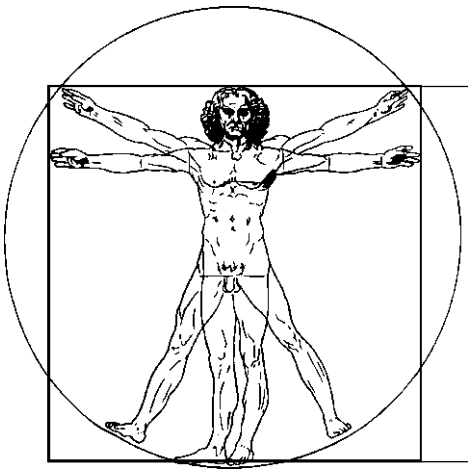

Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter Number Four September 1994

A Liberal Democrat History Group
Conference Fringe Meeting

We Can Conquer Unemployment

Speaker: Lord Skidelsky

Venue: Alexandra Suite, Grand Hotel, Brighton

Sunday 18 September 8.15-9.30pm

The subject of the meeting is the influence of Keynes and Lloyd George's Yellow Book on the problems of conquering unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s. With one of the major policy paper debates at Brighton being on Employment Policy, this provides us with a chance to trace the development of Liberal/Liberal Democrat thought on this important topic. Lord Skidelsky is Professor of Political Economy at University of Warwick. His books include *Politicians and the Slump* and *Oswald Mosley;* he is perhaps best known for his biography of Keynes, of which the first two parts are currently available: *John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed,* and *John Maynard Keynes: The Economist as Saviour.*

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.

We aim to fulfil this objective by organising discussion meetings, by spreading knowledge of historical reference sources, by assisting in the publication of studies of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties, and by publishing this Newsletter. The Newsletter is free to all members, and includes up to date news of our activities.

Membership of the History Group costs £5.00 (£3.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

Contributions to the Newsletter - letters, articles, and, especially, book reviews - are invited. If they are intended for publication, please type them and, if at all possible, send them on disc (any programme, but only 3.5" discs, please). The deadline for the next issue is ***17 November 1994;*** *contributions should be sent to Duncan Brack, Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ.*

The History Group is run by an informal committee, which meets once every three months. Any member of the Group is very welcome to attend a committee meeting and contribute thoughts and suggestions. The next two take place at 6.30pm on Thursday 17 November, and then at 6.30pm on Thursday 2 February, in the Meetings Room in Party HQ (4 Cowley Street, London SW1).

In order to facilitate contacts between History Group members, and the possible organisation of events outside London, we are circulating a list of members' names and addresses with this Newsletter. We will aim to repeat this annually. If anyone objects to this, we will exclude their name; please let Patrick Mitchell know.

In this edition of the Newsletter:

The Origins of Community Politics

Report back from the History Group's first witness seminar - with Gordon Lishman, in June.

The plethora of historic leaflets, booklets and motions laid out by Gordon on the table indicated that this would be an historical feast for History Group members while producing some valuable food for thought in the party's current internal debate on the future of community politics.

Gordon began by discussing the background to the Eastbourne resolution passed at the 1970 Assembly and how its component parts had been determined by negotiations with the party managers of the day. Particularly interesting in view of the party's subsequent identification of community politics with local government was that references to Europe, an international strategy and the need for the party to build a power base in industrial areas were defeated.

The main emphases of the community politics motion had been set out at a fringe meeting earlier in the week. These were that it gave the party a strategy it badly needed in the wake of the disaster of the 1970 election and that in the context of the NLYL 'Red Guard' era, it was not one that threatened the party's establishment.

Gordon then detailed the origins of community politics in the municipal and student liberalism of the late 1960s. It stressed the role of the councillor as the political arm of his/her people, increasing the effective participation of individuals in forming the Liberal society. Gordon rejected any suggestion that community politics was an ideology, but saw its roots as a reaction to the changes in the moral, social and economic climate which gathered force during the 1960s. It was a response to the ultimate failure of the Orpington revival; emphasising the dual approach and seeking to show that the party could be successful without relying on the whim of the floating voter.

There were three key components to community politics. Firstly, taking up casework and grievances on behalf of the electors and encouraging them to solve it themselves. Secondly, encouraging participation in the political process and finally doing all this within a framework of representative democracy. In practice, however, it depended on the rise of cheap offset litho technology which allowed multiple leaflets and the creation of a personal campaigning style.

The neglect of community politics by the party's leadership began in the 1970 Assembly itself, when Thorpe ignored it in his closing speech. Thereafter the strategies of the Lib–Lab pact and the Alliance sought to realign the old political forces. Gordon's view was that only under Ashdown's leadership was there now the potential support at the top for a national community politics strategy.

To conclude, Gordon linked the idea of community politics to the ideas of T H Green on the positive use of liberty. Community politics was inherently liberal because it was quintessentially democratic, challenged the rigidity of party boundaries and accepted that politicians of their nature had no right to unfettered power. A lively discussion followed, which dwelt more on the problems of community politics in the 1990s than on its origins. Nevertheless, the evening was a stimulating and successful one, and will encourage further witness seminars of this type.

Book Reviews

Money and Power
by Tony Little

Dudley Bahlman (Ed):
The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton
(University of Hull Press 1993; £19.95)

Hamilton was Gladstone's principal private secretary in the period up to 1885 and moved on to become a senior Treasury official after the government's fall. Despite his status as a civil servant, he managed both to serve his new Tory masters and retain close personal contacts with senior Liberal politicians. This selection from his diary covers the period in which he rose to become the joint permanent head of the Treasury.

It is important for the insight it gives into the preparation of the Budget over a twenty year period. By today's standards, the figures were minute, hardly enough to cover the spending of a district council. Shortly after the year end, a balance was quickly struck and arrangements made to meet the next year's deficit, or, more frequently, to dispose of the surplus. For most of the period, there was little to distinguish between the approach of Tory or Liberal administrations as both stuck to the tenets of Free Trade. As the new century dawned the strain of financing the Boer War, the naval race and the prospect of some form of old age pension opened strains in the system. Hamilton illustrates orthodox Treasury thinking in the face of Chamberlain's protectionist challenge, which destroyed Balfour's government.

The diary is even more important for its portrayal of the relations between senior Liberals. He mediated between Gladstone and Rosebery in Gladstone's final premiership and was the official responsible for Gladstone's funeral arrangements. As one of Rosebery's closest friends he foresaw his rise to the party leadership and brings out the depth of the antagonism between Rosebery and Harcourt, which scarred Rosebery's government, but he remained on good terms with both men. Despite his friendship, he recognised the failure of the Rosebery government and he even gives us reasons, principally insomnia, which explain Rosebery's otherwise baffling withdrawal from effective public life. With that retirement and with his own increasing illness, Hamilton finds himself further from the centre of Liberal activity and we get only fleeting glimpses of rising new stars such as Asquith.

Bahlman has also edited the Hamilton Diary for the period 1882-5 which has been published in two volumes, though these are currently out of print.

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.

Printed and published by Liberal Democrat History Group,
c/o Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ.
September 1994