

# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## Centenary of the state pension

Pat Thane

**The Old Age Pensions Act, 1908**

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Andrew Connell

**'The Strange Case of Mr Rigg'** Liberal victor in North Westmorland

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Report

**The Lib-Lab Pact** David Steel, Tom McNally, Michael Steed

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'Why I Am A Liberal'

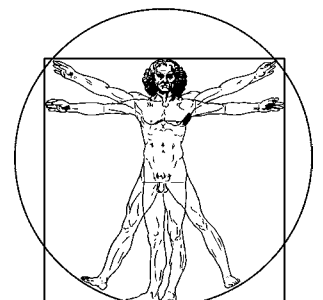
**Kenneth O. Morgan** The dynastic Liberalism of Michael and all the Foots

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Duncan Brack

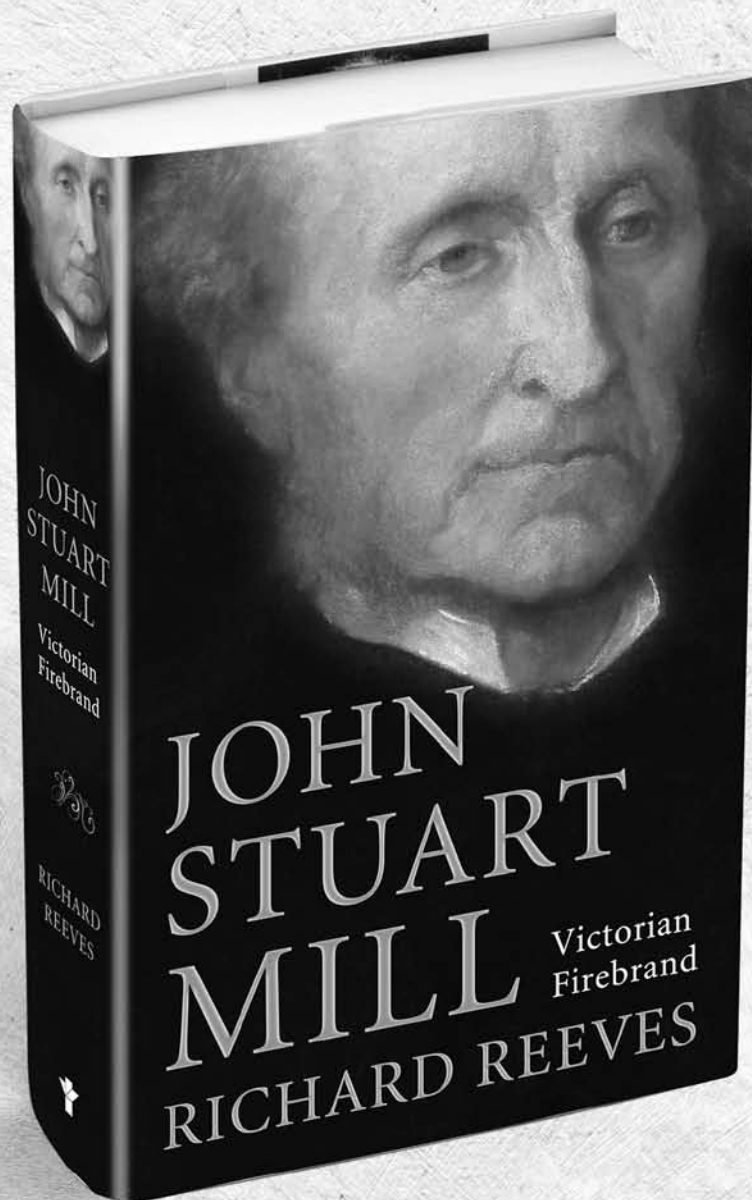
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The *Journal of Liberal History* is published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

ISSN 1479-9642

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Online subscriptions cost £40.00 (individuals) or £50.00 (institutions). As well as printed copies, online subscribers will be able to access online copies of current and all past *Journals*.

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Payment is also possible via our website,  
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Cover design concept: **Lynne Featherstone**

Published by the Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o  
38 Salford Road, London SW2 4BQ

Printed by **Kall-Kwik**,  
18 Colville Road, London W3 8BL

September 2008

## Issue 60: Autumn 2008

### The Old Age Pensions Act, 1908 4

**Pat Thane** analyses the introduction and implementation of the first state pensions, brought in one hundred years ago.

### Letters to the Editor 13

Pensions and the working class (**Martin Pugh**); Hastings facts (**Patrick Jackson and Paul Hunt**); The Master of Elibank (**Sandy Waugh**); Liberal thinkers (**Barry Stocker**)

### 'The Strange Case of Mr Rigg' 14

The surprise Liberal victor in North Westmorland in the 1900 election proved to be something of a surprise himself; by **Andrew Connell**

### Report: Working with others – the Lib-Lab Pact 23

With David Steel, Tom McNally and Michael Steed; report by **Graham Lippiatt**

### 'Why I Am A Liberal' 28

The dynastic Liberalism of Michael and all the Foots; by **Kenneth O. Morgan**

### Campbell as Leader 38

**Duncan Brack** interviews Menzies Campbell, Leader of the Liberal Democrats 2006–07, about his political career.

### Reviews 45

Campbell, *My Autobiography*, reviewed by **Duncan Brack**; Morgan, *Michael Foot, A Life*, reviewed by **Bill Rodgers**; Reeves, *John Stuart Mill, Victorian Firebrand*, reviewed by **Eugenio Biagini**; Brack, Grayson & Howarth (eds.), *Reinventing the State: Social Liberalism for the 21st Century*, reviewed by **Neil Stockley**

Cover picture:

Lloyd George being greeted by pensioners after the introduction of the old age pension.

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### Liberal Democrat History Group

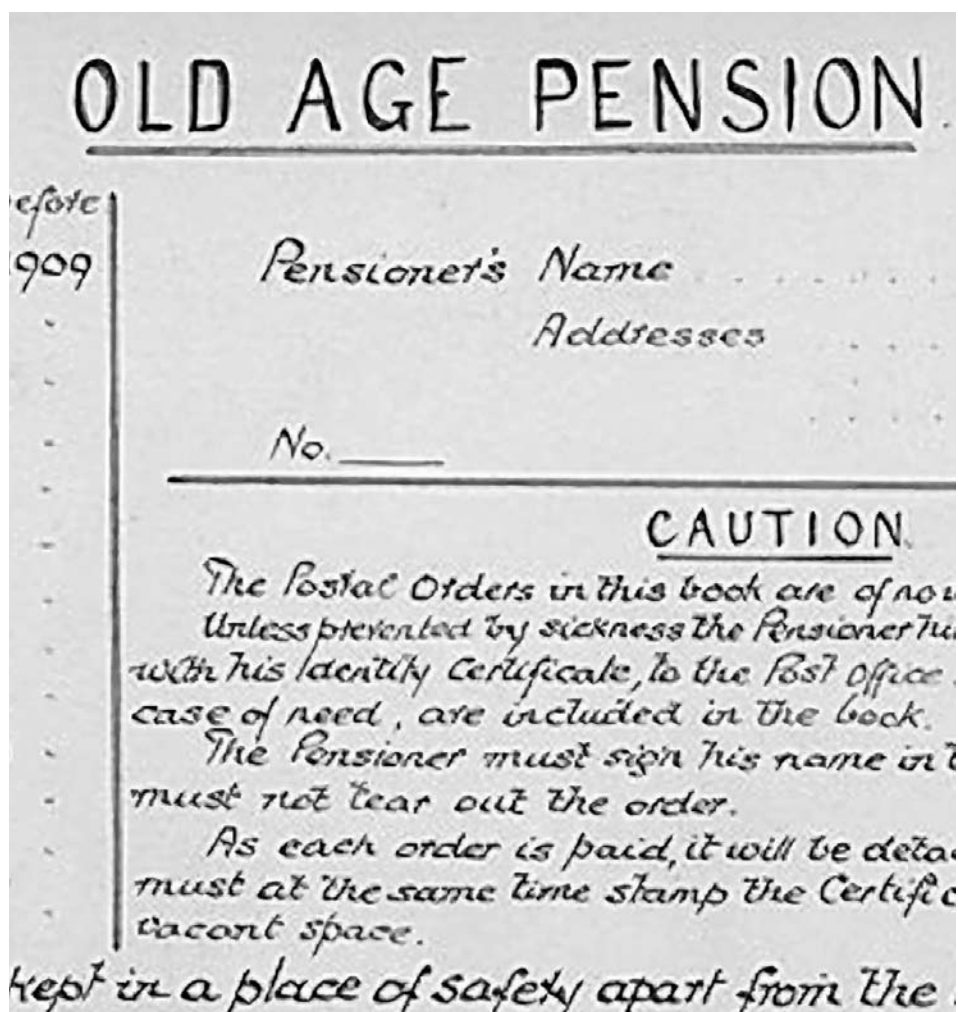
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# THE OLD AGE PEN

A hundred years ago this year, H. H. Asquith's Liberal government legislated to introduce state pensions. The Old Age Pensions Act, 1908, has rightly been seen as one of the foundation-stones of the modern British welfare state. It was just one of a series of remarkably enduring institutions initiated by the post-1906 Liberal governments, which created a decisive break between the deterrent and stigmatising Poor Law principles of state social welfare and serious attempts at more humane and positive forms of provision. **Pat Thane** examines the story of the 1908 Act.



**O**LD AGE pensions were continuously debated in Britain from 1878. They were first placed on the political agenda by Canon William Blackley,<sup>1</sup> who proposed, in an article in *Nineteenth Century*, that every-one aged between eighteen and

twenty-one should be compelled to contribute in order to provide old age pensions for the lower-paid.<sup>2</sup>

Blackley had spent twenty-three years in rural parishes in southern England and discovered the extent of poverty in old age. He noted that Friendly Societies, the voluntary mutual savings



# PENSIONS ACT, 1908

institutions, which supported most skilled urban workers in sickness and old age, provided less assistance in the countryside. For this he blamed the financial instability of the societies. In reality the greater problem was the difficulty of low-paid rural workers and their wives affording the required regular contributions. Blackley believed, however, that the one stage of life at which all workers could save was when they were young, in their first years of work before they faced the costs of marriage and parenthood. He also felt that young workers wasted money that they should be encouraged to save, citing 'instances as I can give from my personal knowledge, of young labourers by the dozen, without a change of decent clothes, continually and brutally drinking, living almost like savages while earning fully £1 a week'.<sup>3</sup> He proposed that all young people should contribute a maximum of £10 which would accumulate in a savings fund, controlled and invested by the state. This would deliver to all 'wage-earners' (as distinct from wage-payers and leisured and salary earners, who would contribute but not benefit), a weekly sickness payment until age seventy, and four shillings per week pension thereafter.

This elegantly logical proposal was widely debated and then investigated by a Select

Committee on National Provident Insurance in 1885–87. This made clear that very many younger people, especially women, did not earn enough to save, and also that prevailing interest rates were unlikely to yield the level of benefits Blackley had envisaged, even when he cut back his proposals to include pensions only. But evidence to the Select Committee made clear that the problem of poverty in old age was real. The only publicly funded 'welfare' available was the long-established Poor Law, which was structured to stigmatise and deter applicants. Those most likely to be deterred were those who had led respectable, hard-working lives, avoiding the shame of poor relief, but never earning enough to save for old age. Most of them were women, who earned least during working life but lived longer than men. The Poor Law insisted that children had an obligation to support their ageing parents – but, at a time of high infant mortality, many older people had no surviving children. Or they might have migrated far away (perhaps to Canada or Australia) in search of security; or they might themselves be too poor to help. There is every sign that close relatives did help older people when they could.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of aged poverty was prominent enough at this time to

give rise to international debate and, in Britain, a succession of further official investigations which offered more evidence of the scale of the problem. In 1889 Bismarck introduced in Germany the first-ever state pensions. Blackley was convinced that he had inspired this innovation, though there is no evidence to support this. Bismarck's scheme formed part of a pioneering contributory social insurance system which the German government had initiated in 1884. In return for regular contributions, workers were entitled to a pension at age seventy, or sooner if they became incapacitated for work. The weakness of the system was that it covered only regularly and better-paid, mainly male, industrial workers, thus excluding many of those at greatest risk of poverty in old age: women and low-paid casual and agricultural workers. Bismarck was concerned to win the electoral support of the male trade unionists in the better-paid trades and to stimulate economic growth by increasing the security of workers in developing industries.<sup>5</sup> In Britain, by contrast, the debate about pensions focused upon how best to support the very poor, who had fewest opportunities to save during their working life. The type of better-paid worker who benefited from the German scheme was normally covered in Britain

Left: one of the original old age pension books.

for sickness and old age by voluntary, mutual benefit societies: Friendly Societies and trade unions.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, from around 1890, Joseph Chamberlain, who had been impressed by the German scheme, became interested in the issue and sought to devise a 'practical programme' of social reform, including pensions. For a while he took the lead in the public debate on the issue. He was reluctant to abandon the contributory insurance approach, on the grounds that fully tax-funded pensions would encourage dependency and discourage self-help. Yet he opposed compulsion and recognised that the poorest people could not afford contributions, yet still survived to old age. Chamberlain proposed a state-subsidised voluntary insurance scheme for the low-paid, but came to recognise that this could not help those in greatest need in the foreseeable future. In the 1890s he came to believe that only a non-contributory pension targeted at the respectable aged poor could begin to solve the problem. Schemes of this kind were introduced in Denmark in 1891, New Zealand in 1898, New South Wales in 1900 and Victoria in 1901.

The businessman and poverty researcher Charles Booth reached similar conclusions. His research on poverty in London and elsewhere helped to expose the extent of poverty in old age and convinced him that the poorest could not afford contributions. He was also convinced that targeted, means-tested schemes would not help, because respectable old people in need would identify them with the demeaning Poor Law destitution test and refuse to apply. They would also be costly to administer. In 1891 he proposed, instead, a universal pension of five shillings per week to be paid to everyone at age sixty-five, which would be simpler to administer and which the rich would repay in taxation.

**During the 1906 election campaign fifty-nine per cent of Liberal candidates supported pensions in their election addresses.**

He had strong support for this in the growing labour movement, but his proposal was widely criticised on grounds of cost. Partly in consequence, he modified his proposal, suggesting in 1899 a pension age of seventy, but a pension of seven shillings per week, since his research now suggested that five shillings would not provide enough for a pensioner to live on.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Liberals in office – planning pensions**

The problem of helping the aged poor continued to be investigated by commissions and committees established by Conservative governments,<sup>8</sup> though the costs of the Boer War (1899–1902) further diminished any likelihood of an expensive pension scheme.<sup>9</sup> It was still an active, unresolved issue by the time of the general election of 1906. During the election campaign fifty-nine per cent of Liberal candidates supported pensions in their election addresses. This was less prominent than free trade, which Liberals supported almost universally, amendment of the Education Act or reform of the government of Ireland, but Liberal support was still substantial. Eighty-one per cent of Labour Representation Committee (LRC, the forerunner of the Labour Party) candidates pledged themselves to pensions, which came a close fourth in their preferences after increased working-class representation, reform of the trade union law and provision for the unemployed. Among Conservative candidates, pensions and Poor Law reform were the most popular social reforms, supported by twenty-two per cent.<sup>10</sup>

Once in office, having achieved a landslide victory in the election, the Liberal leaders were under pressure from Labour and from the vocal reforming wing of their own party to introduce pensions, among other social measures. But they

approached social policy cautiously during their first two years in office. One reason was the large Conservative majority in the House of Lords, which threatened to reject 'advanced' legislation and did reject an Education Bill in November 1906. At least as important was the problem the Liberals inherited from their predecessors, that government revenue could barely keep pace with growing government expenditure, still less fund new ventures, despite cuts in defence spending. An urgent task for Asquith, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was to review the taxation system in order to increase government income. Liberal fiscal policy was constrained by their opposition to tariffs and strong commitment to free trade. Their only realistic means to increase revenue was to increase direct taxation, which was unlikely to be electorally popular and so had to be approached with caution. The social legislation of the Liberals' first two years in office was notable for either placing the burden of cost on local rate-payers (such as the introduction of free school meals in 1906 and medical inspection in schools in 1907) or for costing the taxpayer nothing (such as the Miners' Eight Hours Act, 1908).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, within a year of the election, Asquith asked a Treasury civil servant, Roderick Meiklejohn, to investigate the practicability of a state pension scheme. It was highly unusual for the Treasury, which regarded its role as control of departmental spending, to initiate new expenditure in this way.<sup>12</sup> It is unclear why Asquith took up the issue, though he was under persistent pressure from the labour movement and from Liberal social reformers.

Meiklejohn surveyed existing pension provision and proposals. Asquith read, and carefully annotated, a detailed report on the German scheme. In December 1906 the Cabinet discussed a

Treasury memorandum which focused on poverty in old age as a major and possibly growing problem. The memorandum pointed out that trade unions and Friendly Societies could not assist low and irregular earners. It rejected an insurance scheme because it also could not include the lower paid. It acknowledged the attraction of a universal non-contributory pension, but 'the difficulty is one of money; all other objections to the scheme fall into comparative unimportance beside this one'.<sup>13</sup> Hence the only possibility was a limited non-contributory scheme, similar to one proposed by the Conservative leader Arthur Balfour in 1899. The memorandum emphasised the importance of dissociating pensions from the Poor Law. This evidently genuine desire no longer to stigmatise and punish the poorest was a real change from the discourse on poverty which had dominated the nineteenth century. The aim was to target pensions on the poorest older people without stigmatising them and deterring them from applying.

The Cabinet approved the memorandum, and Asquith began to prepare his second Budget. His priority was to find new sources of revenue to pay for pensions, among other things. As already pointed out, the Liberal commitment to free trade ruled out the option of seeking a new source of revenue by imposing tariffs on imports. Asquith's favoured alternative was to move from the established single rate of income tax on all incomes to a graduated tax, which would increase the tax contribution of higher earners. He succeeded in overcoming Treasury resistance to this, but had to move cautiously to win parliamentary and voter acceptance. His 1907 Budget proposed to differentiate for the first time between earned and unearned income (the latter to be more heavily taxed) and between incomes below and above £2,000 a year. The Budget

speech promised pensions for the following year. In the spirit of Gladstone's determination that the costs of state action should fall equally upon all classes, Asquith announced: 'If we are ready to have social reform we must be ready to pay for it ... I mean the whole nation, the working and consuming classes as well as the wealthier class of direct taxpayers.'<sup>14</sup> Hence he retained the additional taxes on tea, sugar and cocoa which had been introduced to pay for the Boer War, of which working people paid a high proportion, and announced that the yield would be used to finance pensions. The Budget was mildly redistributive, within the working class as well as between rich and poor.

#### Drafting the Bill

Asquith delegated the drafting of the pensions bill to Reginald McKenna, President of the Board of Education. He was not the obvious choice, but Asquith trusted him and was determined to keep the bill out of the hands of the Local Government Board (LGB), which he believed was too closely associated with the Poor Law, which it administered, and would taint the pension with the Poor Law stigma. The Treasury put a strict limit of seven million pounds per year on the cost of the pensions.<sup>15</sup>

The likelihood that the government was shortly to introduce limited non-contributory pensions brought criticism from, among others, the young Liberal correspondent on social questions for the Conservative *Morning Post*, William Beveridge. Beveridge was a resident at the East London Settlement, Toynbee Hall, and already immersed in social work and social research. A visit to Germany early in 1907 to investigate their system of employment exchanges aroused his interest in national insurance, foreshadowing his famous government

report of 1942, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, which influenced Labour's post-war welfare state. He agreed with Booth that means-tested benefits were both inefficient at detecting need and administratively wasteful. He commented, not entirely seriously, that if pensions were to be limited there was much to be said for confining them to women; the grounds for qualification were unmistakable and the need undeniable. He was attracted to the German system of invalidity pensions which 'gave not pensions at a fixed age, but pensions whenever invalidity began'. In 1907 most German pensioners qualified under this heading.<sup>16</sup>

Asquith was impressed by Beveridge's well-founded criticism of means-tests, but was dissuaded by Meiklejohn from taking the social insurance route on the grounds, above all, of the cost of administration. Detailed drafting of the bill was referred to a Cabinet committee consisting of Asquith, McKenna and John Burns, the former trade unionist, now President of the LGB and the first working man to sit in a British Cabinet. Its main task was to fit a pension scheme within the strict budgetary limits laid down by the Treasury. They decided on a five-shilling pension (despite Booth's warning that this would be inadequate) to be paid to those with incomes below ten shillings per week. The chief saving was achieved by placing the pensionable age at seventy, rather than sixty-five, as had been expected; sixty-five was generally thought to correspond with the age at which most workers found it difficult to support themselves. They also recommended a reduced pension of seven shillings and sixpence per week for married couples. The LGB was anxious to include a test of 'character' (or respectability) and it was decided to exclude all who received poor relief after 1 January 1908, and all those unable to provide proof

**Asquith's priority was to find new sources of revenue to pay for pensions ... his favoured alternative was to move from the established single rate of income tax on all incomes to a graduated tax, which would increase the tax contribution of higher earners.**

of 'thrift' during working life. The committee did not suggest how thrift was to be defined. 'Criminals, lunatics and aliens' were also excluded. 'Aliens' were all residents who did not possess British nationality; the largest group at the time were Jewish refugee immigrants from eastern and central Europe.

The scheme would be administered by voluntary local committees, composed of people with relevant experience, assisted by a paid clerk. At the Treasury's insistence, the responsibilities of the local inspectors of Customs & Excise were extended to include supervision of the local pension administration, enabling the Treasury to control the administration at no additional cost. John Burns was furious at the appointment of these Treasury watchdogs. Claims were to be made and pensions paid through the Post Office, the only government department with offices in every district. This scheme was approved by the Cabinet. Through this use of existing institutions costs were kept to a minimum.

In April 1908 Campbell-Bannerman resigned due to ill-health and was succeeded as Prime Minister by Asquith. He appointed David Lloyd George to succeed him as Chancellor. Winston Churchill took his first Cabinet post as President of the Board of Trade. Nevertheless, Asquith presented the Budget which he had prepared and took the opportunity to outline the coming Pensions Bill.

### The critics

The response was predictably mixed. 'Well begun, half done' commented Frederick Rogers, former chair of the LRC and campaigner for universal non-contributory pensions. The LRC pressed on with demands for an age limit of sixty-five and a higher means limit, supported by the TUC. *The Times* commented: 'The promise of a

pension at seventy is too remote to create any very lively feelings, and so far where it has been mentioned at public meetings it has been received with ironical cheers.'<sup>17</sup> The *Liberal Nation* and *The Economist* welcomed the announcement.

In the *Morning Post*, Beveridge pointed out, quite correctly, that there was no sign that the government had planned for the future costs of a potentially expensive system, especially as the proportion of old people in the population was expected to increase. He argued that an insurance system, however costly in the short run, would be more efficient and more cost-effective in the long run, since it would be self-financing. Beveridge was critical of the ad hoc nature of the Liberal social reforms. He conceived of pensions as the first instalment of a wider ranging programme of remedies for the major causes of need. He was shortly to become Churchill's adviser at the Board of Trade and the initiator of labour exchanges, in 1909, and unemployment insurance, in 1911. Beveridge's preference for social insurance was consistent with his wider social and political vision. He wrote:

A non-contributory scheme sets up the state in the eyes of the individual as a source of free gifts. A contributory scheme sets up the state as a comprehensive organism to which the individual belongs and in which he, under compulsion if need be, plays his part. Each view involves abandonment of traditional *laissez-faire*. The first, however, represents a change for the worse which it will be hard to remove. The second is a natural recognition of the growing complexity and interdependence of industrial life.<sup>18</sup>

Social insurance, he believed, could assist social integration because all sections of society

**The response was predictably mixed. 'Well begun, half done' commented Frederick Rogers, former chair of the LRC and campaigner for universal non-contributory pensions.**

(workers and employers directly through regular contributions, taxpayers indirectly through the state's contribution) contributed for the good not only of the very poor and of working people but of all of society. Society gained in stability and productivity when workers had stable, secure lives and felt that the state supported them. At the same time, an insurance scheme would enable working people to continue to practice self-help as well as helping others. Beveridge dismissed the problems of integrating the poorly and irregularly paid into an insurance system, commenting: 'surely they waste more than two pence a week on drink, let them contribute that ... how can a man better prove that he needs and deserves a pension than by paying for it?'<sup>19</sup> His approach was, however, much influenced by his assumption that 'their whole working life is one which will not be allowed to continue permanently in a well-organised state'.<sup>20</sup> He was to devote the next decade, as adviser at the Board of Trade, to the reduction of low-paid casual labour. But a major weakness of his approach was that he had nothing to say about the poverty of older women, who had not necessarily been in paid work throughout their adult lives and, even when employed, had often been very low paid and could not easily fit into an insurance system – especially if they were unmarried, as many were.<sup>21</sup>

### Pensions in Parliament

The Old Age Pensions Bill received its second reading in the House of Commons on 15 June 1908. It was introduced by Lloyd George, who ever after was to receive the credit for the scheme actually devised by Asquith. The pension even came to be known popularly as 'the Lloyd George'. It became clear in parliament that claimants would potentially undergo investigation hardly less rigorous



than under the Poor Law. Their income would be assessed. The disqualifying 'character defects' were now defined as 'habitual failure to work according to his ability, opportunity or need, for his own maintenance or that of his legal relatives'. Receipt of poor relief after 1 January 1908 disqualified, as did imprisonment for crime without option of fine or conviction for drunkenness, within ten years of the claim. 'Aliens and wives of aliens' were excluded. This was to prove a shock to many non-Jewish women who had married Jewish immigrants who had not taken British citizenship. Obtaining citizenship, which had previously been a relatively cheap and simple process, was becoming more difficult in this period of rising anti-Semitism.<sup>22</sup> One advance on Poor Law principles in the proposed legislation was that pensioners were not to be deprived 'of any franchise, right or privilege', though at a time when all women and many men who were not independent householders lacked the vote this was of limited value.

Lloyd George's opening speech was described in the *Spectator* as 'halting in tone and apologetic in manner'.<sup>23</sup> As the debate went on, he became ever more uneasy about the deficiencies of the scheme. He stressed repeatedly that it was 'only a beginning ... the scheme is necessarily incomplete ... this is a great experiment ... we say it is a beginning, but a real beginning'.<sup>24</sup> He made clear that the five-shilling pension was not intended to provide an income adequate to live on, but to supplement and encourage saving and support from relatives and others. The Conservatives had decided not to oppose the bill in the Commons, though a small right-wing group, led by Lord Robert Cecil, did so. Cecil warned:

War might be approaching, and if the government had

weakened the moral fibre of the country by a system and a policy of which this is only the beginning, then a statesman who had mentioned this miserable backsliding from the fine statesmanship of Empire would have something to answer for.<sup>25</sup>

The Labour Party approved the bill 'as a beginning', but pressed for a universal scheme and strongly opposed the disqualification of paupers. Labour succeeded in winning a review of this after two years (it was abolished from 31 December 1910, when the widows of 'aliens' who had themselves been born as British subjects were also allowed to qualify for the pension, following vigorous protests on their behalf<sup>26</sup>). Conservative backbenchers won a modification of the means test to incorporate a sliding scale. Old people with incomes of up to twenty-one pounds per year would receive the full pension; thereafter the pension was reduced by one shilling per week for each shilling per week of income between twenty-one pounds and a ceiling of thirty-one pounds and ten shillings per year. The minimum pension was one shilling. Those with incomes as low as twenty-six pounds per year would receive only three shillings a week. In fact, in the first ten years of the pension, the percentage of pensioners receiving less than five shillings never rose above seven.

The government imposed a closure to avoid further costly amendments. In particular, this prevented debate on the contentious issue of the age limit. As the bill completed its progress through the Commons, *The Times*, with some justice, attacked 'the vagueness of the conceptions underlying the Bill and the haphazard way in which its proposals have been flung together with no coherent theory or aim ... the government are taking a leap in the dark with no more real knowledge than the

rest of whether they will land on solid ground or quagmire'.<sup>27</sup>

The Bill survived strong Conservative opposition in the House of Lords, where some Conservative peers were evidently rehearsing the revolt which was to come against the Budget of 1909. The Lords passed a number of amendments, which were deleted when the bill returned to the lower house, on grounds of having contravened Commons privilege by intervening in a financial measure. In response the Lords passed an unprecedented measure of censure against the Commons. The ageing Lord Rosebery expressed his regret about the ways that society and Liberalism were changing. He thought this 'the most important Bill ... in the forty years I have sat here' more important in its implications even than the parliamentary reform bills, for, he believed, it was a:

... pauperising bill, symbolising the final passing of family pride in caring for their elderly ... it is, of course, socialism pure and simple ... but ... we have advanced to that period of socialism where some such measure as this is required ... it is part of the almost daily transfer of burdens from the individual to the state ... it will absorb money which in the past has gone to charity ... it is the beginning of a long process which will culminate in the handing over of hospitals to the state.<sup>28</sup>

As indeed it was. Rosebery did not, however, advise the Lords to vote against his fellow Liberals.

