



**GLADSTONIAN**

**ACCORDING  
TO GLADSTONE**

# N LIBERALISM

What were the prevailing principles of the Liberal Party in the late Victorian period?

**David Bebbington** explores the views of its leader, W. E. Gladstone.

**W**illiam Ewart Gladstone was a man of ideas. He read widely, as the collection of his books at St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, bears witness, and he wrote extensively. He published five separate titles on Homer alone; during periods of opposition he composed a lengthy article every month; and he encompassed a broad range of subjects, taking in not only politics and Homer but also many aspects of theology.

His most important output was concerned with Liberalism. He acted as leader of the Liberal Party from 1866 onwards, remaining in the role in substance, if not in name, during the 1870s and not retiring until 1894. During this period Gladstone defined what the principles of Liberalism were. The focus of this article is not on particular policies, the stuff of parliamentary debate, but on Liberal fundamentals, the groundwork of Gladstone's mature political theory. What was Gladstonian Liberalism according to Gladstone? The statesman's articles and speeches enable us to construct an answer.

## **Liberty**

Prominent among Gladstone's values as Liberal leader was liberty, a principle usually associated with classic liberalism. He had altered his view of this subject since the 1830s, when, as a young Conservative MP, he had not believed that freedom was intrinsically good. Gladstone sometimes remarked that the single change of opinion during his career had been in this area, because he had come to accept the importance of liberty. The principle included, he maintained, free speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom to worship and freedom of the person. It extended in foreign affairs to liberty for subject races struggling to escape from oppression, notably the Bulgarians against the Turks in the 1870s. Freedom also implied the minimising of the state. People, Gladstone held, should not look to the legislature for answers to their problems, but should seek solutions themselves. Here was the rationale for self-help. If the population expected the government to provide social benefits, the consequence would be an undermining of freedom. The state would grow and the government would become

oppressive at home. Gladstonian Liberalism certainly embraced the principle of freedom: 'without liberty,' remarked the statesman, 'there is nothing sound'.<sup>1</sup>

Gladstone had come to give a high place to liberty chiefly through developing his economic views. He had learned from Sir Robert Peel that it was wise to reduce tariff barriers so as to promote free trade and global prosperity. His economic synthesis was a Christian version of political economy deriving from the Scottish theologian Thomas Chalmers. Laws made by human governments, according to Chalmers, could interfere with the laws of providence. The world was designed by its Creator to be a self-acting mechanism that, if left alone, would operate efficiently. Hence there should be as little regulation of trade as possible. Gladstone's policies were erected on this foundation. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1850s and 1860s, he called for retrenchment, the cutting back of public spending. He even circulated to his civil servants a memorandum about regularly counting the number of paper clips on their desk. None was to be wasted. Taxation was to be as low as possible, with Gladstone

**'Without liberty', remarked the statesman, 'there is nothing sound'.**

## GLADSTONIAN LIBERALISM ACCORDING TO GLADSTONE

constantly aiming for the abolition of income tax. Money was to be left in people's pockets so that it would circulate and generate wealth. The population was to be free in the economic sphere to engage in enterprise.

The question arises of whether Gladstone should be classified as an individualist in consequence of his version of economic liberalism. Individualism is often seen as the kernel of nineteenth-century liberalism. Society, on this understanding, is an association of rational egoists pursuing their own self-interest. Gladstone's concern for liberty seems to be an assertion of the right of the individual to be free from the tyrannies of the state and so his identification with this perspective appears plausible. His speeches, however, show that he set a high value on other principles beside freedom. He habitually suggested that liberty needed to be balanced by order, or law and order, or loyalty. Liberty did not stand alone in splendid isolation as a sanction for individualism. Rather, values associated with the community were ranked alongside it. Gladstone should not be seen as an individualist, for he perceived the theoretical importance of belonging to human groups.

