, 1996), p. 141.
- 10 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford, 1995), p. 218.
- 11 *Ibid.* p. 67.
- 12 Matthew Oakshott speaking at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, 29/1/01.
- 13 Williams, Jenkins, Rodgers and Owen, *The Limehouse Declaration*, 25/1/81.
- 14 Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre*, pp. 534–35.
- 15 Tony Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980–90* (Hutchinson, 1992), p. 66.
- 16 Interview with Shirley Williams, House of Lords, 10/7/02.
- 17 Patricia Lee Sykes, *Losing From The Inside: The Cost of Conflict in the British Social Democratic Party* (New Brunswick, 1990), p. 116.
- 18 For an examination of SDP economic policy, see Robin Marris, 'The Politics of Rationalism: Reflections on the Economic Policy of the SDP'. For constitutional policy see Wilson Finnie 'The SDP's Plans for Britain's Constitution', in *Political Quarterly*, Vol 54 1983.
- 19 Lee Sykes, *Losing From The Inside*, p. 50.
- 20 John Cole, *As it Seemed to Me* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), p. 243.
- 21 This article presents a strategic analysis. There were other important factors explaining the SDP's failure to break the mould and indeed Thatcher's 1983 election victory. Crewe and King provide an historical analysis which discusses the difficulties for the new party given the first-past-the-post electoral system which afforded Labour the time it needed to recover. To a degree, this contradicts the experience of the SDP in that it took support largely from the Conservatives. See also David Butler and Denis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983* (Macmillan, 1984).
- 22 George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1966).
- 23 Ian Gilmour, *Whatever Happened to the Tories* (4th Estate, 1998), p. 318.
- 24 Interview with Shirley Williams, House of Lords, 10/7/02.
- 25 Interview with Cecil Parkinson, House of Lords, 11/11/02.

# RICHARD COBDEN AND

To mark the bicentenary of the birth of Richard Cobden (1804–65), one of the founding fathers of British Liberalism, **Simon Morgan** analyses Cobden's critique of British imperialism, which Cobden saw as at best a drain on British resources, and at worst a major cause of instability in British foreign relations and a threat to Britain's moral standing in the wider world. He argues that these views were shaped by Cobden's Christian belief in a Providential world order, and that an appreciation of this moral idealism is also crucial to understanding Cobden's beliefs in the essentially benign nature of the free market.



'The great Chinese Warriors Dah-bee and Cob-den', from *Punch* (7 March 1857). Reproduced with the permission of *Punch, Ltd.*

This year marks 200 years since the birth of Richard Cobden – one of the most important influences on the early Liberal Party, who promoted what became its three main shibboleths: free trade, peace and retrenchment.<sup>1</sup> Today, Cobden is remembered primarily for his leadership of the Anti-Corn Law League, which helped to usher in the long era of British free trade, and also for his outspoken criticism of Palmerston's aggressive foreign policies, a stance which has led A. J. P. Taylor to dub him one of the quintessential 'trouble-makers'.<sup>2</sup>

A key component of Cobden's critique of British foreign policy was his anti-imperialism,

which later inspired such prominent critics of Empire as J. A. Hobson.<sup>3</sup> This essay analyses that critique, arguing that imperialism was a major stumbling block to the realisation of Cobden's ultimate goal, the creation of a world order based on peaceful commercial intercourse between sovereign nations.<sup>4</sup> In the process, it demonstrates that Cobden's views on this issue owed much to his Christian beliefs in a world shaped by divine Providence – beliefs that informed much of his political and economic thought, but which have been downplayed by historians and biographers.

Cobden's critique of British imperialism may be broadly considered under two headings: the financial costs of colonial



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government, and the broader instability caused by British imperial ambitions, including the formal seizure of territory, the establishment of 'spheres of influence' across the globe, and the violent 'opening up' of markets in Asia to British manufactures.

As regards the former, it was during his tour of the Mediterranean in 1836–37 that Cobden seems to have begun thinking about the cost of maintaining Britain's foreign possessions and garrisons. In his letters and diaries, he compiled information on the salaries of various colonial functionaries, noted cases of nepotism (such as the step-brother of the late Lord Canning, who was Captain of the Port of Malta), and deplored the expense of the elaborate fortifications at Gibraltar.<sup>5</sup> Once back home, he promised the Edinburgh publisher William Tait an article on the colonies.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the project was shelved indefinitely due to other calls on his time and pen. By the end of 1837 he was embroiled in the campaign for the Incorporation of Manchester under the Municipal Reform Act of 1835, and by the end of the following year in the campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws.

Nonetheless, this was more the beginning than the end of Cobden's concern with colonial government. During the anti-corn-law campaign, Cobden realised that the colonies were not simply a job-creation scheme for younger sons of the aristocracy (though this was a theme to which he would return), but that colonial commercial interests were also a major bastion of monopoly and a barrier to freedom of trade.

He was particularly irritated by the way in which the West Indian planters, who had only liberated their slaves in 1837 after they had extorted a huge compensation package from the British government, now cynically manipulated anti-slavery sentiments to support the differential duty on colonial sugar – arguing that prohibitive duties on slave-grown sugar were necessary to offset the increased production costs of the newly freed colonial labour force. While Cobden deplored slavery, he contended that the real way to combat it was not through prohibition of slave-grown produce, but by demonstrating that free labour was more efficient. He argued that protection merely led to waste and inefficiency on the part of the planters, while the system of colonial preference also raised costs by preventing the purchase of food and other goods from the United States – meaning that the West Indian colonies had to depend on more expensive supplies from Britain. In the meantime, he thought, British ports should be opened to all sugar to give the British working classes access to cheap supplies of this commodity.

Cobden's views on the matter were rejected by the mainstream anti-slavery movement, though he remained on good terms with several of its leaders, particularly Joseph Sturge. Increasingly, however, Cobden was turning his attention to the whole issue of imperialism as a threat to peace and as a potentially limitless drain on the resources of Britain itself. This threat was twofold. First, each new colony or sphere of influence became a potential

flashpoint between Britain and the other great powers. In 1856–57, for example, he was particularly worried that Anglo-American imperial rivalries over the Mosquito Coast (now part of Nicaragua) might lead to an armed confrontation between naval vessels belonging to the two countries, and possibly to a full-scale war.<sup>7</sup> It was one of Cobden's foremost concerns in the 1850s and 1860s to avoid such confrontations. This was at the heart of his doctrine of 'non-intervention' in European disputes, of his attempts to promote a system of arbitration in the case of international disagreements, and also of his attempts to reform international maritime law to guarantee the rights of neutral vessels not carrying contraband of war against impediment by belligerent powers in times of conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Second, there was the all too real danger that imperial functionaries on the ground, whether civilian or military, might use their powers to acquire territories in the name of Great Britain, therefore allowing them to call on the military might of the home country to defend their acquisitions. One of the classic instances of this peripheral expansion was the carving out of a private empire in Borneo by James 'Rajah' Brooke of Sarawak, while he also held the official posts of Consul General of Borneo and Governor of Labuan. Cobden and John Bright were sickened by Brooke's reception as a hero in Britain and, along with Joseph Hume, orchestrated a campaign against him, which echoed, perhaps consciously, the Foxite Whigs' epic impeachment of Warren Hastings for alleged

**Cobden's critique of British imperialism may be broadly considered under two headings: the financial costs of colonial government, and the broader instability caused by British imperial ambitions.**

## RICHARD COBDEN AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM

corruption during his tenure as the first Governor-General of India. In the end, Brooke escaped official and public censure, while Cobden's own reputation suffered as it was thought he had placed too much emphasis on the testimony of Brooke's personal enemies.<sup>9</sup>

Undaunted, Cobden revisited the theme in one of his lesser-known pamphlets, *How Wars are Got Up in India* (1853).<sup>10</sup> The bulk of this publication consists of an almost forensic reconstruction of the chain of events leading to the outbreak of the Burmese War in 1852. It cites the immediate cause of the war as the actions of Commodore Lambert, who had been dispatched to Rangoon on the authority of Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General of India, to investigate a claim for damages made by two British captains fined for misdemeanours committed in Burmese waters. Dalhousie gave Lambert specific instructions not to enter into hostilities; but after a perceived snub from the Governor of Rangoon, Lambert blockaded the port, seized a Burmese naval vessel and attempted to remove it from territorial waters, despite being warned that shore batteries would open fire if this were attempted. Shots were then exchanged and formal hostilities commenced. Cobden deplored Lambert's departure from his instructions, but also censured the Governor-General for retrospectively condoning his actions. Moreover, despite acknowledging the fact that it was contrary to British interests and would be an expensive drain on the resources of the Government of India, the acquisition of Burmese territory was accepted by Dalhousie as inevitable in order to maintain Britain's standing in the eyes of the Burmese.<sup>11</sup>

For espousing such anti-imperialist views, Cobden has often been criticised as a 'Little Englander', interested only in the balance sheet rather than in Britain's international prestige. However, this is a misconception. Cobden believed that Britain's

power stemmed from the extent of its trade and manufactures, rather than from the possession of extensive overseas territory; hence he saw it as an essential task to inform the public that colonies actually cost money rather than making it. Moreover, Cobden's writings demonstrate that he had a rather jealous eye to Britain's moral reputation abroad. While this may seem unsurprising given his range of foreign contacts, including leading liberals in France, Italy, Germany and the United States, it was also essential for the triumph of his free-trade ideas that Britain be seen as open and honest, rather than as a self-serving and devious bully. Increasingly, he saw imperialism as the greatest threat to this wider moral standing.

He was critical of Britain's propensity to take a firmer line over trivial issues when dealing with technologically less advanced nations than she would with other great powers, such as the United States. Indeed, he pointed out that, at the time of the Burmese war, Britain was involved in a stand-off with the United States in Central America, where the initial readiness to trade threats could only result in an embarrassing climb-down and by which 'our cannon will have been the cause of our humiliation'.<sup>12</sup> He grew particularly angry when the slaughter of large numbers of primitively equipped native peoples by heavily armed and highly trained British troops was greeted as a proud victory. In *How Wars are Got Up* he cited the response of General Cass in the US Senate to the Burmese war, started over a claim for compensation of less than £1,000, as an example of the damage done to Britain's moral influence: 'The whole history of human contests ... exhibits no such national provocation, followed by such national punishment ... *Well does it become such a people to preach homilies to other nations upon disinterestedness and moderation.*'<sup>13</sup>

Cobden consistently highlighted the hypocrisy of a nation

supposedly guided by Christian morality brutally imposing its will on other peoples and races across the globe. With regard to Brooke's activities in Borneo, he told his fellow peace campaigner Henry Richard:

It shocks me to think what fiendish atrocities may be committed by English arms without rousing any conscientious resistance at home, provided they be only far enough off, and the victims too feeble to trouble us with their remonstrances or groans.<sup>14</sup>

Though the influence of Cobden's religious notions on his political thought is seldom talked about, the number of times his letters and other writings hint at divine retribution for Britain's imperial activities in the east is striking. In the conclusion of his pamphlet on the Burma war, he appealed to the national conscience 'which has before averted from England, by timely atonement and reparation, the punishment due for imperial crimes' to put an end 'to the deeds of violence and injustice which have marked every step of our progress in India'.<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Henry Richard, he put it more forcefully: 'If God really rules this earth (as I solemnly believe He does) upon the principle of a self-acting retributive justice, then British doings in India and China involve a serious reckoning with us or our children.'<sup>16</sup> Cobden's words came to seem unusually prescient on the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, even to those who did not share his belief in a divine and retributive Providence.