### Pensions implemented

The Bill received the Royal Assent on 1 August 1908. It gave a pension, which was not on its own enough to live on, primarily to the very old, the very poor and the most respectable, provided that they were also

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British subjects. In effect it was an amendment of the Poor Law and operated on similar principles. Yet it was not the Poor Law. The government and its administrators were careful to protect pensioners from the language of opprobrium which had characterised the poor relief system since 1834 – successfully, it seems, in view of the much larger numbers of impoverished old people who were prepared to apply for the pension than for poor relief, and of their reactions to it, as we will see. Also, entitlement and administration were uniform throughout the country, which had never been true of poor relief. For the first time, the state gave a cash payment to a group in need as a right (if they met the criteria), without deterrent penalties.<sup>29</sup> The dockers' leader, Ben Tillett, greeted it joyfully as 'the first piece of socialism Britain has entered upon'.<sup>30</sup> However, he soon changed his mind and supported a resolution at the annual conference of the TUC shortly afterwards, that:

The Act will not be satisfactory until amended so as to provide for a minimum pension of five shillings per week, without condition, to men and women of sixty; in the case of persons who by reason of their affliction by blindness are rendered incapable of earning their living, the age limit to be entirely removed.<sup>31</sup>

A similar resolution was passed annually for the next sixteen years.

The first old age pensions were paid to 490,000 people on 1 January 1909, the great majority at the maximum rate. Most of the pensioners were women; 37.4 per cent were men. At the time of the 1911 census men accounted for 41.4 per cent of the over-seventy population, but were only 36.7 per cent of pensioners. The total number of pensioners rose to 650,000 in March 1909 and to 1,070,626

after the removal of the pauper disqualification in March 1911. The LGB had estimated 572,000 pensioners in the first year. The undercount was greatest in Ireland (by 70,000 compared with 10,000 on the mainland); the government appears to have underestimated the extent of rural poverty, though there may also have been some audacious claims, in view of the difficulty of proving the age of older people in Ireland, since compulsory registration of births had been introduced only in 1865, and also perhaps a temptation for nationalists to extract some illicit benefit from the English Treasury.<sup>32</sup> In consequence, Lloyd George had to request an additional £900,000 to finance the first year of the scheme.

On 1 March 1906 about 168,100 people age seventy and over were receiving outdoor relief. This fell in 1910 to 138,200 with the abolition of pauper disqualification and to only 9,500 in 1912. Increasingly also, Poor Law guardians granted five shillings a week to paupers believed to be 'old' whether they were above or below the age of seventy. The numbers of people aged seventy or above in workhouses were much less affected. These mainly housed people who needed residential care or who could not survive outside on the minimal pension. The total of aged workhouse inmates on 1 March 1906 was 61,400; in 1910, 57,700; in 1912, 49,300.<sup>33</sup>

In the first years, about 40 per cent of the over-seventy age group qualified for the stringently means-tested pension, whereas only about 24.5 per cent of the same age group had received poor relief in 1906.<sup>34</sup> This suggests the extent of the severe need which had been going unmet before the introduction of the pension; and also that the pension may have been less plagued by the problem of non-take-up than later means-tested schemes, perhaps due to sympathetic local

administration. The 'character clause' seems to have proved almost unworkable and hardly ever to have been applied.

The process of claiming a pension began with completing a form at the post office. This was sent to the local pension officer, who investigated the claim. He reported to the local committee, which made a decision and notified both the claimant and the pension officer. The voluntary local pension committees were made up members of Friendly Societies, trade unions, clergymen and others with relevant experience or interest in social issues. Where the officer and the committee disagreed, there could be a further investigation and a hearing which both officer and claimant might attend. If disagreement persisted, each had a right of appeal to the LGB. Claimants seem, on the whole, to have been well treated. The system seems to have worked harmoniously, with few appeals and generally good relations between pensions committees and officials.

Where a pension was approved, the pension was payable each Friday at the local post office. Grateful pensioners were said to have offered flowers, apples, and even rashers of bacon to the postmasters and -mistresses who handed them their first pension. For years they showered their gratitude on Lloyd George who had done no more than to steer the legislation doubtfully through the Commons.<sup>35</sup>

For all its inadequacy, the impact of the pension upon the immense poverty of Edwardian Britain should not be underestimated. As John Burns reported to Asquith after the first pensions were paid:

I visited the shopping places where most of the poor do congregate. After chats with the butcher, the cheesemonger and the police the general view was that the five shillings to one

**Yet it was not the Poor Law. The government and its administrators were careful to protect pensioners from the language of opprobrium which had characterised the poor relief system since 1834.**

was a boon, but where a couple received the joint pension it meant a great deal to the honest and provident poor. So far there was no evidence of waste or spending on drink and from many sources there were really grateful thanks for those who had brought this boon to the deserving poor.

Lloyd George commented to Parliament in 1909, in the course of defending the additional cost of pensions:

Pensions officers and pensions committees ... have all told me the same story of people facing poverty and privation for years with resignation, with fortitude and with uncomplaining patience; they all ask the same question and they ask it in vain – how on earth these poor people could have managed to keep body and soul together on such slender resources. It is not that they have understated their resources; on the contrary there are cases where they have overstated them with a sort of pride ... what strikes you is their horror of the Poor Law ... this Pension Act has disclosed the presence amongst us of over 600,000 people, the vast majority of whom were living in circumstances of great poverty, yet disclaimed the charity of the public ... it has cost more than was anticipated, but the greatness of the cost shows the depth of the need.<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusion

The Old Age Pensions Act, 1908, has rightly been seen as one of the foundation-stones of the modern British welfare state. It was just one of a series of remarkably enduring institutions initiated by the post-1906 Liberal governments, which created a decisive break between the deterrent and stigmatising Poor Law principles of state social welfare and serious attempts at

more humane and positive forms of provision. These included the Education (Provision of Meals) Act, 1906, which enabled local authorities to provide free meals for under-nourished schoolchildren; this was made compulsory for all local authorities, with an Exchequer subsidy in 1914. In 1907 local authorities were required to inspect the health of children in state schools and to provide for their medical care; in 1912 this work also received a subsidy from the Exchequer. The Children Act, 1908, established a separate system of justice for minors under age sixteen, withdrawing them from adult courts and prisons, and shifted much responsibility for the care of children in need from the Poor Law to local authorities.

In 1909 the modern probation service was introduced as an alternative to prison for offenders, aimed at rehabilitation. In the same year the Trade Boards Act introduced an effective minimum wage for women in some of the worst-paid trades, and Beveridge's labour exchanges began to be established throughout the country, funded by the Treasury, designed to reduce unemployment by matching unemployed workers to jobs by gathering and disseminating information about vacancies. Then the National Insurance Act, 1911, introduced social insurance to Britain. Part 1 of the Act, masterminded by Lloyd George, introduced National Health Insurance; Part 2, the work of Beveridge and Churchill, concerned unemployment insurance. This was designed, unlike pensions but like the German scheme, to provide security and health care for regularly employed manual workers (white-collar and, also, agricultural workers were excluded) rather than to relieve poverty. The great majority of beneficiaries were male. However the scheme did include a maternity benefit for insured women and wives of insured

**The Old Age Pensions Act was just one of a series of remarkably enduring institutions initiated by the post-1906 Liberal governments, which created a decisive break between the deterrent and stigmatising Poor Law principles of state social welfare and serious attempts at more humane and positive forms of provision.**

workers, intended to contribute to reduction of the high rates of infant mortality by improving the resources of working-class mothers. After a campaign by women, the benefit was paid directly to the mothers rather than, as originally intended, to the insured men.

At least as important as the social legislation, which gradually increased social expenditure under the Liberals, were the tax changes which made the spending possible. The introduction by Asquith of a graduated income tax was taken further by Lloyd George in the controversial 1909 Budget, finally passed in 1910, which increased tax on earned income, introduced a super-tax on incomes above £5000 per year, increased death duties and, for the first time, introduced tax relief for each child of taxpayers earning £500 per year or less.

This was a remarkable series of changes in a short time. Equally remarkable is how long many of them have lasted. The principles established in the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act have certainly long survived, for good and ill. British state pensions remained wholly non-contributory, with minor amendments to the scheme, until 1925. In 1925 the Old Age, Widows and Orphans Contributory Pensions Act introduced pensions at age 65 for contributors to National Health Insurance and to the widows and orphans of male contributors, in return for additional contributions. The non-contributory pension continued to be paid at age seventy to those who did not qualify for National Insurance. The rate of pension (now ten shillings, but still inadequate for survival without a supplement) was the same for both forms of pension. The change was a response to widespread conviction that too many needy people became incapacitated, or died, before the age of seventy and to the particularly high rates of unemployment among older workers during the

depression of the inter-war years. Resistance to the cost of a more inclusive non-contributory pension remained strong.

The pension system was more substantially reformed by the post-war Labour government in 1946, inspired by Beveridge's 1942 report, though Labour modified his recommendations in important respects. In particular the basic state pension still did not provide a living income. Despite Beveridge's desire to avoid the means tests he had always opposed, from the beginning, large numbers of the poorest pensioners had to supplement the pension with means-tested National Assistance: 648,000 of them in 1948, almost a million by 1951. It has continued to be the case, to the present, that the basic state pension is inadequate for survival. Pensioners have been required to supplement it with occupational pensions, private savings or, in the case of the poorest, means-tested state welfare, currently known as Pension Credit. Throughout this time a high proportion of the poorest pensioners have failed to apply for the supplement for which they would qualify (currently up to 30 per cent of eligible pensioners), due either to pride or ignorance. The concerns of Booth and Beveridge about the exclusionary effects of means-testing have proved justified. Most of these poorest pensioners are female for the same reasons that women were most of the aged poor in 1908: women do not fit comfortably into a pension system based upon contributory state insurance, income-related occupational pensions and private saving because so many of them have interrupted work records due to caring responsibilities, and when they work they earn less than men and so qualify for lower pensions and have less opportunity to save. High rates of partnership break-up, like high rates of widowhood in the late nineteenth century, and the fact that women on

average live longer than men, contribute further to the relative poverty of older women.<sup>37</sup> Many of the problems that were identified one hundred years ago have not disappeared.

The Old Age Pensions Act, 1908, was an important foundation-stone in the building of the British welfare state, embodying some of its weaknesses as well as its strengths.

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**The Old Age Pensions Act, 1908, was an important foundation-stone in the building of the British welfare state, embodying some of its weaknesses as well as its strengths**

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## GREAT LIBERAL DOCUMENTS

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This is a guide to key texts by British and foreign authors which have informed, influenced and inspired British liberal thought and politics. The earliest of these documents is from 1644, John Milton's *Areopagitica*, his great polemic against censorship and in favour of free speech. The newest is *Make It Happen*, the latest statement of the vision and values of the Liberal Democrats, the first under Nick Clegg's leadership.

Through these documents readers can gain access to fundamental liberal ideas, theories and policy programmes as they were originally written. The guide provides a brief contextualisation of each one and indicates where it can be found.

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# LETTERS

## Pensions and the working class

Barry Doyle ('The rank and file and the Liberal government crisis of 1912', *Journal* 59, summer 1908) may be correct in claiming that our understanding of the impact of Edwardian social welfare reform has been limited by evidence dominated by middle-class responses, but this is largely because historians have not properly exploited the resources that throw light on the reactions and experiences of the working-class beneficiaries. His example of a letter by a middle-class physician only reinforces the conventional inadequate perspective.

The crucial case of the 1908 old age pensions, for example, is very revealing of the immense popularity of some of the innovations, and of the shrewdness and humanity of the Liberal government in using the Post Office as the key element in the implementation of the

scheme. The Post Office was an economical means of administering the reform and, by freeing the elderly from the humiliations of the Poor Law system, it promoted a high take-up rate.

It is in fact easy to understand popular responses by studying local newspapers, which reported freely on what the new pensioners said on collecting their first pensions and on how they coped with the system, and to follow the interaction between the recipients and the system in the Post Office archives at Mount Pleasant in London and in the Scottish National Archives (better known as the Scottish Record Office) in Edinburgh. For details, see my article, 'Working-Class Experience and State Social Welfare, 1908–1914: Old Age Pensions Reconsidered', *The Historical Journal*, 45, 2002, 775–96.

Martin Pugh

## Hastings facts (1)

In his article on the 1908 Hastings by-election (*Journal* 59, summer 2008), Ian Ivatt incorrectly refers to the young Liberal candidate, Robert Vernon Harcourt, as 'Sir Robert'; and does not mention the interesting fact that, later in the same year, the thirty-year-old candidate went on to succeed John Morley as Liberal Member for the Montrose Burghs, a seat which he held until 1918.

Robert's half-brother, Lewis Vernon Harcourt, his senior by about fifteen years, was a colleague of Morley's in the Liberal cabinet, and it would have been interesting to be told whether he played any part in the Hastings by-election campaign.

Patrick Jackson

## Hastings facts (2)

I much enjoyed Ian Ivatt's article analysing the Hastings by-election of 1908. From 1981 to 1986 I was the constituency agent for the Hastings & Rye Liberal Association, and we had a member (a Mr Daniel Pilcher), then aged 100, who

had been involved in both the 1906 general election and the 1908 by-election. He would sometimes sing the 1906 song in support of Freeman Freeman-Thomas, the sitting Liberal MP (1900–06) and against du Cros, the Tory candidate:

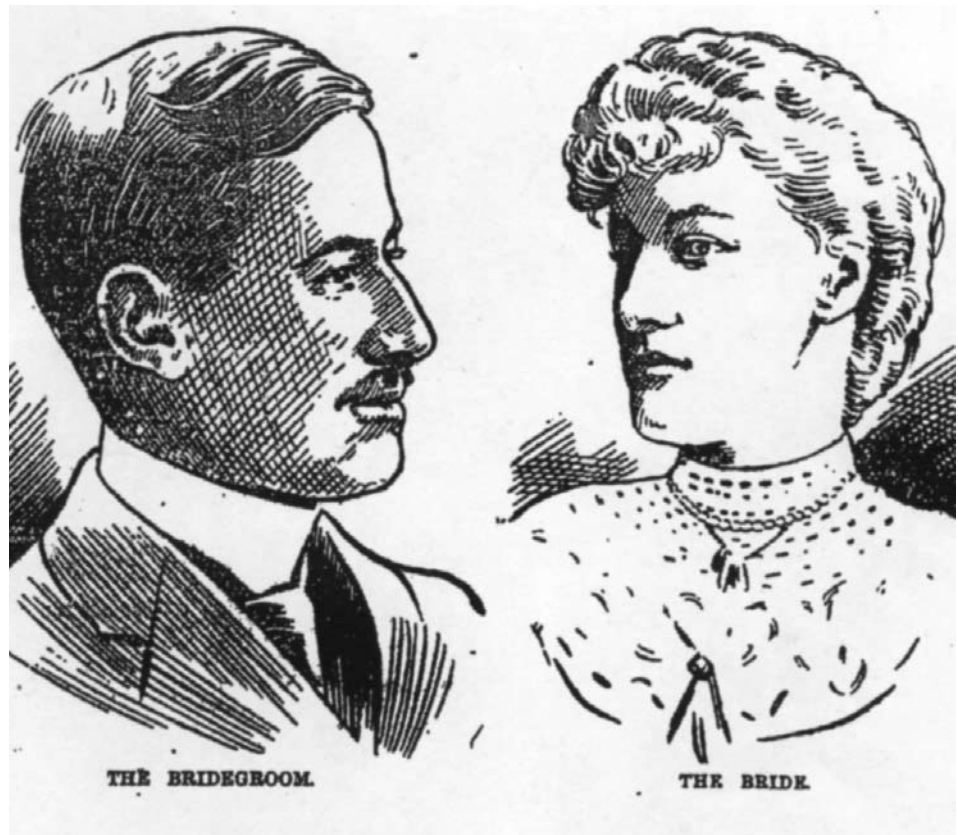
Vote, vote, vote for Freeman Thomas,  
Throw old du Cros in the sea.  
Du Cros, he is no good,  
He'll want to tax your food,  
Freeman Thomas is the one for you and me!

Readers of the *Journal* might also be interested to learn that the by-election scenes in *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, Robert Tressell's great novel of working-class life (recently dramatised on BBC Radio 4), are drawn from the 1908 Hastings by-election. The only difference is that in the novel the newly elected MP for Mugsborough (Hastings) is a Liberal. The changed result

continued on page 55

# 'THE STRANGE

In the October 1900 'khaki election', Liberals barely improved on their disastrous 1895 performance. Facing the Unionists' ruthless playing of the patriotic card,<sup>1</sup> the party could not even find a candidate in 139 English constituencies and only in Wales did its share of the vote increase. A few formerly safe seats like Derby and Lancaster were regained in close fights, but the net gain was a mere six, and the party remained hopelessly outgunned in both Houses of Parliament. But through the gloom shone one utterly unexpected shaft of Liberal sunlight: the capture of North Westmorland, a rural fastness of valleys, fells, lakes and sheep, which had known only Tory MPs since Napoleonic times. Yet the new MP did not behave as expected. **Andrew Connell** tells 'the strange story of Mr Rigg'.<sup>2</sup>



**I**N THE old county town of Appleby the sitting Conservative<sup>3</sup> suffered the humiliation of seeing his 17.4 per cent majority dissolve into a losing margin of 11.4 per cent,<sup>4</sup> a defeat all the more embarrassing for being at the hands of a youthful Liberal candidate selected barely a month before polling day.

Coming early among the English county declarations, what *The Times* deemed a 'rather remarkable victory' caused 'great excitement'.<sup>5</sup> In remote Langdale the arrival of the result by telegraph from Appleby aroused 'consternation and dismay, exorbitant joy and humiliating grief', the Conservative *Westmorland Gazette* reported, adding: 'As a

# E CASE OF MR RIGG'

political omen North Westmorland proves absolutely nothing.<sup>6</sup> This assessment seemed amply borne out both by the outcome of the 1900 general election, and by Westmorland's reversion within a decade to another century of Toryism. But I shall argue that this was no mere freak result; North Westmorland Liberals had stumbled on the ideal candidate who, but for a mysterious aberration, might have served as a role model for a type of Liberal MP equipped to resist the almost total annexation of rural England by the Conservatives from 1910 onwards.

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For two centuries Westmorland elections were dominated by the county's largest landowners, the Lowther family; through them local Conservatism acquired its distinctive pale yellow favours while Liberals wore blue. From 1774 until 1892 the county seat was represented in every parliament by at least one Lowther, and from 1832 to 1880 no election was even contested.<sup>7</sup> But Non-conformity was strong among local voters newly enfranchised by the 1884 Reform Act,<sup>8</sup> and in October 1885 the Hon. William Lowther beat off the Liberal

challenge of James Whitehead by just 10 votes in the new single-member constituency of North Westmorland. A decade later the seat looked much less marginal. Gladstone's commitment to Irish home rule was a vote-loser in an area in which Roman Catholicism was regarded as alien and sinister, and owner-occupier farmers, who outnumbered tenants,<sup>9</sup> were suspicious of the merest hint of compulsory land purchase. By 1895, with 5,023 votes cast in the usual high turnout, the Conservative majority had swollen to 873.

The winner did not even bear the customary name. In 1891 William Lowther had surprised his constituency party by telling them he would not stand again, and with no other family member available,<sup>10</sup> the Conservatives adopted Sir Joseph Savory, a carpetbagger London goldsmith and former Lord Mayor. Rotund and balding, a dull speaker with limited local connections, Savory was an eminently undistinguished figure whose increased majorities in 1892 and 1895 demonstrated the extent to which Westmorland men of modest property were deserting Liberalism. He seemed destined to remain backbench lobby fodder for as long as he chose,

and the circumstances of the 1900 election might have been expected further to boost his vote in a locality with a strong military tradition, well represented among the servicemen in South Africa. But 'in vain did the Tory leaders invoke the aid of Khaki, claiming Bobs, Buller and B.-P. as their own particular possessions';<sup>11</sup> Sir Joseph was sensationally unseated.

The explanation, the *Yorkshire Post* lamented, lay in 'petty, personal and local questions',<sup>12</sup> issues of probity no more than delicately alluded to on Liberal platforms, but 'discussed among farmers and tradesmen in the freer intercourse of the market or tavern'. Some looked askance at their MP's involvement in two protracted court cases, one concerning a quarry near Kirkby Stephen, the other the City Electric Light Company in London; but the really damaging allegation was that he was enriching himself by robbing local farmers. Near Appleby lies Brackenber Moor, a large area of common upland pasture which was – and still is – used for military manoeuvres. Compensation from the War Office was due to all with common rights, but rumour persisted that Sir Joseph, who had sought to

Left: The bridegroom and the bride: Richard and Gertrude Rigg; *Kendal Mercury*, 16 September 1904

boost his local standing by buying up land and manorial lordships, had pocketed most of it. His protestations that this was 'absolutely false', that the money had all gone to a committee of commoners, and 'not one penny has passed through my hands',<sup>13</sup> were greeted with scepticism. North Westmorland Conservatives braced themselves for a reduced majority; but in the prevailing patriotic climate it was inconceivable that the seat would fall to an inexperienced opponent with threadbare Liberal credentials.

The shock victor, Richard Rigg, thirty-four years younger than Savory, was a native of Windermere, where the family had a coaching business and his father John owned the handsome hotel that overlooks the railway station. Educated across the lake at Hawkshead Grammar School, he passed his Cambridge Locals before he was fourteen<sup>14</sup> and in January 1892 transferred to the nearest public school, Sedbergh, but stayed only one term. The school register, generally explicit about departures under a cloud, simply records Rigg as having been 'withdrawn'; plausible explanations are the outbreak of scarlet fever in the school and the coincidental prolonged absence through ill-health of the celebrated headmaster Henry Hart, whose muscular Christianity had transformed Sedbergh's reputation, though not its sanitary arrangements.<sup>15</sup> How Rigg spent the next five years, other than in part-time soldiery as a commissioned officer in the Second Volunteer Battalion of the Border Regiment, which he joined in 1896, is unclear. There is no evidence of extensive travelling. Possibly he assisted his uncle in the running of the hotel, his father having retired to devote more time to hunting and freemasonry; but the path before him was that of a gentleman of means.

When Sir Joseph Savory became North Westmorland's

**The Liberal press exulted as their handsome, dark-moustached young hero charmed meeting after meeting with his 'courtesy, amiability and effective speeches ...'**

member, his niece recorded, the Rigg family were 'pillars of Conservatism';<sup>16</sup> certainly in 1892 the Misses Rigg of Windermere adorned a Primrose League gathering,<sup>17</sup> and in the 1895 election John Rigg supplied coaches to convey Conservative voters on polling day.<sup>18</sup> The timing of and reasons for his son's conversion to Liberalism, apparently with parental blessing, remain obscure. Lady Carlisle would subsequently tell her biographer son-in-law that Richard saw the light while up at Oxford;<sup>19</sup> but in fact he went to Gonville & Caius, a Cambridge college not renowned for radicalism. And although local press reports in September 1900 stated he had left university in 1898, Caius' records show that he matriculated in 1897, passed two parts of the Law tripos in 1898 and 1899 and took his degree the following year.<sup>20</sup>

By 1900 he had been called to the Bar of the Inner Temple, though he was never to practise,<sup>21</sup> and was an instructor in musketry in the Volunteers, with the rank of captain. Like other socially conscientious middle-class men, he patronised Friendly Societies, his most durable connection being with the Oddfellows, for whom he acted as treasurer.<sup>22</sup> With an evident predilection for committees, he was also president of a cycling club, captain of a Boys' Brigade battalion, member of the Westmorland Football Association, Conservator of the River Kent Fishery District, an enthusiastic freemason<sup>23</sup> and churchwarden in his home parish of St Mary's Applethwaite. His faith was evangelical, and he was an impassioned teetotaler.

Early in September 1900, a few days after his twenty-third birthday, Richard Rigg was announced as Liberal candidate for North Westmorland. Of his immediate impact on a demoralised local party<sup>24</sup> there was no doubt. The Liberal press exulted as their handsome,

dark-moustached young hero charmed meeting after meeting with his 'courtesy, amiability and effective speeches ... His very youth, coupled with his marvellous grasp of political principles and facility for their eloquent and popular expression, render him infinitely more qualified to represent the needs of a constituency like North Westmorland than a goody-goody and fossilised antediluvian like Sir Joseph Savory.'<sup>25</sup> From the platform Rigg, who had volunteered for service in South Africa but was not called up because of his parliamentary candidacy, denounced not the war itself but the way it was being managed. Patricia Lynch has suggested that Liberals in 1900 'who adopted a moderate imperialist stance ... ran the risk of appearing to neglect the party's traditions of social reform', these being 'mutually exclusive alternatives'.<sup>26</sup> Not so for Rigg, whose 'vigorous exposition of advanced Liberal views' *The Times* remarked on;<sup>27</sup> he supported state pensions, Lords reform, one man one vote, and greater public control over voluntary schools. The simple message of his posters was: 'Vote for Rigg, the local candidate: Unity of Empire and Old Age Pensions.'

'To say that Mr Rigg has taken the electorate by storm is to put it mildly', remarked the normally apolitical *Lakes Herald* on polling day. The *Westmorland Gazette* published an anxious appeal to its Conservative readers. The Liberals were a divided party, not to be trusted with the 'destinies of the Empire'; and voters must realise that they could not 'choose their member because of his qualities, or because they like him, without giving power to the party he supports'.<sup>28</sup> The count in Appleby confirmed the Conservatives' worst fears. Though most of the crowd waiting in the rain wore yellow favours, they cheered heartily the declaration



that Rigg had won with a majority of 579. A shocked Sir Joseph Savory pulled himself together sufficiently to make a gracious speech of congratulation before disappearing on the next train south. Richard Rigg, meanwhile, was borne shoulder-high through the crowded streets of Appleby, took the train to Kirkby Stephen to repeat the process and thence to Tebay where railway workers, reported to have voted solidly Liberal, sounded a volley of foghorns. His odyssey ended at Windermere station, where, through darkness and heavy rain, a band escorted his carriage down the hill to Bowness on the lakeside and all the way to Ambleside.<sup>29</sup>

While the *Conservative Manchester Chronicle* consoled its readers with the comment that the Appleby result showed 'the overwhelming strength of Imperialist feeling in the country',<sup>30</sup> the Liberal *Carlisle Journal* rejoiced that 'the Tories and aristocracy of North Westmorland, with the Earl of Lonsdale at their head', had received 'the most staggering blow which has ever been dealt to them'. They might blame 'petty pique and narrow local topics', but this was a victory of Liberal policies appealing to the 'sturdy electors'.<sup>31</sup> By happy coincidence Richard Rigg was the same age as the Younger Pitt when he was returned for the old rotten borough of Appleby in 1781. Perhaps he was destined for similar greatness? Even the *Daily Mail* approved: 'The baby of the house, he seems to be made of the right stuff.'<sup>32</sup>

Not resting on his laurels, Appleby's youthful and energetic new MP 'nursed the constituency as it has never been nursed before or since'.<sup>33</sup> Unfailingly conscientious and courteous, he rarely refused invitations to attend functions and deliver earnest, well-crafted speeches, confident in the knowledge that every word would appear in the local press. And having taken up

a cause he remained faithful to it. As 'Brother Rigg' he told the Oddfellows that 'Friendly Societies are the creation of the working classes of this country ... the backbone of the land in health, thrift and self-denial'.<sup>34</sup> As President of the Vale of Eden Band of Hope, he admonished 3,000 children in their great annual demonstration in Appleby: 'You should never forget that in fighting drink you are fighting for the gospel of Christ. If you want a Christian country you must have a sober country, for drink is the fruitful mother of every social ill.'<sup>35</sup> Godliness, temperance and state education were his recurrent themes in halls, chapels and Liberal Clubs. 'The greatness of England depends upon the morality of its home life and the temperance of its people ... Our children must be brought up to become God-fearing and God-serving men and women ... The child of poor parents will by his perseverance be enabled to fight his way to the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge.'<sup>36</sup>

Priggish though all this may sound to the modern ear, it helped confirm the popularity of the virtuous young Liberal MP, evident at the 1900 Liberal Boxing Night party in Appleby, a ten-hour marathon of tea, dinner and dance, with 350 guests.