### Community

Another feature of Gladstonian Liberalism was therefore community. The language of community runs through Gladstone's discourse. It is applied to corporate life of all kinds, whether small or large, at home or abroad. 'The sense of a common life', he declared in 1890, '— parochial, municipal, county, national — is an ennobling qualification to civilised man.'<sup>2</sup> Each individual must show respect for the whole, for the common good. This bond of human society Gladstone called 'reverence'. There must be reverence for the customary, traditional ways of the group, and especially for its

**Gladstone should not be seen as an individualist, for he perceived the theoretical importance of belonging to human groups.**

leaders. Individuals should be willing to submit their judgement to the inherited wisdom of the collectivity. Reverence would then function as the glue of human communities.

Which communities in particular did Gladstone mean? In the first place there was the family, the basic building block of society. Its high esteem in the nineteenth century, according to Gladstone, was one of the greatest fruits of Christianity. The Christian faith had raised respect for women over the centuries. In Aristotle, women are wrongly treated as inferior participants in the household. In Christian teaching, by contrast, women possessed moral and social equality. There might be a difference of function, but there was equality of status. Gladstone praised the 'reciprocal deference' between husband and wife to be found in the pages of Homer.<sup>3</sup> The family was the essential training ground for children. And, not least for that reason, the statesman denounced threats to the family. In 1857, when he was out of office, the government introduced a bill to allow divorce. Previously divorce had been possible only by means of a separate act of parliament, which by its cumbersome and expensive nature was inconceivable for nearly all the population. Now, although limited to very specific circumstances, divorce was to be made more widely available. Gladstone resisted vehemently in parliament, arguing that marriage was sacred and designed to be permanent. Although his campaign was unsuccessful and the bill passed into law, the strength of his opposition was an index of the high value Gladstone placed on the family.

A second community that Gladstone envisaged as having a place in social theory was the church. Gladstone, though beginning as an evangelical, had adopted a high view of the place of the church as a visible and organised society. It possessed its

own rulers, the bishops, whose authority was independent of that of the state. Although a strong defender of the Church of England as established, Gladstone always insisted that the state was not to interfere with the internal life of the church, specially its teaching. His *bête noire* was Erastianism, the belief that the state was to control the church.

This conviction caused serious problems in government. During his first administration, in 1870, the government was responsible for a bill that aimed to fill the gaps in the national system of education in England and Wales. It had to consider what form of religious instruction should be given in the new schools. Gladstone wanted there to be dogmatic Anglican teaching in accordance with the creed. His fellow cabinet members, on the contrary, wanted the religious training to be acceptable to all Protestants, whether Anglican, Methodist, Congregationalist or whatever. There were acute tensions in cabinet until, in the end, the bill was passed in the form preferred by his colleagues. One of the greatest legislative measures of his government enacted a policy that Gladstone himself detested.

Yet as Prime Minister, Gladstone was able to serve the Church of England. The bishops were appointed by the Queen on the advice of her premier, and so Gladstone was able to recommend men who would give able leadership on the episcopal bench. He drew up a list of the qualities he looked for in a potential bishop:

Piety. Learning (sacred). Eloquence. Administrative power. Faithful allegiance to the Church and to the Church of England. Activity. Tact and courtesy in dealings with men: knowledge of the world. Accomplishments and literature. An equitable spirit. Faculty of working with his

brother bishops. Some legal habit of mind. Circumspection. Courage. Maturity of age and character. Corporal vigour. Liberal sentiments on public affairs. A representative character with reference to shades of opinion fairly allowable in the Church.<sup>4</sup>

With such paragons at its head, the church could hardly fail to thrive. Gladstone wanted to strengthen the church through its leadership so that it would be a powerful and independent force in the life of the nation.

A third type of community that he envisaged was the municipality. Gladstone saw towns and cities as possessing a strong corporate identity. He believed it was desirable to foster a sense of local loyalty, and so opposed measures of centralisation transferring powers from local to national authorities. Municipalities, he believed, should be entrusted with large powers.