Cobden's Christian morality may be disturbing to modern eyes, and indeed it led him to some distinctly illiberal statements over preferring the Christian despotism of Russia to the Islamic despotism of the Ottomans. However, the notion of a divinely ordered creation was central to his beliefs in the international division of labour and the benign operation of the free market. The

**Cobden consistently highlighted the hypocrisy of a nation supposedly guided by Christian morality brutally imposing its will on other peoples and races across the globe.**

theory ran that each region of the globe had been bestowed by the creator with certain natural advantages and resources, enabling it to produce particular goods more economically than others. Each region could then exchange their specialities with other regions in return for goods that they were unable to produce economically themselves.<sup>17</sup>

However, while many Evangelicals, including humanitarians such as Lord Shaftesbury, saw Britain's acquisition of an overseas empire as a Providentially ordained opportunity to spread the gospel among the heathen, Cobden's belief in non-intervention caused him to reject the so-called 'civilising mission'.<sup>18</sup> Instead, he saw a moral corruption at the heart of even such a supposedly benign and enlightened form of imperial rule as the British Empire purported to be, and its fundamental discrepancy with the New Testament message of peace and love. Unfortunately, during the Indian Mutiny it was the Old Testament god of battles and bloody revenge that held sway. The real and imagined atrocities of the rebels were met with even more brutal suppression, legitimated by an intense and disturbing public blood-lust. Cobden counted himself lucky that his defeat at the Huddersfield election earlier that year, a result of his unflagging opposition to the Crimean War, meant that there was no onus on him to address the public on the Mutiny. However, to his credit he continued to advocate restraint on the part of British forces trying to relieve the beleaguered garrisons at Cawnpore and Lucknow.

The Mutiny spelt the end for the system of dual government that he had attacked in *How Wars are Got Up*: the power of the East India Company was ended and henceforth India was to be ruled by a Viceroy responsible directly to the British government. Nonetheless, Cobden was content to let Bright busy himself with the details of governmental reform in India, while he himself continued

to believe that the British had no right to be there at all. Ironically, by paving the way for the abolition of the East India Company and establishing more clearly the link between India and the British government, the Indian Mutiny actually seemed to strengthen the equation of colonial possessions with British prestige.

During the 1850s and 1860s, Cobden was forced to witness the subversion of his free-trade ideals to justify the aggressive foreign policies of Lord Palmerston. Particularly after the Don Pacifico affair of 1850, when the government blockaded Greek ports to obtain redress for a nominally 'British' merchant, supposed transgressions against British interests, or the need to protect freedom of commerce, were frequently used as justifications for British aggression, while colonial expansion itself was defended as a way of acquiring markets for surplus manufactures.<sup>19</sup> Nowhere was this more blatant than in the Far East, where China and Japan were kept open to western trade by naval bombardments of the ports of Canton (1856) and Kagoshima (1863) respectively. Cobden argued that free trade had to be achieved peacefully and voluntarily in order to achieve the ideal of lasting peace based on mutual interdependence.

He was also farsighted enough to realise that the easy victories achieved in the east by western arms were primarily due to a technological advantage that was purely temporary.<sup>20</sup> Though his belief in divine Providence persuaded him that particular races had been endowed with physical characteristics that suited them to life in particular latitudes, a theory that he used to attack white colonies in the tropics as 'unnatural', Cobden was more or less unburdened by the theories of the inherent racial superiority of Europeans which guided his later nineteenth-century counterparts. He therefore realised that it was only a matter of time before free trade in weapons allowed the



**Richard Cobden in youth and middle age.**

Chinese and Japanese to possess advanced armaments, at which point the balance of power would shift as decisively as the Mosquito Coast episode demonstrated it already had done in the case of Britain's relationship with the United States.

To Cobden, Britain's expanding empire was not a source of national strength, but of weakness. The cost of the colonies,

## RICHARD COBDEN AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM

their governments and garrisons, were at best a drain on precious resources, which, instead of being invested in peaceful and productive commercial pursuits, merely helped to sustain that most parasitic of classes, the British aristocracy, by providing employment for their younger sons in both civil and military posts. While the consequent high levels of taxation dragged Britain down, other powers free of colonial entanglements, such as the United States, would have a clear field to usurp Britain's commercial dominance. At worst, the colonies were a Sword of Damocles that could precipitate Britain into a war at any moment.

However, the colonies also had a more insidious impact on the nation's strength by sapping its moral authority in the wider world. Armed interventions and massacres would only undermine that authority, regardless of whether they were carried out under the banner of 'free trade' or the 'civilising mission'. This meant that formal empire was unacceptable in any circumstances – an aspect of his thought that subsequent admirers, especially those brought up with a belief in the benefits of British imperialism, found difficult to swallow, even if they accepted the validity of Cobden's economic arguments.<sup>21</sup>

Cobden's attitude towards informal empire is more difficult to pin down. Indeed, some of his arguments during the 1840s seemed to suggest that Britain could in effect subordinate the entire world economy to her needs by using free trade to ensure that potential competitors became suppliers of raw materials and foodstuffs, rather than being encouraged by British tariffs on those items to develop their own manufacturing base. Ultimately however, he was a believer in Adam Smith's doctrine that the well-being and prosperity of each individual nation depended on the well-being and prosperity of every other nation. It was to Britain's advantage that other

states developed economically so that they could afford more of her goods; the exploitation of the weak by the strong, whether directly through imperial domination or indirectly through the imposition of unfair conditions of trade (as in China), would eventually prove to the detriment of all.

It seems fitting to finish with Cobden's own words on this subject, contained in a letter to G. and C. Merriam and Co. of the United States on receiving from them a copy of Webster's *Dictionary*:

A public man can no longer labour with success for the benefit of his own Country without promoting the interests of mankind at large ... To hasten the advent of that era when international prejudices shall disappear before the universal conviction that the interests of each nation are bound up in the prosperity of all other nations, shall be one of the great objects of my public life.<sup>22</sup>

*Dr Simon Morgan is Research Officer with the Letters of Richard Cobden Project at the University of East Anglia, directed by Professor Anthony Howe. The project is funded by a major grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board's Resource Enhancement Scheme, and aims to produce a definitive edition of the letters of this important British statesman. An international conference to mark Cobden's bicentenary was recently held at Dunford House in Sussex, from which it is hoped that a volume of essays will result. If readers have any information about letters from Cobden in private collections, they are urged to contact Dr Morgan (s.j.morgan@uea.ac.uk) or Professor Howe (a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk).*

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**Ultimately however, he was a believer in Adam Smith's doctrine that the well-being and prosperity of each individual nation depended on the well-being and prosperity of every other nation.**

- Press, 1986).
- 2 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792–1939* (London: Hamilton, 1957), chap. 2. The major works on the League are Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838–46* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958); and Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (New York: Leicester University Press, 2000).
  - 3 J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 1902). See Peter Cain, 'J. A. Hobson, Cobdenism, and the Radical Theory of Economic Imperialism, 1898–1914', *Economic History Review* 31 (1978), pp. 565–84 and the subsequent debate with P. F. Clarke, *Economic History Review* 34 (1981), pp. 308–16 – all reprinted in John C. Wood and Robert D. Wood (eds.), *John A. Hobson: Critical Assessments of Leading Economists*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge, 2003), ii, pp. 184–219; See also Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism: Radicalism, New Liberalism and Finance 1887–1938* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
  - 4 For a critical assessment of Cobden's internationalism, see Peter Cain, 'Capitalism, Imperialism and Internationalism in the Thought of Richard Cobden', *British Journal of International Studies*, 5, 3 (1979), pp. 229–47.
  - 5 Cobden's journals from this trip are in the *Cobden Papers*, British Library (hereafter *Cobden Papers*): Add. MS 43672 A and B.
  - 6 Cobden to Tait, 15 August 1837. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43665, ff. 387–8.
  - 7 For example, Cobden to John Bright, 29 Oct. 1855, *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43650 ff. 142–3; Cobden to George Wilson, 2 Nov. 1855, *Wilson Papers*, Manchester Central Library: M20 vol. 23.
  - 8 These ideas are encapsulated in Cobden's 'Letter to Henry Ashworth', reprinted in *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1868), ii, pp. 5–22.
  - 9 Edsall, *Richard Cobden*, pp. 238–9; Graham Irwin, *Nineteenth Century Borneo: A Study in Diplomatic Rivalry* (The Hague, 1955), chap. 7, especially p. 144; L. R. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo* (Hong Kong University Press, 1970), pp. 25–26.
  - 10 *Political Writings*, ii, pp. 27–106.
  - 11 *Ibid.* pp. 102–03.
  - 12 Cobden to Henry Richard, 10 Aug. 1852. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43657 ff. 140–1; partially printed in J. A. Hobson, *Richard Cobden: The International Man* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1918), pp. 86–87.
  - 13 *Political Writings* ii, p. 105 n. Cobden's emphasis.
  - 14 Cobden to Henry Richard, 6 Dec. 1849. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 53657; reprinted in Hobson, *Richard Cobden: The International Man*, pp. 60–62.

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- 16 Cobden to Henry Richard, 10 Aug. 1852. *Cobden Papers*, BL Add. MS 43657 ff. 140–1; partially printed in Hobson, *Richard Cobden*, pp. 86–87.
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- 20 Cobden to Henry Richard, 2 Nov. 1863. *Cobden Papers*, Add. MS 43659 ff. 237–40; printed in Hobson, *Richard Cobden*, pp. 313–15.
- 21 Particularly W. H. Dawson, *Richard Cobden and Foreign Policy: A Critical Exposition, with Special Reference to Our Day and its Problems* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926), chap. 9.
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# THE BRITISH LIBERAL POLITICAL STUDIES GROUP

Over the past few decades the Liberal Democrats have expanded greatly as a political party across Great Britain. In Scotland and Wales they have formed part of the government, and at Westminster, in local government and in the European Parliament they have become a serious political force.

As the Liberal Democrats have developed, so academic interest in both the contemporary party and its Liberal and SDP predecessors has increased. The British Liberal Political Studies Group has therefore been set up, as a sub-group of the Political Studies Association (PSA), to coordinate and encourage the academic study of British Liberal politics, both contemporary and historical.

## Purpose of group

The British Liberal Political Studies Group aims to cover the following areas:

1. Political campaigning in both historical and contemporary contexts

connected with the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.

2. Policy development and creation within the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.
3. The history of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.
4. The history of Liberal political groups associated with British Liberal politics.
5. Important historical events.
6. Analysis of leadership within the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP.
7. The study of Liberal and Liberal Democrat state and regional parties in both historical and contemporary contexts.
8. The study of the Liberal Party both in opposition and in government.
9. The study of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and SDP's past and predicted election results, opinion polling and party development at local, regional,

national and European levels.

10. An examination of the interrelationship between British Liberal politics and related political parties outside the United Kingdom.

## Proposed activities

1. Panels – to organise one or two panels on the topic of British Liberal Political Studies at the annual PSA conference, and other occasional day conferences at various venues.
2. To hold an annual conference.
3. To organise meetings at appropriate Liberal Democrat state and federal conferences.
4. Communications. The circulation among members of a Directory with names and email addresses.
5. To contribute towards the *Journal of Liberal History*.
6. Annual Report – preparation of the annual

report of the specialist group submitted to the PSA.

## Newsletter

A twice-yearly newsletter will be established within the group.

## Membership

Initially free for 2004–05; rising to £20 per annum, including a yearly subscription to the *Journal of Liberal History*.

## Convenor and membership registration:

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# CONRAD RUSSELL



Conrad Russell (Earl Russell) died on 14 October 2004. Well known to *Journal* readers as Honorary President of the Liberal Democrat History Group, and author of *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism*, he will be much missed. **Celia Thomas** writes this appreciation.

The letter written in 1987 from Conrad Russell to Lady Seear, then Liberal Leader in the Lords, could not have contained better news: a Professor of British History at University College, London, who had just inherited an earldom from his half-brother, was asking to join the Liberal benches. He said he was a member of the SDP in Brent, but only because there was no functioning Liberal branch. The relatively small number of active and lively Liberal peers constantly needed refreshing, but Margaret Thatcher was not generous in her allocation of new peerages for this part of the House – and so the prospect of a hereditary peer joining the Liberal ranks with a first-class brain and pedigree to match was more than welcome.