The cheering which began on his rising was only interrupted by the singing again of 'for he's a jolly good fellow', followed by renewed shouting and clapping of hands. The hon. gentleman at last had to begin his remarks to the chairman in order to stop the cheering.<sup>37</sup>

Equally at home at a Primitive Methodist bazaar or a Masonic dinner, his place in county society was further confirmed by appointment as a JP and promotion to the rank of major in the Volunteers. In September 1904 the press reported in exhaustive detail his marriage, by the Bishop of Barrow, to Miss Gertrude Anderson in her parish church of St Andrew,

Penrith; there were several hundred guests, many of whom had arrived by special train, 'crowded to a most uncomfortable degree' in the nave, while the galleries were thronged by the public.<sup>38</sup>

Rigg's instant impact on the Liberal Party nationally was attested to by his election in February 1901 to the Executive Committee of the Eighty Club, over which no less a figure than the party leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, presided; at a club 'at home' in July he proposed the vote of thanks to the speaker, Sir William Harcourt.<sup>39</sup> But in the later claim that 'his early speeches at Westminster earned him a high place in the party',<sup>40</sup> there was more than a little journalistic licence. *Hansard's* columns reveal that he was true to Westmorland parliamentary custom in rarely addressing the Commons. He did not deliver his maiden speech until November 1902, when moving an amendment to the Education Bill. Consistent with his previously expressed view that schools should be more answerable to the public's elected representatives, he argued that councillors should be in the majority on education committees and free, without interference from the Board of Education, to co-opt additional members qualified by educational expertise rather than representation of some vested interest. Seconding, Alfred Emmott of Oldham congratulated his hon. friend on 'having at last successfully broken the silence he has so long maintained'. Lloyd George also spoke in support, but the amendment was soon withdrawn,<sup>41</sup> and for the next two years Rigg did not speak again in the House.

Nevertheless Appleby Liberals speculated that their MP might be a future Prime Minister, following in the footsteps of former members for the borough, Pitt and Lord Liverpool;<sup>42</sup> and the *Yorkshire Post*, describing Rigg as 'associated with an ambitious

**Not resting on his laurels, Appleby's youthful and energetic new MP 'nursed the constituency as it has never been nursed before or since'.**

band of young Liberals', claimed that 'his Parliamentary status is not to be measured by his lack of assertiveness'.<sup>43</sup> He tabled occasional written questions, seconded a motion without speaking, and in August 1904, appropriately for the Treasurer of the Anti-Tobacco Society, presented the first reading of a Bill 'to provide for the prevention of Juvenile Smoking'.<sup>44</sup>

Though the local Conservative press poked occasional fun at such 'fads',<sup>45</sup> Rigg was not an easy target. In the aftermath of victory he had praised Sir Joseph Savory for being 'honourable, manly and straightforward', adding 'Whether you agree or disagree with me politically, I hope the day is far distant when I shall forfeit the love and affection of both parties in North Westmorland'.<sup>46</sup> He made a point of joining Captain Joscelyne Bagot, Conservative MP for South Westmorland, in a bipartisan demand that Poor Law Guardians should be forbidden by law to reduce the amount of outdoor relief awarded to people who were in receipt of Friendly Society allowances;<sup>47</sup> and his moralising speeches not only rarely criticised political opponents but even commended the hapless Prime Minister Balfour.<sup>48</sup> 'I have talked with men of all political shades in the county,' said Appleby Liberals' chairman, 'and I can safely say that personally Mr Rigg has not a single enemy'.<sup>49</sup>

To oppose him at the next election North Westmorland Conservatives chose Major George Noble of Newcastle, a Lloyd's underwriter with a gallant military record but no electoral experience. Their hopes of regaining the seat were not improved by the Unionist rift between Balfour and Chamberlain over tariff reform. Rigg toured the constituency early in 1904 with a series of speeches extolling the virtues of free trade,<sup>50</sup> and the Parliamentary Liberal Party made hay with a

string of by-election victories as well as the acquisition of Winston Churchill. The approaching election landslide was casting its shadow, and Richard Rigg's political future seemed as secure as the Lakeland fells overlooking his newly acquired marital home in Windermere.

So it was with utter astonishment that Herbert Coutts, president of the North Westmorland Liberal Association, read on 16 November 1904 a letter from his MP offering his resignation. To Richard Rigg's 'painful regret' there had gradually been borne on him 'the conviction that my views and opinions upon some of the most important questions of the day are not in accord with those of the leaders of the Liberal Party'.<sup>51</sup> He listed the issues that particularly concerned him, later expounded more fully to the press. He believed that, for the sake of imperial prosperity, the government was right to support the use of Chinese labour in South Africa; he approved of the Aliens Act because his experiences at an East End mission had convinced him of the need to keep the 'lowest class of Europeans' out of Britain; he supported the principles of the Education Act; and though not a protectionist he believed that imperial preference merited serious consideration.<sup>52</sup>

What prompted this bizarre conversion? Lady Carlisle would later claim that Rigg wanted a knighthood as a reward for his sensational election success in 1900 and deserted the Liberals when it did not materialise.<sup>53</sup> There is no contemporary supporting evidence other than *Punch's* limerick, whose hint at personal ambition may owe more to the need for a rhyme than to the actual circumstances:<sup>54</sup>

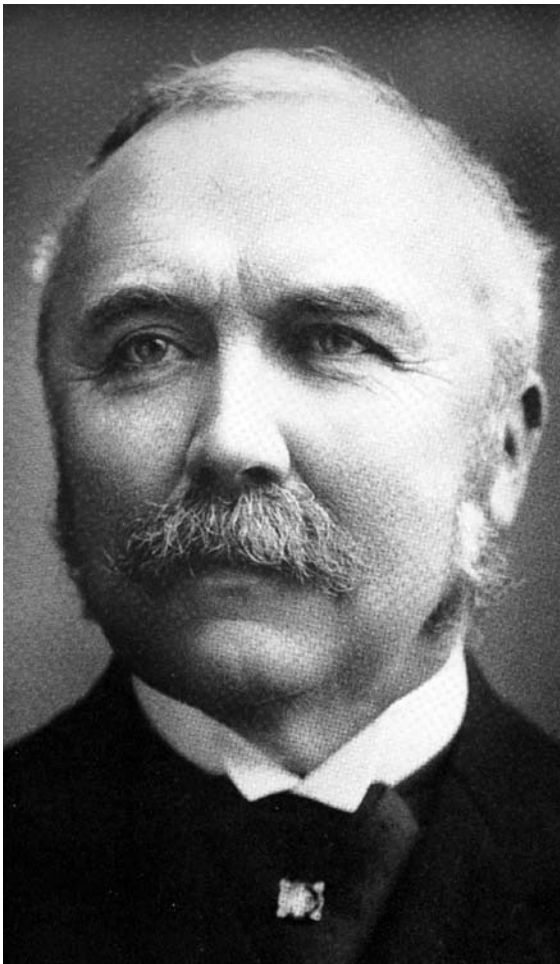
There was a young member  
name RIGG  
Who grew weary of being a  
Whig.  
So, thirsting for glory,  
He emerged as a Tory

And gallantly went the whole  
pig.

Some speculated that his new bride had changed her husband's politics;<sup>55</sup> but when a pre-arranged and now distinctly awkward Liberal Ladies' At Home was held in Windermere a few days after the storm broke, it was the MP's wife who played hostess while his mother absented herself. Rigg's insistence that it was 'absolutely impossible' for him to support the Liberal leadership may have been provoked by some Westminster quarrel, but the press offers no clues; on behalf of the Parliamentary Party, Herbert Samuel<sup>56</sup> was content to point out that Rigg had voted without demur on all the points he now raised. Perhaps as he became more and more a figure in the county establishment he was absorbing the attitudes of his social circle; perhaps, as a fastidious man, he found the rhetoric of 'New Liberalism' vulgar;<sup>57</sup> again, evidence is lacking. Like his fellow-Anglican Gladstone, Rigg admired the Nonconformist conscience, and the answer may lie solely with his inmost thoughts: 'I have the satisfaction of feeling that what I have done was conscientious and right'.<sup>58</sup>

The veteran Liberal Sir Wilfrid Lawson remarked, 'It's a first principle of Liberalism that a man has the right to change his mind. He has been three years a Liberal; let him be a Tory for three years and then come back and be a Liberal again'.<sup>59</sup> Rigg's local party took a less sanguine view. They accepted his proffered resignation, but puzzlement turned to fury when the MP, having initially said that he would stand in the by-election as an independent, then met with the Conservative candidate and announced that they were in agreement on most matters. *The Times* wondered whether Major Noble might step aside for Rigg, who was quoted as saying that 'he would doubtless be a

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ishment  
that Herbert  
Coutts,  
president of  
the North  
Westmor-  
land Liberal  
Association,  
read on 16  
November  
1904 a letter  
from his MP  
offering his  
resignation.**



Parliamentary candidate again'. By now the press was claiming that the defection had been 'whispered for weeks past' and there had been 'informal negotiations with Conservatives'. Rigg was adamant that he had 'acted absolutely on his own initiative' with 'no collusion',<sup>60</sup> but he attended the next meeting of Windermere Conservatives and was enrolled as a member.

Portraits of 'Dicky Rigg' were reportedly being stamped on in the homes of Liberals outraged that a temperance warrior could join the party responsible for the Licensing Act.<sup>61</sup> A tactful decision to return some wedding presents did not prevent his servants, so the MP claimed, from being insulted in the streets of Windermere, while he himself was 'literally inundated with threatening and abusive letters' and even struck in the face on his mother's doorstep by a muffled assailant. Early in December he wrote from London: 'I have had

**'That great Christian statesman, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman' – Leader of the Liberal Party 1899–1908**

to leave my house in the dead of night under police protection to escape Radical ruffianism.' *La Petite Republique* embroidered the tale: 'M. Rigg ... has been compelled to fly ... and take refuge in London, the police having declared that they cannot answer for his life.'<sup>62</sup> He let it be known that his health had broken down under the strain, and on doctor's orders he and his wife would spend Christmas on the continent. Meanwhile a Liberal reporter in Windermere claimed that the 'overwrought' Rigg's allegations of violence and intimidation were mere 'Illusions, Hallucinations and Delusions'. His dramatic flight from the town had in reality amounted to boarding the last train of the evening on a station platform deserted apart from his father and one policeman.<sup>63</sup>

Though Rigg did not formally apply for the Chiltern Hundreds until February 1905, the by-election campaign to succeed him began at once. On the advice of Lady Carlisle, North Westmorland Liberals selected her personal secretary, Leif Jones, a fluent writer and temperance orator from a distinguished Welsh Nonconformist family, and an experienced, though as yet unsuccessful, election campaigner.<sup>64</sup> The poll took place early in March and, for all his eloquent exploitation of Conservative disarray over tariff reform, Jones saw the Liberal majority fall from 579 to 220.<sup>65</sup> In the January 1906 general election he faced a new challenger in the Earl of Kerry, an amiable Etonian army officer actively supported by the fifth Earl of Lonsdale, Hugh Lowther, taking time out from his round of pleasures. The Conservative campaign beat the Imperial drum against the 'pro-Boer' Jones, and despite the national landslide which won them the neighbouring Kendal seat, the Liberals held on in Appleby by a majority of just three. Leif Jones was as much relieved as

triumphant when he told his supporters that there was now 'Blue Sky over Westmorland'.

Richard Rigg took no part in either election.<sup>66</sup> Politely declining invitations to stand as a Conservative in such unpromising seats as Burnley and Barnard Castle, he restricted his political activity to appearing on a platform in Cockermouth to support Sir John Randles, who lost to Sir Wilfrid Lawson, but regained the seat six months later, after the old radical's death. Rigg attended the funeral on behalf of the Church of England Temperance Society, and Sir Wilfrid's prediction that he would be no more than three years a Tory was looking ever more prescient. Addressing a meeting of the UK Alliance<sup>67</sup> on Blackpool sands, Rigg told his audience that 'they must deplore the fact that the Unionist party was so liquor-ridden, and when it made itself so subservient to the drink trade it deserved to be beaten'; and CB was the 'best temperance Prime Minister the country had ever known'.<sup>68</sup> To the Oddfellows he reaffirmed his support for old age pensions, though he believed they would be unnecessary if there were comprehensive temperance reform; and he expressed the ambition 'some day to go to the House of Commons again to represent the interests of friendly societies'.<sup>69</sup>

By 1907 Rigg was telling audiences that the defeat of the Liberal Education Bill by the Lords would be 'nothing short of a national calamity', and 'the men who insist on denominational instruction are driving the Bible out of schools'. He himself was an 'evangelical Christian' and he deplored the 'Church going to the brewer'. It was shameful that churches administered alcoholic communion wine, for 'many young men got their fondness for drink there'. The duty of the Church was to assist 'that Christian statesman Sir Henry Campbell-

Bannerman' in fighting the liquor trade; and he recalled that when he was in the Commons those members with a financial interest in drink 'were rich enough to buy up all the rest'.<sup>70</sup>

The Conservative Party was not the obvious home for a man proud to be called a 'fanatic' in his opposition to strong drink and tobacco; and at the 1907 Christmas dinner of Kirkby Stephen Liberal Club Rigg's return to the fold was announced, along with an assurance that he was 'practically pledged to fight for the Liberals at the next general election in a neighbouring constituency'.<sup>71</sup> A prompt Conservative response to this desertion came at the Primrose League New Year's Day meeting in Appleby. Mixing his biblical references, the chairman derided the 'coat of many colours' of the 'wandering sheep', who had strayed in search of support for his 'temperance propaganda'.<sup>72</sup>

Although Rigg addressed meetings of Oddfellows, temperance organisations and the Cumberland and Westmorland Association in London in the course of 1908, he was not seen on Liberal platforms and barely mentioned in the *North Westmorland Liberal Monthly*, which commenced in June.<sup>73</sup> In January 1909 he was reported to have sent his two-guineas subscription and an 'interesting letter' to Penrith Liberal Club, but any more active political involvement was precluded by his appointment in March as High Sheriff of Westmorland. It was in this capacity that in the January 1910 general election Richard Rigg had to announce from the steps of Appleby Shire Hall the 3,335 votes cast for Lancelot Sanderson (Conservative) and 2,868 for Leif Jones (Liberal). Out of just five English county seats held by the Liberals in 1900 that were now Unionist, North Westmorland registered the greatest swing.<sup>74</sup> It is hard to imagine that Rigg

did not reflect that he could have held the seat.

Two months later, in full flow at Penrith Liberal Club's annual social, he denounced opponents of Lloyd George's budget, whose 'speeches were one long advocacy of their own selfish interests ... land, land, land, property, property, property, dividends, dividends'.<sup>75</sup> Looking forward to the end of plural voting, often blamed by Liberals for defeats in county seats, he assured his audience that 'a brighter dawn was coming for Liberalism when they saw Home Rule for every county and no invasion of alien voters'. A speaker from the floor pointedly remarked that they would all like to see Mr Rigg back in parliament. A further general election was expected as a quasi-plebiscite on the Parliament Act, and in May 1910 North Westmorland Liberals were reported to be in the brink of selecting a candidate to replace Leif Jones, who had said his goodbyes and was seeking a safe seat elsewhere.<sup>76</sup> In June Richard Rigg made an open-air speech to the largest ever Band of Hope rally in Appleby; in October he addressed Penrith Liberal Club, whose president he now was, for an hour. But when the North Westmorland Liberal candidate was finally announced in late November it was not Rigg but another ex-MP, Philip Whitwell Wilson, scion of a well-known Kendal Liberal family, who had sat for St Pancras. In the fortnight before polling day he did his best, but the margin of Conservative victory increased.

North Westmorland saw one more election, in October 1915, when Henry Cecil Lowther, son of the former MP, was unopposed.<sup>77</sup> In 1918 North and South Westmorland were merged into one seat, held for the Conservatives by John Wakefield Weston, whose parliamentary career from 1913 to 1924 consisted of four uncontested elections and a single speech. Every inch of

Westmorland would continue to be represented by Conservatives until 2005, when the Liberal Democrat Tim Farron won Westmorland & Lonsdale. This constituency does not include most of the old North Westmorland seat, which is now part of Penrith & the Border, still one of the safest Conservative seats in Britain.

Arguing for recognition of the value of local studies in informing analysis of the development of political cultures, Jon Lawrence rightly stresses the 'need for extensive new research into the 'politics of locality' which recognises ... the peculiarities of place'.<sup>78</sup> North Westmorland, and especially the Eden Valley, was – and still is – home to a relatively static society which not only valued candidates with genuine local credentials and unimpeachable morality, but also, in a manner Patricia Lynch suggests was typical of rural constituencies, took at face value claims to place the good of the community above party considerations;<sup>79</sup> of such virtues Richard Rigg was a paradigm.

To the peculiarities of place we might add those of personality. Growing up in a social milieu becoming increasingly Conservative, Rigg abruptly embraced a Liberalism that was simultaneously Imperialist and in its social aspects 'New'. Though his time in the House seems to have been an anti-climax after the instant fame he achieved in getting there, four years was hardly long enough to determine how far he might rise in Parliament; he was only 27 when he resigned. At the very least, given his Westmorland roots and widespread popularity, he could have emulated previous county MPs by occupying his seat until retirement, ennoblement or death, had his conscience not prompted him to desert his party just as it was poised to sweep the country.

Richard Rigg had an apparent taste for swimming against

**Growing up in a social milieu becoming increasingly Conservative, Rigg abruptly embraced a Liberalism that was simultaneously Imperialist and in its social aspects 'New'.**



the tide, and it is quite conceivable that as a born-again Liberal he would in December 1910 have recaptured his former seat. He chose instead to devote the last three decades of his life to an extraordinary range of activities, described by *The Times* as 'A Career of Public Service'.<sup>80</sup> During the 1914–18 war he received the Territorial Decoration, was a Commissioner for National War Savings, chaired the Ministry of Labour panel for Employment of ex-Officers and in 1918 was awarded the OBE. For a man praised for patience and good humour, a prodigious memory for facts and faces and a fluent, incisive tongue, this was just a beginning. A quick glance at the spectrum of his responsibilities takes in chairmanship of the Trained Nurses Annuity Fund; presidency of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries; presidency of the National Temperance Hospital, a ward of which was named after him; mastery of the Glovers Company; mayoralty of the City of Westminster; and many more. Political activity is hinted at only by the vice-chairmanship of the Abbey Constitutional (usually a euphemism for Conservative) Association; perhaps he ultimately returned to his roots. He certainly acquired a vast circle of friends in the course of public life, and, though a lifelong teetotaler, mellowed to the extent of readily standing his round if a social occasion required it.<sup>81</sup>

Early in World War II Richard and Gertrude Rigg retired to Hove. In 1942 they died within months of each other. There were no children and, in the absence of any surviving personal papers, no clues as to whether he had any regrets as to what he himself, his native county, his party and his country might have lost when he turned his back on a life in politics.

*Andrew Connell, whose tutors at Oxford included Kenneth O. Morgan, is a history teacher at the*

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*comprehensive school in Appleby and an elected member of the General Teaching Council for England. His work on Westmorland parliamentary politics has also appeared in Northern History and Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society.*

- 1 Paul Readman's 'The Conservative Party, Patriotism, and British Politics: The Case of the General Election of 1900' in *Journal of British Studies* 40 (2001), convincingly reinstates the view that the Boer War was the dominant issue that in most constituencies cost the Liberals working-class votes
- 2 Headline to the editorial leader in the [*Kendal*] *Mercury*, 2 December 1904.
- 3 In North Westmorland the term 'Unionist' was rarely used by either side.
- 4 Contemporary election result reports did not calculate percentages; see F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885–1918* (London, 1972), p. 412. Craig supposed that Rigg subsequently became a Liberal Unionist, but, as we shall see, this is an error, albeit understandable.
- 5 *The Times*, 8 October 1900.
- 6 [*Westmorland*] *Gazette*, 13 October 1900.
- 7 Before 1832 there was one two-member borough, Appleby, split between Lowther and Tufton nominees. The great Reform Bill disfranchised Appleby, and created a single-member borough of Kendal. The Lowthers had no influence there and it returned Liberals until it was subsumed into South Westmorland in 1885.
- 8 See James Burgess, *History of Cumbrian Methodism* (Kendal, 1980) and the same author's monumental and unpublished Sheffield University PhD thesis, *A Religious History of Cumbria* (1984).
- 9 See C. E. Searle's unpublished University of Essex PhD thesis, *This Odd Corner of England* (1984), pp. 328, 384 and M. E. Shepherd, 'The Small Owner in Cumbria' in *Northern History* xxxv (1999).
- 10 One son, James, already sat for

neighbouring Mid-Cumberland (Penrith), and a distant cousin, also James, for Thanet.

- 11 [*Mid-Cumberland & North Westmorland*] *Herald*, an avowedly Radical (by local standards) paper, 13 October 1900.
- 12 *Gazette*, 13 October 1900; the local press often quoted controversial points from other provincial newspapers rather than taking responsibility for them.
- 13 Letter from Sir Joseph Savory to the Conservative [*Penrith*] *Observer* 2 October 1900.
- 14 I am grateful to David Shaw for information from the admissions register. We can assume that Rigg boarded by the week at Hawkshead.
- 15 I am grateful to Sedbergh's archivist, Elspeth Griffiths, for access to the admissions register. The *Sedberghian* of March 1892 reports on the scarlet fever epidemic, and the unrelated illness of Hart, who would also have been Rigg's housemaster, as he was placed in the School House. It took a succession of epidemics to persuade the Governors in 1906 to appoint a school medical officer.
- 16 Undated Memoir of Sir Joseph Savory, possibly written in 1921, the year of his death, by his niece Helen P. Savory. There is a copy in Kendal Record Office.
- 17 *Gazette*, 25 June 1892.
- 18 *Gazette*, 27 July 1895.
- 19 Charles Roberts, *Radical Countess* (Carlisle, 1962), p. 80.
- 20 I am grateful to James Cox, archivist at Caius. The report in the *Amble-side Herald & Lakes News*, 28 September 1900, may just be another case of the press getting it wrong, or it may be that J. C. Shepherd, Rigg's Ambleside agent, wanted to obscure his man's inexperience. Local papers also spoke of Rigg's 'brilliance' at Cambridge; in fact he took an ordinary degree and won no prizes.
- 21 See *The Times* obituary of Rigg, 1 Sept 1942.
- 22 The local press carried frequent reports of Rigg's speeches to gatherings of Oddfellows; and Penrith Buffaloes thought well enough of him to name a lodge in his honour.
- 23 A fairly comprehensive list of public bodies to which Rigg belonged

- appears in *Who Was Who, 1941–50*.
- 24 The state of the local Liberal Party can be inferred from the absence in the columns of the *Mercury* or the *Herald* of reports of any activity earlier in 1900. Prior to Rigg's selection he is not mentioned, nor are any other names trailed.
- 25 *Herald*, 1 September 1900.
- 26 Patricia Lynch, *The Liberal Party in Rural England 1885–1910* (Oxford, 2003), p. 156.
- 27 *The Times*, 8 October 1900. From a different perspective he was 'an advocate of every exploded fad' (*Observer*, 25 September 1900).
- 28 *Gazette*, 6 October 1900.
- 29 The events of polling day were reported at length by e.g. the *Observer*, 9 October 1900.
- 30 Quoted in the *Gazette*, 13 October 1900. However, a correspondent in the *Liberal Manchester Guardian*, 10 October 1900, insisted that Rigg's domestic radicalism had appealed to his audiences more than his imperialism.
- 31 *Carlisle Journal*, 9 October 1900.
- 32 *Herald*, 13 October 1900, carried comments from the provincial and national press on Rigg's victory.
- 33 *Observer*, 1 September 1942, following his death on 29 August; *The Times*' obituary also appeared on the 1<sup>st</sup>, the *Herald* and the *Gazette* on the 5<sup>th</sup>.
- 34 *Penrith Observer*, 22 January 1901. He was speaking from the Chair to Appleby Oddfellows.
- 35 *Penrith Observer*, 18 June 1901.
- 36 Speech at Appleby Liberal Club's Christmas Party, reported in *Penrith Observer*, 30 December 1901.
- 37 *Observer*, 31 December 1900. This traditionally Conservative paper gave Rigg generous coverage.
- 38 *Kendal Mercury*, 16 September 1904.
- 39 *Eighty Club Yearbook 1901 et seq.* For a brief outline of the origin and purposes of the Eighty Club, see H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone* (Oxford, 1997) p. 361.
- Rigg came fifth out of twenty-seven candidates for the ten-man Executive, with 117 votes.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Parliamentary Debates* 4<sup>th</sup> Series vol. cxv (28 November 1902) col. 749–51.
- 42 *Herald*, 2 January 1904.
- 43 *Yorkshire Post*, 22 November 1904, quoted in *Observer*, 29 November 1904. Conservative papers stressed the significance of Rigg's defection from the Liberals.
- 44 *Parliamentary Debates* 4<sup>th</sup> Series vol. cxxxv (4 August 1904) col. 1002. Many of its provisions were eventually included within the 1908 'Children's Charter'.
- 45 *Gazette*, 5 November 1904.
- 46 *Observer*, 31 December 1900.
- 47 *Mercury*, 1 July 1904.
- 48 *Observer*, 8 November 1904.
- 49 *Herald*, 2 January 1904.
- 50 Although Joseph Chamberlain sought to marry tariff reform and Empire, there was a sound Liberal Imperialist argument for free trade. See Paul Readman, 'The Liberal Party and Patriotism in Early Twentieth Century' in *Twentieth Century British History* vol. 12, no. 3 (2001), pp. 282–85.
- 51 The correspondence was reproduced in the *Mercury*, 25 November 1904, and in *The Times* on the same day.
- 52 *Herald*, 26 November 1904.
- 53 See note 17 above.
- 54 *Punch*, 30 November 1904. That this was simply headed 'Lines from North Westmorland' without further explanation indicates that Rigg's defection was by then a national news item.
- 55 See note 62 below.
- 56 The long-awaited entry of Samuel, seven years older than Rigg, into the Commons was delayed by repeated failure to capture South Oxon; he was eventually returned for the safe seat of Cleveland in a by-election in 1902. In June 1903 Rigg and Samuel, rising Liberal stars, were stewards at an Eighty Club House Dinner.
- Rigg's subsequent support for the anti-Semitic Aliens Bill raises intriguing, but so far unanswered, questions as to the relationship between the two.
- 57 Dr Jon Lawrence, in correspondence with the author, has speculated that Rigg may have been uncomfortable with 'the emerging populist style of the New Liberal politics' and its 'vulgar exploitation' of issues like Chinese slavery.
- 58 *Herald*, 11 February 1905.
- 59 *Observer*, 29 November 1904.
- 60 *The Times*, 26 November 1904.
- 61 *Observer*, 29 November 1904.
- 62 Quoted in *The Sedberghian* vol. xxv, no. 6 (1905). *Petite République* added: 'this abnormal state of things has been created by the policy of M. Chamberlain.'
- 63 See A. N. Connell, 'Blue Sky over Westmorland', pp. 200–09 in *Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Archaeological & Antiquarian Society* 3<sup>rd</sup> series, vol. VI (2006).
- 64 Roberts, *Radical Countess* pp. 81–87. See also article by David M. Fahey on Leif Jones in *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals*, ed. J. O. Baylea and N. J. Gossman (New York, 1988), which comments on the degree of intimacy between the Countess and her secretary.
- 65 J. A. Spender's *Life of the Right Hon. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (London 1923), vol. ii, p. 164, misleadingly presents the 1905 North Westmorland by-election as a Liberal capture from the government; Rigg never sat in the House as a Conservative.
- 66 According to the Lady Carlisle, Richard's parents campaigned for the Conservative in the by-election 'to prevent any Liberal winning what he had relinquished' (Roberts, *Radical Countess*, p.86).
- 67 The Alliance was a national temperance organisation whose president was Rigg's successor as Appleby's MP, Leif Jones.
- 68 *Herald*, 25 August 1906.
- 69 *Herald*, 18 August and 22 September 1906.
- 70 *Herald*, 5 January 1907.
- 71 *Mercury*, 27 December 1907. Rigg's belated apologies for absence were conveyed by veteran local activist Dr T. H. Gibson, who also assured the meeting that Mrs Rigg was a keen Liberal and had played no part in her husband's earlier break with the party.
- 72 *Observer*, 7 January 1907.
- 73 The British Library holds a complete set of this publication, which folded in the summer of 1910.
- 74 See Craig, *Election Results*. The others were Saffron Walden, Louth, Rugby and Cricklade. Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* (London, 1967) discusses each seat, but there is no discernible common thread. Even Homer nods, however, and what he says about Rigg is inaccurate (p. 340).
- 75 *Herald*, 19 March 1910.
- 76 He had three further spells in the Commons, sitting for Rushcliffe and Camborne before becoming Lord Rhayader in 1931. See his *Times* obituary 27 September 1939.
- 77 Sanderson had taken up a judicial appointment in India. It was considered patriotic not to contest wartime by-elections and a Liberal candidate was never mooted.
- 78 Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People* (Cambridge, 1998) p. 6.
- 79 Lynch, *Liberal Party in Rural England* pp. 98–102. She is discussing elections for local government, but this holds good for parliamentary ones, too.
- 80 *The Times*, 1 September 1942.
- 81 *Westmorland Gazette*, 5 September 1942: the longest and most affectionate tribute was from the former Conservative standard-bearer. The *Mercury* had long ceased publication, and the *Herald's* Liberalism was a distant memory.