The point can be illustrated by reference to temperance reform. Some Liberal leaders rejected the proposal that local authorities should be allowed to prohibit the sale of alcohol within their bounds. If in a local poll most people voted to ban liquor, leaders such as Lord Hartington believed, the majority would be tyrannising over the minority who wanted to be able to buy a drink. That would infringe the principle of individual liberty. Gladstone, however, was willing to support a majority decision to ban alcohol. The expression of conviction by the community as a whole should, in his view, override individual freedom.

Because he upheld local decision-making, Gladstone thought it crucial for people to participate in municipal affairs. They should both vote and offer themselves as candidates for election. Local political involvement was, in the statesman's opinion, a sure sign of a healthy body politic. Local leaders, trained by joining

in the direction of local affairs, would go on to become MPs. Gladstone in office set himself to extend local government, his last bill as Prime Minister being a measure to establish a council in every parish. Even villages were to have a distinct political identity, together with a sense of responsibility for their own affairs. Whether tiny villages or great cities, local settlements were to display a community consciousness.

The nation had even stronger claims on the loyalty of the individual. Gladstone saw patriotism and nationalism as interchangeable. Nationalism, he maintained, was a force for good in the modern world. He conceded that it could be corrupted into national pride and so become oppressive or assertive. In general, however, nationalism fostered progress, stimulating industry, for example, in the newly united Italy. Gladstone envisaged nationhood as a compound of race, religion, language, history and other factors. In Wales, national identity was specially linked to history and language. More often it was linked to religion and even more frequently it was rooted in race.

Nationhood was a delicate question in the British Isles in Gladstone's day. Whereas England, Scotland and Wales were content to form part of a United Kingdom, Ireland was not. There a strong movement aimed at establishing a separate parliament and perhaps a separate state. Gladstone pondered Irish claims, gradually reaching the conclusion that Ireland should be treated as a nation distinct from Britain. In 1886, therefore, he proposed Home Rule, the setting up of a parliament in Dublin, separate but subordinate. Accepting Irish claims against Britain was the boldest move of Gladstone's career, and, though he failed to carry the bill, the proposal represented a noble effort to bring about a peaceful settlement to the relations between Ireland

and Britain that might well have averted the troubles of the succeeding century. Irish Home Rule was an indication of Gladstone's commitment to giving recognition to nations as distinct communities.

Nations, however, were part of a larger international community. In that sphere, Gladstone held, there should be cooperation rather than competition. He often spoke of the Concert of Europe, meaning the great powers acting together to settle differences, restrain over-ambitious states and keep international order. Gladstone believed that each great power, when acting separately, naturally pursued its own self-interest. When, however, the great powers took joint action, the effect was to neutralise national selfishness. In Gladstone's series of Midlothian speeches in 1879, the most celebrated triumph of his public oratory, he explained that among the proper principles of foreign policy was the maintenance of the Concert of Europe.

Gladstone's vision extended beyond his own continent, recognising the importance of Britain's relations with America, a great power of the future. In his first administration he insisted on settling the big outstanding difference with the United States. During the Civil War the Confederate vessel *Alabama*, built on the Mersey, had preyed on Federal shipping. After the war the United States demanded damages from Britain. The Conservatives generally favoured brushing aside the idea as an impertinence, but Gladstone made a generous settlement through arbitration. He argued that the decision helped establish the principles of international law.

Furthermore, Gladstone held that small nations should have a recognised place in the international arena. Another Midlothian principle was acknowledging the equal rights of all nations, not just of the

**Irish Home Rule was an indication of Gladstone's commitment to giving recognition to nations as distinct communities.**



## GLADSTONIAN LIBERALISM ACCORDING TO GLADSTONE

great powers. The statesman was known as a champion of small nationalities struggling to be free. Nations therefore should accord respect to each other, so avoiding war. Each nation was to recognise itself as part of a wider community of nations.