Conrad's maiden speech followed soon after he joined in 1988 and was as robust as it was fluent. It was obvious that he was completely at home in the Lords, with its curious procedures and its distinctive language, culture and history. He spoke in the Second Reading debate of the Education Reform Bill which, as well as introducing a national curriculum and allowing schools to opt out of LEA control, also reorganised higher education. He quoted a (Conservative) Minister in 'the other place' as saying that 'the cohort of the education establishment and its camp followers have been gnawing away at the bill and its provisions like rats in a cellar', and went on:

I am tempted to say that I address the House as one of the rats, save for the fact that I am visibly

aboard the sinking ship. Indeed, in 1984 I gave up a good job in the United States and came back aboard the sinking ship to help to man the pumps. That speech also reminds me of the seventeenth-century anti-clerical who said that there was no need to listen to the protests of the clergy because they were all our servants.

Already the pattern was set of how Conrad prepared his speeches. Metaphors came naturally to him, and he was always 'reminded of' an apt parallel in another century – usually the seventeenth – with which he was just as familiar as he was with the present. The speech went on to say that between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of his working time was spent 'trying to clear up the mess caused by government cuts'. Not for him the

anodyne maiden speech, full of flowery expressions of gratitude to all and sundry; there was business to get on with.

Conrad Sebastian Robert Russell was born in Sussex on 15 April 1937, the son of philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and Marjorie Spence, Bertrand's third wife, who changed her name to Patricia but was known as 'Peter'. The earldom was created in 1861 for Conrad's great-grandfather, Lord John Russell, twice Prime Minister and an architect of the hard-won Great Reform Act of 1832. Conrad's early years were spent in America where his father was briefly a professor at the City College, New York, before having his appointment terminated on the grounds that he was considered 'morally unfit' to teach. The family returned to England, Conrad only just surviving pneumonia, for which he was treated by an antibiotic obtained in America which was not yet available in the UK.

His parents' relationship was a stormy one, and eventually hit the rocks when his mother, fed up with her husband's philandering, took off with Conrad, aged fifteen, to Cornwall. He hardly had contact with his father until the final phase of Bertrand's life when they were reconciled, although that cut him off completely from contact with his mother who became a recluse, and who only just pre-deceased her son. After Eton and Merton College, Oxford, he was appointed Lecturer in History at Bedford College for Women, part of London University, where he met his future wife, Elizabeth Sanders. In later life, alongside the recreations of swimming and cricket in *Who's Who*, he always listed 'uxoriousness', presumably to distance himself from his warring parents.

It was in this period that he began to publish political histories of the Tudor and Stuart periods: *The Crisis of Parliaments: English History 1509–1660* (1971); *Origins of the English Civil War* (1973); and *Parliaments and English*

*Politics 1621–1629* (1979). In 1979 Conrad accepted a chair as Professor of History at Yale University, and stayed until 1984, when he returned to this country to be Astor Professor of History at University College, London. In 1990 he moved to become Professor of British History at King's College, and published three more books: *The Causes of the English Civil War* (1990); *Unrevolutionary England 1603–1642* (1990); and *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637–1642* (1991). Conrad became known in the academic world as a leading revisionist on the English Civil War, refuting the conventional view that the clash was simply between the King and Parliament. He believed it was much more to do with the English attitude to Charles I's attempt to enforce observance of the Prayer Book in Scotland and the revolt there.

Within two years of his arrival in the House, Conrad had taken over the social security portfolio from Desmond Banks and was immediately plunged into the controversy about the withdrawal of benefit from students. He knew all about impecuniousness, and once said that his father only wrote *The History of Western Philosophy* because he was desperate for funds. The Education (Student Loans) Bill horrified him. Not only was he against the whole idea of student loans, but the bill itself was, in his eyes, a constitutional outrage as all the detail of the scheme was left to regulations and was not on the face of the bill at all. It was a 'skeleton' bill which all but bypassed Parliamentary scrutiny, as regulations usually went through both Houses 'on the nod' and were unamendable. Conrad's first action was to table a 'reasoned amendment' to the bill's Second Reading motion – a most unusual step, leading to a division. Although this vote was lost, it singled him out as a master of Parliamentary procedure, and one who knew instinctively where the boundaries lay between robust opposition and recklessness.

He was a pioneer of ways to draw attention to unimportant-looking regulations which were likely to have a devastating impact on the lives of vulnerable people, while understanding the convention that the Lords did not vote down orders over which they had powers unfettered by the Parliament Acts. Thus he moved motions calling on the government to withdraw certain regulations, for instance on the withdrawal of benefit from students, or on another occasion the transfer of maternity pay to industry, which could lead to fewer women being employed. In one session he moved no fewer than four of these 'non-fatal' motions: from benefits for asylum seekers pursuing appeals to child benefit.

His dogged persistence in drawing attention to the most Cinderella-like part of the Parliamentary process has led directly to the establishment of two most welcome new committees: the Delegated Powers Scrutiny Committee to examine the bills which delegate powers in the first place, and the Merits of Statutory Instruments Committee which can 'warn' peers of major issues coming up in statutory instruments. As Conrad himself would say, that reminds me of the time at a Lib Dem conference when there was a social event with dancing. He asked the young researcher in the Whips Office – a striking redhead – to dance, and afterwards I asked her what they had talked about. 'Statutory instruments', she said, with a hoot of laughter. Conrad never had any small talk.

Conrad's arrival in the House in 1988 coincided with the formation of the Liberal Democrats, and, over the next decade he was anxious to help the party to trace or remember its roots. The following two extracts from an essay on Liberal philosophy are particularly telling as they highlight what was surely Conrad's chief preoccupation in practically every cause he championed – that is, the nature of power, particularly the dangers of arbitrary power

**He asked the young researcher in the Whips Office to dance, and afterwards I asked her what they had talked about. 'Statutory instruments', she said, with a hoot of laughter.**



Conrad in the Lords; his father, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970); his parents, Bertrand and Marjorie, in 1961; his great-grandfather, Lord John Russell (1792–1878).

and his absolute abhorrence of the abuse of power.

It is in England that Liberal politics have their longest continuous institutional history. The Liberal Democrats are the heirs of the Liberal Party, just as the Liberal Party were the heirs of the Whigs. The Whigs traced their continuous history back to the attempt, in 1679, to exclude James II from the English succession, and John Locke was our first serious political thinker. We are the heirs of a continuous tradition which stretches from Locke through Mill to Keynes and Beveridge. Beveridge, trying to protect people from the giants of poverty and want, came from the same tradition as Locke trying to protect them against an arbitrary king. It is a tradition of protecting individuals from the effects of arbitrary power.

And:

For us, from John Locke saying that even God Almighty must keep his promises, down to our Deputy Leader, Alan Beith, saying in 1991 that ‘we are the only party committed to coming into office ready to reduce our power’, we have a continuous ideological tradition. As Locke’s remark suggests, our chosen instrument for control of power is law, combined with an ascending theory of power which bases government on the consent of the governed. Law does not protect classes: it protects individuals. From the championship of the seventeenth-century non-conformist criminalised for not attending Church of England services, to the championship of the twentieth-century unemployed threatened with loss of benefit for turning up to a job interview with ‘unsatisfactory appearance’, the basic reflex to defend the individual against a bullying power is the same.

He believed that power – wherever it occurred – always had to be dispersed and accountable.

Electoral reform was one of his causes, and he became President of the Electoral Reform Society in 1997. Although he was committed to voting reform for the Commons, he never involved himself in the interminable arguments about Lords reform, believing that the former was the answer to the latter.

Conrad juggled his teaching and research commitments with his Parliamentary work often by bringing his students down to the Lords where they might have tutorials in the interview rooms, or where they might be taken to the gallery while he spoke or voted. The experience his students had of taking jobs to make ends meet, or running into trouble of any kind, was all grist to Conrad’s mill, and made him a formidable opponent for a government minister. He was not just interested in student poverty, but in how all those who fell foul of the benefit system managed to live at all. One student who had cause to be grateful to him was Austen Donnellan, the King’s student who was charged with ‘date rape’ in 1993. The college tried to deal with the matter internally, but Conrad was instrumental in making sure the case came to court where he spoke up for his student, who in the end was acquitted.

In 1995, the government introduced the Child Support Bill, establishing the ill-fated Child Support Agency – a flagship bill which Conrad abhorred. He predicted its problems from the outset, and was vehemently opposed to the formulaic way it operated, without taking individual cases properly into account. It is significant that the CSA’s problems are as bad today as they were when it was set up. He was also highly critical of the Jobseekers Bill of 1995, with its punitive disqualification to benefit – warning the government that not since 1649 had anyone died of starvation in England, and that the notion of a welfare safety net went back to the Poor Law of 1601, not to Beveridge, as many thought.



By the mid-nineties most of the chattering classes were looking forward eagerly to a change of government. But Conrad was never sanguine that a New Labour government would be any better than the Tories. In the famous debates about 'equidistance', for example, in 1995, he wrote: 'It is not clear to me that "New Labour" are any better than "Old Labour" ... They are still the party of the big stick and the strong executive. The thought of a Prime Minister who admires Margaret Thatcher makes my blood run cold.' He called their spending plans 'cowardly' and foresaw the time when a Labour government was unpopular and the Tories were failing to provide an effective opposition. One of the major differences he saw between New Labour and the Liberal Democrats was in the word 'liberty': 'What for us is at the very centre of our message is for them a peripheral ideal, which they are in favour of if they remember to mention it.'

Although Conrad, like all Liberal Democrats, warmly welcomed much of the first Labour administration's constitutional reform programme, he was very exercised over the bill in 1999 bringing in closed lists for PR elections to the European Parliament, obeying the whip only at the last possible stage, when an amendment in favour of open lists failed. In the end, the bill was only passed because the Parliament Act was used to bypass the Lords, such was the opposition to any system of PR by the Conservatives. But the bills of which Conrad was perhaps most critical – and there were quite a number over his years in the House – were those concerning immigrants and asylum-seekers under both Tory and Labour governments. He fought tirelessly for their rights, particularly for their right to have their cases considered properly and for their benefits, saying in 1996, that 'we are practically all descended from immigrants. In my case, that is from 1393; we were Bordeaux wine merchants. Even the most

**'It is not clear to me that "New Labour" are any better than "Old Labour" ... They are still the party of the big stick and the strong executive.'**

ancient of the aristocracy normally came over with the Conqueror, if not later.'

No piece about Conrad would be complete without recalling his penchant for anecdotes starting 'Did I ever tell you about the time ...?' or throw-away witticisms which often left his colleagues perplexed. If one had time, it was well worth asking him to elucidate, which he never minded, but mostly he was led to believe we were all as clever as he was in knowing what he meant, as we laughed heartily – with him laughing loudest of all. Limericks were another favourite way of making a point, and his formidable memory meant that he always had an appropriate one in his head.

He was a great telephoner – particularly at weekends – ostensibly for 'advice' which was often an excuse for a gossip. He asked for advice most often on which engagement to fulfil when duties clashed – advice he only took if it accorded with his own perfectly well-made-up mind. Sometimes he asked whether something could be 'put round the grapevine', but sadly had to concede that that sort of grapevine may have existed in a former century but not in the present. He never criticised anyone personally, and curiously for a non-religious person, quoted the Bible more than any peer in the House, including the Bishops. He was careful

about his appearance, and knew that looking like a wild-haired absent-minded professor sometimes suited his cause. 'Should I get my hair cut?' was a question he asked more than once, but he never asked whether his shoes needed cleaning, knowing that dirty shoes would always count against him in the House.

He was a tireless letter-writer to newspapers, and would often succeed in sending a short and suitably tailored one to the *Daily Telegraph*, knowing that there was not much competition there from those of a left-of-centre persuasion, but the *Independent* was the newspaper he wrote to most often. He never quite broke into the world of television or radio, the broadcasters perhaps sensing that his views could be expressed somewhat elliptically for a mass audience.

In the end, his lifelong addiction to cigarettes caught up with him. His beloved wife had died in 2002 of lung cancer, and almost immediately his own health began to deteriorate. In the end, his admissions to hospital with chest infections and his need for constant oxygen wore him out, and he died peacefully in the early hours of 14 October 2004.