# REPORT

## Working with others: the Lib-Lab Pact

Evening meeting, 14 July 2008 with David Steel, Tom

McNally and Michael Steed; Chair: Geoff Tordoff

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

**F**ROM MARCH 1977 to October 1978, the Liberal Party kept Jim Callaghan's Labour government in power through the Lib-Lab Pact, and ministers consulted systematically with Liberal MPs on policy. Thirty years on, key participants from both sides discussed the history of the Pact and its impact.

David Steel (Leader of the Liberal Party 1976–88) argued that the origins of the Pact were located as far back as September 1965 when the then Speaker of the House of Commons, Sir Harry Hylton-Foster,<sup>1</sup> died. As Harold Wilson's government was teetering on the verge of losing its majority, Wilson was keen for a Liberal to take Hylton-Foster's place. Peter Bessell<sup>2</sup> went on radio saying that Jo Grimond<sup>3</sup> would make an excellent Speaker. This angered Grimond and the Parliamentary Liberal Party quickly decided to reject to Wilson's ploy. However this collective decision was undermined by a direct approach by the government to Roderic Bowen,<sup>4</sup> who agreed to become Deputy Speaker, preserving the government's majority. Bowen had not disclosed to his Parliamentary colleagues that he intended to take the Deputy Speakership; if he had, they would have urged him to go for the Speaker's chair. Grimond's reaction to this episode was that, in a position where the government was in danger of losing its majority in Parliament, there should

either be an election or a long-term agreement between parties. This formula impressed itself on Steel and when similar Parliamentary arithmetic occurred in 1976 he adopted it.

Callaghan's government lost its majority in November 1976. The leader of the opposition, Mrs Thatcher, typically failed to consult with other parties about the new Parliamentary situation. At what she thought was an appropriate moment in March 1977 she tabled a motion of no confidence. Before the vote, Bill Rodgers,<sup>5</sup> with whom David Steel had worked on the 1975 European referendum campaign, asked what the position of the Liberal Party would be. With the formative episode of 1965 in mind, Steel told Rodgers that either there would have to be a long-term arrangement between the Labour and Liberal parties to sustain the administration or that the Liberals, as members of the opposition, would be voting against the government. That led to conversations with Cledwyn Hughes<sup>6</sup> and meetings with the Prime Minister. The Parliamentary Liberal Party agreed to enter an arrangement and this was endorsed by the Labour Cabinet (with four dissenting voices<sup>7</sup>). For Steel the issue at the heart of the agreement was the need to fight inflation and pursue economic recovery. Of course there were other, political, considerations. The government wished to remain in office and the Liberals did not particularly want a general election,

although the soundings taken by Geoff Tordoff (Chairman of the Liberal Party 1976–79) at David Steel's request indicated that the party in the country was prepared to fight one if no suitable arrangement could be reached.

Looking back over the Pact, Steel felt it had achieved its primary purpose of combatting inflation. At the start of the Pact inflation was at 20 per cent and by the end it has been reduced to about 8 per cent. As to enacting Liberal policy, there was only really one success, a tax incentive for firms which introduced schemes of profit-sharing – a modest scheme but one which was built on by future Chancellors. The great disappointment was the failure to achieve proportional representation for direct elections to the European Parliament. The party had its eyes on this prize and when it was not secured there was dissension among both MPs and in the party in the country. When Steel faced opposition in the Parliamentary party on the issue, it was Jo Grimond who came to his rescue, describing as 'bonkers' the idea that you could pull out and go to the country in a general election on the question of PR for Europe. However, Steel admitted that he had miscalculated on this issue, naively believing that it would gain the support of up to 100 Conservatives who had voted for PR in the Scotland and Wales Bills and against the background of strong campaigning by Conservative Action for Electoral Reform. In the end the Tories refused to back any measure being brought forward under the detested Lib-Lab agreement. The Pact also made the Liberal Party face up to political realities in a way which it had not been obliged to do for years, and to associate itself with the hard decisions which needed to be taken as part of political influence.

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Callaghan's decision not to call an election in October 1978 led to the Winter of Discontent. The electorate apportioned some blame to the Liberal Party for this, even though the Pact was over long before the 1979 general election. Some years later Steel asked Callaghan why he had refused to call an autumn election in 1978. Callaghan replied that he had received advice that he might not win an overall majority and Steel responded by asking 'What was wrong with that? We were doing quite well with our agreement.'

Tom McNally (Head of the Prime Minister's Office, 1976–79) opened by quoting Jim Callaghan from his memoirs: 'Beneath his quiet exterior, David Steel is a determined man and one whom I found scrupulous in his dealings with me.' This characterisation was not a creation of Callaghan's for the history books; it was a genuine feeling of the Prime Minister's which he made clear in public and private at the time. This was important because at the heart of the agreement was the relationship between Callaghan and Steel and the Pact stood or fell by it.

Britain was undergoing massive change in the 1970s, a transformation from the great industrial and manufacturing base of previous centuries into the service-based economy which exists today; the decline of heavy industry and the social consequences it created had to be managed against the background of a massive oil shock. Labour felt it had failed on the economy during its 1964–70 government, but both Conservative and Labour governments in the 1970s found the economic situation immensely difficult. Progressive change was also in the air, particularly the social reforms of the 1964–70 Labour government in areas such as homosexual and abortion law reform, race relations

and the lifting of censorship regulations, so it was time of great social, political and economic turmoil.

In opposition between 1970 and 1974, Labour had pieced together a fragile unity based on the 'social contract' designed to repair the damage to the relations between the party and the trade unions caused by Barbara Castle's<sup>8</sup> *In Place of Strife* plans which, ironically, Callaghan had done so much to destroy, and on the promise to renegotiate the terms of entry to the Common Market. The February 1974 election was a fluke. Heath mistimed calling it. Had he gone a couple of weeks earlier he might have won, but by delaying he looked indecisive, unable to deal with the industrial crisis. The combination of an unpopular government and a mistrusted opposition, together with a slick campaign by Jeremy Thorpe, gave the Liberals their best election result for years, in terms of votes if not seats.

Labour confidently expected the slim plurality they obtained in February 1974 to increase at the October general election but in fact their majority was only three seats. The European referendum campaign in 1975 was important because for the first time there was cross-party cooperation; politicians got used to working with each other where they shared beliefs, losing some of their party tribalism. However, by 1977 the general political atmosphere was bleak. There was a real sense, certainly on the right and in elements of the press, that Britain was becoming ungovernable. The ability of the Parliamentary system to meet the social and economic challenges of the day, especially hyper-inflation, was seriously questioned and there were even preparations by some for a coup d'état. So it is right to judge the success of the Lib-Lab Pact against that

background. During the period of the Pact every economic indicator – inflation, unemployment, productivity, and exports – improved. This restored confidence in the ability of the democratic political system to work; talk about Britain being 'ungovernable' receded.

In terms of party advantage McNally thought it possible that the Liberals could have pressed the case for individual policies harder, using the threat of a general election, but it had to be remembered that a significant cadre of left-wing Labour MPs, led by Tony Benn,<sup>9</sup> actually believed that it would be better to fight and lose an election in order to capture the party in opposition and impose more extreme policies – the alternative economic strategy. They believed that Labour failed because it was not socialist enough, so a Liberal threat to bring down the government might not have had as much force as it appeared.

McNally identified a number of barriers to the effective operation of the Pact. There was the lack of experience of parties in Parliament in working together in such an arrangement; there was no equivalent of the Cook-Maclennan collaborations of the late 1990s, or of working together on local authorities (and devolved administrations) which is today commonplace. There was also the imbalance between the Labour Party – the party of government, with 300 seats in Parliament, backed by the civil service – and the Liberals, with just 14 MPs and two research assistants. There were opponents of the Pact in both parties destabilising from within. However, one constant supporter of the Pact, whose role has perhaps been overlooked, was Michael Foot,<sup>10</sup> 'that old Plymouth Liberal' who used to justify staying in office with the phrase: 'We must be there when the North

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<b>Lib-Lab Pact chronology and election analysis (Michael Steed)</b>		
<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Commentary</b>
<b>1974</b>		
October 1974	Overall Labour majority of three in the Commons	13 Liberal MPs
<b>1975</b>		
May 1975	Very limited (Met DCs) local elections	Modest Liberal losses
5/6/75	67% vote in favour of British membership of EEC	
26/6/75	Conservatives gain West Woolwich, only 1975 by-election	<b>Lib % –9.0</b>
<b>1976</b>		
January–May 1976	Jeremy Thorpe's leadership increasingly under challenge	
March 1976	Three by-elections	<b>Lib % –3.1</b>
5/4/76	James Callaghan becomes Prime Minister	
May 1976	Comprehensive district elections	Substantial Liberal losses
10/5/76	Jeremy Thorpe resigns	
Summer 1976	Two by-elections	<b>Lib % –6.6</b>
7/7/76	David Steel elected Liberal leader (indirect membership ballot)	
4/11/76	Walsall and Workington by-elections	Labour's overall majority wiped out
<b>1977</b>		
Autumn 1976/Feb 1977	Newcastle Central and three other by-elections	<b>Lib % +17.3</b> in Newcastle Central but <b>–5.9</b> in other three <b>Pre-pact by-election % loss-rate 5.5, excluding Newcastle; 3.2 including.</b>
22/2/77	Government defeated on guillotine motion	
Thursday 17/3/77	<i>Government loses adjournment vote by not contesting it</i>	
Friday 18/3/77	<i>Margaret Thatcher announces motion of no confidence</i>	
Weekend 19–20/3	<i>Consultation–speculation–WW TV interview</i>	
Wednesday 23/3/77	<b>Lib-Lab Pact announced</b>	<b>Government wins confidence vote</b>
31/3/77	Birmingham Stechford by-election	Fourth-place <b>Lib % –6.6</b>
April 1977	Two by-elections	<b>Lib % –9.9</b>
5/5/77	Comprehensive county council elections	Disastrous (three-quarters) loss of Liberal seats
7/7/77	Saffron Walden by-election	Second place held but <b>Lib % –5.1</b>
July 1977	<i>David Steel extends Pact with agreement of most Liberal MPs</i>	
18/8/77	Birmingham Ladywood by-election	<b>Lib % –8.5</b>
24/11/77	Bournemouth East by-election	<b>Lib % –11.8</b>
13/12/77	Commons rejects PR for European Parliament	
<b>1978</b>		
21/1/78	<i>Special Liberal assembly in Blackpool</i>	<i>Conditionally endorses Lib-Lab Pact</i>
March–April 1978	Four by-elections	Epsom second place lost; <b>Lib % –11.2</b>
May 1978	Limited district elections	Further Liberal losses but votes better than in May 1977
25/5/78	<i>David Steel announces forthcoming termination of the Pact</i>	<b>Pact by-election % loss-rate 10.1.</b>
Summer 1978	Three by-elections	<b>Lib % –3.3</b>
4/8/78	Jeremy Thorpe accused of conspiracy to murder; Minehead hearings follow	
October 1978/March 1979	Four by-elections	<b>Lib % –8.0</b>
<b>1979</b>		
1/3/79	Devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales	Scotland fails to meet turnout hurdle, Wales badly lost
28/3/79	Government loses confidence vote 311–310	
29/3/79	Liberal gain Liverpool Edgehill by-election	<b>Lib % +36.8</b> <b>Post-pact by-election % loss-rate 6.0, excluding Liverpool</b>
3/5/79	General election	Liberal seats reduced to 11: Margaret Thatcher in power – <b>Liberal general election loss-rate 4.4%</b>

*Note: Lib % figures are means of the change in % vote in the group or period concerned.*

Sea oil comes'. In fact not a drop of North Sea oil did come ashore under the Labour government, and not a penny of revenue was received from it. Whether hanging on for the oil would have saved the government is questionable; like Attlee's government in 1951, the Labour party in 1978–79 was burnt out, lacking in flexibility, internally divided and out of ideas.

In conclusion, McNally thought the success of the Pact was undoubtedly the stability it gave to bring about an economic turn-around, and the groundwork it lay in loosening the cement of the old two-party system and improving the prospects for cross-party cooperation. It gave the social democrat wing of the Labour Party a place to go when this was later needed.

Michael Steed (President of the Liberal Party 1978–79 and an academic psephologist) produced a chronology and psephological analysis of the Pact and referred to sources including David Steel's books, *Against Goliath* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989) and *A House Divided: The Lib-Lab Pact and the Future of British Politics* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), together with *The Pact: The Inside Story of the Lib-Lab Government, 1977–78* (Quartet Books, 1978) by Simon Hoggart and Alistair Michie. This last account contains what Steed and David Steel described as 'purple passages' and the authors' style is, unsurprisingly, journalistic, but Steed felt it was broadly accurate, although other speakers disagreed.

Turning to his own role, Steed said that he was not much involved in the early stages, being involved in work to draft the manifesto for the European election campaign. The first politician with whom he had a discussion about the Pact was Sir Geoffrey Rippon,<sup>11</sup> when they met in Rome. Rippon

was outraged, regarding the Pact as a dreadful conspiracy to deprive the Conservatives of their rightful place in office, an attitude typical of Conservative politicians and the Conservative press which consistently and systematically attacked the Pact.

The psephological story of the Pact is very clear. The county council elections of May 1975, soon after the announcement of the Pact, were unequivocally the worst nationwide electoral performance by the Liberal Party in the last thirty-five years, apart from the Euro elections of 1989 (when the Liberal Democrats came fourth behind the Greens). Three-quarters of the seats being defended were lost. The parliamentary by-election record confirms the Pact's unpopularity. In the first part of the Parliament the party was losing about one in four of the voters who had supported it in October 1974. During the period of the Pact this rose to one in two, and after it ended the decline reverted to a rate of one in four. This series of electoral hammer blows explains the difficulties David Steel experienced inside the party in relation to the Pact. Lots of excellent councillors lost their seats for no other reason than what David Steel was doing at Westminster – and how the Tory press was presenting it. In the medium term, the Pact could be identified as a factor in the slow increase in the concept of tactical voting, but this was happening anyway. There was little tactical voting in the 1979 general election; it was particularly frustrating that so few Labour voters could be persuaded to vote tactically, except in a couple of constituencies. In the long term, tactical voting has become the basis of Liberal Democrat strength in Parliament and there is an arguable case that the Pact laid the foundation for this position.

Why was it so bad? The press was appalling, with political cartoonists hammering away at two immensely damaging themes: first, that Liberal MPs were scared of a general election and looking after their own skins; second, that David Steel was weak compared to Jim Callaghan. These themes embedded themselves in the public mind. Probably the only way to have deflected these attacks was to have prepared the ground for a cross-party arrangement with public debate and explanation for six months or so before agreeing a Pact. The Parliamentary arithmetic made it likely that the government would lose its overall majority in the House of Commons at some point in 1976, but there was no public debate or even any serious discussion within the Liberal Party about what would then happen. Nor was there much debate after November 1976 until the agreement was concluded in March 1977. The Liberal Party as a whole was therefore to blame in wasting that crucial four months, failing to mount a national debate about the reality of a hung Parliament, unable to educate the public and the media about what the options were and so avoiding the accusation that the party's MPs were running for cover, scared of losing their seats.

Responding to the point made by David Steel and Tom McNally that the Pact provided stable government, Steed argued there was an alternative route to stability – a general election resulting in a government with a working majority. There was economic improvement during the period of the Pact but is there reason to believe this would not have happened under a newly elected majority administration? The Pact did, however, give stability in the last six months of the Parliament when the Callaghan government carried on in a minority and there was uncertainty about the date

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of the next election and about the continuation of policy.

On 22 February 1977 the government lost a guillotine motion on devolution. Before then Callaghan could count on the support of the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists; afterwards the government could not be sure of a majority. Had the Parliamentary Liberal Party indicated that they would vote against the government in Mrs Thatcher's motion of no confidence it is possible that Callaghan could have cobbled together a deal with the Ulster Unionists. There was what Steed called a hidden arrangement, even as early as the time of the Lib-Lab Pact, and since revealed by Bernard Donoghue,<sup>12</sup> whereby the UUP would support the government in return for a Speaker's Conference on the number of Westminster seats for Northern Ireland. Even if David Steel had been a tougher negotiator on issues like PR for Europe it is unlikely that he would have achieved more.

The next important period was July 1977, when the Pact was extended with the support of most Liberal MPs. The unpopularity of the Pact was now beginning to hit home, and dissent was growing. Steed believed that here was the opportunity to renegotiate the terms of the Pact, demonstrate greater toughness and get more from the government, perhaps extending the process into the autumn and using the Liberal Assembly as leverage. This would have given the lie to the cartoonists' and other critics' version of events that David Steel was always weak in relation to Callaghan. Even if no more could have been extracted from the government and the Liberal Party had withdrawn from the Pact, there was little danger of the government's falling because devolution was back on track and it could have

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survived with Nationalist and UUP support.

In response David Steel agreed there was not enough discussion about what to do in the event of a hung Parliament. After the February 1974 general election there was no real prospect of a Conservative-Liberal coalition, because the two parties combined would not have had a majority; in any case the mood of the party and the country was against keeping in office a Prime Minister who had just been rejected by the electorate. But there was also a general mood of hostility to the very idea of coalition. There could have been an opportunity to use an autumn election in 1978 to talk up the Pact and the positive outcomes associated with it for the economy to try and persuade the public that the Liberal Party had acted responsibly in providing stability to the government at a difficult time. Unfortunately Callaghan chose to postpone the election and that opportunity disappeared in the very different circumstances of May 1979. On a possible renegotiation, David Steel said this was simply not on the Parliamentary Party's radar. They took the view that the question was merely whether the arrangement should continue. Perhaps they were too close to the day-to-day business of the Pact in Parliament to have the necessary perspective to re-think the whole basis of the agreement.

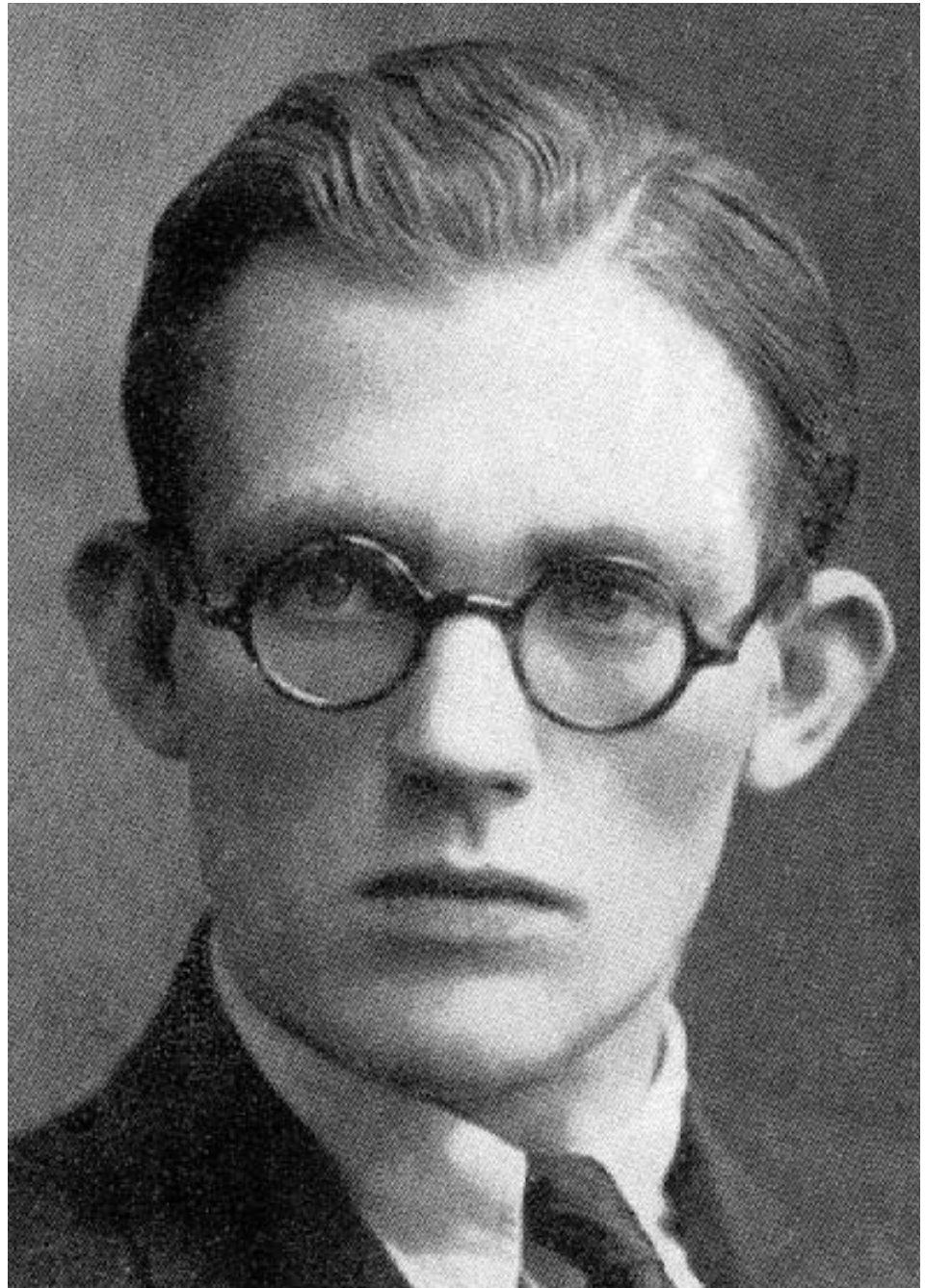
While each speaker found some positive outcomes for the Pact and agreed that it had laid the foundation for more cooperative forms of politics in the years ahead, the meeting was left with some fascinating 'might-have-beens' – perhaps meriting a chapter in a future volume of political counterfactuals.

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- 1 Sir Harry Hylton-Foster (1905–65), Conservative MP for the City of York, 1950–59 and Cities of London & Westminster, 1959–65; Speaker of the House of Commons, 1959–65.
- 2 Peter Bessel (1921–85), Liberal MP for Bodmin 1964–70.
- 3 Jo Grimond (1913–93), Liberal MP for Orkney & Shetland 1950–83, Leader of the Liberal Party 1956–67; created Baron Grimond, 1983.
- 4 Roderic Bowen (1913–2001), Liberal MP for Cardiganshire 1945–66.
- 5 Bill Rodgers (b.1928), Labour MP for Stockton on Tees, 1962–83, member of the Gang of Four and founder member of the SDP; created Baron Rodgers of Quarry Bank, 1992; Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords 1997–2001.
- 6 Cledwyn Hughes, Labour MP for Anglesey 1951–79 and Cabinet Minister 1966–70, Chair of Parliamentary Labour Party at the time of the Pact; created Baron Cledwyn of Penrhos, 1979.
- 7 Peter Shore, Tony Benn, Stan Orme and Bruce Millan.
- 8 Barbara Castle (1910–2002), Labour MP for Blackburn 1945–79; Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity 1968–70; British Labour MEP 1979–89; created Baroness Castle of Blackburn 1990.
- 9 Tony Benn (b.1925) Labour MP for Bristol South East 1950–61 and 1963–83, MP for Chesterfield 1984–2001; Secretary of State for Energy 1975–79.
- 10 Michael Foot (b.1913) son of Isaac Foot, Liberal MP for Bodmin; Labour MP for Plymouth Devonport 1945–55 and Ebbw Vale 1960–92; Leader of the Labour Party 1980–83, Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons 1976–79.
- 11 Geoffrey Rippon (1924–97), Conservative MP for Norwich South, 1955–64 and Hexham 1966–87; Cabinet Minister 1970–74; created Baron Rippon of Hexham 1987.
- 12 Bernard Donoghue (b.1934), economist, academic, senior policy adviser to the prime minister 1974–79; created Baron Donoghue, 1985.

# 'WHY I AM THE DYNASTIC LIBERALISM OF

'I am Liberal first of all because of the unfaltering resistance which liberalism is pledged to offer to those twin dangers of fascism and war.' The author then added some general reflections on British history. Liberalism, he wrote, was largely responsible for 'the social and democratic institutions which this country already enjoys'.<sup>1</sup> This ardent young Liberal was a twenty-year-old undergraduate at Wadham College, Oxford, called Michael Foot. **Kenneth O. Morgan** examines the dynastic Liberalism of Michael and all the Foots.



# A LIBERAL'

## MICHAEL AND ALL THE FOOTS

HE WAS writing in the *News Chronicle*, in an article commissioned by that Liberal newspaper's editor, Aylmer Vallance, and published in April 1934. His party credentials as a young Liberal were impeccable. He breathed the very air of traditional Liberal principles – free trade, free speech, the importance of Nonconformity, international peace. His bookish teenage years were profoundly influenced by reading classic Liberal historians like Macaulay, George Otto Trevelyan and J. L. Hammond, by individualist religious dissenters like William Tyndale or John Bunyan, and the grand old cause of constitutional liberty successfully preserved (he believed) in the face of royal tyranny by Cromwell, Milton and their brethren.

