

Origins of the Party
by Malcolm Baines

John Vincent:

The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857-68

First published in 1966, this is one of the few great historical classics dealing with the Liberal Party. Despite its age, it is a must for anyone interested in Victorian Liberalism.

As the book of the thesis it marries detail with a fascinating discursive essay which successfully brings together all the different aspects of the mid-nineteenth century Liberal Party; party organisation, the parliamentary party, the rank and file and vignettes of some of the chief Liberal leaders of the decade.

It also still has the capacity to provide refreshing and thought-provoking insights. Vincent stresses the importance of voting Liberal as part of the newly enfranchised craftsman's striving for self-improvement. He also emphasises the importance of a shared perception of history to these Liberal voters in which Bunyan and Cromwell become radical heroes on whose shoulders they stood. By contrast, the parliamentary Liberal party is shown not to be split between radicals and cautious whigs, but to be composed of local time-serving notables; lawyers, factory owners and gentry, lacking in energy and force.

Vincent also draws out the difference and similarities between the various Liberal leaders. Bright is shown to have pursued the destruction of aristocratic privilege, but with little interest in or capacity for social reform. Palmerston's success depended on parliamentary support, administrative expertise and the approval of the 'top ten thousand'. Of particular interest, Vincent concludes that the key difference between the whigs and Gladstone was not policy, but who they appealed to. Gladstone's success rested on how, amplified by the provincial press, he presented the hope of justice in an oppressive world, thereby creating a revolution in rhetoric and public expectation.

The book concludes by judging the Liberals on the 'Condition of England' question, which is the main area where nineteenth century Liberals have been attacked in this century. The Conservatives had nothing better to offer, he considers, while the Liberals believed that the familiar policies of peace, retrenchment and free trade would remedy the 'Condition' in themselves. However, what the Liberals achieved more than anything was the political education of the public in the 1860s, ultimately creating those high expectations by which they themselves have been judged.

A Real Drag
by Tony Little

The break up of the Liberal Party in 1886 over Home Rule for Ireland brought to an end the dominance established after 1832. It created an extraordinary alliance between Whigs, Unionist Radicals and Tories. It cost Liberalism the inevitable successor to Gladstone, in Lord Hartington and its foremost

populariser of social policy in Joe Chamberlain. By coincidence, new biographies of both men have just been published.

Patrick Jackson:

The Last of the Whigs
(Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994)

Lord Hartington, later 8th Duke of Devonshire, came from a solid Whig family, among the greatest land owners in Britain (and Ireland), with family ties to many of the major figures on the Liberal benches. Once he had decided to take up politics, it was inevitable that he would have a leading part but it was also a role he deserved by his administrative ability. In so many ways, Hartington embodied Whiggism - good, disinterested government; willing, reluctantly, to recognise the need for progress; but protective of the interests of his class.

He entered Parliament in 1857 and took office in 1863, reaching the cabinet in Gladstone's government of 1868-74. When Gladstone retired, hurt, in 1875, he assumed the leadership of the party in the Commons, where he had to put up with considerable insubordination from the Grand Old Man.

Queen Victoria offered Hartington the premiership in 1880 but he refused when Gladstone made clear his unwillingness to serve in a subordinate capacity. He was an increasingly unhappy member of the Liberal Government up to 1885. It is reputed that every member of this cabinet offered to resign at least once. Hartington's principal disputes were with the vacillating foreign policy, especially over the occupation of Egypt and the Sudan.

He was also unhappy with the threat to property posed by Gladstone's Irish land reforms and Home Rule for Ireland. Consequently, he refused to serve in the Liberal government which went down to defeat over Home Rule. His stand rallied a Whig rebellion to which his old adversary Chamberlain supplied a voice, personality and distinctive policy. In the immediate Home Rule crisis, the Tory leader Salisbury offered to serve under Hartington but he again refused the premiership and settled for sustaining the Tories in office. Thereafter he remained an ally of the Tories, taking up office under Salisbury in 1895 but breaking with them over Free Trade in 1903.

Hartington's was a complex personality disguised under a laid back, languid air. He professed boredom with politics but was nothing without it. The heir to an immense estate, he lived on a parental allowance for most of his life. A close friend of the Prince of Wales and his 'fast' social set with whom he pursued shooting and horse racing, he could seem ill at ease in social gatherings. When Chamberlain attacked him as a drag on the wheel of progress, he appropriated the criticism as a boast.