*Celia Thomas is the Head of the Liberal Democrat Whips' Office in the House of Lords; she has worked there since 1977, and before that in the House of Commons.*

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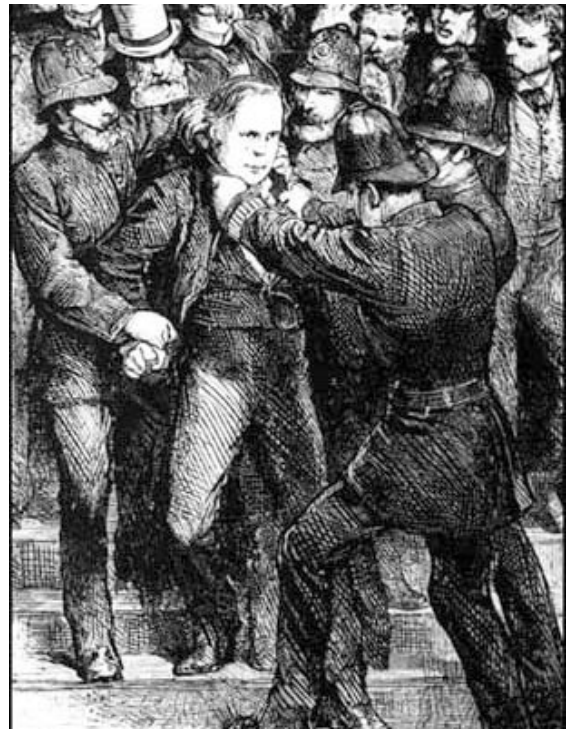
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# RELIGION AND

## THE IMPACT OF THE BRADLAUGH CASE ON THE BERWICK-UPON-TWEED BY-ELECTIONS OF 1880 AND 1881



Bradlaugh being ejected from Parliament in 1880.

During the nineteenth century religion and politics were so inextricably linked that a religious controversy could sometimes influence the outcome of an election.

**Michael Wickham** examines the effect of a religious controversy on voting behaviour in two nineteenth-century Berwick elections.

Nowhere is this linkage of politics and religion better illustrated than in the case of Charles Bradlaugh, whose election to Parliament was to have serious repercussions for the Liberal Party in constituencies across the country. However, it is possible to emphasise the importance of one issue to the detriment of others in electoral politics, as the example of Berwick-upon-Tweed shows.

At the general election in 1880 the borough of Northampton returned the Radical candidate Charles Bradlaugh as one of its two Members of Parliament. Bradlaugh was an avowed atheist and an advocate of birth control, and his unorthodox beliefs so outraged Members on both sides of

the House that he was prevented from taking his seat, on the ground that an atheist could not be bound by the statutory religious oath of allegiance. In order to solve the problem, the Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, introduced a measure that would allow Bradlaugh to affirm allegiance, instead of offering the customary religious oath – however, a hostile cross-party majority rejected this. During the course of the 1880 Parliament, therefore, Bradlaugh had to make repeated attempts to take his seat.

The Bradlaugh case was a constitutional issue which aroused men's passions both inside and outside Parliament. On the one hand, there were those who felt a genuine revulsion against Bradlaugh on account of his atheism,

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and were determined to secure his exclusion from the legislature; on the other hand, there were those who, while disapproving of his unorthodox views, believed sufficiently in the concepts of religious and political tolerance to argue for his admission. During the early 1880s these opposing viewpoints found expression in a number of by-elections, two of which were at Berwick, a rural, two-member borough with a population of 14,000 and an electorate of 1,820.

As was often the case in matters of a religious nature, it was the Conservatives who made the Bradlaugh controversy a major election issue.<sup>1</sup> At the 1880 Berwick by-election, which was brought about by the succession of the Liberal Member Henry Strutt to the peerage, the Conservative candidate, David Milne Home, addressing a meeting of the electors at the Town Hall, said that, during the three months that Mr Gladstone had been in power, the Government had made a succession of mistakes. The greatest of these was the attempt to allow Mr Bradlaugh to take his seat after making an affirmation, instead of taking the oath like other members of the House of Commons. Milne Home pointed out that Britain was a Christian country and that the House of Commons was a representative assembly of that Christian country. The affirmation that he had spoken of was introduced by the House of Commons for the purpose of giving in to those who had some religion, whether they were Wesleyan, or Jewish, or Catholic. It was in deference to their religious scruples. Yet Mr Bradlaugh boasted he had

**For Gladstone the issue was not simply about whether or not atheism was permissible in the Commons. It was about who decides on the acceptability of a Member of Parliament: his constituents, or the Commons?**

no religion. Therefore it was in defiance of the constitution that he was permitted to make this affirmation. And the Government gave their full support to enable him to make this affirmation, and in doing so they said that atheism was permissible in the House of Commons.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Gladstone took a broader view than this. For him the issue was not simply about whether or not atheism was permissible in the Commons. It was about who decides on the acceptability of a Member of Parliament: his constituents, or the Commons? Drawing a parallel between the Bradlaugh case and the Wilkes affair of 1763–74, where the Member for Middlesex was excluded from the House of Commons against the wishes of the electors, Gladstone warned the House on 22 June 1880 that subverting the electorate's rights was a very serious matter and should be given very careful consideration.<sup>3</sup> However, Gladstone, a deeply religious man himself, also argued in favour of Bradlaugh on theological grounds, suggesting that there was more danger of irreverence and impiety in the theory that it does not matter which God you worship, provided you worship some God or other, than there was in any candid acknowledgment of the complete separation that had been drawn between civil duty and religious belief.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Liberal candidate, John McLaren, did not allude to the Bradlaugh case during his campaign, his membership of the Government (as Lord Advocate for Scotland) would have left the electors in no doubt about his

position on the issue. Indeed, his tacit support for Bradlaugh may have been his undoing, both at the Wigton by-election in May, where he was seeking re-election on taking office, and at the Berwick by-election two months later. While a number of other factors (such as Milne Home's local connections, the ill-feeling generated by the Liberal committee's choice of candidate, the conscientious electioneering of the Conservatives and, arguably, bribery) influenced the outcome at Berwick, one cannot discount the relevance of the Bradlaugh issue. This was definitely the view of the local Conservative newspaper, the *Berwick Warder*, when it sought to explain the sudden and dramatic shift in Berwick politics between the general election in April, when the Liberals had returned two candidates with 56 per cent of the vote, and the by-election in July, when the Conservative candidate won by three votes:

We are inclined to think that these considerations [i.e., the admission of an atheist into the House of Commons and the disrespect shown to religion by Liberalism] have been the main cause of the defeat of the Lord Advocate and of the Government which he represents. A good many Liberals have not voted at all, while others have given their votes to the Conservatives. Even among those who voted for the Lord Advocate, many have expressed their satisfaction at the result of the election, and their hope that the Government will take to heart the lesson it teaches, for no

## RELIGION AND POLITICS

Government can long withstand the offended religious feelings of a Christian people.<sup>5</sup>

The *Warder's* contention that some Liberals switched their allegiance because of the Bradlaugh affair is certainly sustainable. First, there is the report in the local Liberal newspaper, the *Berwick Advertiser*, that the Catholics, who generally supported the Liberals, 'voted almost in a body for Captain Milne Home'.<sup>6</sup> This was probably because they had taken umbrage at the Liberal committee's decision to select McLaren as their candidate, instead of Hubert Jerningham, who was a fellow Catholic. But it is possible that their voting behaviour was also influenced by two other factors, namely, the Conservatives' espousal of denominational education and Gladstone's championship of Bradlaugh.

Second, there is the letter which appeared in the *Warder* and was addressed to the 'ELECTORS OF THE TOWN OF BERWICK!' from a 'LIBERAL CONSERVATIVE', confessing his change of heart and expressing his hope that others might do the same:

I was once a great admirer of Mr Gladstone, but since his favouring the public recognition of an atheist in the House of Commons, I have changed my mind. The British Nation as a whole believes in God, and its representatives should do so also. I hope you all think the same, and that for once both Liberals and Conservatives in Berwick will put their shoulders to the wheel and do their utmost to return a member of sound religious principles. Mr McLaren may be [a] very good man but he cannot vote against his party, while, you are well assured of Capt. Home. Electors, since the ballot has been introduced your fellow townsmen cannot know how you vote; but let every believer in God remember when he approaches the ballot box, that there is an Eye that sees him, and

a God who will reward him, if he advances His cause.<sup>7</sup>

Doubtless, there were other voters who shared these sentiments. Indeed, if the experience of other constituencies is anything to go by, then the Bradlaugh case unquestionably had a detrimental effect upon Liberal support at this time. For instance, at Scarborough in July 1880 the Conservatives flooded the constituency with blue cards carrying the inscription, 'Fathers of Scarborough. Do you want your children to be defiled by Bradlaugh's filth? If not, vote for DUNSCOMBE.' Although the Liberals retained the seat, their majority of 595 in April was reduced to 222. At North Berwick and at Wigton, where McLaren had sought re-election before trying his luck at Berwick, Bradlaugh's name was also widely used, and in both towns the Liberals lost the seats they had won at the general election three months earlier.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most prominent casualty was Sir William Harcourt, the Home Secretary, who was defeated at the Oxford by-election in 1880 by a Conservative who tarred him with the Bradlaugh brush.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in the North Riding of Yorkshire in January 1882, the Conservative candidate, Guy Dawnay, reported that no issue generated so much interest among the electors as the Bradlaugh case; and even a last-minute repudiation of his pro-Bradlaugh stand by the Liberal candidate failed to prevent his defeat. Two months later, Sir Thomas Dyke Acland complained to Gladstone that the issue was being used effectively against his son who was contesting East Cornwall. Even though the Liberals eventually retained the seat, their share of the vote dropped from 60 per cent in 1880 to 51 per cent in 1882.<sup>10</sup> W. L. Arnstein has shown that the Liberals suffered a net loss of five seats in by-elections in 1880 and five more in 1881; and, although they did not, on balance, lose any additional seats in 1882, their share of the vote declined in



Charles Bradlaugh  
(1833–91)

seven out of that year's eight contests. Even though it was normal for the winning party at a general election to experience some decline in strength in subsequent years, and even though the Bradlaugh case was not the only issue at stake at these by-elections, it would seem that wherever Bradlaugh became an issue the Liberals lost votes.<sup>11</sup>

However, there was a limit to the benefits that could be gained from the Bradlaugh case. At the 1881 Berwick by-election, which was occasioned by the elevation to the peerage of Liberal MP D. C. Marjoribanks, the Liberal candidate Hubert Jerningham, when asked whether it was true that he had pledged himself to support any measure to admit a professed atheist into the House of Commons, responded by saying that the question was wrongly put. 'He did not pledge himself to admit an atheist into the House. He had said that Mr Bradlaugh, of whose opinions he did not wish to know anything, had a right to sit in the House of Commons,

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but he was glad of the opportunity to say that he abhorred Mr Bradlaugh's doctrines.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding his denunciation of atheism, Jerningham still found himself under attack for upholding Bradlaugh's right to enter Parliament. The *Warder* led the way by expressing its surprise that a Roman Catholic, of all classes of Christians, should be prepared to assist in such an unholy work, pointing out that Jerningham did not have the sanction of the leaders of his Church. The newspaper concluded that if Jerningham persisted in maintaining that it was possible to overlook a total and absolute negation of all religion, it could only warn the electors that he would be a most dangerous and unfit parliamentary representative.<sup>13</sup> It was not only Jerningham's *political* opponents who rebuked him for supporting an atheist. The *Advertiser* reported that the Roman Catholic priest at Wooler and a certain Mr Gorham from Tonbridge had also become involved in the Bradlaugh controversy. While disclaiming any connection with the Conservative candidate, Henry Trotter, they had done their utmost to influence the electors against Jerningham by the use of 'strong placards' and by circulating extracts from Bradlaugh's writings.<sup>14</sup>

Yet despite these attempts to discredit Jerningham by invoking the Bradlaugh issue, the Conservatives were unable to repeat their success of the previous year. Indeed, the Liberal majority at the by-election of 1881 (517) was the largest in the borough's history so far,<sup>15</sup> suggesting that, in Berwick at least, the name of Bradlaugh was no longer capable of arousing religious passions to the extent that it could significantly affect voting behaviour. When confronted by other factors, most notably the personal popularity of a local candidate, the Bradlaugh case lost its impact as an election issue. Indeed, the *Advertiser* even maintained that amongst the reasons for Jerningham's success were the persistent attacks made upon him because of his Catholicism and his promise to vote for the admission of Charles Bradlaugh to the House of Commons.<sup>16</sup>

*Michael Wickham is a Lecturer in History at North Tyneside College.*

- 1 Religious issues, such as church rates, the Maynooth Grant, the disestablishment of the Irish Church and Sunday closing, were frequently seized upon by the Conservatives as a means of diverting the electors' attention from issues such as parliamentary reform and free trade, which were associated with the Liberals and opposed by the Conservatives.
- 2 *Berwick Warder*, 13 July 1880, p. 2.
- 3 Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. CCLIII, 1880, 569.
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- 5 *Berwick Warder*, 20 July 1880, p. 3.
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- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 12 *Berwick Advertiser*, 7 October 1881, p. 2.
- 13 *Berwick Warder*, 7 October 1881, p. 2.
- 14 *Berwick Advertiser*, 28 October 1881, pp. 2 and 3.
- 15 The result of the poll in 1881 was: Jerningham (Lib) 1,046; Trotter (Con) 529.
- 16 *Berwick Advertiser*, 28 October 1881, p. 2.