### Communitarianism and its critics

Gladstone's mature political vision therefore embraced a range of communities: family, church, municipality, nation and international relations. He broadly fits the school of thought called in recent times the communitarians. These writers were theorists who in the 1970s and 1980s criticised the assumptions of American political life prevailing at the time.

Their critique was directed centrally against John Rawls's book *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls postulated the absolute priority of liberty in making political arrangements. Such a liberal polity, Rawls argued, would be chosen in the abstract by any rational agent. This case, communitarians contended, postulated a mistaken conception of how human beings operate. They do not live as rational agents in the abstract, but, rather, are bound up with particular communities possessing a distinct territory, shared activities and common values. Rawlsian theory deprived human beings of the benefits of community, and in particular of mutual encouragement to the good life. This charge was the burden of Charles Taylor's *Hegel and Modern Science* (1979) and of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981). Communitarians offered an alternative political theory to what in Rawls, despite all the qualifications he offered, amounted to a form of liberal individualism. Gladstone was far more like Taylor and MacIntyre than he was like Rawls. The community, according to Gladstone, confers benefits on

individuals, claiming their allegiance without calculation of self-interest. Involvement in public life is a duty, and patriotism, based on a sense of common values, is a virtue. The principle of justice is embodied in the community. All these views were shared by Gladstone with the communitarians. The foundation of his position was by no means a species of liberal individualism. Paradoxical as it may appear, the leader of the late Victorian Liberal Party was far more of a communitarian than a liberal.

Two major criticisms are often mounted against the communitarian political thinkers of the modern world. One is that they neglect the sharpness and frequency of conflict within communities. The communitarians, on this view, are so concerned with the role of the group that they assume its solidarity. Internal differences such as class conflict are minimised or else ignored altogether. A second criticism is that theorists of this school neglect the relations of members of a community with those outside its bounds. They so stress the mutual obligations of people within the community that they have nothing to say about their responsibilities to members of other communities. Where did Gladstone stand on these points?

On the issue of the internal divisions within communities, Gladstone often spoke of the separation of interests within groups. In the church, he was extremely conscious of the party tensions. In the nation, he often spoke of the divergent interest of the classes. In the international community, he was highly aware of the pursuit of national self-interest. Gladstone's constant theme was that every section should subordinate its own interests to those of the community as a whole. Within the nation, for example, all classes were to seek the common good. The task of the politician, as

Gladstone saw it, was to achieve a balance between classes. Thus in taxation policy, he tried to ensure that all classes contributed their fair share to the national coffers. The aristocracy should pay tax on land, the middle classes on income and the working classes on food. Gladstone's fiscal skill lay in persuading each of the classes that the balance was just. In his last years in public life, Gladstone often spoke of the conflict of the masses against the classes. The 'masses' were the rank and file of the population, the mass of the people who represented the whole nation. The 'classes' were the selfish professionals, whether soldiers or lawyers, who pursued their own interests at the expense of the nation at large. He was highly aware of the fragmented nature of the body politic, but he asserted the priority of the whole, of the common good. That was to stand in a long tradition of Christian social analysis.

The other question raised by critics against the communitarian school is the issue of the relation between members of one polity and those outside. The communitarians often neglect the responsibility of people in one land for those elsewhere, treating each nation as self-sufficient. Gladstone, however, did not fall into that snare. Here another salient category of Gladstone's thought needs to be introduced, the idea of humanity. Gladstone frequently spoke of our 'common humanity'.<sup>5</sup> In 1876, for instance, he urged that Turkey must not be allowed to massacre her Bulgarian subjects. The Conservative government was declaring that it was in Britain's interest to support Turkey against Russia, and so to ignore the massacres. According to Gladstone, however, the people of Britain shared their humanity with the Bulgarian people. Because the British had fellow-feeling with the oppressed in their suffering, they must denounce Turkish misrule.