Foot was the product of a political dynasty centred on Plymouth whose influence extended throughout Devon and Cornwall. He was the son and younger brother of Liberal MPs; he had stood successfully as a Liberal as a fifteen year-old in a mock election in Leighton Park, the Quaker school, in May 1929. In Oxford he had been a charismatic president of the University Liberal Club. His political idol was the still towering personality of David

Lloyd George, for whom he had campaigned in the 1929 general election. Breakfast with L.G. at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford in 1932 had been a highlight of his undergraduate years: 'it was superb'.<sup>2</sup> As a star speaker in the Oxford Union, elected president in June 1933, Foot took a strongly partisan Liberal line in debates. In January 1933, on a motion that 'This House believes that British Liberalism has before it a great future', he chose to thank God that, under the National Government, there was still a party he could support.<sup>3</sup> The previous October he had launched a fierce rhetorical onslaught on the Tariff Boards created by the government, and the regime of protectionism and imperial preference established at the conference at Ottawa, which overturned almost a century of free trade since the repeal of the Corn Laws. He ridiculed protected 'Peter Pan industries which never grew up'. The *Oxford Magazine* reviewer wryly observed that 'this is the first speech in which Mr. Foot has not mentioned the name of Mr. Lloyd George'.<sup>4</sup>

As his *News Chronicle* article indicated, Foot linked his Liberalism strongly with the peace movement so active amongst Oxford undergraduates at that time, and in which he had himself been a prominent figure. In

a book *Young Oxford and War*, published later in 1934, to which he had been asked to contribute by an influential Indian active in Labour politics in London, Krishna Menon, Foot's near-pacifist argument identified Liberalism strongly with the movement for disarmament and a spirit of true internationalism. Indeed only through liberalism, broadly defined, could a peaceful world order and an end to international anarchy (a favourite term of Foot's, drawn from G. Lowes Dickinson's book of that title) be achieved. By contrast, Communists wanted to overthrow capitalism by violence and bloodshed. Conservatives enshrined the military virtues and blind obedience to the state. Socialists (not dealt with so fiercely, perhaps) tended to look inwards and to undermining the capitalist system at home rather than working for a truly international order.<sup>5</sup>

Foot had viewed with anxiety his father Isaac's taking office in MacDonald's National Government in October 1931 as Minister for Mines. He chided Isaac amiably in early 1932:

Well, I hope you are feeling thoroughly uncomfortable in your present position. I hope that the responsibility for a niggardly disarmament policy and blustering [?] dealing with

Left: Michael Foot in 1935



## 'WHY I AM A LIBERAL'

Ireland rests on your shoulders. I hope that you squirm in your pronouncement of each tariff order. I hope you will vote with patriotic resignation for the further cuts and a raising of the school leaving age.<sup>6</sup>

He was enthusiastic when Isaac, along with other mainstream Liberals under the leadership of Sir Herbert Samuel, resigned from the government following the Ottawa conference and the imposing of imperial preference and tariffs. He continued his enthusiastic evangelism for the Liberal cause after graduating from Oxford in the summer of 1934. On a debating tour of American universities in November and December, undertaken with his close friend, John Cripps, Michael Foot struck an ardently Liberal note time and again, notably in attacking US isolationism in its foreign policy and extreme protectionism in its trade policy.<sup>7</sup> When he returned to Britain and contemplated a future career, one of the projects that appealed to him was writing the life of Charles James Fox, the hallowed Whig champion of the democratic ideals of the French Revolution. It was a cherished ambition which, like his proposed life of William Hazlitt, was endlessly deferred over the decades, though perhaps Foot's presence, in his ninety-fourth year, at a ceremony to unveil a statue of Fox in Bloomsbury Square in early 2007 represented a final genuflection to his lifetime hero.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, a few months later, the young Liberal Foot defected for ever.<sup>9</sup> No doubt his friendship with young socialists like John Cripps, and meeting (and shortly working on a book with) his father Sir Stafford, was one major factor. Another was a trip to Palestine to visit his brother, Hugh, where he met a number of persuasive Jewish socialists. A more direct one was his first experience of poverty and despair in an industrial

city when he briefly worked in Liverpool for a few months in 1935 (and was particularly alienated by the right-wing views of his employer, the former Liberal MP, Richard Holt). Another, typically, appears to have been the influence of left-wing novelists, notably H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, whose works he read on Liverpool trams as they took him in leisurely fashion to his office on the waterfront. At any rate, he joined first the Labour Party, then the Socialist League (where he met the vivacious Barbara Betts, later Castle), and actually stood as Labour candidate for Monmouth at the general election in 1935. Thereafter he would be frequently attacked for jettisoning his ancestral Liberalism in favour of extremes of state control and centralisation which made a mockery of his early enthusiasm for individuality, freedom and libertarianism. Barbara Castle noted in her memoirs that 'the best way to infuriate Michael' later on was to refer to his youthful article 'Why I am a Liberal'.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the Liberalism of Michael Foot never disappeared. It is significant that his closest friend when he started up as a journalist was the former Liberal MP for Hereford, his buccaneering colleague in editing the *Evening Standard*, Frank Owen.<sup>11</sup> He shared to the full Foot's enthusiasm for David Lloyd George; he had been one of the six Lloyd George Liberal candidates in the 1931 general election and later wrote a (sadly inadequate) life of the great man, *Tempestuous Journey* (1954). Liberal instincts continued to influence key aspects of Foot's approach and style as editor of *Tribune*, as a left-wing Labour dissenter, and even as a government minister. It remained, and remains, as a significant thread in the warp and woof of the British progressive left at the dawn of a new millennium, and is well worth re-examination here.

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The Liberalism of Michael Foot was ancestral and dynastic. The historian John Vincent has seen it as patrician and elitist, derived from a 'West Country Hatfield'.<sup>12</sup> The Foot family, based previously in St Cleers, overlooking the Cornish moors, and then from 1927 in Isaac's spacious, book-lined country house in Pencrebar close to the Devon-Cornwall border, was powerful throughout the West Country. Their seat of political power was Plymouth, where Isaac (and later two of his sons) was senior partner in an important solicitor's firm, Foot and Bowden. David Owen, another Plymouth-bred politician, told the present author how aware he was of growing up within the towering Liberal shadow of the Foots of Plymouth.<sup>13</sup> Michael Foot's grandfather, the elder Isaac (1843–1927), was a notable self-made man, a carpenter and part-time undertaker by trade, an influential Methodist and teetotaler, who built a Mission Hall and a hall for the Salvation Army in Plymouth city centre.

But the Foot legend was really the work of his son, Michael's astonishing father, Isaac Foot (1880–1960).<sup>14</sup> Based in his native Plymouth, he soon became a Liberal patriarch and patron of immense and pugna-cious impact. Briefly attracted to socialism as a young man, he was passionately excited by the Liberal landslide election of January 1906 (in which both Plymouth seats went Liberal) and by the socially radical campaigns of Lloyd George, of whom Isaac was at first an intense disciple. He twice stood unsuccessfully for parliament in the 1910 elections, in January for Totnes, in December for Bodmin, where he was only narrowly defeated. He was elected to the Plymouth borough council in 1907 and by 1920 had become deputy mayor, in good time to celebrate the tercentenary of the sailing of the good ship *Mayflower* from Plymouth Hoe. He was to become

mayor at the end of the Second World War. His Liberalism, like that of his Cornish wife, was a product of sense and sensibility. It was rooted in West Country Methodism (in later life Isaac became president of the Methodist conference), in strict teetotalism, and in what Isaac saw as the radical, anti-royalist traditions of the West Country in general and Plymouth in particular. He cherished Freedom Fields in the middle of the city, which commemorated the triumph of Plymouth's parliamentarians in withstanding a lengthy royalist siege during the Civil War, and was to become a passionate champion of Cromwell, and effectively the founder of the Cromwell Association in the late 1930s. One of Isaac's more famous pronouncements was that the way to judge a man was to know on which side he would have fought at the battle of Marston Moor in 1644.<sup>15</sup> An opponent of capital punishment, he seems to have viewed the execution of Charles I without regret. His son Michael inherited this conviction.

During the First World War, Isaac Foot was alienated by his hero Lloyd George's advocacy of military conscription and alliance with the Tories. He stood as an Asquithian Liberal for Bodmin in December 1918, and then in a by-election in Plymouth in 1919 where the victor, Lady Astor, a fellow teetotaller with whom he became extremely friendly, was the first woman to take her seat in parliament. Isaac then stood for Bodmin again in a by-election in 1922, successfully this time, making fierce criticisms of the Lloyd George government's policies in Ireland and in foreign policy. He held the seat in the general elections of 1922 and 1923, lost in 1924, but succeeded again (this time as an admirer of Lloyd George once more) in 1929 and 1931. After this, as mentioned above, he served in the National Government briefly, as Minister for

Mines. He played a particularly notable part in debates on India, and was influential in rebutting the imperialist extremism of Churchill in debates on the 1935 Government of India Act. He met with further electoral disappointments, losing his Bodmin seat in 1935, losing again at St Ives in a by-election in 1937 and yet again at Tavistock in 1945. But his Liberalism remained unflinching.

Nothing was a more powerful testimony to this than Isaac's famous library, of perhaps 70,000 volumes, crammed somehow into every available cranny of Pencrebar.<sup>16</sup> It reflected the capacious mind of an Edwardian man of broad but unquenchably Liberal culture, with thousands of volumes commemorating, or celebrating, early Protestantism, the work of John Milton, the debates of the Civil War, the French Revolution and the American Civil War. His holdings of religious and patristic literature included no less than 240 early bibles, notably the 1536 New Testament of William Tyndale, 'apostle of England', a Protestant martyr for the faith during the reign of Henry VIII, and innumerable works by Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Richard Baxter, and the early Quakers (over 200 volumes) amongst a cast of tens of thousands. While Isaac's bibliomania extended generously to medieval Catholic incunabula, to Shakespeare, Swift, Wordsworth, Hardy and even (remarkably) to Oscar Wilde and the sonnets of his homosexual lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, Pencrebar was above all a shrine to Liberal Protestantism, and the ideals of a free democratic republic.

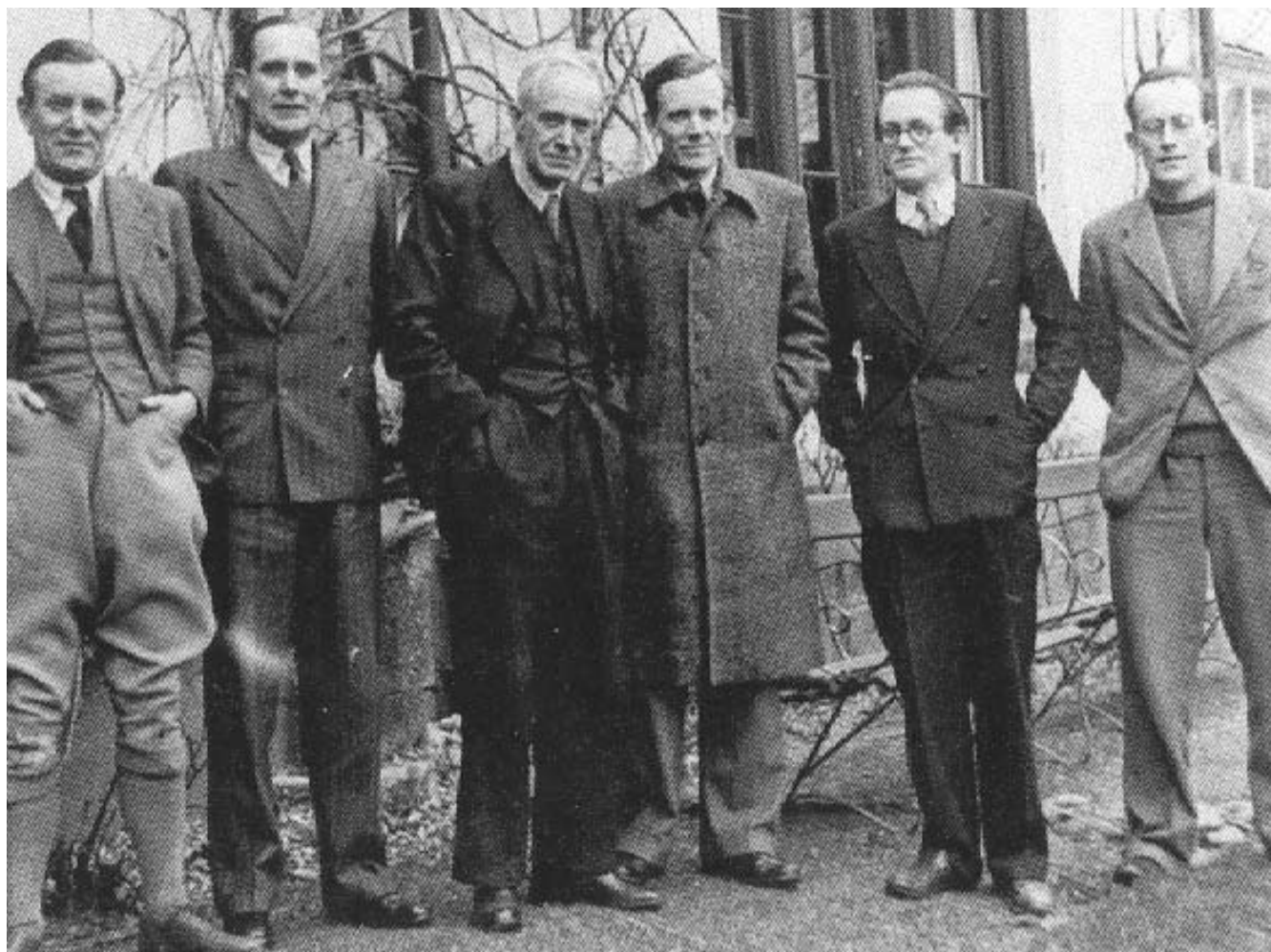
Michael's defection from the family faith to join the Labour Party in 1935 was a shock to Isaac, and perhaps even more to his resolutely orthodox wife Eva. A Cornish pasty sent by Eva to Michael on the eve of the poll in 1945 was a delayed signal of forgiveness, an edible olive

branch, as it were.<sup>17</sup> Yet in many ways it was Michael who seemed to be the most natural of Isaac's heirs, the most dedicated in his love of books and learning, the most outspoken and pugnacious champion of free speech and liberal dissent. Nothing gave Isaac more pleasure in his later life than the appearance in 1957 of Michael's book *The Pen and the Sword*, a vivid account of Dean Swift's journalistic triumph in laying low the mighty Marlborough during the reign of Queen Anne. The two did not agree on everything. Isaac never really shared Michael's passion for Byron (as opposed to Wordsworth or Shelley). Michael never felt his father's enthusiasm for the United States in general and Abraham Lincoln in particular. Nevertheless, in key respects, the most important quality of Michael Foot, socialist pamphleteer, editor and parliamentarian extraordinary, was that he was Isaac's son.

Michael was born in 1913, the fifth oldest child, the fourth of five brothers, with two sisters, and enjoyed warm relations with all of them. Membership of the family was no doubt a taxing experience – keeping up with the gifted disputatious Foots was no mean task, and indeed an impossible one for the females of the family. Still, it was a remarkably close unit, with all of them enjoying private jokes in family gatherings and codes of behaviour including an enduring passion for Cromwell and for Plymouth Argyle football club. Correspondence between them would feature the family phrase, 'pit and rock', a reference to the famous passage in Isaiah about never forgetting 'the rock whence you are hewn and the pit whence you are digged'. Three of Michael's brothers, Dingle, Hugh and John, were active apostles of the family Liberalism.

Dingle, the eldest, born in 1905, seemed from the very start destined to follow in Isaac's

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Liberal footsteps.<sup>18</sup> He went to Bembridge School on the Isle of Wight, where he was taught by J. H. Whitehouse, a former pacifist Liberal MP who had opposed the First World War. In Oxford he became president of the Liberal Club, and later president of the Union. He put in a strong performance in standing for Tiverton in the 1929 general election, where he gained over 42 per cent of the vote, and in 1931 was elected for Dundee, taking one of its two seats in harness with the Conservative, Florence Horsburgh. By now he had entered chambers and was to build up a considerable international reputation, with a prominent legal practice in Commonwealth countries in Africa and south-east Asia. He remained member for Dundee until the 1945 election, where he lost to Labour. Michael tended to gloss over the fact that Dingle stood for Dundee

**From left:** Dingle, Hugh, Isaac, John, Michael and Christopher Foot at Pencrebar in the late 1940s

without Conservative opposition in what was effectively an anti-Labour front. But of his firm, even radical, Liberalism there was no doubt, and he was fierce in his condemnation of Simon's followers, whom he later called 'the Vichy Liberals'. In the early months of the war in late 1939, he was prominent, along with the Conservatives Leo Amery and Robert Boothby, David Grenfell from Labour, the past and future Liberal Clement Davies, the actual Liberal Graham White, and the Independent Eleanor Rathbone, its convener, in the all-party 'Parliamentary Action' group popularly known as 'the Vigilantes'. Indirectly, it played a key *sub rosa* role in undermining Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister in May 1940,<sup>19</sup> and Dingle served as junior minister under Hugh Dalton at the Ministry of Economic Warfare in Churchill's government. Dalton

seems to have had a high regard for one he called 'my Foot'.<sup>20</sup>

After the calamitous Liberal performance in the 1945 election, Dingle Foot spent much of his considerable energy on his legal career, mainly in the Commonwealth, where he often acted with much courage. He was expelled from Nigeria in 1962 after challenging the Emergency Powers Act there. In domestic politics, he had had links with the movement Radical Action (originally formed during the war in 1941 and including Sir William Beveridge, Tom Horabin and Vernon Bartlett, among others) to keep his party as a force on the progressive left. After 1945 he was vocal and active in resisting Clement Davies's alarming drift to the right. Dingle's close ally in all this was Megan Lloyd George, of whom he was certainly an intimate friend and (some suspected) lover. At any

rate, he treated Megan with far more sensitivity and loyalty than did her long-term lover, Philip Noel-Baker, who grievously let Megan down when she might have reasonably hoped to marry him; Dingle, unlike Noel-Baker, did attend Megan's funeral.<sup>21</sup>

Dingle found other allies among the Liberal MPs, including such pro-Labour figures as Edgar Granville, Wilfrid Roberts and Emrys Roberts.<sup>22</sup> The first two of these eventually joined the Labour Party, as did Megan Lloyd George at the time of the 1955 election. So, too, did Dingle, and he entered the House as Labour member for Ipswich after a by-election in 1957. When Harold Wilson became Prime Minister in 1964, he appointed Dingle Foot his Solicitor-General, and he was then heavily involved in policy towards Africa, especially in legal moves designed to counter the unilateral declaration of independence in Southern Rhodesia led by Ian Smith after the break-up of the old Central African Federation. However, Dingle Foot never seemed wholly attuned to membership of the Labour Party, and his ancestral Liberalism always exerted a powerful contrary pull. He resigned from the government over its handling of the illegal Rhodesian regime in 1967 and was thereafter a critic, including over policy towards Biafra and also Commonwealth immigration. Dingle was defeated in Ipswich in 1970 and his remaining years until his death in 1978 were not happy, with a gloomy lapse into near-alcoholism. He was now largely occupied with legal and constitutional work in the Commonwealth and also Northern Ireland. Certainly, especially in his legal career and as a courageous practitioner of the common law, his Liberal heritage was an inescapable part of him down to the end.

Hugh Foot, the second brother, born in 1907, was less party political than Dingle. He

too found the family Liberalism a compelling influence, with all the books and the innumerable household portraits and busts of Oliver Cromwell. He was to name his two sons appropriately – Paul, after the favourite family saint, Oliver, after the ancestral hero. Hugh attended the Quaker Leighton Park School, as Michael was to do, and became president of the Liberal Club at Cambridge, before the almost predictable presidency of the Cambridge Union and a far less predictable enthusiasm for rowing (football and cricket were the Foot games). Michael somewhat unfairly wrote of Hugh as 'never the brightest of the brood' and something of a 'hearty', but he seems to have taken this in good part, and indeed in 1939 was briefly Michael's landlord in London where he took a relaxed and genial view of the tenant's payment of rent.<sup>23</sup>

Hugh went into the Colonial Service, starting in Palestine in 1929 (where, as has been seen, Michael visited him in 1934), then moving on to Transjordan, Nigeria, Jamaica (where he was Governor) and finally in 1957–60 in Cyprus as Governor during a dangerous state of emergency. Here, he played a distinguished part in reducing tension in that violent island, re-establishing diplomatic and personal relations with Archbishop Makarios and finally achieving an end to violence with the granting of independence to the island – something which a recent Conservative Minister of State for the Colonies, Henry Hopkinson, had declared would 'never' happen. Hugh Foot then served on the UN Trusteeship Council but clashed with the Conservatives over Rhodesia. Harold Wilson brought him in as Ambassador to the United Nations in 1964 and he remained there for nearly six years. There were some who felt that at first Hugh was somewhat too passive as a former Colonial Office man; Dingle Foot told Barbara Castle that 'Hugh can't

remember he's no longer a civil servant' in early discussions over the Rhodesian UDI in 1965.<sup>24</sup> But he soon struck a firm and commanding note, especially in dealings over the Palestine question. Foot was the major author of resolution 242, that unavailing monument to international pressure on Israel after the illegal occupation of the West Bank, and became a strong champion of the Palestinian cause. After he died, perhaps on the orders of his son Paul, Palestinian flags were draped on his coffin at the funeral service.<sup>25</sup>

There is no doubt that the career of Hugh, too, was a monument to Liberalism. He noted with pride that every colony in which he served was soon to gain its independence. His fundamental ideals of international reconciliation and self-determination were a product of the culture of Pencrebar. His memoirs spoke of the impact upon him of his father, and he fondly recalled Isaac giving him a volume of Edmund Burke's speeches on American independence, with their precepts on 'magnanimity in politics' and 'participation in freedom'.

Hugh's two sons, in their contrasting ways, also testified to this vivid Liberal heritage.<sup>26</sup> Paul, the elder, became a famous crusading left-wing journalist. His long-term membership of the Socialist Workers' Party, with its singularly illiberal creed, led nowhere and may be seen as yet another instance of the Foot family eccentricity. However, as an exponent of the politics of exposure of corruption and dishonesty in high places, of police inadequacies or blunders in the James Hanratty, Helen Smith, Carl Bridgwater and Colin Wallace cases, or the racist rhetoric of Enoch Powell, even in his reporting for *Private Eye*, Paul Foot was a noble specimen of the dissidence of dissent. His later monograph, *The Vote*, is a passionate and moving plea for popular democracy, from the

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Levellers at Putney to the suffragettes and beyond. It is also the continuation of long family arguments, with Uncle Michael about parliament, with Aunt Jill over the Pankhurst daughters, and, most startling perhaps, with grandpa Isaac over the anti-democratic politics of the great Oliver Cromwell.<sup>27</sup> It is a very Foot book.

Oliver, Paul's younger brother, found another outlet for Foot Liberalism with his work for the arts and for the Christian charity Orbis International; his death in early 2008 was greatly mourned.<sup>28</sup> Another admirably dissident Foot descendant is Paul's son, Matthew, a criminal lawyer and vigorous campaigner for civil liberties, especially active as a critic of ASBOs.

The third brother, John, Baron Foot, born in 1909, was the one who remained impeccably Liberal throughout.<sup>29</sup> He went to Bembridge School, like Dingle, and he too became president of the Oxford Liberal Club, and then of the Oxford Union as well. He was always a sparkling and witty orator, the best of them all in Michael's view, and embodied all the Foot enthusiasms, for Cromwell especially. He stood for parliament as Liberal candidate for Basingstoke in 1934 (in a by-election) and 1935, and then for Bodmin in 1945 and 1950. In the 1945 election he joined in the family campaign against Leslie Hore-Belisha, Michael's opponent in Devonport, and a former Liberal who was felt to have behaved dishonourably in traducing his former ally Isaac at a by-election in St Ives in 1937 (when Walter Runciman, another National Liberal defector, stood down). After his defeat by just 210 votes, Isaac had bitterly quoted from Lord Alfred Douglas's poem of betrayal, 'The Broken Covenant', against the traitorous Simonite Liberals, Hore-Belisha and Runciman: 'I shall know his soul shall lie in the bosom of Iscariot'. The National Liberals

– the 'Vichy Liberals' as Dingle called them – were always a special Foot family target; during his campaign in Bodmin in 1945, John voiced his profound hope that Hore-Belisha and other Simonite renegades would be annihilated, as by and large they were.

Thereafter John focused on his career as a solicitor in Plymouth, but he remained politically active as a supporter of CND as zealous as Michael (according to his brother),<sup>30</sup> in work for the Immigrant Advisory Service, as a close friend of Jeremy Thorpe in West-Country Liberalism, and finally as a Liberal peer, Baron Foot of Buckland Monachorum. Lord Tordoff recalled John Foot, when president of the Liberal Party, presenting all his successors with the Foot family volume of Milton's *Areopagitica*, with a slip inside for all of them to sign.<sup>31</sup> Of all the Foot brothers, it was John with whom Michael seems to have had the closest rapport, starting with a cheerful fraternal trip to Paris in search of French culture and French girls back in 1934.

Sadly, Michael's younger brother, Christopher, had a somewhat unhappy life as a solicitor managing the family firm, while the two daughters, Jennifer and Sally, were not encouraged to develop their abilities, a major reproach to the progressive instincts of the family.

This, then, was Michael Foot's powerful Liberal heritage. From the time of his joining the Labour Party in 1935 it was a tradition held at arms' length. Thereafter, his career followed its own individual, even eccentric, course – elected Labour MP for Plymouth, Devonport, in 1945, backbench critic and permanent dissenter and 'Bevanite' down to his electoral defeat in 1955, editor of the left-wing *Tribune* and radical pamphleteer *par excellence*, heir to Nye Bevan as MP for Ebbw Vale from 1960, leader of CND and impresario

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at a host of left-wing marches, 'demos' and protests, close ally of Jack Jones and the unions, cabinet minister during the era of the 'social contract' in the 1970s and finally, in an ultimate disastrous period, Leader of the Labour Party in 1980–83. His abiding mentor now was no traditional Liberal, but Nye Bevan, the class warrior who fought the capitalist enemy, viewed the old Liberals with something near contempt, and saw socialism in terms of centralisation, nationalisation and the celebration of the collectivist cause to promote national minimum standards from Tonypandy to Tunbridge Wells. Michael Foot, his disciple and ardent biographer, echoed his master at every stage.

Of course, Michael Foot remained for the rest of his career remote from the Liberal Party and its creed which provided him with his early inspiration. He was above all else the Labour propagandist and partisan. And yet, it is important to the understanding both of his career and of the history of the twentieth-century Labour Party more widely to see that Liberalism remained of importance for him, as perhaps less obviously it did for another son of Edwardian Liberalism, Tony Benn. Foot shared this quality with many of those who made the transition from Liberalism to Labour, from Christopher Addison in the early 1920s onwards.<sup>32</sup> As a backbencher in 1945–55, and again in 1960–70, he was especially active in pursuit of the rights of minorities, freedom of speech, liberty of conscience, and the reform of parliament. His booklet, *Parliament in Danger* (1959), was a passionate plea for the freedom of backbenchers and a relaxation of the stifling control of the party whips. He cited the powerful authority of Edmund Burke in his support.<sup>33</sup> Unlike others on the left, Michael Foot was always manifestly a parliamentarian, however at home he might be on the march or on the platform.



His journalism of exposure, certainly *Guilty Men*, written with Frank Owen and the more conservative Peter Howard, at the time of Dunkirk, is the work of a radical rather than a socialist. His political hero in many ways remained Lloyd George (who, indeed, gets off very lightly in *Guilty Men*) while such economics as he could command took their stand on the writings of Keynes he had encountered in tutorials in Wadham from Russell Bretherton.<sup>34</sup>

His Liberalism was especially to the fore in his pursuit of freedom of the press. He insisted that this was one of his dominant goals in his trade union legislation of 1975, including the promotion of the closed shop for journalists. He pointed to his sympathy for conscientious dissenters who should not be compelled to join a union, although critics complained that his Liberal sympathies disappeared when he insisted on closed shops for all writers in newspapers and periodicals, whether journalists by trade or not. It was a debatable argument either way. Foot undoubtedly felt that the National Union of Journalists (of which he was an active member) was a legitimate agent for a free press and liberty of expression, well in the tradition of Milton's *Areopagitica*, of which he had been taught by his father, Isaac.<sup>35</sup> He had pursued much the same line, as a left socialist, in defending the rights of free expression of Djilas and other dissidents in eastern Europe. Others, including many Labour journalists, wondered whether enforced membership of a union was really any kind of guarantee of freedom of expression. One of those who took this view, apparently, was his brother Dingle, who had fought for freedom of the press in African and Asian countries. Michael Foot was on firmer ground in meeting the miscellaneous arguments of right-wing newspaper publishers, some of whose commitment

to free speech and free thought had been less conspicuous than his own.

Nevertheless, a judge as liberal in spirit as Lord Scarman could see in Foot's trade union legislation of 1974–76 a valuable updating of Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal trade union legislation back in 1906.<sup>36</sup> It could well be argued that the unions had been a major gap in the Liberal Party's policies ever since the working-class 'Lib-Labs' left them after 1918. The Labour government had made the 1906 'Magna Carta' that much more protective of workers' rights, and, for the moment, moderate Conservatives like Prior and Pym went along with it. Otherwise, colleagues of his in Cabinet in 1974–79 recalled Foot as being on the libertarian side of ministerial arguments. One instance was the introduction of seat-belts in cars, which Foot (who had ceased to be a driver long since) viewed as an unacceptable intrusion into personal liberty.<sup>37</sup> Barbara Castle was struck by how rational and conciliatory Foot would be in discussing the conducting of a referendum on membership of Europe in May 1975:

As I listen to Mike these days the more conscious I am that, as they grow older, these Foot brothers all merge into one collective Foot type: rational, radical and eminently reasonable. They even speak in the same voice and the same terms: they are natural Liberals.

She added, 'No wonder Paul Foot has rebelled against his elders!'<sup>38</sup>

Shirley Williams told the present writer that she saw in Michael a ministerial colleague, with whom she worked closely in 1975–76, as a man who was not a natural champion of an over-mighty central state apparatus at all, but rather a natural champion of decentralism and devolution. He was essentially 'a

free spirit', although one whose personality was constrained by office.<sup>39</sup> It was entirely appropriate that, rejecting his old Bevanite legacy, he should take up the cause of devolution for Scotland and Wales. (It should be added that Jim Callaghan, himself no devolutionist, took a somewhat more sceptical view of Foot's views here.<sup>40</sup>) Michael Foot was also a major champion of the Lib-Lab Pact of March 1977, for which he was sharply criticised by Tony Benn. The pact, of course, was essentially a tactical device to keep the minority Labour government in office. But clearly Foot, unlike Benn and perhaps Denis Healey, felt quite at ease in allowing scope for consensual discussion with David Steel and the Liberals on such matters as Europe and constitutional reform, and regretted the Liberals' later decision to end the pact. He was a driving force throughout in keeping it alive.<sup>41</sup>

Foot's Liberalism, equated with a defence of a free parliament, also came out strongly when he became Labour leader. He increasingly saw the approach of the Bennites and hard left as at basic variance with the pluralism which should govern the internal processes of the Labour Party. To Foot, the Labour Party should aim at being a progressive broad church in the way that the Liberal Party of yore had been; it should straddle a rich variety of viewpoints, from Shirley Williams to CND. Militant Tendency offended his deepest instincts because it was anti-parliamentary and illiberal. The Bevanites, he believed, had always worked within the bounds of legitimate constitutional dissent; they were a 'legitimate left'.