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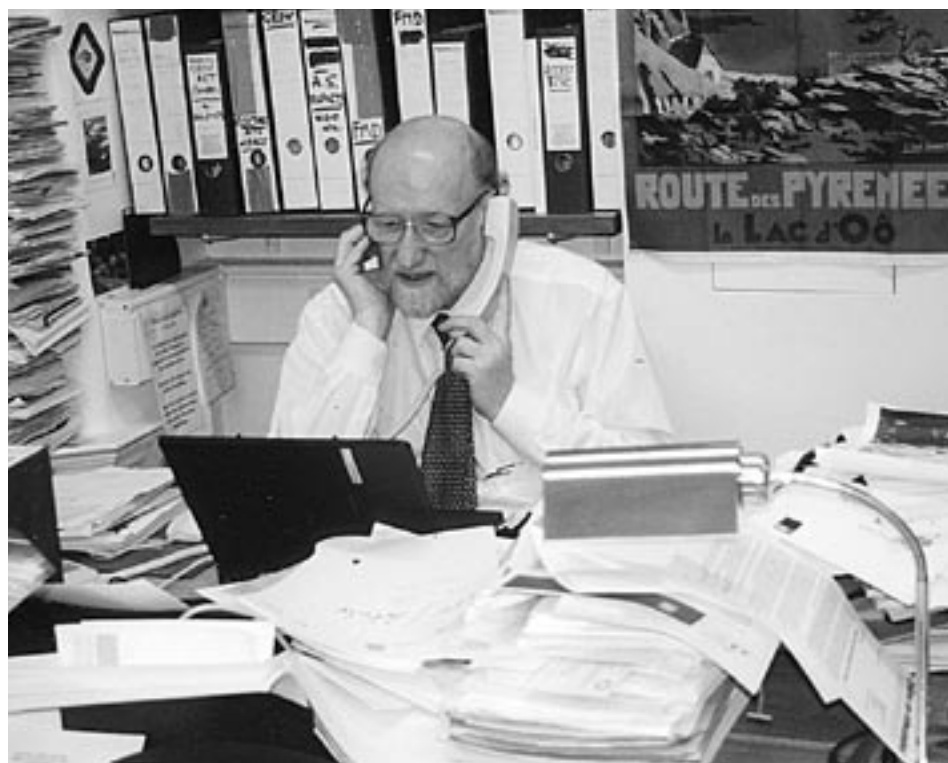
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# FROM ANGRY YOUNG TO SIMMER

**Adrian Slade  
talks to  
Lord Tony  
Greaves**

There is something a little incongruous about the notion of the Liberal Democrats' oldest angry young man donning the ermine of a peer of the realm. For those with long party memories, Tony Greaves has always seemed to be at the forefront of the vociferously democratic ant-establishment faction within the party, whether in the Young Liberal Movement attacking the tactics and policies of Jo Grimond and Jeremy Thorpe, opposing the Lib-Lab Pact, or fighting his corner against the Liberal/SDP Alliance and the subsequent merger terms, not to mention aspects of today's party that annoy him. On the other hand, he is also acknowledged for his shafts of political wisdom and for bringing about the Liberal Party's key 1970 Assembly commitment to community politics that transformed Liberal (and later Alliance) campaigning methods so successfully after the near collapse of the party at the previous election. He remains a consummate campaigner, nationally now as well as locally. Recently he has even become a Pendle councillor once again. 'I couldn't keep away from getting myself elected to something', he says.



Greaves happily accepts the description 'radical', seeing himself as a 'a radical Liberal, a left-wing Liberal and a social Liberal, all of which are part of the mainstream of British Liberalism over the last hundred years.' He is less certain whether he is as angry as he used to be – his wife Heather told me that, to his evident surprise, 'he has been much calmer since they had the children'.

They have two, now both graduates. Party members may not have noticed this alleged calm, although in conversation there is an affable humour and likeability about him.

Professionally he has been a teacher, but much of his working life has been in party jobs – election agent, publications, the Association of Liberal (and then Liberal Democrat) Councillors,

# NG MAN RING OLD GURU

etc. His wife's comment prompted me to ask what, if anything, he did with the spare time you suspect he doesn't have. Apparently the answer is, or was until he was ill last year, rock-climbing. You do need calm and nerve for that.

As it turns out, Tony Greaves and I joined the Liberal Party in the same year, 1961, but we had come through very different routes. By then I had already done two years' National Service, three years at Cambridge and nearly two years as a copywriter with J. Walter Thompson. At Cambridge my priorities had been Footlights, cabaret, theatre and law, strictly in that order. Apart from demonstrating against Suez and the Soviet intervention in Hungary, I had not taken much active interest in politics. Not until after 1959 did Jo Grimond fully impinge upon my consciousness. I then found myself helping two early '60s Young Liberals – Antonia Grey, a fellow JWT copywriter, and Tony Bunyan – to write a 'Votes at 18' leaflet and the Young Liberals' *Charter for Youth* (1961).

By contrast, Tony Greaves took to politics at a much earlier age. At seventeen he was busy debating and absorbing issues in the sixth form of his 'very enlightened'

direct-grant grammar school, Queen Elizabeth's in Wakefield. He went on to university at Oxford, where he joined the Liberal Party. I asked him why.

'I didn't come from a Liberal family. We lived in Bradford and every now and then my father, who was a policeman, used to send half a crown to the local Tory party. My great-grandparents, cockneys by birth, were involved in the founding meeting of the Independent Labour Party in Bradford. My mother's father was a rabid Tory and his father was a schoolmaster in Bradford who organised a petition for the extension of the tramway to Eccles Hill. So local campaigning was in the blood. He was also a member of the Orange Order', he adds apologetically.

'But at school we debated everything. The school was an interesting mix of fee-payers, one or two others like myself who had got in because we were in the top 2 per cent on the 11-plus, and a third group who were bussed in from mining villages in the West Riding of Yorkshire where there was no grammar school. They were the ordinary grammar-school intake. The playground culture was dictated by the mining villages. The sixth-form

culture was more that of traditional liberal education.

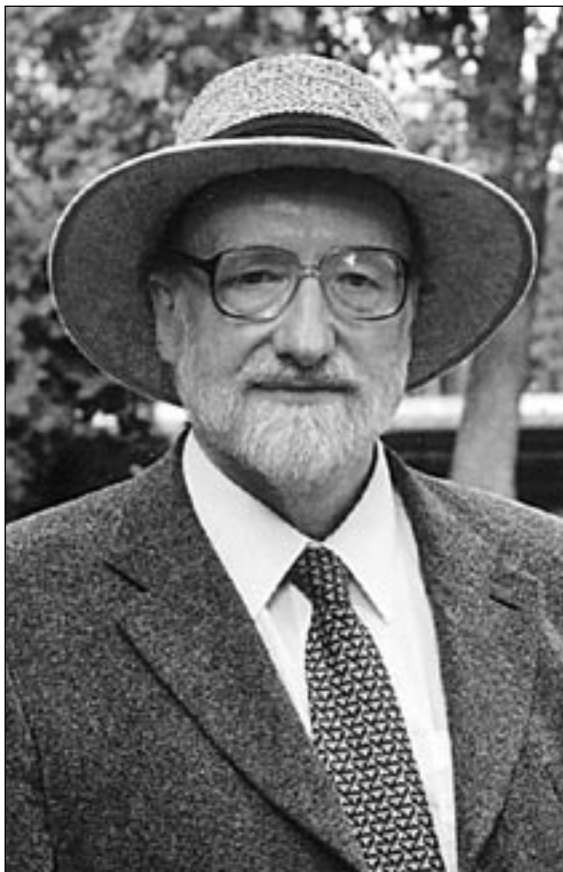
'I was not debating as a party Liberal but it was the end of the fifties, and there was a general view that the Labour Party was split and was bugged, rather as it is now. We had the Tories who had been in power for seven or eight years, a Prime Minister who seemed to be an old fogey. There had been the whole crisis of Suez. And then there was Jo. Who knows what his appeal was? He was just charismatic. And, for all his top-of-the-range Edinburgh accent, in those days he came across as classless and very modern.'

So Tony Greaves joined the Liberal Party – for reasons very similar to my own. But how does Jo's classless party square with that ermine he is entitled to wear today?

'The concept of wearing ermine is a nonsense. The fact that you have to be ennobled to sit in the Upper House is outdated, to put it mildly. I would like to see a separation of honours and the job that needs to be done here. I don't believe in the honours system. I once turned down an OBE offered by Paddy Ashdown but no, of course I didn't turn down a peerage – certainly not – because

**Greaves happily accepts the description 'radical'. He is less certain whether he is as angry as he used to be.**

## FROM ANGRY YOUNG MAN TO SIMMERING OLD GURU



sitting in Parliament is a political job on behalf of the party and everything I believe in and stand for. So I accepted the peerage that inevitably goes with it.'

Tony Greaves finds no discomfort in blocking legislation passed by a democratically elected House of Commons, because he believes that, due to the electoral system, the current composition of the House of Lords actually reflects the way the country votes much more accurately than the Commons. 'That's why I believe we have a perfect democratic legitimacy. If you believe, as I do, that we have a fundamentally corrupt electoral system in this country, I have no conscience at all about voting down proposals that arise from such a system.'

So the House of Commons is just as corrupt as the Lords?

'No. The individuals are elected so they have some legitimacy to speak on behalf of their constituents. In the House of Lords I don't attempt to do that job. I can speak for the party and myself or with a wider remit, and I frequently do. It's the system that is corrupt.'

He goes on to cite the example of a new planned centre for asylum-seekers in Worcester that his wider remit as a peer enables him to speak against and help to oppose locally. I get the feeling that he has not quite answered the question of Commons 'corruption' but we move on to his preferred model for the House of Lords.

'I would like to see the whole House elected at a regional level by STV, but we don't want the new House competing directly with the Commons, or being seen as a stepping stone to it. So you prevent that by having a long tenure – twelve to fifteen years – and then a bar on subsequent election to the Commons. The parties would decide who the candidates would be.'

So there would be no non-party or appointed members?

'Well, yes there would. The party says 20 per cent appointed. I would go further and say more than that but I wouldn't give them a vote. Let them give us their knowledge and expertise, but most of the appointed independent members say they will only vote when they have listened to the debate. We can't have that. We haven't the time for that.'

He admits that this somewhat contradictory, not to say controversial, version of a second chamber is not achievable and he suspects that under the present government no version of an elected chamber is possible. 'Not under this prime minister anyway. He wants them all appointed.'

He rejects my suggestion that the recent return to Pendle Council of Councillor Greaves indicates any loss of interest in the House of Lords. 'There are issues locally that I want to get involved with.'