**Paradoxical as it may appear, the leader of the late Victorian Liberal Party was far more of a communitarian than a liberal.**

The effect was to galvanise the existing Bulgarian agitation into a powerful political force. His efforts are still remembered to this day, with a street in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, being named after Gladstone. The rationale for the campaign was humanity, the fundamental human characteristics of the peoples of the two lands.

The same theme of humanity runs through Gladstone's later speeches. In 1879 he appealed on behalf of the hill tribes of Afghanistan when the country was invaded by Britain under a Conservative administration. 'Remember', he declared, 'that He who has united you together as human beings in the same flesh and blood, has bound you by the law of mutual love.'<sup>6</sup> Humanitarian concern is rooted here in the intentions of the Creator, and humanity was conceptualised by Gladstone as a distinctly Christian value. It derived from the statesman's theological development. He had come to recognise the humanity of Christ and his consequent sympathy for suffering as central dimensions of faith. Consequently Gladstone insisted that dwellers in one land must be concerned for inhabitants of others, particularly when they were undergoing suffering. There was an obligation not just to other members of one's own community but also to all other human beings. Gladstone escapes the criticism mounted against other communitarians because his version of their theory was tempered by humanitarianism.

Gladstone's Liberalism is therefore rather different from how it is often portrayed. Certainly it did not amount to a simple individualism. Rather, his political philosophy as Liberal leader had three supreme values: liberty, community and humanity. He believed in freedom for individuals, but not at the expense of responsibilities to others. He believed in the importance of community, but not to the neglect of outsiders.

**Gladstone escapes the criticism mounted against other communitarians because his version of their theory was tempered by humanitarianism.**

He believed in humanity, but not in the abstract: the need of individuals to enjoy freedom had to be taken into account. The combination provided its own checks and balances. In terms of recent debate in political theory, Gladstone should be seen as a communitarian, but, unlike some later representatives of the school, he was acutely aware of the salience of internal divisions within communities. Hence the statesman's position was a qualified communitarianism.

That stance may even have its relevance today. Perhaps a combination of liberty, community and humanity is worth pursuing in the twenty-first century, as in the nineteenth.

*David Bebbington is Professor of History at the University of Stirling. He is the author of William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in*

Victorian Britain (*Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993*) and *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer and Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)*, Chapter 9 of which provides an ampler and fully referenced version of the case propounded here. This paper was delivered as the Founder's Day address at St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, on 8 July 2004.

- 1 *The Times*, 24 October 1890, p. 4.
- 2 *The Times*, 30 October 1890, p. 4.
- 3 William E. Gladstone, *Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869), p. 410.
- 4 John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 3 vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1903), Vol. 2, p. 431.
- 5 *The Times*, 28 November 1887, p. 4.
- 6 William E. Gladstone, *Political Speeches in Scotland, November and December 1879* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1879), p. 94.

## LETTERS

### Cuckoo in the nest?

I am not sure that Lawrence Iles fully appreciates the point of my criticism of Herbert Gladstone for his part in the Liberal-LRC pact of 1903-06 ('Organiser par excellence: Herbert Gladstone (1854-1930), in *Journal of Liberal History* 51 (summer 2006)).

Gladstone was absolutely right to want more working-class MPs. His father had expressed eager appreciation of the few who already existed in the late nineteenth century. But he went disastrously wrong when he helped a separate party to struggle to its feet.

It was predictable at the time that, at the very least, the nascent Labour Party would thus become stronger when it sought to fish in the same pond as the Liberals for working-class votes,

and that the long-term beneficiaries would be the Tories. At worst, it would actually kill the Liberal Party – as it very nearly did.

Roy Douglas

### Liberals in Windsor

In arguing that the Liberal Democrat position in 2005 was too far to the left, Antony Wood claims that Windsor 'has never had anything other than a Conservative MP' (Letters, *Journal of Liberal History* 51 (summer 2006)).

In fact this is not true. Elections in Windsor between 1832 and 1874 frequently returned Liberal MPs.

John Austen