The anti-parliamentarism of Militant which so disturbed him emerged again, in what he believed to be the threat from the European Common Market. He campaigned against Britain's remaining in the EEC in 1975 not as a socialist but as

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a democrat. Sovereign parliamentary authority, painfully acquired since the time of Cromwell, was being fundamentally challenged by an unelected bureaucracy located overseas, with scant parliamentary redress. As it happened, Foot was to change his view about Europe over time, largely because of the encouragement from centre-left social democrats in continental countries, like Gonzales, Soares and Papandreou. His links with Francois Mitterrand, another intellectual socialist, may also have been a factor.<sup>42</sup> After all, an author who wrote so sympathetically on international free spirits like Montaigne, Hazlitt, Byron, Heine, Stendhal and Silone, was not obviously one of nature's Eurosceptics or xenophobes. Throughout his retirement he wrote on irrepressible liberal figures like these. His historical reading focussed on Michelet, Macaulay and Trevelyan, as it had done in his youth, not to mention that epitome of transnational enlightenment and reason, Edward Gibbon.

In his final years as an active politician, in the mid-1990s, he took up another grand old Liberal cause, that of defending the national freedoms of Croatia in the face of Serb aggression. There were those, including Paul Foot, who chided his uncle with ignoring the distinctly illiberal and racist elements of Croatia in its neo-fascist Ustasha past under Pavelich and its present reality under President Franjo Tudjman.<sup>43</sup> But for Michael Foot it was a case of clear aggression upon a smallish nation 'rightly struggling to be free' as the old Yugoslavia crumbled. He and his wife Jill, both in their eighties, travelled to their beloved Dubrovnik, almost helpless before Serb and Montenegrin shellfire and rockets, to tell the world of the atrocities that were being committed, while British Tory foreign secretaries like Hurd and Rifkind stood aside as their predecessors had done

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in Spain during the time of the Popular Front. *Two Hours from London*, Jill's film, which shows Michael Foot appealing to the world conscience from the battlements of old Dubrovnik above the harbour, is deeply moving, despite efforts by the BBC to curtail or even ignore it.<sup>44</sup> It calls to mind another brave octogenarian's crusade against savage aggression – the endeavours of Gladstone in his eighty-sixth year in 1896 to rouse the conscience of the civilised world over Turkish atrocities in Armenia. Michael Foot's Liberal inheritance was never more thoroughly vindicated.

The audacious Liberalism of Michael Foot – embracing the party Liberalism of his heritage and his family – is at least as important as the socialism of Nye Bevan in making him what he was. Foot was an emotional, instinctive and principled politician. He believed that the essence of politics emerged in the market of free ideas. One of his particular heroes was John Stuart Mill – not the intellectually tortured Mill who feared 'the tyranny of the majority', but the champion of a kind of feminism who wrote the somewhat bloodless *Subjection of Women*.<sup>45</sup> Michael Foot's most characteristic and revealing book is not his two-decker biography of Bevan, stirring though it is, but his volume *Debts of Honour*, published around the time he became Leader of the Labour Party in late 1980. It is a volume of essays, each of them a study of personalities, and an eclectic and even eccentric collection it is, too. It includes mavericks like Beaverbrook, whose friendship Foot cherished. But above all it is a catalogue of predominantly liberal (or Liberal) dissenters, 'trouble-makers' in Alan Taylor's inspired phrase – Hazlitt, Disraeli (a real radical to Michael), Russell, Paine, Defoe, Swift and, above all, father Isaac, a portrait drawn with deep insight as well as affection. Only three of Foot's

pantheon could be classified as socialists: the cartoonist Vicky and the authors H. N. Brailsford and Ignazio Silone. Even here, in the case of Brailsford, the emphasis is placed on his writings on the seventeenth-century Levellers, on Shelley and Godwin during the French Revolutionary wars, and Brailsford's work in the women's movement. Journalists were derisive when reading that Tony Blair had seen in Foot's book in 1982 a more attractive route to ethical socialism. But this was unfair. It is not at all surprising that a young man like Blair, with an idealistic heart but no aptitude for political theory, should find appealing a tradition that was non-Marxist and non-coercive but altruistic, warm and humane.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from his book on Bevan – admittedly, a very considerable exception – Foot did not write on the history of the labour movement. He encouraged the writing of works on Hardie, Lansbury or Maxton by others, but he focussed himself on pre-industrial radicalism. This is not to say that socialism was not important to him, but it was a socialism that was always libertarian and literary-romantic, drawn from an instinct for humanity rather than an analysis of class. Perhaps that adds to his stature. Michael Foot was one of the great prophets and communicators of the British left. He was influential throughout the world in proclaiming what it meant to be a socialist as he understood it. Always underpinning it was an instinctive Liberal imperative. Michael has quoted his father, Isaac, contemplating his world in simple moral terms after a bitter by-election defeat at St Ives in 1937:

The purpose of liberalism is to defeat fear and bring hope. Wordsworth once gave the definition of a liberal. He spoke of 'a man of hope and forward-looking mind'. That is a definition of a liberal and the triumph

of liberalism means the conquest of fear.<sup>47</sup>

It is not the most inappropriate of epitaphs for the son of Isaac. Perhaps the last evidence may be taken from two of Michael Foot's closest comrades from the epicentre of Welsh valleys socialism. There was Aneurin Bevan during the CND controversies in 1959 telling a friend privately, 'deep down, Michael is still a Liberal'.<sup>48</sup> And, nearly half a century later, there was Neil Kinnock's considered view – 'Michael belongs to the Liberal-Republican pantheon, not the Socialist one'.<sup>49</sup>

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1 *News Chronicle*, 4 April 1934.  
 2 Michael Foot to Isaac Foot, 'Friday' 1932 (Isaac Foot papers, private possession); D. F. Karaka, *The Pulse of Oxford* (London, 1933). Foot was to write a passionate tribute to Lloyd George on news of his death, *Daily Herald*, 5 April 1945  
 3 *Oxford Magazine*, 26 January 1933.  
 4 *Ibid.*, 26 October 1932.  
 5 Michael Foot's chapter in V. Krishna Menon (ed.), *Young Oxford and War* (London, 1934), pp. 39ff. and 59ff.  
 6 Michael Foot to Isaac Foot, 'Friday' 1932 (Isaac Foot papers, private possession).  
 7 Report of debates at Yale, 19 November and La Rochelle, New York, 26 November 1934 (Michael Foot papers, private possession).

8 Interviews with Michael Foot, 2002–06. At the launch party for my book on 21 March 2007, there was a fascinating discussion on Fox between Michael Foot and William Hague, author of a recent biographer of the Younger Pitt.  
 9 For a fuller discussion, see Kenneth O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life* (London, paperback edn., 2008), pp. 40–43.  
 10 Barbara Castle, *Fighting all the Way* (London, 1993), p. 77.  
 11 Michael Foot wrote a highly sympathetic account of Frank Owen in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. There is a brief but lively account of Owen's life in Gron Williams, *Firebrand: the Frank Owen Story* (Square One Publications, Worcester, 1993). I am much indebted to the author for drawing my attention to this work.  
 12 Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life*, p. 13.  
 13 Interview with Lord Owen, 25 March 2004.  
 14 See the fascinating volume, Michael Foot and Alison Highet, *Isaac Foot: A West-country Boy – Apostle of England* (London, 2006).  
 15 Isaac Foot's name is inscribed on the monument put up in 1939 at the site of the battle of Marston Moor, between Leeds and York.  
 16 Theodore G. Grieder, 'The Isaac Foot Library: a Report to the University', 1964: Online Archive of California (<http://www.oae.cdlib.org.findaid.ark>). Isaac Foot's library was sold after his death to the University of California, Santa Barbara, for the remarkably small sum of £50,000.  
 17 Interviews with Michael Foot, 2002–06.  
 18 Dingle Foot's rather sparse papers are in Churchill College, Cambridge.  
 19 Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies, Liberal Leader* (London, 2003), pp. 91ff.; Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven, Connecticut, 2004), pp.

307–09.  
 20 Ben Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (London, 1985), p. 284.  
 21 Mervyn Jones, *A Radical Life* (London, 1991), p. 185. The biography of Noel-Baker (David J. Whitaker, *Fighter for Peace: Philip Noel-Baker 1889–1982* (York, 1989)) makes no reference at all to this relationship.  
 22 Clement Davies to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, 15 November 1950 (Clement Davies papers, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, J/3/45); Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies*, pp. 171 ff.  
 23 Hugh Foot, *A Start in Freedom* (London, 1964), pp. 22–23, 61. Michael's comments on his brother appeared in the *Evening Standard* in 1961.  
 24 Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964–70* (London, 1984), pp. 22–23, entry of 23 March 1965.  
 25 I owe this information to Professor Wm. Roger Louis, of the University of Texas at Austin.  
 26 Hugh Foot, *A Start in Freedom*, p. 34.  
 27 Paul Foot, *The Vote* (London, 2005), esp. pp. 25 ff.  
 28 Obituary of Oliver Foot, *The Guardian*, 12 February 2008.  
 29 Obituary of Lord Foot, *The Independent*, 12 October 1999. I am indebted to reminiscences of him from Lord Tordoff and Lord Livsey.  
 30 Information from Michael Foot.  
 31 Information from Lord Tordoff.  
 32 See Kenneth and Jane Morgan, *Portrait of a Progressive: The Political Career of Christopher, Viscount Addison* (Oxford, 1980). There is an absorbing discussion of some of the underlying issues in Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 294ff.  
 33 This pamphlet was published by Pall Mall Press. Foot was much influenced at this time by his leading role in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which attracted the support of many Liberals, including his brother John.

34 Morgan, *Michael Foot*, pp. 26–27.  
 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 307–12; Foot's memorandum, 'Freedom of the Press', 3 December 1974 (CAB 129/180/3); Cabinet conclusions, 6 November 1975 (CAB 128/57), National Archives, Kew.  
 36 See Lord Wedderburn, *The Worker and the Law* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, London, 1986), pp. 586ff. Also see Paul Davis and Mark Freedland, *Legislation and Public Policy: A Contemporary History* (Oxford, 1993), and Brian Brivati, *Lord Goodman* (London, 1999), pp. 229 ff.  
 37 Information from Lord Rodgers, 14 November 1995.  
 38 Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries, 1974–76* (London, 1980), p. 347, entry of 20 March 1975.  
 39 Interview with Baroness Williams, 1 November 2004.  
 40 Conversations with the late Lord Callaghan.  
 41 Tony Benn, *Conflicts of Interest, Diaries 1977–80* (London, 1990), pp. 85 ff., entries of 23–27 March 1977; I am much indebted for interviews with Lord Steel of Aikwood, 20 July 2004, and Lord McNally, 17 January 2006 and for their observations at the Liberal Democrat History Group meeting on the Lib-Lab Pact, 14 July 2008 (see report in this *Journal*).  
 42 Interviews with Michael Foot, 2002–06.  
 43 Paul Foot to Michael Foot (Michael Foot, private papers); conversations with Ms Vesna Gamulin in Dubrovnik.  
 44 For a fuller account, see Morgan, *Michael Foot*, pp. 455ff.  
 45 Conversations with Michael Foot.  
 46 Tony Blair to Michael Foot, 28 July 1982, and undated (? 1996) (Foot private papers).  
 47 Isaac Foot, quoted in M. Foot and A. Highet, *Isaac Foot*, p. 212.  
 48 Interview with Geoffrey Goodman, 23 March 2004.  
 49 Interview with Lord Kinnock, 30 January 2005.

# CAMPBELL



In October 2007, Menzies Campbell resigned as Leader of the Liberal Democrats after just nineteen months in the post. On page 45 we carry a review of his autobiography. In July of this year *Journal* Editor **Duncan Brack** interviewed him with a view to supplementing the story told in the book.

# AS LEADER

*Q: Your autobiography has relatively little to say about why you became and remain a Liberal, apart from being attracted by Jo Grimond and the Liberal position on Suez. Can you say more about why you joined the party?*

MC: My parents were both Labour – neither of them were activists, I think their memberships had probably lapsed by the time I was a teenager, but they did talk a lot about politics. And the first thing I was conscious of was Suez in 1956; I remember thinking, because there were National Servicemen at Suez and I was fifteen, that three years later and it could have been me. That was a seminal moment for British politics: this was the lion pretending to roar but having no claws and sounding rather hoarse; and of course it brought the end of Anthony Eden. For Britain it was the end of the immediate post-war era, something of a watershed. And lo and behold, bestriding all this was Jo Grimond who, it seemed to me, was the person who spoke out most effectively and charismatically. There was the Torrington by-election, too; I remember schoolboys shouting ‘remember Torrington!’ It did seem that under Jo, Liberalism was going to have a renaissance. Then I went to university, and politics was the fashionable activity for students at the time. I used to say that my first serious act of rebellion was to join the Liberal Party, because my parents were

both socialists. So I suppose it was a series of factors: being more politically aware, being attracted by Jo Grimond, seeing what some thought might be a Liberal renaissance, reading John Stuart Mill, and not wanting to do what might be expected of me – none of these was of itself the compelling factor, but taken together I joined the Liberals.

Political debating was the thing at university. There was a kind of progression: first-year students had to make their mark, then you had to try and become Treasurer of the political club, and then Secretary, and then you would lead it in your fourth year. And so I got on to that treadmill – although I was the only politically active student who was on the running track as much as I was in the debating chamber, and from time to time the two were not entirely in sync. So, that’s why ... and I just felt naturally sympathetic and at home; I sometimes refer to it as gut Liberalism.

*Q: How would you describe that if someone asked you to sum it up in a sentence? What are the values of gut Liberalism?*

MC: Individual freedom; personal liberty; opportunity. This is the way I put it in the book: ‘I count myself to have had a privileged life in which opportunity has always played a significant part. I see my life as one of experience and not of achievement.’ Those two sentences have to be read together. My father left

school when he was fourteen; his first job was as an office boy in a tea import company. That was thought by his parents not to be a very stable existence, so he went and he served his apprenticeship as a joiner, and he worked on one of the ships that was built on Clydeside as part of the effort to deal with the worst of the recession. His brother was a great ladies’ man and used to go to the dance halls, but my father went to night school; and eventually he had his own business. As for my mother, her friends and contemporaries say she could have played hockey for Scotland: she was a very good sportswoman. So when I was growing up, there was a feeling that they were doing their best for me; there was a sense of duty about making the most of it. So that’s what I think a Liberal society should provide: it should offer opportunity for those who are lucky enough to have the talent, and it should offer support for those who need it. And the overall arching cement that binds it all together should be freedom, individual liberty and human rights – and internationalism.

*Q: Although they’re not as wide as journalists pretend, there are some differences between the so-called ‘economic liberals’ and ‘social liberals’ in the Lib Dems. Where would you put yourself in the party now?*

MC: I tried to argue during my leadership that this was an artificial distinction. I mean, there’s no intrinsic merit in

Left: Menzies Campbell during his leader’s speech at the Liberal Democrat conference autumn 2006



taxation, any more than there's intrinsic merit in nuclear weapons; it's what the consequences are that is important. Taxation is only justified to the extent that it's necessary to provide the quality of public services, particularly health and education, that a civilised society should embrace. Now I don't know if that's left- or right-wing; but it's certainly always been my view that there is no point taxing for taxing's sake. On individual freedom, on the British spectrum I suppose I would be regarded as being strongly on the left – though within our own party the spectrum may not be exactly the same. I was also robust on defence. I supported David Steel in all his trials and tribulations over nuclear weapons. And actually, going back to Jo, the policy in Jo's time was for a nuclear deterrent, but a NATO nuclear deterrent to which the UK would subscribe; and of course that's in effect what has happened, because British nuclear weapons are effectively assigned to NATO. So, I was always a Grimondite, I always accepted the utility of nuclear weapons. But that is not inconsistent with disarmament. I'm signed up to the 'Toward a Nuclear-Free World' initiative put forward by Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn, which Margaret Beckett also supported, trying to put some bite into the whole notion of multilateral disarmament. So, there you are: strong on defence, strong on civil liberties, no taxation for taxation's sake.

I suppose I was always regarded as being on the right because my jacket and my trousers always matched ... what's very interesting is the difference in the party now. I remember the first party assembly I went to – 1961 in Edinburgh – and there were lots of suits about; but then the party changed quite dramatically thereafter and there weren't quite so many suits! Now there's a proper mixture. But I suppose I was always regarded as being

part of the suits. And I was a supporter of David Steel's, of course, who would have been regarded as being on the right of the party in some respects. But remember, he was Chairman of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, President of Shelter, and author of the Abortion Act of 1967. So, I'm answering your question by saying that I do not think it is easy to characterise people within our party as necessarily left and right.

*Q: You don't say much about your period as Chair of the Scottish Liberal Party, from 1975 to 1977, apart from stabilising its finances. What do you think you achieved in this period?*

MC: It happened because there was a palace revolution. In 1974, we'd fought almost everything – 68, I think, out of the 71 seats in Scotland, as part of the Thorpe strategy in the second election of '74 – and we didn't have the resources to do it. There were people in tears because they never got what they were promised from headquarters. So there was a Young – or Middle-Aged – Turks' revolution, of which I was part. You ask me what I did then. It's a good question. I kept the ship afloat. It does seem to me that I have often been the coxswain in the lifeboat! We had practically no money; we were bust until we developed an early form of the lottery. What I was doing was holding the damn thing together – with a very good man as Treasurer called John Lawrie, who was an actuary, terribly precise. So – survival. It was also the beginning of a serious debate about home rule, devolution; Labour was frightened to death by the success of the SNP in October 1974. Since we had very few MPs, as Chairman I did a lot of television and radio. We tried to put some meat on the bones of the federalist case.

#### **Ashdown resigns**

*Q: Looking back, do you still think it was the right decision not to have*

**So, there you are: strong on defence, strong on civil liberties, no taxation for taxation's sake.**

*stood for the leadership in 1999? After all, although Charles Kennedy looked unbeatable at the start of the campaign, Simon Hughes's campaign almost caught him, and might have overtaken him if it had started earlier.*

MC: I'd been very closely associated with the so-called 'Project'; I was one of the small group of people to whom Paddy would talk before he went to meet Blair and to whom he would come back and report. And it seemed to me that although the party may not have known just how far these discussions had gone on, nonetheless by 1999 they knew more or less what had been happening and they were ready for something else. And it didn't seem to me that someone who had been so close as I had could provide that something else.

Also, the clear impression was that Charles was way out in front. I always assumed that his campaign was ready to run. He'd become President, he'd been round the country, he was well known, and very good on the box. It seemed to me that he was unassailable. Don Foster and Nick Harvey and I met several times under the chairmanship of Archy Kirkwood to determine whether one of us should stand, but in the end all three of us, for different reasons, decided that we wouldn't and we then all gave our support to Charles.

Also, because David and then Paddy had become such close friends of mine, I knew what the frustrations of leadership were. I know it cost both of them in terms of family life and personal life; although there was one thing which they didn't have to contend with to the same extent as we all do now, and that is the 24-hour-a-day constant news agenda. I talked to Elspeth, and we wrote down the pros, we wrote down the cons. The cons included not being able to keep on doing any legal work, which was quite important to my financial responsibilities. The cons outnumbered the pros very considerably.

Q: Do you still think that was the right decision?

MC: Yes. People do say, as you pointed out in your question, look at how close Simon Hughes got – but remember, he was coming from a different wing of the party from me. And then (the things we wish we'd never said!) I was asked about it and I said, 'Well, for ten minutes a day I think I made a mistake, and then common sense kicks in.' Of course everyone quotes the first half of the sentence and not the second. I never regretted the decision not to stand. I knew in my heart that for sound, sensible reasons it wasn't for me; standing was a romantic kind of speculation which soon vanished in the cold light of reality.

Q: Do you think Paddy was right not to groom a successor? Because it meant that his whole agenda – the 'Project' – disappeared after he stepped down.

MC: David Steel didn't groom a successor, and neither did Jo Grimond. And it was the British people that made Paddy's agenda disappear when they gave Blair a majority of 160. Although, right up until November 1998, when Paddy decided to step down, Blair was still talking in terms of replacing Gavin Strang and David Clark [ministers in Blair's first Cabinet] with Liberal Democrats – I heard some of this from David Clark, who's a friend of mine. They got wind of it and there was a real mobilisation against it in the Labour Party, to the extent that Blair would have found it impossible to do. This was against the backdrop of the Joint Cabinet Committee. Robin Cook and I became firm friends, we got on like a house on fire – stemming from the Scott Inquiry into arms to Iraq in 1996, when Robin and I had combined our forces because we were covering it for our respective parties. It was in foreign affairs that we made the JCC work perhaps better than anywhere else.

**It was in foreign affairs that we made the Joint Cabinet Committee work perhaps better than anywhere else.**

### The Kennedy leadership

Q: If you had been elected leader in 1999 instead of Charles Kennedy, what would you have done differently?

MC: I think I would have tried to keep open a dialogue with Labour – though I'm not sure that it would necessarily have taken the form of the JCC, nor that it would have lasted very long. My analysis of Blair is that he went on a journey almost from the moment he became Prime Minister; he turned into this quite extraordinary authoritarian figure. We would not have been able to live with him on tuition fees, or Europe. We would have been disappointed at the failure to give full-blown freedom of information. I was particularly disappointed by his insistence on a referendum on home rule. In fact I threatened to vote against the bill, because we had campaigned for devolution, it was in our manifesto; there was absolutely no reason why the legislation shouldn't be introduced without a referendum. The heavies were put on me; Roy [Jenkins] was detailed to ring me up and say, 'You may not like this, but sometimes in politics you've got to do things you don't like, and the relationship between us and the Labour Party is very important to the ultimate achievement of the home rule legislation, and you would be being extremely unhelpful if you were to vote against.' Roy could always move me in the direction he thought I should go.

So, whoever had been leader, I think there would inevitably have been a parting of the ways. And of course Iraq was the determining issue, the straw that would have broken the camel's back. So, if it had been my responsibility then I would have attempted to have kept the non-doctrinaire, centre-left alliance together – but I believe that Blair's political movement across the spectrum would have made that increasingly difficult, and

Iraq would most certainly have been the end of it.

Q: You opposed Charles speaking at the big anti-war demonstration in February 2003 (though backed him when he decided to speak). Why?

MC: If you remember, on that platform there were a lot of not-very-liberal people, and there was a lot of visceral anti-Americanism. Now, as you know, I spent a year in California; one of my best friends is Jeff Bingaman, who is US Senator for New Mexico – he voted against Iraq. There were lots of Americans who were on the same side of the argument as us, and my feeling was that to be associated with such fundamentalist anti-Americanism was really not a good thing at all.

But what happened was that Charles went to lunch at *The Guardian*, and they gave him a very hard time. (I went to one of their lunches in the autumn of 2005; there were about eight or ten people around the table, and I never got to eat my sandwich! It was unlimited inbound fire for an hour and a half or so, really hard pounding.) When he came back, not surprisingly he took some account of that and then decided he would go on the march. When he rang me up to say, 'Look, I'm going to do this', then I said, 'Well, I wouldn't have done it, but if that's your decision then it's got to be the right decision.' I wasn't the only person to feel concerned about the anti-American nature of thing; I believe Shirley [Williams] was concerned as well.

Q: You generally express your view of Charles's leadership in terms of sympathy for his drink problem. But were you not frustrated by his inertia and variable performance?

MC: Well, I say that in the book. I think I say that he irritated me, and I have no doubt that I irritated him. It was a great contrast to Paddy. But if he were here, he would say, 'But look at the results' – the progress made in 2001 and then again in 2005. The figures speak for themselves.

*Q: Do you think he might have resigned or been forced out if it hadn't been for the Iraq war? It is possible to argue that the war saved his leadership, because it gave him an agenda to follow without him having to come up with one himself.*

MC: The Iraq war did give Charles a platform, and it gave the party definition and distinctiveness. Could we have expected to continue to make the sort of progress we did in 2005 if there hadn't been an Iraq war? Probably not – but we can't be sure. Also, the thing to remember is that the affection with which the public regarded Charles was more than mirrored in the party.

*Q: Do you think Charles should have gone ahead with his abortive press conference in 2003 and stood down in order to seek treatment for alcoholism?*

MC: It must have been very, very difficult for him. He had clearly crossed a psychological barrier, but then drew back. It's easy to be critical after the event, but he was wrestling with demons. As I understood it, what he was going to say was: 'Look, I've got this problem; six months off to sort it out; Ming Campbell, he'll be in charge; but after six months I'll be back, sharp as a tack.' It could have worked.

*Q: You say you were quoted by The Guardian after the Southport conference in spring 2004 as 'ruling nothing in and nothing out'. Is that what you said? If so, what did you mean by it?*

MC: This was after the lobby lunch. We'd had the Budget and PMQs [which Charles had missed], and I was being hounded; I felt I had to say something. If it was serious and Charles was going to go, then where was the leadership going to be? It's a kind of a stock phrase which people use on all sorts of occasions, and I thought it would do enough to make it clear that if there was a problem we could deal with it, but not so strong as to suggest that I was gunning for

the job. But that was not how *The Guardian* interpreted it.

*Q: In the book, you quote Sue Lawley, when you were on Desert Island Discs later in 2004, as claiming that you had suggested that you should be installed as leader without a contest if Charles should resign.*

MC: She asked me whether it was true, as the newspapers had said, that I'd been asked to act as a caretaker leader after Charles's stomach problem during the Budget statement – well, that wasn't true. There was a huge amount of gossip at the time, but I never thought that if Charles stepped down at any stage there wouldn't be a contest, because it was clear to me, whatever the circumstances, that Simon Hughes would be running – he felt he had come close the previous time.

*Q: What do you think caused the problems at the manifesto launch in April 2005, when Kennedy struggled to explain the details of the party's policy on local income tax?*

MC: It was on the Monday of that week when Sarah [Charles's wife] went into labour. I can't remember where Charles was, but I was put on standby, and I was immediately told: you're 'Charles' for tomorrow – that was Tuesday – and also for Wednesday. And I went to Bristol, to help Stephen [Williams, the successful candidate for Bristol West], and then up to help Tim Farron [successful candidate for Westmorland & Lonsdale]. The decision was taken that the manifesto launch, which had been arranged for the Wednesday, clearly had to be cancelled. Now the question was: did you do it on the Thursday or the Friday? If you did it on Friday, then you got the Saturday papers, which were not as good for press coverage. If you waited until the following Monday, then nearly a week had elapsed and we would be well behind the other two parties. And so, the decision was taken to do it on the Thursday. In the end that was really the only day; and there was an

understandable determination to give the impression that Charles was right on top of things.

*Q: You describe the 2005 election as a missed opportunity. Do you think it was the manifesto launch that poisoned everything?*

MC: That's a strong statement, but there's no doubt it had an effect.

*Q: In the book you mention Labour and the Lib Dems coordinating attacks on the Conservatives in the 2005 election. It was fairly common knowledge that that happened in 1997 and 2001, but more surprising, I think, that it was still going on in 2005. Can you say any more about this?*

MC: It wasn't as close as it had been in 2001, and certainly not as close as it had been in 1997. It was more of a non-aggression pact rather than an alliance; that was my understanding.

*Q: So that brings us to Charles's resignation in January 2006. You say that you watched his statement on 5<sup>th</sup> January (when he stood down, but stated that he intended to be a candidate for the leadership, to clear the air) with 'quiet admiration'. Did you not think, however, that calling a leadership election when he knew that his main rivals – you and Simon Hughes – had already said they would not stand against him was dishonest?*

MC: I just thought to myself, this is not going to work. We are going to be back in the same difficulty.

*Q: Charles said in the same statement that he had resolved his drink problem. Did you really think he had at the time?*

MC: I heard what he said.