In the years since his death, Hartington's reputation has lived under the shadow of Gladstone, Chamberlain and Salisbury. Jackson's is the first full biography for 80 years. It rehearses the major incidents of the career and yet it does so without illuminating the personality or giving insight into the turning points of his life. An expensive disappointment.

Peter T Marsh:

Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics
(Yale University Press 1994)

If Hartington's drift from paternalist Whig to patrician Tory can be readily comprehended, Chamberlain's transformation from Radical Joe to father of the Empire takes rather more understanding. What Marsh's massive new biography makes clearer is that Chamberlain never ceased to be radical nor drifted far from his Birmingham base in a career which broke up both the Liberal and the Tory parties.

Joseph Chamberlain was born of non-conformist London stock but made his fortune in the manufacture of screws in a Birmingham company that now forms part of GKN. Caught up in the agitation against Foster's 1870 Education Act, Chamberlain switched from business to politics on the extreme radical wing of the Liberal party. Rebuffed in Sheffield he turned to local politics and, while mayor of Birmingham, he used his business skills to pioneer gas and water socialism, under which the local authority supplied gas and other services, at a profit, using the cash flow from these businesses to fund borrowing for a revitalisation of the city, its roads and public buildings.

Radical Joe was one of the first to recognise the transformation of politics occasioned by the second and third Reform Acts and created a party organisation at ward, constituency and national level to mobilise a mass electorate. Although notionally profoundly democratic, Chamberlain's organisational skills ensured that in Birmingham, at least, Liberal associations remained loyal to him, personally, throughout his career.

Chamberlain won a by-election in 1876. His municipal reputation and his talent ensured quick promotion to Gladstone's 1880 government despite personal antipathy between the two. His unhappy experience of that government and of Irish MPs left him none too willing to compromise over Gladstone's Home Rule proposals and it was Chamberlain who supplied the fire to the Liberal Unionist revolt while Hartington supplied the manpower. Marsh plays down the limited scale of the Radical unionist revolt and treats the whole episode in line with the Cooke/Vincent thesis that the break up of the Liberal Party was a bungled power play between the three party leaders. To my mind this does insufficient justice either to the policy consistencies of Hartington and Chamberlain or Gladstone's preference for measures over men. Chamberlain had no enthusiasm for reuniting the Liberal Party as long as Gladstone lived and by the time of his death, the opportunity had passed. For the remainder of his life, he pushed Tory domestic policy in a moderately radical direction and was one of the first to promote old age pensions. Offered a free choice of office, Joe became Colonial Secretary under Salisbury in 1895 and pursued an active imperialist policy which was dragged down by the Boer War.

As the new century dawned and the Tory government tired, Chamberlain drew together his concerns for the empire and for the competitiveness of British industry to promulgate a policy of tariffs with preferences for colonial goods. This, like

so many of Chamberlain's policies, unorthodox approach broke the Tory party. It cost them the 1906 general election and Chamberlain his health.

Marsh's massive biography will set the standard for years to come. It replaces the traditional picture of the infallible imperialist with a more human portrait of a prickly, pioneering politician whose business roots gave him a perception of Britain's declining world position denied to the more traditional aristocrats of the political elite.

Publications

New from the Party's publishers:

- Giving Politics a Good Name:
A Tribute to Jo and Laura Grimond*
by Peter Joyce £3.50
- Liberal Democracy: the Radical Tradition*
by Geoffrey Thomas £3.95
- Towards the Sound of Gunfire:
A Short History of the Liberal Democrats* (2nd edition, 1994)
by Peter Joyce £2.50

All available from Liberal Democrat Publications, 8 Fordington Green, Dorset DT1 1GB (0305 264646); add 20% P&P. The two Joyce booklets will be available at Conference, the other shortly afterwards.

Membership Services

The History Group (with thanks to Richard Grayson for the work) is pleased to make the following listings available to its members.

Mediawatch: a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers and some magazines and journals (all those listed in the British Humanities Index, published by Bowker-Saur). Starting in 1988, this now extends to August 1993.

Thesiswatch: all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats!)

Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy of either of these free of charge; send an A4 SSAE to Duncan Brack.

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