This was a cue to look back thirty years from Greaves the simmering older guru to Greaves the angry Young Liberal radical that I first became aware of in the sixties. His first Liberal Assembly was in 1964. Mine was in 1965. Brighton, 1966, was the year of

the so-called 'Red Guard', when George Kiloh, Tony Greaves, Terry Lacey and a few other equally impassioned Young Liberals attempted to commit the party to a non-nuclear UK and withdrawal from NATO. It was a spectacularly noisy occasion in which Richard Moore, with similar passion, just succeeded in defending the platform and a more traditional party policy. It was followed by a debate almost as lively on 'workers' control', led by Terry Lacey and, again, Tony Greaves. He recalls that highpoint in what soon became the Young Liberal Movement.

'It all came out of that generation of people who joined the party when it was advancing hugely. There had been Orpington, followed by a number of near misses, including a by-election in Leicester. Then Harold Wilson had become leader of the Labour Party and took over our 'time for a change' message. The Liberal vote went up in the '64 election but overall the result was disappointing and in the subsequent parliament the party pretended to have its teeth in the red meat of power when it didn't. We won more seats in the '66 election, but by that time Jo was exhausted, the party was running out of ideas and didn't know where it was going. A small group of us younger party members felt something must be done. We decided to get more involved in young people's campaigning with other groups, particularly the Young Communists. We also decided to try to make the Liberal Party more radical in its policies and more campaigning in its approach. That's why we started at the Brighton Assembly with defence and industrial democracy.'

He admits that in party terms the efforts of the Young Liberals were not wholly successful. 'The YL movement grew. We had a record 750 delegates at a conference the following year and two years later we were at the core of the 'Stop the '70 (South Africa cricket) Tour' campaign, but during those years the party was a



flop really. Thorpe was a hopeless leader with no philosophical depth of any kind. He was a brilliant actor and mimic but his idea of leadership was to mimic Jo Grimond and try to make speeches like Jo had made them but, after the jokes, it was without any of Jo's feeling for issues. He thought he was an organisation man but his efforts there flopped too. What was needed was a leader who could provide a different version of progressive politics from Harold Wilson. He failed in that too.'

Despite these fierce criticisms he does not think that, if Jo Grimond had remained as leader, results would have been very different, and accepts that, although Grimond was his sort of leader and Thorpe wasn't, it was Thorpe who was ultimately the more successful of the two in terms of achieving votes. He also believes strongly that it was the Young Liberals' approach to campaigning that saved the Liberal Party after the election debacle of 1970. This approach was at the root of the resolution passed at the Eastbourne Assembly committing the party to campaign through community politics.

'A lot of Young Liberals, like Terry Lacey, George Kiloh and Hilary Wainwright, had left the party by then, but those that remained, like myself, Gordon Lishman, Graham Tope, Michael Steed and others, decided we were still Liberals and we believed that what was called in those days direct-action campaigning on locals issues was the way to get elected. One or two individual Liberals like Wallace Lawler, Joan Harris, Cyril Carr, Michael Meadowcroft and Stanley Rundle had already demonstrated this in the '60s by building some kind of Chinese wall around their own wards. Some people in the party criticised us for putting all the emphasis on getting elected but isn't that what politics are about?'

He concedes that this approach, linked to national campaigning, did not take full

effect until the '80s and '90s, but he has no doubt that community campaigning is now embedded deep in the Liberal Democrat approach and historically he has a right to claim its origins in his and others' efforts at the 1970 Liberal Assembly.

In '76 there was a change of party leadership. Tony Greaves voted for David Steel but he did not support his pact with the Callaghan Labour government. 'There was nothing in it for the party. I am not against coalitions. For example, I am a great fan of the current very successful coalition in Scotland, but in the Lib-Lab Pact we gave everything and got nothing.'

He agrees that the arrival of the SDP did little to change his views on alliances. He was the sole sceptical platform speaker at the famous Llandudno fringe meeting of 1981. 'I was concerned that we did not stop being the Liberal Party of British politics. I did not believe that the "moderate" and moderating version of the Liberal Party had become prevalent as the rationale for the party. I believe we were there to advance Liberalism and radical Liberal policies. I feared a wishy-washy compromise. In the event I don't think the Alliance actually was a complete compromise but it took a huge amount of time, effort and inter-party negotiation to prevent it. Secondly I didn't see why Liberal politicians who had busted a gut to achieve what they had achieved in their patch had to give it all away. In the early days it was all based on an SDP misconception that only they could win seats, and of course the seat negotiations were a nightmare as a result, but within a couple of years many senior members of the SDP, including Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers and, of course, Roy Jenkins, were openly recognising that they were as Liberal as the rest of us and that led to closer co-operation.'

Nevertheless not close enough for Tony Greaves to back the idea of merger in 1988, although he himself says that on the SDP side

it was mostly the members who did not see themselves as Liberal, like David Owen, who decided to oppose it. He himself was a pug-nacious and unhappy member of the Liberal negotiating team who did not accept the final outcome. His decision seems to have been based on a mix of instinctive discomfort with the detail of the constitution and a refusal to accept the name 'Social & Liberal Democrats', the unwanted compromise eventually agreed with much Liberal reluctance.

Greaves' comment at the time was: 'Merger has failed to achieve something better. The new party is universally labelled a "centre party" in a way the Liberal Party never was.'

'I was a very unhappy person,' he adds today, 'and so were the Pendle Liberals who decided constitutionally to opt out of the new party, only returning when the name was changed to Liberal Democrats.'

He retains his hostile views about the early days and believes that only the new party's local government base kept it alive, but the Greaves of 2004 strikes me as uncharacteristically optimistic and relaxed about the current state of the Liberal Democrats and their prospects. To most people his past reputation is one of disgruntlement, anger with the party leadership and democratic rage on a wide range of issues. Indeed, he recalls Alan Beith asking him during the merger negotiations in '88 whether he had strong views about everything, to which he replied: 'If I have a view I like to press it strongly, but there are lots of things I don't have a view about it, so I don't say anything.' Were anger and impatience part of his nature? 'Perhaps they are, but I only look for things that are not OK. I have never seen the point of making a speech saying you agree with things.' So if he says nothing, is he happy? 'By and large, yes.' A useful clue for Greaves watchers.

These days his political disgruntlement and argument is pretty tightly focused. Within the

**He has no doubt that community campaigning is now embedded deep in the Liberal Democrat approach and historically he has a right to claim its origins in his and others' efforts at the 1970 Liberal Assembly.**

## FROM ANGRY YOUNG MAN TO SIMMERING OLD GURU

party he recently fought a long constitutional battle with senior party members to make it easier for ethnic minority candidates to get selected. As a result, the party's first elected ethnic minority candidate, and the North West Region's second MEP, is Saj Karim. In the House of Lords, with (Lord) Chris Rennard, he has used his long experience of elections to lead the hard-fought opposition to Labour's extension of all-postal voting, which he believes to be wide open to corruption. 'They are treating votes like Eurovision Song Contest votes. They have lost all sense of an individual vote cast in person in secret and counted as one vote.'

Although he supports the principle of devolution, he has fought equally hard against the government's proposed referendums and structure for the English regions, which he believes will be an extra layer of bureaucracy and ineffective. Time and again he cites local government experience as being an invaluable tool when arguing a case in the House of Lords.

'I am a person who has a whole series of individual personal campaigns running at the same time. If you are a radical politician you should see life in terms of projects and adventures. Other people can deal with the administration and bureaucracy that needs to be done. That's fine.'

The Greaves volcano still simmers but these days rarely does it spit directly at the party, which, I suspect, now sees him more as a shrewd guru than an angry rebel. Unlike most other senior Liberal Democrats he does not indulge in speculation about prospects, but he is prepared to give his three reasons why people should vote Liberal Democrat rather than Labour or Tory.

'Firstly, because we are the only remaining democratic major party left in politics. We still have a party where policy is made mostly by its members, and I think that is important to electors as well as activists. Secondly, public services. I think we are holding the line in the

**What still differentiates him from most Liberal Democrats is that, from a radical and democratic perspective, he has always seen Labour as the principal enemy.**

party that public services ought to be run in the public sector by elected public bodies, and not by market economics. Both the other parties are veering off into short-term privatisation. Thirdly, local government. We believe in democratically elected local government, probably by STV, with enough real powers and freedom from government interference to do a proper job. And I believe STV will happen. Look at Scotland. Thirty years ago, who would have thought it?'

It is hard to tell whether Tony Greaves has merely become more accepting of the party or whether the party itself has become more Liberal and therefore more acceptable to him. What still differentiates him from most Liberal Democrats is that, from a radical and democratic perspective, he has always seen Labour as the

principal enemy. He is virulent in his opposition to Labour centralism and conservatism, and his closing advice to Charles Kennedy is to attack the government more sharply right across the board. He expected the Leicester South win and believes that the recent by-election results could change British politics significantly, particularly for the Tories. 'He [Charles Kennedy] has been asking the right questions on Iraq but now he has got to be much sharper in challenging Labour'. On what particularly? 'On everything.'

If he does, he can count on the very full support of this unpredictable but hard-working peer.

*A shorter version of this interview was first published in Liberal Democrat News in September 2004.*

## LETTERS

### Speeches and names

Issue 43 was amongst the mountain of papers and magazine I've just carted back to Kinshasa after a few days back in Leeds.

Re the continuing SDP ('Fourth Party, Fifth Column?') I recall the count at the Bootle by-election which was the final debacle for the SDP. As the article points out, Jack Holmes finished seventh, but he claimed his right to make a speech in the time-honoured descending order of votes polled. It was chutzpah at its best! He began by saying, 'I came here tonight with a victory speech in my pocket – and it will have to stay there', and continued, 'I would like to thank all those who voted for me – and it won't take long.'

Second, C.H. Pritchard's letter on the change in the law to permit party names on ballot papers was valuable evidence, but the 'direct action' that finally

provoked the change – as was pointed out in an earlier issue of the *Journal* – was Frank Davis' change of name by deed poll to 'Frank Liberal Davis' when he contested the Acton by-election.

Third, no doubt many readers have pointed out, in connection with David Boyle's review of David Walters' book, that it was George Dangerfield, not Trevor Wilson, who wrote the important but idiosyncratic book *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Trevor Wilson wrote a different though still important book, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party*.

**Michael Meadowcroft**

### Counterfactuals

I read Mark Pack's review of *Prime Minister Portillo and Other Things that Never Happened (Journal of Liberal History 44)* with interest, and would agree that it steers a middle course between

a serious academic work and a more popular book. However, I am not sure that I would share his analysis. For example, John Charmley's essay on Halifax contains the suggestion that Hitler deliberately held his panzers back to allow the British Expeditionary Force to escape at Dunkirk, when it is just as likely that the German high command was worried that their armour had advanced too far ahead of the main army. A failed counter-attack by light tanks at Arras had shown them to be vulnerable. The chapter is more than 'twee' – it contains a considerable amount of wishful thinking.

Whilst some of the counterfactuals devote a considerable amount of attention to antecedent events, the analysis is not always complete. Richard Grayson, for example, does not give due attention to the fact that the change of allegiance in the working-class vote had begun before the First World War. The schism had already occurred when the bulk of trade unions leaders changed their allegiance to Labour, but it was a rift over leadership rather than dogma, a bit like Henry VIII's split with Rome. Socialism was never particularly popular with the working class, and the trade union movement has been more pragmatic than ideological.

James Parry ignores the strength of social Liberalism, which was by no means restricted to New Liberalism and the Lloyd George era. It had been present in local government in Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham, with the progressives on the London County Council, and in some London boroughs where Liberals and socialists stood on a platform of greater municipalisation, a point that the *Orange Book* authors would do well to remember.

It has been suggested, in *BBC History*, that counterfactuals appeal to people who support lost causes. I would agree that there is an element of wishful thinking in some of the essays,

particularly Robert Taylor's 'What if Harold Wilson and the unions had agreed *In Place of Strife*', which contains no antecedent evidence. With the exception of those essays that avoid the horrors of the Thatcher era, I think I prefer the existing course of events.

Andrew Hudson

### Spectacular victories

In his article on 'Spectacular victories' (*Journal of Liberal History* 44), Jaime Reynolds spotlights Charles Masterman's gain of Manchester Rusholme as 'the most impressive' result of the 1923 election, citing his widow Lucy's account from her 1934 biography. As his papers' first processor (L. Iles, 'The Papers of Charles and Lucy Masterman', Heslop Archives, Edgbaston, 1987), I must add some notes of cautious appreciation.