### Leadership

*Q: Why did you decide to stand for the leadership, having not stood seven years earlier?*

MC: A lot of these young people, the new MPs, had been biting my ear ever since November 2005. I was concerned about them because they were full of hope and expectation and determination. They had fought like

**I never thought that if Charles stepped down at any stage there wouldn't be a contest, because it was clear to me, whatever the circumstances, that Simon Hughes would be running.**

hell to win their seats, and I felt a kind of obligation towards them. I was criticised, I know, for my response [after Charles resigned] in saying 'I'm going to be a candidate', but it seemed to me that someone had to – there had to be some continuum. I was nervous at the idea that a vacancy had arisen and no one was going to say that they were going to be running to fill that vacancy on a permanent basis. There are those who say I should have waited, but you have to make these judgments based on what you feel; I thought it was the right thing to do.

*Q: What did you think you could offer?*

MC: Stability, and continuity.

*Q: What were the main themes of your leadership campaign? What did you try to put over?*

MC: The environment was enormously important – so I gave up my Jaguar! Taxation. Opportunity – using myself as an illustration; you know, the fact that I'd had three lives and been lucky to do so. Liberalism internationally as much as domestically.

*Q: In the book, you describe the tasks you set yourself after the local elections in 2006: 'First, I had to put the party back on an even keel after the traumas of Charles's resignation and the leadership election; second, I had to make the party more professional in its outlook; and, third, to ensure we would be ready for a general election whenever it might come.' These are all essentially organisational – did you have any aims as regards the policy or ideology of the party?*

MC: I had inherited a policy agenda under way, of course – remember, Charles had established the Tax Commission. I inherited the issue of the post offices [part-privatisation of Royal Mail], which we dealt with in Harrogate [the spring Lib Dem conference in March 2006], two days after I was elected. The 'Meeting the Challenge' exercise was under

way. Lib Dem policy-making is like an oil tanker: it takes you a while to stop it and get it to turn. I did run with the environmental stuff as hard as I possibly could, but I had largely inherited a policy agenda. And it had within it a series of major changes. I went straight into the post offices issue; then we had dropping the 50p top tax rate in September 2006, and then we had Trident at the following spring conference, and then we followed that up with the big tax stuff last September. My job, in the beginning, was to see through the policy initiatives which had begun under Charles's leadership. Once that was done I would have created an agenda of my own.

*Q: Dropping the commitment to the 50 pence top tax rate was a major change. Why do you think it was right to do that?*

MC: It was against aspiration, it discouraged ambition – and it didn't produce huge sums of money. I was at a lunch the other day with some businessmen, and one of them was asking me about tax and claimed we were a high tax party. I said, 'Under my leadership we dropped the 50p rate.' And there was a kind of ripple around the table. I thought 50p had served its purpose, and from my point of view, it was a break with the past.

What was fascinating was the way the party took to it. I was worried about the conference debate, because the 50p commitment was iconic to some. I thought that people would feel determined to hold on to it whatever the circumstances. But, to my surprise, we won the debate very convincingly. During the debate Paddy came up to me and said, 'I've sat here on many, many occasions, quaking at the outcome of some debate or other, and I can tell you now, you're going to win this.'

*Q: Moving on to March 2007, in the book you mention Elspeth saying to Tony Blair that you were going through hell. You hadn't really*

*Q: What did you think you could offer?*

**MC: Stability, and continuity.**

*written about that up until that point. Can you explain?*

MC: There was a constant refrain about age; you will remember the cartoons. I'd begun to get the measure of Prime Minister's Questions, though I had had some sticky moments at the beginning. But there was this constant refrain, and it was not helped by careless talk among Liberal Democrat colleagues in both the Lords and the Commons. And that's as far as I'm going to go on that, for the moment.

*Q: Do you think there was a consistent attempt to undermine you from within the party?*

MC: My position was not helped by ill-judged comments from colleagues in both the Commons and the Lords.

*Q: Do you think the criticisms of you over your age were really cover for criticisms of other aspects of your leadership?*

MC: Stories have a natural life; if the story doesn't move on, then it dies – but if someone is foolish enough to open their mouth, then they simply give the story legs and it does not die. The relationship between the party and the leader is now much, much more in the public's eye than it ever was before.

*Q: Your resignation seemed to come very suddenly, but in the book you say you'd been thinking about it for some time. When did you start thinking about it?*

MC: As soon as Brown said: 'No election'. When we heard the news, Elspeth said immediately: can you take it for another two years? That was the point at which I said to myself, 'Well, if she's begun to ask that question, then other people are going to ask that question.'

*Q: Your resignation statement mentioned the need for radical revision of the party's internal structures. What did you mean by that?*

MC: I was really trying to lay a trail for whoever came after me. I spent a lot of time at the Policy Committee. Archy [Kirkwood] used to say to me



it was time well invested, but I began to feel that the Lib Dem leader is like the opposite of the harlot, with responsibility but without power. You carry the can for everything, but you don't have the authority to deal with everything. Now, I know these might be thought to be illiberal reactions, but the process does not need to be obsessively liberal in order to achieve liberal objectives. People used liberalism as a shield for indiscipline; you would go to these meetings and people would say, 'I didn't join this party to ...', and your heart would sink. And yet, I have to be fair about this, on the issues I wanted to make my own – like the 50p rate, environmental taxation, Trident – I got my own way, but it did take an awful lot of effort. I used to say, 'People in this party would rather beat the platform at the conference than beat the Tories at the ballot box.'

*Q: What were your main achievements in your career as leader?*

MC: Well, I think I did the things I was expected to do. I steadied the ship after Charles's resignation. And if you remember, the leadership campaign itself was rather more colourful than one might have expected, and we had to get through that. I did start the process, I think, of asking the party to smarten itself up: meetings started on time, we reached conclusions; at the Shadow Cabinet I would let everyone speak, but we'd reach a conclusion at the end of it. And we were ready for the general election. That was the one thing that we had to get sorted, and we did. We were ready for it, and if it had been called, my own programme was already 80 per cent written. The manifesto was agreed – I did eight hours in the chair that day! – and we came out with a manifesto upon which we could have legitimately fought the election. So, I would regard that as an achievement.

And then, personally – part of my seat had been represented

**I began to feel that the Lib Dem leader is like the opposite of the harlot, with responsibility but without power. You carry the can for everything, but you don't have the authority to deal with everything.**

by Asquith, so there was a kind of a symmetry about leading the party from the constituency from which Asquith led the party. I just wish that one or two people were still around. My parents would have been proud of that. I would have valued Roy Jenkins's advice, and I think he would have been instrumental in dealing with some of the more loquacious elements in the party.

*Q: What did you try to achieve but failed to? And what do you wish you had done but didn't?*

MC: We are in a period of enormous change, which I don't think people understand. We have a group of highly talented, highly motivated new Members of Parliament who've never really known anything but success since 1997. But some of the rest of us were around in the days when the party was down to six MPs – I remember 1970, when David Steel nearly lost his seat – and in 1992, we got only twenty. The tide comes in and the tide goes out, and the trick is to be able to survive both – not to be swept away by the tide coming in, and certainly not to be dragged under by the tide going out. It's two years away, the next election; things could change completely before then.

I got Prime Minister's Questions right in the end, because we did a huge amount of work at it. It was hard to do that from the beginning; we were pitchforked straight in. What people forget – and I noticed someone making the point on behalf of Nick [Clegg] the other day – is that first of all you get only two questions, so recovery, if you get one not quite right, is much more difficult than if you get six [like the Leader of the Opposition]. Second, there's nowhere to put anything, and if you notice, if you look straight at Cameron, he reads; he reads an enormous amount [resting his notes on the despatch box]. Also the camera angle doesn't help – it's a small thing, but in this age

of obsessions about appearance and style and all the rest of it, the camera angle for the Lib Dem leader is really rotten; it makes you look as if you are squint.

*Q: Michael White wrote in his review of your book in The Guardian that you lacked the 'killer instinct that makes the difference at the very top'. Do you think that's a fair assessment?*

MC: No, I don't. I've said this before but it's true, all the things I've ever done in my life involve winning or losing: you win your race or you lose it, you win your case or you lose it, you win your seat or you lose it. I have a competitive edge, and, well, let me put it this way, if by killer instinct he means lack of scruple, then that's not something to which I would aspire.

*Q: In the author's note in your autobiography, you say that you count your life 'as one of experience not achievement'. That seems an odd statement given what you have achieved – can you say what you meant by it?*

MC: I've been enormously lucky. There's a little bit at the end of the book, after I resigned which sums it up:

My principal emotions were frustration and irritation. The three tasks I had set myself when I became leader had all been achieved but the postponement of the election had robbed me of the chance to show just how far I had taken the party. I also felt a sense of perspective: I had run in an Olympic final, pleased a case as a QC in the House of Lords, become an MP after an eleven-year campaign, overcome cancer, been knighted for services to parliament, and led the party of Asquith and Lloyd George. It was indeed a long way from 19 Park Road, Glasgow.

So that's really what I feel – I just feel I've been enormously lucky; I can think of all sorts of people more talented than me who've never had the opportunity.



# REVIEWS

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## Leader out of time

Menzies Campbell: *My Autobiography* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2008)

Reviewed by **Duncan Brack**

**I**T SEEMS to be an iron law of politics that when the chance comes, political parties pick leaders as different as possible from their predecessors. Just as the laid-back (at times inert) Charles Kennedy was a total contrast to the hyperactive Paddy Ashdown, so the upright and duty-driven Menzies Campbell came as a huge difference to the chaos of the last few months of the Kennedy leadership. And in one other important respect, too, the second and third leaders of the Liberal Democrats were wholly different: whereas Kennedy was consistently lucky (not least in the outbreak of the war in Iraq, which, as I argued in my review of Greg Hurst's biography (*Journal* 53, winter 2006–07), gave him the agenda he would otherwise have lacked for his leadership from 2003 onwards), Campbell was pretty consistently unlucky. To pick a few examples, he was unlucky in his choice of a question in the first Prime Minister's Questions of his acting leadership, in the misbriefing given by the party's press officer after Campbell's leader's speech in the March 2007 conference, which damaged the image of what was otherwise a successful conference, and, in the end, in Gordon Brown's failure to call an election in September 2007, which sounded the death-knell for his own continuing leadership.

Campbell's autobiography, which was carefully timed to come out just after the spring 2008 Lib Dem conference (Nick

Clegg's first as leader), is an interesting and enjoyable read, important for anyone wanting to understand the recent history of the Liberal Democrats. It is well written and in places moving – as in the story of Campbell's fight against cancer in 2002–03, told mostly through diary entries. But what it isn't is revealing – either about Campbell's innermost beliefs and feelings, or about what he really thought of his colleagues in the Liberal Democrats, particularly of Charles Kennedy and his performance as leader, and of the un-named MPs and peers who mounted a deliberate effort to destabilise his own leadership in 2007. Campbell is too much the gentleman to want to cause any rifts in the party's re-established harmony after the successive leadership crises of 2005–07, and too much the intensely private man to want to lay his soul bare to his readers. As you can see from pages 38–44, the interview we conducted with him in an attempt to fill in some of the gaps in the book was only partly successful.

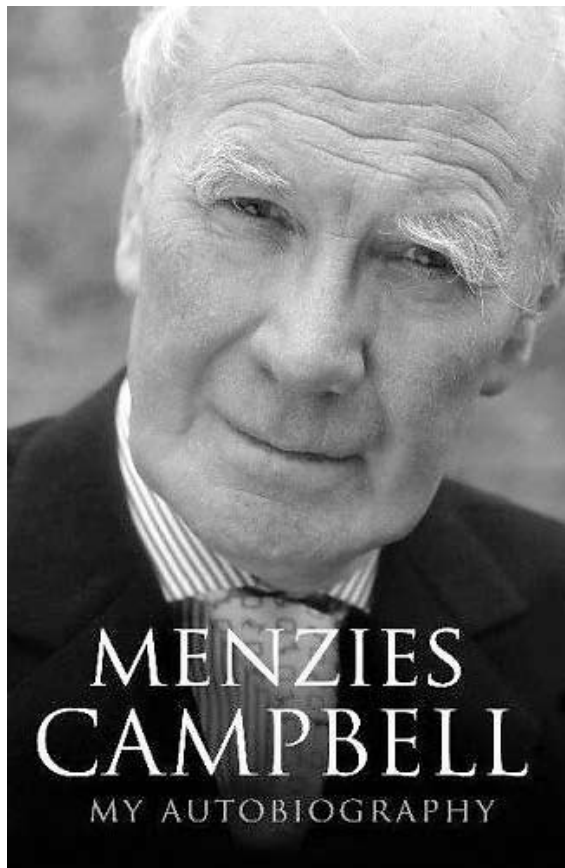
In many ways Campbell was like a leader from an earlier era. Unlike Kennedy, or Cameron, he had a life before and outside politics, and the first quarter of the book deals with it: most famously, his record as an athlete, competing in the Olympics in 1964 (including the final of the 4x100m relay, where the team broke the British record but still finished last), and less well known, beating O. J. Simpson in 1967, and setting

British records for the 100m and 100 yards. Athletics gave way to the law, and a career as a barrister, hoping one day to be a judge; as he commented on his fortieth birthday, 'I was a lawyer first, politician second' (p. 91).

This section of the book also deals with his early involvement in politics, primarily at university, where he joined the Liberal Club, motivated mainly by Suez and Jo Grimond (like many of his generation) and something of a desire to rebel against his parents, who were socialists. After university, however, he had no involvement in politics until 1973, when a by-election in the seat in which he lived, Edinburgh North, drew him back in. He fought Greenock in both 1974 elections, became friends with David Steel, served as Chairman of the Scottish Liberal Party from 1975 to 1977, and was selected for North-East Fife, which he won on the third attempt in 1987. *Why* he did any of this is not terribly clear, as other reviewers of the book have observed, and as he himself commented ('Why I decided to pick up politics again in autumn 1973 after three years of marriage is now a mystery to me' (p. 81)), but, I suspect, has much to do with the way in which active involvement in a smallish party can simply sweep a competent individual on to a series of positions unless a determined effort is made to stop, combined with the strong sense of duty that Campbell evidently feels towards all his obligations.

The second quarter of the book covers Campbell's efforts to win North-East Fife, and his experiences in the parliamentary party under the Steel and Ashdown leaderships. He enjoyed a relatively close relationship with many Scottish Labour figures, particularly John Smith (one chapter is entitled 'My friend John') and Donald Dewar (both were at Glasgow University at the same time as Campbell), and Robin

**Campbell's autobiography is an interesting and enjoyable read, important for anyone wanting to understand the recent history of the Liberal Democrats. It is well written and in places moving. But what it isn't is revealing.**



Cook; he believed that the cooperation he developed with Cook over the Scott Report on arms to Iraq helped to bring other Labour MPs closer to the Lib Dems, bolstering the Ashdown–Blair ‘project’. The dangers of a Lib Dem backlash against the ‘project’ if the full extent of the Ashdown–Blair talks became known, however, paradoxically led to his being kept out of some of the key meetings – as he was seen as a potential replacement for Ashdown should the latter have to resign. But there was no question that he was a supporter of the Ashdown approach; he turned down the offer of a Scottish Supreme Court judgeship in 1996 just in case the 1997 election might lead to a coalition (after seeking advice from Roy Jenkins, who observed that he’d become Home Secretary eighteen months after turning down the editorship of *The Economist*).

The third quarter covers the Kennedy leadership, from 1999 to 2006. One criticism often

levelled at Campbell is his failure to stand for the leadership after Ashdown’s resignation. As the book makes clear, he thought about it at some length, and started to gather expressions of support, including from Roy Jenkins and Tom McNally, who would otherwise have been expected to have backed Kennedy, and from Ashdown himself. But parliamentary party support was not widespread enough, and, as dealt with in the interview earlier in the *Journal*, Campbell’s assessment was that he simply would not win – a reasonable conclusion in the circumstances.

Campbell has been accused of including too much in the book about Kennedy, but this is nonsense: this period covered both his own deputy leadership (2003–06) and Kennedy’s dramatic resignation, which propelled Campbell himself into the leadership; of course he was going to write about Kennedy at some length. In fact from a historian’s point of view the book has disappointingly little to reveal about the real inside story of the Kennedy leadership, including the extraordinary efforts his office and some of his colleagues went to to cover up his binge drinking and deny that he was in any way compromised by alcohol. I suspect there is much more that Campbell could have said – for example, about the details of his conversation with Anna Werrin, head of Kennedy’s office, when she revealed to him in summer 2003 the full extent of the cover-up operation (p. 205). Ever the gentleman, however, he refrains – and in fact throughout the book goes out of his way to express his admiration for the more positive aspects of Kennedy’s leadership.

Should Campbell have confronted Kennedy about his drink problems earlier? He ponders the question in the book, particularly after Kennedy cancelled the press conference called, in July 2003, to announce that he

was stepping down temporarily to seek treatment. But there were two problems, as Campbell recognised:

Partly, it was natural reluctance to challenge him over something so private and partly because his reputation and popularity in the country and in the party at least had never been higher. It was the big conundrum: those of us who knew about Charles’s drinking were concerned, but those who didn’t saw Charles as a leader of a party that was strong and strengthening in the polls. (p. 209).

In fact, a confrontation did take place, in March 2004, after Kennedy had missed the Budget statement the week before and had appeared pale and ill during his leader’s speech at the spring party conference; as Greg Hurst reveals, Kennedy then admitted, for the first time, that he was an alcoholic, to a delegation that included Campbell.

The trouble was that Kennedy kept on claiming either that he was about to sort himself out or that he had just done so; and the nearer the election approached, the more difficult any more determined confrontation became. It took until winter 2005, after the election, for his colleagues’ forbearance finally to crack. Campbell tried again, in December 2005, suggesting resignation, but Kennedy effectively called his bluff at the parliamentary party meeting that afternoon, demanding, and receiving, expressions of loyalty; Campbell, and probably many other MPs, felt inhibited from speaking out publicly (‘the only thing I had to say had already been said to him in confidence’ (p. 236)). Loyally, Campbell then took no part in the final push, led by Ed Davey and Sarah Teather, to persuade Kennedy to stand down, though he reveals that had Kennedy gone

ahead with his first intention, to call a leadership election to clear the air, he would not have been a candidate but neither would he have served under Kennedy in the shadow cabinet.

The final quarter covers, of course, the leadership campaign, from January to March 2006, and Campbell's own leadership, from March 2006 to October 2007. Unsurprisingly, this is the least analytical section of the book (it's not the easiest thing to analyse your own leadership), and it ends abruptly and without any conclusion. Without knowing any of the wider background, from reading the book alone there is not much to explain why he felt it necessary to resign just a year and a half after his election. We pick up some of these points in the interview, which I hope helps to reach an assessment of the Campbell leadership: what did he achieve, and why he did go?

As he saw it himself, his main achievements were, first, to stabilise the party and, second, to professionalise it. To a considerable extent he achieved both. For those not involved at the centre of the party (as I was, at least up to a point, as Chair of the Federal Conference Committee) it is difficult to appreciate just how bad things had become by late 2005: with no clear leadership, party committees were drifting, the parliamentary party was demoralised, there was a feeling (expressed at the autumn conference and by outside commentators), that the party had missed its best chance for a generation at the 2005 election – and yet there was no sense at all that the leader had any plans for how to deal with this, or even that he was aware of it. With Campbell in charge, this began to change; he took the party organisation seriously and made sure that it was ready to fight the election that could have happened in October 2007. Although he was not there long enough for

any fundamental organisational reforms, the party organisation that Nick Clegg inherited in December 2007 was in far better shape than that which Campbell picked up in March 2006.

In terms of policy, Campbell admits himself in the interview that he largely simply adopted the agenda begun under Kennedy's notional leadership after the election – significant changes in taxation policy and a new approach to the British nuclear deterrent – rather than developing one of his own. This is true – yet he fought for these policy changes in a way that Kennedy never would have, including in particular his intervention in the debate on Trident in the spring 2007 conference, which clearly swung the vote (the book correctly recalls my own assessment, as chair of the debate, that he was going to lose and should stay out of it; I completely underestimated his ability to turn it round).

So in many ways Campbell's record was not a bad one. Why, then, did his leadership end so abruptly? There are several reasons, most of which are not fully addressed in the book. His age was a problem, but not the simple fact that he was sixty-four when he was elected leader; rather, he looked old, older than his years (the cancer treatment may have been partly to blame) and acted old, with an old-fashioned turn of phrase. Simple soundbites did not come easily to him – he had too much respect for intellectual arguments – and, famously, he found it difficult to adjust to the yah-boo style of Prime Minister's questions ('it's theatre, not debate. I'm uncomfortable with that kind of politics.' (p. 258)). None of this would have mattered until quite recently – Campbell would have been a fine party leader in the early or mid twentieth century – and in fact he worked hard at all of these things and was getting much better; his performance at

PMQs improved substantially and his leader's speech to his last party conference, in September 2007, was one of the best, of any leader's, that I've heard. But that all came too late; in today's media-intensive world, initial images are set very quickly and are very difficult to dislodge once formed.

Second, he was innately cautious (he mentions this in the book from time to time, for example over participation in the Butler inquiry), too much so for the leader of the third party. On a number of occasions, he took his time reaching decisions, only to find that the ground had shifted under his feet, often because of leaks to the media, before he could announce them (his measured response to Gordon Brown's mischievous attempt to recruit Lib Dems into his Cabinet ended up looking like duplicity and weakness). His preference for consultation before he reached decisions – in itself an admirable trait in a leader – sometimes stopped him making the snap decision that might have served better.

Third, he lacked solid support in the parliamentary party. His closest advisor, Archy Kirkwood, had stepped down from the Commons in 2005 and was a relatively new peer. Although the vast majority of the MPs supported him in the leadership election, there was no real inner circle committed to the Campbell leadership; as an obvious caretaker leader never likely to do more than one election, most of them were looking ahead to his successor. After the local elections in 2007 this began to turn into a systematic attempt to destabilise him, with a number of MPs and peers briefing the press against him. The gradual slide downwards of the party in the opinion polls throughout 2007 began to trigger panic amongst those unfamiliar with hard times, the party having been on

**In today's media-intensive world, initial images are set very quickly and are very difficult to dislodge once formed.**

a fairly constant upward trend since about 1995; and some supporters of other potential candidates began to try and trigger a new leadership election. The Parliamentary Party in the Lords was a particular problem; he alienated many of them by supporting a referendum on the European constitution (Lib Dem peers, for many of whom the European question was a defining issue of their time in politics in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, tend to be a good deal more pro-EU than their counterparts in the Commons), and mentions a prickly meeting with a Lords delegation in July 2007. The final thirty-six hours before Campbell's resignation saw both the Party President, Simon Hughes, and the Deputy Leader, Vince Cable, make markedly unhelpful comments: Hughes said Campbell had to 'raise his game', Cable that the leader's position was 'under discussion'. In the end, as he observes in the book, even his own office didn't try very hard to dissuade him from going.

And, as I mentioned before, he was notably unlucky. The local elections of 2007, which began to drive the nails into the coffin of his leadership, were not actually all that bad; 26 per cent of the vote, only one point lower than the year before, and 246 seats lost, against the party's own internal expectations of up to 600 losses; furthermore, the defeats were highly concentrated, with large numbers of losses (of district council seats with small electorates) in a handful of areas accounting for the bulk of them. Nevertheless, it looked bad. And then, of course, Brown failed to call the election in the autumn. Had the election been called for autumn 2007, Campbell could well have ended up leading the party that held the balance of power in the Commons; he could have made a very able cabinet minister. But in its absence, could a caretaker leader who cannot realistically

**Menzies Campbell is a decent, honourable and thoughtful man, driven by a sense of duty and responsibility underpinned by an instinctive, slightly old-fashioned liberalism.**

have expected to have been in the post for much more than three years stretch it out to four? In the end, he didn't hesitate.

Menzies Campbell is a decent, honourable and thoughtful man, driven by a sense of duty and responsibility underpinned by an instinctive, slightly old-fashioned liberalism, rather than by any clear ideological or

policy agenda. Sadly these qualities proved to be not enough for leading a third party lacking a clear national message in an increasingly media-intensive age.

*Duncan Brack is Editor of the Journal of Liberal History. He has chaired the Liberal Democrats' Conference Committee since 2003.*

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## The Left Foot

Kenneth O. Morgan: *Michael Foot, A Life* (HarperPress, 2007 (hbk); Harper Perennial, 2008 (pbk))

Reviewed by **Bill Rodgers**

ON THE day Michael Foot was elected Labour leader, on 10 November 1980, I met Ian Aitken, the *Guardian's* political editor, an old friend since my Oxford days and an unreconstructed Bevanite. He was over the moon. 'It's marvellous', he said, then pausing, 'although it will be a disaster'. This seemed to sum up the romanticism of what I then called Labour's 'legitimate left', now more often described as the 'soft left'.

The Winter of Discontent 1978–79 had wrecked the last chance of survival for the Callaghan government. The Militant Tendency, ugly and threatening, was on the march, the trade unions were lacking responsible leadership and Labour MPs were demoralised and scared. As the Gang of Four was moving towards the SDP, Michael Foot should have recognised the crisis that was facing his party. But he failed and Labour fought the 1983 election on a manifesto described as 'the longest suicide note in history'. The party had reached its nadir.

It is difficult to publish an honest biography while the subject is still alive. There are pressures from the family and

friends, and the historical perspective can be distorted. But ten years ago, Kenneth Morgan negotiated a persuasive 'Life' of James Callaghan and he has repeated his success in his 'Life' of Michael Foot.

When I knew he was working on his new book, I was uneasy. The historian, A.J.P. Taylor (who taught me), wrote a book called *The Trouble Makers*; and Taylor and Foot performed together in successful television debates in the 1950s. Until the penultimate stage of Foot's career, when he was in the Cabinet, he too had been above all a trouble-maker. Could Morgan get inside the skin of his subject when Callaghan had been a very different man?

Michael was one of the seven children of Isaac Foot, the patriarch of a well-established and well-respected West Country professional family, Nonconformist in religion, Liberal in politics and steeped in literature and music. (See Kenneth Morgan's article earlier in this *Journal*.) The first chapter of the book – perhaps the only one – leaves me with unqualified warmth towards Michael as he grows up in the far-off world of the interwar years. I admit that

I underestimated the strength of his passion for Swift, Hazlitt and Byron, equal to his passion for politics.

But in the second chapter, and the second half of the 1930s, we find Michael a left-wing socialist in Liverpool, becoming a journalist in London and meeting Aneurin Bevan, a fiery young Welsh MP, and Lord Beaverbook, the newspaper magnate and much besides. Both became his heroes; Bevan deeply influenced the whole of his life.

At the 1945 election, four members of the Foot family were Parliamentary candidates, but only Michael stood for Labour and he alone was elected. Henceforth, for forty years he was a significant figure in the politics of the left, as MP for Plymouth for ten years and then, after a short gap, for Ebbw Vale.

Through much of the 1950s, the Labour Party was in turmoil, uncertain where to go and how to change following the wartime coalition and Clement Attlee's successful post-war administration. Hugh Gaitskell became Attlee's successor, but Bevan was the charismatic leader of the left. As much as Michael Foot loved Bevan, he could not abide Gaitskell and it conditioned his political disposition long after their death. He could not, for example, forgive my role in campaigning in support of Gaitskell and against unilateral disarmament at a critical time in 1960–61.

The Bevanites were a mixed bag both inside Parliament and out, held together by the weekly newspaper *Tribune*. Some were fellow-travellers, close to the Communist Party during the Cold War; others were bloody-minded, or natural campaigners, enjoying the political battle and uneasy about the responsibility of office. Michael Foot was very much part of the eclectic left-wing show, but was never a hard-line ideologue.

Above all, he was a radical libertarian.

He was an opponent of party discipline in the Commons and played a major role in the 1960s – in harness with Enoch Powell – in defeating the Labour government's bill to reform the House of Lords, because it might have enhanced the second chamber's influence. He believed in the traditional cut and thrust of debate in the chamber and disliked cross-party select committees. And in the 1970s, when we were both in the Cabinet, he strongly opposed compulsory seat belts – on libertarian grounds – and effectively killed my own proposals despite the fact that I had won a Cabinet majority.

Michael Foot, now aged over sixty, arrived in the Cabinet in 1974 as 'an incorrigible rebel' with no previous experience of government. Harold Wilson appointed him to balance the predominantly right-wing membership and to please the trade unions.