First, the seat was not regarded, contemporaneously, as an 'unexpected' gain. The *Manchester Guardian* correctly anticipated the Liberal gain, though, as Lucy's account conceded, by Winston Churchill! Masterman was, in fact, a last-minute candidate, parachuted in when Churchill decided to contest a Leicester seat on an anti-socialist platform against the ex-Liberal, now Labour, F. Pethick Lawrence, an old colleague of Masterman's from the Cambridge Union.

Second, and more in line with Dr Reynolds' conclusions, Masterman's gain of the seat, and his loss a year later were the product and the failing of local Liberal organisation. In 1923, the Liberals won all the Manchester seats bar one (held by J. R. Clynes for Labour), due to the hard local work and 'community politics' style of the paid organiser and secretary of the Manchester City Liberal Federation, Lloyd George's personal assistant Colonel Thomas Tweed, a convert from Labour. Unfortunately, Masterman, himself an Asquithian, ignored much of Tweed's advice and in particular

demonised the Rusholme Labour supporters as 'communist'. His private correspondence shows that many local Christian socialist vicars refused to support him in 1924, preferring Labour's William Paul.

Larry Iles

### Auntie Nell, the mole

When working for the BBC at Bush House in the early 1960s, I would often meet up with my honorary aunt, Nell Perryman. She was a quiet lady from Honiton in Devon, who rented a room in a flat in Dulwich and was a long-term member of St John's Ambulance. Her greatest love was to go to Gilbert and Sullivan operas at the D'Oyly Carte Opera House in North London – I think we saw the lot.

Auntie Nell used to work as a telephonist at the National Liberal Club. Regularly on a Tuesday after work, I would walk along the Embankment and join her in her small cubicle on the ground floor. 'Come to see Miss Perryman?' I would be greeted by the doorman. Her supper was served at 6pm and she always shared it with me.

There were many notable members who would drop by to make calls but I remember Jo Grimond in particular. 'Put me through to my constituency, Miss Perryman', he would declare. 'Very well, Mr Grimond', Auntie Nell would reply. 'I'll page you as soon as the call comes through'. Ten minutes later he would take the call in an adjacent box.

In 1962 I migrated to Canada, travelling onwards to New Zealand and Australia. By the time I returned, Auntie Nell had died. One day, my mother and I was discussing her over the washing up. 'You know, Anne', she said, 'it was a strange thing – she voted Conservative all her life!'

Cllr Anne Roberts

*Editor's note: some of these letters have been edited for length and clarity. Readers are encouraged to submit letters by email.*

**Masterman's gain of the seat, and his loss a year later were the product and the failing of local Liberal organisation.**

# REPORT

## Liberals in Liverpool – Their Legacy

Fringe meeting report, March 2004, Southport, with Sir Trevor Jones and Cllr Mike Storey

Report by **Neil Stockley**

The Liberal Democrat History Group's spring conference fringe meeting took place in Southport, close to what is hallowed ground for many Liberals: Liverpool, the cradle of community politics and the old stamping ground of Sir Trevor Jones – 'Jones the vote', former leader of Liverpool City Council, the father of the Focus leaflet and the meeting's first speaker. The second speaker was Cllr Mike Storey, who has served on the council for thirty years, the last ten of those as Liberal Democrat leader. In 1998, somewhat to his surprise, the Lib Dems won outright control of Liverpool.

Sir Trevor traced the rise and fall of the Liberals in Liverpool during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1968 a victory in Church Ward began what he called the 'by-election trail'. The Liberals took over the City Council five years later. This may have been an impressive achievement but it was not a complete triumph. As Sir Trevor explained, at no stage did the Liberals win outright control in Liverpool. Indeed, during their years in power, they never had more than forty-eight councillors out of a total of ninety-nine.

In 1982, the Liberals lost power in Liverpool to the Labour Party, then firmly under the thumb of the Militant Tendency. Sir Trevor showed a mixture of anger and regret as he recounted how Derek Hatton and his cronies 'brought the city to its knees'. It was an especially bitter period in the city's politics. Sir Trevor recalled how Hatton had once promised to dance on

his grave. 'That's good, Derek,' he replied, 'because I'm going to be buried at sea.'

For Cllr Storey too, 'the dark times' of the 1980s were a defining period. He recounted how Liverpool had 'lost its way completely' and people's lives had been destroyed ('the things they did to schools ... council staff were terrorised ...'). He believed that Militant's 'reign of terror' caused people to withdraw from civic and community life.

So, local politics can go badly wrong. What have the Liberals and Liberal Democrats done to put them right in Liverpool? The answer seemed to be based on a style of politics, an approach to governance, rather than a doctrine or a programme. Liverpool's Liberals are definitely political technicians and not ideologues or policy wonks. As Sir Trevor put it: 'You did what you liked as long as you were true to your principles.' But neither the policy programme nor the principles they followed in the 1970s were explained. For his part, Mike Storey was proud to have a chance to 'change Liverpool for good'. One got the impression that there has never been quite enough time to work out a grand design or a policy vision, let alone to describe what it is. Indeed, Mike Storey recalled how, on a radio election-night results programme in 1998, he had been asked what the Lib Dems wanted to achieve following their unexpected victory. In just a few minutes, he had pieced together an answer based on making Liverpool 'a premier

European city' with inclusive leadership that had style and panache.

Further, the Liverpoolian brand of Liberalism is highly responsive to local needs and wishes (even if the speakers hardly mentioned the theory of community politics). 'You need your finger on the pulse [of] what the community thinks,' said Cllr Storey. Liberals have to show that they are 'doing something' to solve peoples' problems, he explained. By contrast, 'the Labour agenda is not about the whole community'. It is not hard to see how such local populism is inextricably linked to the party's political strategies. A party with no inherently safe seats or tailor-made constituencies has had little choice but to reach above and beyond the trade union, the traditional voting bloc, the old symbols.

Indeed, Cllr Storey explained the Lib Dems' recent successes in the following terms. The Conservatives believed that they had a God-given right to rule but had been wiped out in Liverpool. Labour spoke in patronising tones of 'our people' or 'our ward', with a mindset that placed people into voting blocs and took them for granted. But the Liberal Democrats believed that any ward could be won. As Cllr Storey saw it, that meant that the party would always have to be proactive in its approach to campaigning.

The Liverpool approach has clearly been a success. But both Sir Trevor and Cllr Storey identified some flaws. The first was a shortage of activists and councillors. In 1973, the year they took control but without a majority, the Liberals contested just seventy-four seats out of ninety-nine. ('Still,' said Sir Trevor, 'we gave the impression we were fighting them all.') In the 1970s, the Liberals suffered from a very high turnover of councillors. As Sir Trevor saw it, these were the risks of drawing on large numbers of younger people to be candidates and councillors.

**What Sir Trevor and Cllr Storey proved above all was that, in Liverpool, Liberals don't talk politics, they just do it.**

Their second regret was a failure, at least since the heyday of David Alton, to translate the party's local government success into Liberal and Lib Dem MPs from Liverpool. (Both speakers, as well as the chair, Chris Rennard, hailed from Liverpool Wavertree, which Cllr Storey called the party's 'big dream'.)

One of the intriguing issues to arise was 'why Liverpool?' Why had Liberalism – and, more particularly, a special urban variety of Liberalism – proved so successful in that city? Cllr Storey put it down to the fact that Liverpool is 'a maverick place ... where people like to buck the trend'. Sir Trevor believed that Liverpudlians like to support the underdog. For his part, Chris

Rennard saw Liverpool as 'a commonsense place'.

This question, as well as the specific policies, strategies and tactics that Liberals in Liverpool have followed, could have been developed in further depth. For instance, when the party has won, has it really been because Labour has lost? But no matter: we can come back to the analysis another day. At the spring fringe meeting, a good cross-section of the party's activists and campaigners came to honour three giants of community-based Liberalism, listen to their stories and celebrate their achievements. What Sir Trevor and Cllr Storey proved above all was that, in Liverpool, Liberals don't talk politics, they just do it.

## REVIEWS

### Permission campaigning

Paul Richards: *How to Win an Election* (second edition; London: Politico's Publishing, 2004)

Reviewed by **Mark Pack**

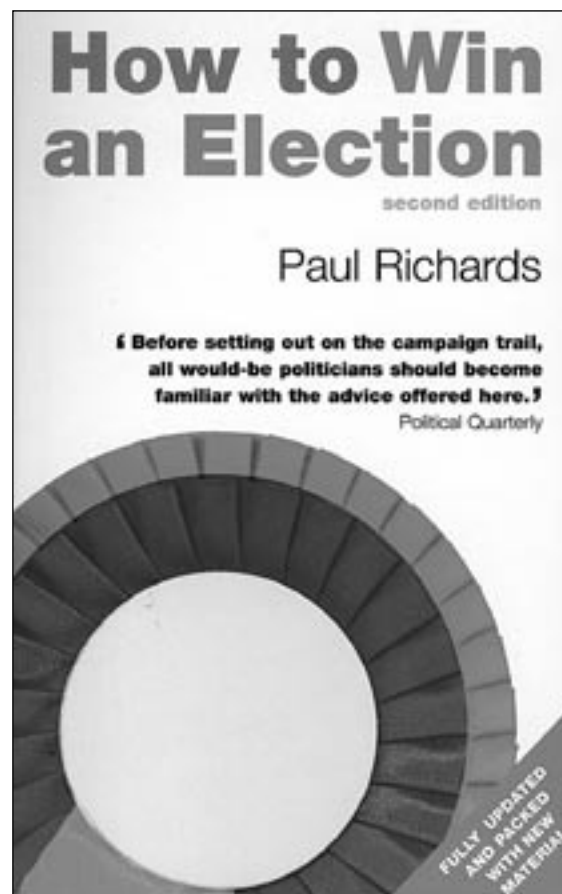
Taken at face value, this new edition of Paul Richards' book is a failure. The blurb promises a guide to winning elections, yet a novice reading this book will not come away with the practical skills to have a chance of winning. But if you ignore the over-eager publishing hype on the back of the book and in the press release launching it, and instead take it as a gentle canter through the elements of modern elections, it is much more successful.

To give one simple example – a reader of the section on internet campaigning will almost certainly come away knowing that it is important and what it involves in broad terms, but

having learnt almost nothing about how to actually go away and send emails or develop a successful website.

The author has a long record of standing for, or organising campaigns on behalf of, the Labour Party in UK elections – and, as he points out, his own personal lack of success when standing is an almost irresistible item in his own biography. Yet he does have real experience to impart which helps distinguish the book from some of the abstract academic tomes covering the same area.

Although he can't resist the occasional mindless partisan jibe, the book gives a fair wind to examples and campaigning styles



from all the main UK political parties. His breezy and readable style makes his views always clear and concise. Even if the descriptions sometimes gloss over the complexities – as with his superficial comments on turnout levels – you know clearly and quickly what his views are.

The book's eight chapters have a broad spread, from the purpose of elections, to the formation of strategies, to the delivery of campaigns. Paul Richards's own particular emphasis through the book is on 'permission campaigning'. This is the idea that, with a public that is often cynical and uninterested, politicians first have to work hard to get 'permission' from them to engage in discussion on an issue and need then to build up a personal dialogue.

He also draws heavily on one of his previous publications, on media management, which makes that section of the book one of the few to offer detailed 'how to' steps from which the reader can learn practical skills.

The book's production qualities are variable. In its favour is

## REVIEWS

good clear printing on decent paper and a spine made using proper glue – particularly important in a reference work. Counting against is the poor index, which a series of spot checks showed up to miss many items. Page 160 is also in the wrong place and a description of US primaries that states there are four types is not followed by details on all four.

For someone wanting to know more about what happens in campaigns and why, the book is a success – just don't expect to learn how to do actually do it yourself.

*Mark Pack has a doctorate in nineteenth century English elections and now works in the Liberal Democrats' Campaigns and Elections Department, specialising in internet and legal matters.*

extract covering the Unionist years privately in 1981<sup>3</sup> and the period when Derby served under Disraeli, ending with his resignation in 1878, was not published until 1994<sup>4</sup>. These, presumably final, extracts have had to wait a further nine years.