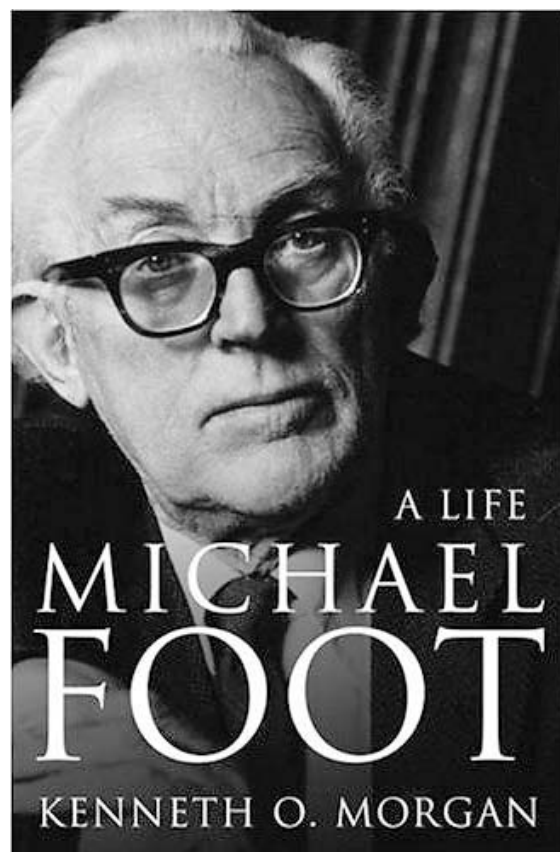
Kenneth Morgan recognises the dangerous growth of the power of the unions in the 1970s, and calls one of his own chapters 'Union Man', doubling up his description of Foot's chosen role and the title of the autobiography of Jack Jones. But he is much too gentle in treating the cosy relationship between Foot and Jones that gave the unions almost all they wanted.

In early January 1981, Michael Foot called on me at my home in Kentish Town. He had decided to make a last attempt to persuade me to stay in the Labour Party of which I had been a member for thirty-two years. I have no idea whether his attempt was genuine, but there was no meeting of minds. He did not grasp the serious consequences of an imminent split because for most of his life he had preferred to be associated with the far left than with the Fabian social democrats.

It was Neil Kinnock, Foot's protégé, who broke the spell in the Labour conference of 1985 by denouncing Liverpool's Derek Hatton and his allies. At last, the legitimate left – including the unreconstructed Bevanites – were ready to join together to save the party as it was squeezed between Mrs Thatcher and the SDP/Liberal Alliance.

Michael Foot is now seen as a loveable elderly gentleman with a dog and a walking stick. I wish I could share this simple affection, as Kenneth Morgan has written an excellent, perceptive 'Life'. But for me the dominant image will remain the Michael Foot in the photograph on the jacket of the book, angry and unforgiving.

*Bill Rodgers (Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank) was a member of James Callaghan's Cabinet, one of the SDP's Gang of Four and leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords 1997–2001.*





## Greatest of the Liberal philosophers

Richard Reeves: *John Stuart Mill, Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007)

Reviewed by Eugenio Biagini

THIS IS the first full-length biography of the great Victorian philosopher since the publication of Michael St John Packe's work more than fifty years ago.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime Mill has inspired hundreds of publications by some of the world's leading scholars in disciplines ranging from logic and political theory to economics and social history. Almost every single aspect of his life and work has attracted not only specialist attention, but also debate, greatly stimulated by the publication of the monumental *Collected Works*.<sup>2</sup>

The task of producing a major reassessment of Mill's life and work in the twenty-first century was therefore a daunting prospect for any single writer. It is symptomatic of the topicality and relevance of Mill's ideas for the wider public that such a task was attempted not by a professional historian or philosopher, but by a journalist and former government advisor on welfare reform. This is also very appropriate: for journalism and advising on (and indeed making) public policy were two of the many ways in which Mill exercised his influence during a career which spanned the central decades of the nineteenth century and was only interrupted by his sudden death in 1873. By then he was regarded as the greatest Liberal of his age. A hundred and thirty-four years later he was voted 'the greatest Liberal' in a poll sponsored by the present *Journal*. Moreover, although many of his views were controversial during his own lifetime, most of them have since become accepted features of the way we understand democratic life, to the extent that his

authority is frequently invoked by libertarian Conservatives and Fabian socialists as much as by Liberal Democrats. How can we account for such a dramatic and long-lasting impact?

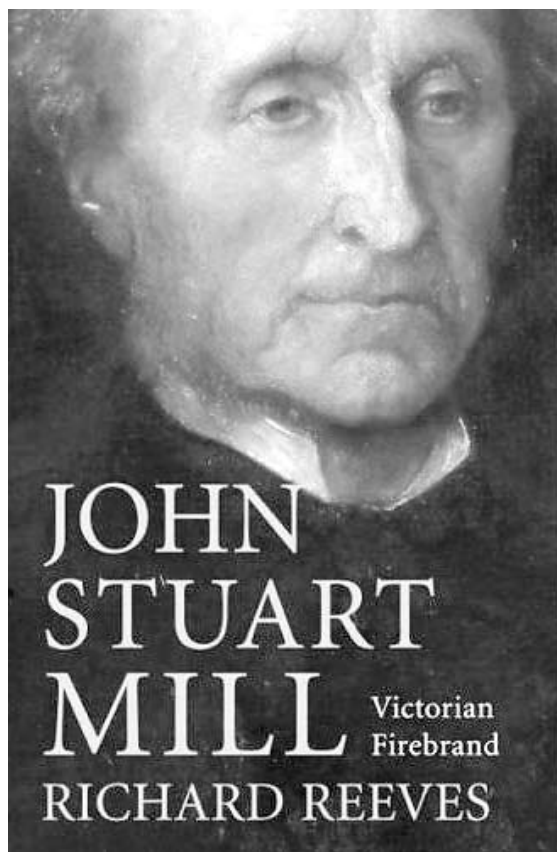
Mill was a political and constitutional theorist, logician, economist, civil rights campaigner, social reformer, imperial administrator and an MP for the constituency of Westminster (1865–68), then one of the few 'democratic' boroughs in the country. His hobbies included botany, which turned him into a keen environmentalist and a champion of biodiversity (pp. 234–35). But what is truly exceptional about him is not that he took such an active interest in so many different disciplines and fields of political activity, but that he *excelled* in all of them, to the extent of setting new standards among academics while also reshaping popular opinion. Thus his *Principles of Political Economy* (first published in 1848, then widely revised in successive editions until 1873), became and remained a main textbook in British and Irish universities for a whole generation. Its abridged popular edition sold tens of thousands of copies, and inspired the publication of similar works by some of Mill's disciples (including Henry and Millicent Fawcett), which in turn fired the reforming zeal of late-Victorian labour leaders.

Of course, of all of his works, it is *On Liberty* (1859) which has been and continues to be the one most widely read. This is not surprising, not only because of the intrinsic value of this 'little book' (as Mill called it), but also because liberalism was certainly the key dimension of

his thought and whole mindset. Liberty was at the root of his attitude both to democracy and gender equality and to the 'socialism' with which he toyed throughout his career. As Reeves argues:

[It] was Mill's liberalism that shaped his response to socialism ... He was vehemently opposed to centralised state control of the economy, but was a strong supporter of socialism in the form of collective ownership of individual enterprises, competing in a market economy. In the final analysis, the best system was the one which provided for the 'greatest amount of human liberty and spontaneity' ... Mill was a liberal, a democrat and a socialist – in that order. (p.7)

Here we find a further reason why Mill continues to exert a powerful fascination on modern Liberals, especially in this country and the rest of Europe, where 'liberty' is closely linked to a degree of social democracy.



This link, which came to dominate Liberal politics in the days of Beveridge and Keynes, was first identified by Mill, for whom finding the right balance between individualism and social responsibility was a moral imperative as well as the main question in modern social engineering.

Reeves brings to life this extraordinary figure in a sympathetic but critical biography, a comprehensive study which reveals – ‘warts and all’ – the multifaceted personality of this philosopher–man of action. It must be said that there are not many ‘warts’, but Mill was no saint, let alone ‘the Saint of Rationalism’ as Gladstone dubbed him – at least not in the sense of being only motivated by some cool utilitarian calculus of costs and benefits. On the contrary, he was passionate to an excess, often allowing his emotions to drive him beyond prudence. His personal austerity and principled approach to public affairs were somehow ‘saintly’, but Reeves puts them in context and shows how Mill could also be extremely prickly and unforgiving, especially when it came to what he perceived as affronts to his beloved friend, intellectual partner and (eventually) wife, Harriet Taylor. It did not help that she was also touchy and self-centred. Reeves offers a persuasive reassessment of their relationship and her influence on him. This is an area which has attracted considerable debate, largely because Mill was always extravagantly generous in his praise of Harriet’s gifts and contribution to his intellectual development. Weighing carefully the evidence, Reeves suggests that she should not be regarded as either the instigator of Mill’s most radical views (for example on gender equality and ‘socialism’), or as a boastful mediocrity. Instead, Harriet was for him primarily an intellectual companion,

**Reeves has produced a lucid and perceptive synthesis, which pays equal attention to Mill’s life and the development of his ideas.**

who constantly stimulated and encouraged him to explore new ideas and venture into uncharted and difficult territories, even when this involved standing up to public opinion and challenging contemporary political correctness.

One of the areas in which Mill was a resolute ‘nonconformist’ was in his attitude to racial prejudice. In a famous revisionist account, Mehta has criticised Mill for his ‘Orientalist’ attitudes to India.<sup>3</sup> An Orientalist he may have been, but without any consistent sense of imperial superiority; in fact he was often critical and dismissive of the claims and pretensions of the European powers, arguing, for example, that ‘the characteristic of Germany is knowledge without thought; of France, thought without knowledge; of England, neither knowledge nor thought’ (cit. pp.220–21). In his days he was in fact criticised for his racial egalitarianism, an attitude which was perceived as out of step not only with public opinion, but also with what the majority regarded as ‘a fact’ – namely, the notion of a cultural (or even biological) superiority of the ‘white man’ over the rest of the human species.

Mastering a bibliography which is not only vast but also multidisciplinary – ranging from the history of political

and economic thought to social and political history and gender studies – Reeves has produced a lucid and perceptive synthesis, which pays equal attention to Mill’s life and the development of his ideas. The book has a predominantly chronological structure, but each chapter has also a strong thematic focus, which enables the author to study the various dimensions and developments of Mill’s thought and career in their historical and biographical context. The result is a great historical biography, which the general reader will find riveting and the professional academic indispensable.

*Eugenio F. Biagini is a Lecturer in History at Sidney Sussex College Cambridge, and Reviews Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.*

- 1 M. St J. Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (Seker & Warburg, 1954); but see also the recent short biography by W. Stafford, *John Stuart Mill* (Macmillan, 1998).
- 2 John Robson et al (eds.), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (33 volumes, University of Toronto Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965–91).
- 3 U. Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

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## Social Liberalism

Duncan Brack, Richard S. Grayson and David Howarth (eds.):  
*Reinventing the State: Social Liberalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*  
(Politico’s, 2007)

Reviewed by Neil Stockley

**R**EINVENTING THE *State* appeared on the eve of the Liberal Democrats’ 2007 autumn conference. This was a difficult time for the party.

Its then leader, Sir Menzies Campbell, was achieving little traction with the public and the Liberal Democrats were languishing in the opinion polls.

Within weeks, the party was looking for a new leader, its third in as many years.

With the party in an uncertain situation, its social liberals sought to assert themselves anew. *The Guardian* claimed that the Liberal Democrats' 'left wing' had published *Reinventing the State* as the start of an attempt to 'take on the dominant pro-market *Orange Book* faction' and 'wrest control of the party'.<sup>1</sup> That was a case of over-spin. *The Orange Book* received a cool reception from most of the party when it was published in 2004, and its most contentious recommendation, to reshape the NHS using a social insurance model, was widely criticised.

Social liberalism has always been the dominant strand in the Liberal Democrats' philosophy. The party's continued support for an activist state and its policies on taxation and redistribution of income, public services, and the environment are all testament to that.<sup>2</sup> The policy review paper *Trust in People*,

adopted by the party in autumn 2006, reiterated the Liberal Democrats' commitment to 'a fairer ... much less unequal society', with 'decisions taken near to those they affect' and 'public services that ... involve those that use them ... and make full use of the talents and imagination of their staff'. The party also renewed its commitment to protecting the environment as 'an urgent priority'. All the candidates for the leadership in 2006 and 2007 promised that social justice, reforming the state and safeguarding the environment would be their priorities.

Still, Dr Richard Grayson, one of the editors of *Reinventing the State* and a former Liberal Democrat Director of Policy, was quoted as saying that the publication sought 'to influence the manifesto, so it will put issues such as social justice and the environment at its heart and will be an avowedly centre-left manifesto'. He added: 'I think we are pushing at an open door'.<sup>3</sup>

If social liberalism is predominant in the Liberal Democrats, and Dr Grayson was correct, it follows that the analysis and prescriptions presented in *Reinventing the State* are of central importance for the future of the party. So what do the 'social liberals' have to say?

The core idea of the twenty-two contributions is, in the words of the editors, 'reinvent[ing] the British state so that it delivers social justice and environmental sustainability through a decentralised and participatory democracy'.

'Social liberals', as represented here, perceive that, for some twenty years, British political debate has focused on promoting the values and virtues of the market. In contrast to the 'economic liberals', they argue that such a reliance on markets has led – or, if unchecked, could lead – to outcomes that liberals cannot

accept. Duncan Brack makes a powerful argument that the current level of social inequality in Britain undermines individuals' personal freedom – their ability to participate fully in society – along with the well-being of the community. Ed Randall argues that unfettered market action will lead to greater environmental degradation. Tim Farron MP contends that rural communities have been deprived of opportunities in housing and employment and local farmers left exposed to the power of monopolies.

The authors contend that a mixture of state and collective responses must be taken if such market failures are to be addressed. The pivotal issue is the forms that such responses should take. The contributors differ from the 'economic liberals' in arguing that the best way to promote economic equality is to radically reform the state, rather than to reduce it in size or rely on market-based policy solutions. They are sceptical about the market and its tendency to erode personal freedoms (in their broadest sense) and community cohesion. Paul Holmes MP, for instance, argues strenuously that markets are an imperfect tool for delivering social policy objectives. 'Social liberals' are, however, just as suspicious of the centralised state and its propensity to be coercive, bureaucratic and out of touch with peoples' needs and concerns. This is where they part company with the 'social democrats'.

The 'social liberals' main solution to social and economic inequality is 'localism'. This is forcefully articulated by Chris Huhne MP, who defines it as 'the decentralisation not just of management decisions but of political responsibility to a human scale where voters can once again identify – and complain to, or praise, or boot out – decision makers in their community'. In a compelling piece,



Huhne builds a democratic, liberal case for localism, arguing that it will help to revive confidence and participation in politics. He shows that increased spending on public services under Labour has not led to a commensurate increase in quality of service.

Huhne discusses two ways forward. One is the introduction of markets or quasi-markets in the public services. The other is to introduce more local, democratic decision-making. He says, correctly, that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but there are important differences. Huhne argues that markets or quasi-markets may lead to reduced services (the reduction of choice) for those left behind when people choose another option. They may also lead to reduced flexibility or, worse, undermine the potential for innovating and adapting public services to local needs and circumstances. Huhne contends that the problem with Britain's public services is the lack of local accountability and control; centralisation has stifled creativity and initiative. He also uses international data to rebut the argument that allowing local flowers to bloom in the public services will lead to greater social inequality, and shows that there is no necessary connection between the two. John Howson and Richard Grayson then describe how these principles can be applied, in education and the NHS respectively.

The Liberal Democrats have clearly embraced 'localism' as a guiding principle. Their leader, Nick Clegg, has written that Labour's 'activist' model of 'central state' has failed to enhance social mobility or to tackle wealth inequalities. He wants to see in its place 'the liberal model of delivering social justice', based on 'localising our public services and in community control [which] is grounded in our belief that it is by giving

individuals real control over their lives that we can create opportunities for all'.<sup>4</sup> In March 2008, the party adopted a new health policy that embraced elements of the 'localist' approaches. It also took up, in a very cautious way, some 'market-based' policy proposals.<sup>5</sup>

The social liberals seem to have prevailed. But many 'economic liberals' are also content with this turn of events. That should not be too much of a surprise. In an incisive essay, David Howarth MP describes the core values of 'social liberalism' as a commitment to the redistribution of wealth and power, alongside a belief that democratic decision-making must be deepened. He casts considerable doubt on the validity of the comic-book clash between 'social liberals' and 'economic liberals', as sometimes presented by sections of the media. Howarth argues that in the British context, 'economic liberals' really have the same end goals as 'social liberals'. Any disagreement will really be over means rather than ends: specifically, how different sorts of social liberal perceive the role and limitations of market mechanisms to achieve their goals. More pertinently, Howarth argues, the difference is really about 'how far government policy should promote economic equality beyond the point strictly required by the goal of safeguarding personal freedom': between 'maximalist' and 'minimalist' social liberalism.

The 'social liberals' (or, as David Howarth might say, 'maximalist' social liberals) still seem to have their work cut out. Chris Huhne's version of 'localism' can be traced back to the public services policy commission that he chaired in 2001–02. Its report was adopted by the party but very few of its specific proposals, especially those relating to user choice, were finally reflected in the 2005 general election

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manifesto. One of the reasons was, apparently, that party strategists sought to position the Liberal Democrats as being more concerned with delivering quality and capacity in public services distinctively in the political debate. Another was their perception that the Huhne framework lacked specific attractive promises, suitable for use in an election campaign. It is also possible that some leading 'social liberals' feared that allowing local flowers to bloom could serve to exacerbate social and economic inequalities.

Recent policy developments notwithstanding, the Liberal Democrats have some way to go before they can claim to be a truly 'localist' party of the type contemplated by many of the contributors to *Reinventing the State*. Moreover, the party has yet to demonstrate a functional link between its existing policy proposals for increased local accountability and its declared goals of promoting economic equality and enhancing social mobility. This highlights a major challenge for 'maximalist social liberals'; they can (and, usually, they do) triumph in the party's intellectual debates, but may not always be so successful in political or tactical arguments.

Other developments since the publication of *Reinventing the State* further illustrate this point, and how important the differences between the types of 'social liberal' can be. By most of the definitions set out in this book, Nick Clegg surely qualifies as a 'social liberal'. The most significant policy shift under his leadership to date has been the promise to 'look for ways to cut Britain's overall tax burden, so ordinary families have more of their money to spend for themselves'.<sup>6</sup> The editors and other contributors to *Reinventing the State* want to slim down and constrain central government, giving as many of its powers as

possible to elected local institutions. Some may perceive that the new taxation pledge could reduce the community's collective ability to redistribute wealth and enhance individual opportunities. Moreover, political analysts have suggested that the new taxation pledge was made in part for electoral purposes: fending off Conservative challenges in some seats and attracting low- and middle-income voters in others. If that is correct, 'maximalist social liberals' will need to come to terms with the political realities and dilemmas facing the Liberal Democrats or, better still, provide their own specific suggestions as to how they might be addressed.

As noted above, the contributors discuss other areas of market failure, besides economic inequality. Remedies for protecting the environment or, more precisely, addressing climate change and decarbonising the economy, are set out clearly by Chris Huhne MP, who was the party's shadow environment secretary at the time of writing. This framework uses market-based instruments that provide incentives to lower carbon emissions from energy and transport, green taxes to promote environmentally friendly behaviour and regulation where price signals cannot produce the desired outcomes. It is consistent with the 'liberal environmentalism' described by Ed Randall. The policy measures are designed to ensure that the poorest members of society are not adversely affected.

A similar clarity of liberal thought and policy practice is not always so evident elsewhere in the book, however. Several contributors discuss other important areas in which markets are deficient (for instance, their impact on local communities) but rather less is said about these might be addressed or how the positive outcomes of markets best secured.

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This is not to say that, environmental matters aside, the 'social liberals' are ignorant about economic policy. One of the most impressive essays is David Hall-Matthews' thoughtful analysis of economic globalisation. He does not try to argue that national governments should try to stand in the path of free trade; rather, they should not use globalisation as an excuse for evading their responsibilities to their citizens. Hall-Matthews finds that most concerns about globalisation amount to concerns about the fate of national governments and that these are to some extent understandable, especially to liberals, who instinctively resist any concentration of power. Hall-Matthews concludes that, contrary to some myths, nation-states (suitably reformed) can – and should – take action to ameliorate the most negative impacts on their own citizens. Surely no liberal could object to that. One suggestion is that such action should take the form of reinvigorating local communities. This is somewhat vague, however, and how this would be done and who would bear the costs is not made clear in the collection.

If there is an important omission from this book, it concerns what sort of economic policy 'maximalist' social liberals propose and how much it may differ from the party's existing economic thinking which, since the early 1990s, has taken on a more 'market-driven' approach. The question is important for the obvious reason that a strong, sustainable economy is essential to support and underpin policies of redistribution and innovation in social policy. Moreover, the questions around economic policy have become even more relevant; since the essays were written, the US's 'credit crunch' has occurred and started to have impacts on Britain. There is more questioning now of the prevailing orthodoxy in

economic policy than there has been for some twenty years. In some areas, such as the banking sector, the Liberal Democrats have proposed more effective regulation. 'Social liberals' may need to consider whether they are content with those suggestions.

*Reinventing the State* is an important, vital set of essays. The collection conveys in some interesting and compelling ways what it means to be a Liberal Democrat and, more particularly, how social liberals in Britain approach contemporary political questions. In many ways, the essence – the 'heart and soul' – of the party can be found in these pages. The collection's readers, editors and authors may reflect, however, that the party also needs a 'head' and that it occasionally comes to different conclusions to those reached in *Reinventing the State*. In practice, the 'social liberalism' so well elucidated in this book is synthesised with other versions of liberalism and, perhaps as importantly, political considerations will win out in the end. As a result, the party may sometimes tack in directions that are different to those provided in this collection.

*Neil Stockley is director of a public affairs company and a frequent contributor to the Journal of Liberal History.*

- 1 'Lib Dem left attempts to wrest control of the party', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2007.
- 2 See 'Social Liberalism' in Duncan Brack and Ed Randall (eds.), *Dictionary of Liberal Thought* (Politico's, 2007).
- 3 'Lib Dem left attempts to wrest control of the party', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2007.
- 4 Nick Clegg, 'A home for progressives', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2008.
- 5 Liberal Democrats, Policy Paper 84, *Empowerment, Fairness and Quality in Health Care* (2008).
- 6 Liberal Democrats, *Make It Happen* (2008).



**Letters**

continued from page 13

is not due to any Liberal sympathies on the part of Tressell; rather, he believed that Liberals and Tories were basically the same, and that neither would advance the cause of the poor.

*Paul Hunt*

**The Master of Elibank**

Dr Graham Jones, in his article on Eliot Crawshaw-Williams (*Journal* 59, summer 2008) stated that the Master of Elibank (The Hon. Alexander W.C.O. Murray) was Liberal Chief Whip in April 1908. In fact, he was then Scottish Liberal Whip (as MP for Peebles & Selkirk) and did not become Chief Whip (as MP for Midlothian) until February 1910.

*Dr Alexander (Sandy) S. Waugh*

**Liberal thinkers**

It's always good to see informed discussion of liberal thinkers of the past in the *Journal of Liberal History*, but Dr Philip MacDougall somewhat overstates the case for T.H. Green (*Journal* 59, summer 2008). Green is certainly worth reading, but unlike Mill, he is really only a second-division thinker.

Green's work is very derivative of German Idealism, particularly Kant and Hegel. His major work on political thought, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (freely available at <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/green/obligation.pdf>), gives a valuable and clear summary of Kant and Hegel, together with earlier political thought, and also makes clear where his political theory originates. He was not the only nineteenth-century

British philosopher writing political theory inspired by Kant and Hegel; Bernard Bosanquet is another obvious example. Green, therefore, was not the only source that the New Liberals could draw on for a communal basis to political theory.

There has been a return to Kant and Hegel in political thought since the 1970s. Hegel has been influential in the communitarian model taken up by various liberal and social democratic thinkers, including the Canadian Charles Taylor, who wrote a book on Hegel; Kant has been influential in Republican and Third Liberty theories which emphasise the role of active citizenship as a fundamental aspect of human liberty. Green has been little mentioned in all of this, though there has been a modest revival of Green scholarship, as there has been for British Idealism in general.

Philip MacDougall claims that Green introduced various ideas of social reform and state action into British liberalism. However, all the concepts he mentions can be found in Mill, through a careful reading of *On Liberty*; indeed, Mill is sometimes mentioned as part of the Republican tradition referred to above. Unfortunately Philip MacDougall exaggerates the extent to which 'classical liberals' were opposed to state and collective social policies, and a general sense of common welfare. In doing this, he gives away the liberal heritage to the 'libertarians' who claim to follow classical liberalism but who are mostly political conservatives. Mill does not fit into this stereotype, and was strongly condemned on these grounds by Hayek and Mises. Adam Smith himself

anticipates Mill in his concern for national action on social issues. The American political theorist Samuel Fleischacker has done a particularly notable job of placing Smith in the Republican tradition alongside Kant.

While arguing for Green as the prophet of the New Liberalism, Philip MacDougall omits the strong streak of social conservatism in Green, in which he is like some contemporary communitarians. Green was a prohibitionist with regard to alcohol, and contemplated criminalising adultery in *Principles of Political Obligation*, deciding against – but only just.

While I am all in favour of more people learning about Green, it is hard to see why he should be regarded as harshly treated

by voters for the greatest British Liberal in comparison with some other thinkers of at least equal stature – including Jeremy Bentham, the great utilitarian philosopher and political reformer; James Harrington, the seventeenth-century Republican thinker who was an influence on both the Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution; and Tom Paine, the author of important texts on popular sovereignty and rationalism, and one of the inspirations for the American Revolution. Though Kant and Hegel themselves were not British, it is well worth studying them; they help in understanding some of the best contemporary political thought in the English language.

*Barry Stocker*

## LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY: WHAT MATTERS TO YOU?

- Which historical figures inspire you?
- What is your favourite history book?
- Do you think of yourself as part of a political tradition?
- Are Liberal Democrat politics rooted in a sense of history?

I am working on a PhD about the history and traditions of British political parties and would very much like to hear from you.

I am trying to find out how Liberal Democrat members and supporters feel about the history of the party. I would also like to hear from members and supporters of the Liberal Democrat History Group, including those who are not involved with the party.

A short questionnaire is enclosed with this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*. I would be very grateful if you could complete it and return it to me at the address below, by **15th October**. If you would prefer to complete it electronically, I would be very happy to send it by email. I would also be grateful if you could pass on the details to anyone else you think might be interested.

The questionnaire can be completed anonymously, although if you are willing to give your details it would be very helpful as I am keen to be able to contact some of the respondents for follow-up interviews. All this information will be used for my thesis and the results of the survey will also be published in the *Journal of Liberal History*.

Please let me know if you have any questions or if you would like further copies of the questionnaire.

I look forward to hearing from you!

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# FOUNDING THE WELFARE STATE

A hundred years ago, in 1908, H. H. Asquith's government introduced the Old Age Pensions Bill. This was just the beginning of a comprehensive Liberal programme of social reform, including national insurance, minimum wages, labour exchanges and compulsory school meals, among much else. Did this programme really represent a decisive break with nineteenth-century notions of a minimal state, or was it simply an attempt to counter the challenge of the emerging Labour movement? Debate the issue in this centenary year of the Pensions Act.

Speakers: **Dr Ian Packer**, Lincoln University; author of *Liberal Government and Politics, 1905–15*, and **Joe Harris**, General Secretary of the National Pensioners Convention. Chair: **Lady Jane Bonham Carter**, Asquith's great-granddaughter.

8.00pm, Sunday 14 September

Bay View 2, Bournemouth International Conference Centre

## Important notice: email mailing list

We have recently changed the mailing system through which we send out email notices of History Group meetings, latest publications, special book offers for *Journal* members, etc.

If you have already signed up to the mailing list, you should be automatically transferred to the new system. However, we have been experiencing problems recently, and it is possible that you may not be.

If you received an email from us between 29 August and 5 September, advertising our conference fringe meeting (see above), then you are on the list, and no further action is needed.

If you did not, then you are not on the list. To join the list, send a blank email to [liberalhistory-subscribe@lists.libdems.org.uk](mailto:liberalhistory-subscribe@lists.libdems.org.uk). You will be asked to confirm your email address, to avoid spam. Our apologies for any inconvenience.

## Liberal Democrat History Group at Lib Dem conference

Visit the History Group's stand in the exhibition in the Bournemouth Conference Centre – stand 94 in the Solent Hall (just opposite the Lib Dem Image stand). There you can:

- Take part in our Liberal history quiz. Exciting prizes to be won!
- Buy a copy of our latest book, the *Dictionary of Liberal Thought*: £28 to *Journal* subscribers, £35 to everyone else.
- Buy a copy of Richard Reeves's *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (reviewed in this issue – see p. 50): £22 to *Journal* subscribers, £30 to everyone else.
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