This new volume contains a selection from the hitherto unpublished period 1878–85, together with a reprint of the hard-to-obtain, privately printed selection from 1885 onwards. In one extensive volume we have the bulk of Derby's jottings on his Liberal and Liberal Unionist periods.

John Vincent suggests that the diary entries were made at the time or delayed by only a day or two by pressure of business or illness. Vincent adds that they have not been subject to retrospective correction. Internal evidence appears to substantiate this. The entries sometimes repeat views from a few days earlier and show no sign of hindsight. Derby is – at least sometimes – careful to distinguish comments he has noted immediately from those he was not able to record at the time and has had recorded from memory. He is also careful how he handles mere hearsay.

So what do we learn? These diaries served a very different purpose to Gladstone's. Gladstone provided effective time-management sheets, occasionally enlivened by a stray comment, to ensure that he could account to his deity for his labours on earth. Derby was not a religious man. Rather, he recorded the passing events, as they occurred, which were significant to one of the country's leading landowners and front-rank politicians. He is particularly useful in his occasional thumbnail sketches of his contemporaries and sometimes waspish about the recently deceased, repeating the gossip which inevitably coloured contemporary responses to events but which is usually missing from official lives and academic studies. Even after Vincent's editing, we see a glorious mixture of the

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## The diary of a somebody

John Vincent (ed.): *The Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby (1826–93) Between 1878 and 1893: A Selection* (Leopards Head Press, 2003)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

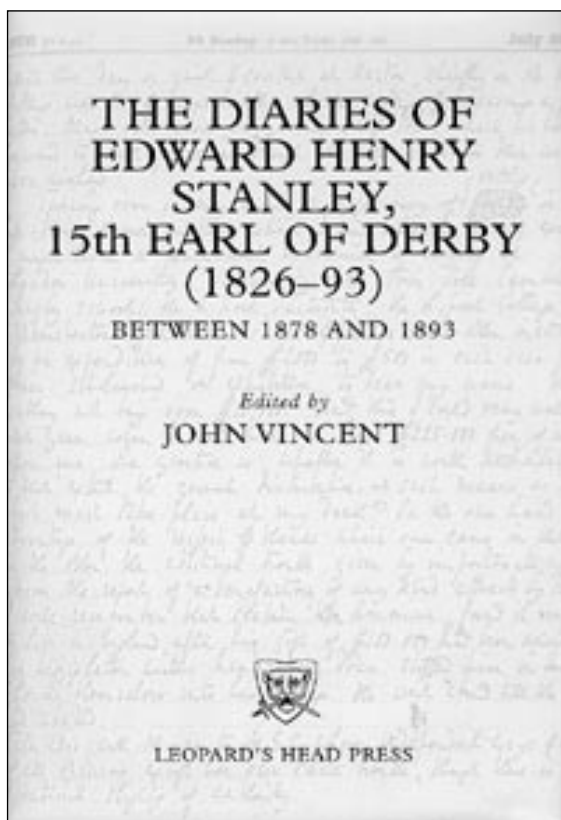
**T**he Stanleys have not been well treated by history, or at least not by historians of the nineteenth century. Edward George Stanley, the 14<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby (1799–1869) led the Conservative Party through the difficult period that followed the destruction of Peel's government in the Corn Laws dispute, and, without ever commanding a majority, he held the premiership three times. He paved the way for the leadership of Disraeli, whom the Tory party would probably never have accepted without Derby's backing. Yet he did not receive a Victorian 'tombstone biography' of any weight and Vincent argues that he still does not have the modern biography he deserves.<sup>1</sup>

His son, Edward Henry, the 15<sup>th</sup> Earl, who also achieved a front-rank position in Victorian politics, as Foreign Secretary under Disraeli and as Colonial Secretary under Gladstone, also lacks a biographer. But perhaps here lies the answer. Despite the family motto, 'Sans Changer', both father and son were what some might describe as turn-coats. The 14<sup>th</sup> Earl served, as Hon. Edward Stanley, in both

Grey's and Melbourne's Whig governments before falling out over reform of the Irish Church in 1834 and joining Peel's Tories in 1837. The 15<sup>th</sup> Earl became a close political friend of Disraeli but quarrelled with him over the handling of the late 1870s' Eastern crisis and may have been 'stitched up' by Disraeli and by Salisbury, to whom he was related by marriage. Gradually he was absorbed into the Liberal Party and became the only man to serve in both Disraeli's and Gladstone's cabinets. However, yet another twist occurred, and he broke with Gladstone over Home Rule, ending his life as a Liberal Unionist.

In the absence of a biography, the diaries must serve as the monument for the 15<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby, important not only as a significant source about his life but for the way in which they fill out the lives of his contemporaries. For this we must be grateful for the dedication and persistence of John Vincent, his collaborators and his publisher. The first extracts from Derby's diaries, covering the period from 1849 to 1869, were published in 1978.<sup>2</sup> Vincent published the

**He is particularly useful in his occasional thumbnail sketches of his contemporaries and sometimes waspish about the recently deceased.**



important and inconsequential. We gain a strong impression of the man behind the writing. This is particularly the case in the early sections of this volume, which cover the aftermath of his resignation from the Conservative government and his discreet passage towards the Liberal benches, when he has no official business to monopolise his time.

Derby was keenly concerned with the management of his estates and the heritage he would pass on. By Victorian standards, his income was extraordinary. When he inherited the title he also inherited a large (70,000 acre) estate, but one which was substantially in debt. By careful management he was able to turn this round so that by the time of these diaries he was debating where to invest cash surpluses and buying further land to round out his holdings. Devoted to his wife, he organised his life to minimise the inconveniences that arose from her deteriorating eyesight and tendency to depression. His own health was also fragile; Vincent suggests that kidney problems prevented him from aiming at the premiership and

from fermenting a coup against Disraeli when they battled over the Eastern question.

Derby's lifestyle appears to be comfortable rather than extravagant, which left him those substantial spare resources and prey to any number of begging letters. Apparently reluctant to give to church-based charities, Derby was a consistent supporter of the Peabody Trust, supplying housing to the poorer classes, and played a significant part in the civic life of Lancashire – Knowsley, the family home, is just outside Liverpool. But in addition he responded generously to what appears to be a random selection of the letters that reached him from all over the country. Vincent includes a selection of entries relating to these letters and Derby's reaction almost as a form of light relief to the more general focus on politics. To quote two (not quite) random examples: 'A lady writes to say that she is out of health, that carriage exercise would be good for her, but is too expensive: will I send her £50 to enable her to hire carriages for the summer?' (25 June 1878). 'Sent £5 to a literary beggar, which I half regret, believing the fellow to be a rascal: but it is done'. (12 July 1881).

The early part of the volume gives an insight into the political methods of Lords Salisbury and Beaconsfield, which Vincent blames for the blackening of Derby's character – the Countess's character is also blackened but possibly with some cause. It also throws unexpected light on the (un)reliability of Hansard as a record of parliamentary speeches by recording the careful editing of some of Salisbury's more intemperate remarks.

While Derby did not immediately join the Liberals after his resignation from Beaconsfield's government, he quickly broke his links with the Tory party and felt that as a leading landowner he could not remain neutral in the 1880 election. His disgust with his former allies was tempered by an unwillingness to work under

Gladstone whom he felt likely to be dictatorial. Over the next two years he was wooed by a Liberal double act. Granville, the Liberal leader in the Lords, regularly consulted with his lordship and sought his advice, while Gladstone took tea with the Countess of Derby. At the end of 1882 and after a characteristic Gladstonian shuffling of the proposed reshuffle he accepted the Colonial Office. From here onwards we are given an insider's view of the 1880–85 Liberal government, with all its quarrels and indecisions as well as its achievements. This is history with the hindsight removed, with the uncertainties and lack of prescience restored, with the cabals and gossip made clearer, as men come together to make decisions without possessing adequate information. This is most obvious in relation to the government's problems over the relief force which failed to rescue Gordon from Khartoum and in the arguments between the party factions which precipitated the government's fall in 1885.

Derby did not spend long soul-searching about Britain's imperial destiny or leading the Colonial Office towards some great scheme to paint the globe red, but administered what was there and dealt with the issues arising. For anyone who does not specialise in colonial affairs, what is striking is the immensity of the low-level man-management that Derby was expected to undertake. But with the more limited communications of Victorian times, the man on the spot had considerable scope to use his initiative and it was important to a Colonial Secretary to know to whom his fate was entrusted.

Ireland, its obstructive MPs and intransigent problems, naturally predominate. No one who reads Derby's comments on the Irish Land Bill of 1881 and the comments he makes on Irish tenant farmers or their representatives throughout the diaries will be at all surprised that he sided with the Liberal Unionists in the great schism of 1886. The

# CIVIL LIBERTIES IN WAR AND PEACE

Law and order has long been a major issue in British politics. The Blair Government has brought in legislation to introduce national identity cards; ministers claim that this measure will make UK citizens more secure from the threats of international terrorism and domestic crime. Especially since 9/11, how to strike the correct balance between protecting the state and promoting the liberties of the citizen has been the subject of heated political debate.

This meeting will examine how Liberals over the last 200 years have responded to repressive measures taken in the name of 'security'.

Speakers will include **Professor Clive Emsley**, Department of History, Open University and author of *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900* and *Britain and the French Revolution*. (Further speakers will be announced in the New Year.)

**7.00 p.m., Monday 24 January** (following the History Group AGM at 6.30 p.m.)

Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

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last section of the diaries covers these Unionist years.

Here I must confess to some disappointment. Like Churchill, Derby had ratted and re-ratted by forming part of the Liberal Unionist alliance with the Conservatives and, while he never again played a part in government, the complexities of party relations between 1886 and 1892 deserve more attention. In addition, the Liberal Unionist story is nearly always told from the point of view of 'Radical Joe' Chamberlain, but the breakaway Liberals were overwhelmingly Whig in character, though their leader, Lord Hartington (later Duke of Devonshire) tended to the gruff and taciturn. Derby's was another voice from the almost silent majority. But, as a reprint of the privately published *The Later Derby*

*Diaries*, this section is constructed on different lines to the rest of the book, with the focus on topics rather than chronology. Unfortunately, whether limited by the source material or by the economics of the original book, the space devoted to these years is modest. Excluding the introduction to this second part, only sixty-one pages cover the years from July 1885 to 1893, when Derby died, compared to the sixty-eight pages for the period April to December 1878. But this slight dissatisfaction should not be allowed to detract from the far greater merits of having ready access to the views of a sympathetic, if aristocratic, inside observer of one of the most convoluted periods of Liberal government.

At a recent conference on the Derby family, John Vin-

cent affectionately described the 15<sup>th</sup> Earl as Mr – or rather, Lord – Pooter, in tribute to his regularly commuting from Whitehall to his Kent home and to his management of official business like a carefully organised clerk. One cannot miss the Pooterish tendencies but Derby was much more than this. An underestimated minister and as dispassionate an observer as any participant in government could be, Derby has left us a valuable archive which restores to Victorian politics the uncertainties which historians spend their lives tidying away. The Leopard's Head Press must be congratulated for bringing such a substantial book to us at such a reasonable price and John Vincent for the wealth of ancillary information and footnotes without which such a book cannot be fully

appreciated. Both the specialist and the newcomer to the complex politics of the final decades of the nineteenth century can expect to be entertained and enlightened.

*Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

- 1 This is due to be rectified shortly by Angus Hawkins.
- 2 John Vincent (ed.), *Disraeli, Derby, and the Conservative Party: Journals and Memoirs of Edward Henry, Lord Stanley 1849–1869* (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978).
- 3 John Vincent (ed.), *The Later Derby Diaries: Home Rule, Liberal Unionism, and Aristocratic Life in Late Victorian England. Selected Passages* (printed and published by the author, 1981). (Vincent does not appear to go for snappy titles.)
- 4 John Vincent (ed.), *A Selection from The Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby (1826–93) Between September 1869 and March 1878*, Camden Fifth Series Vol. 4 (1994).