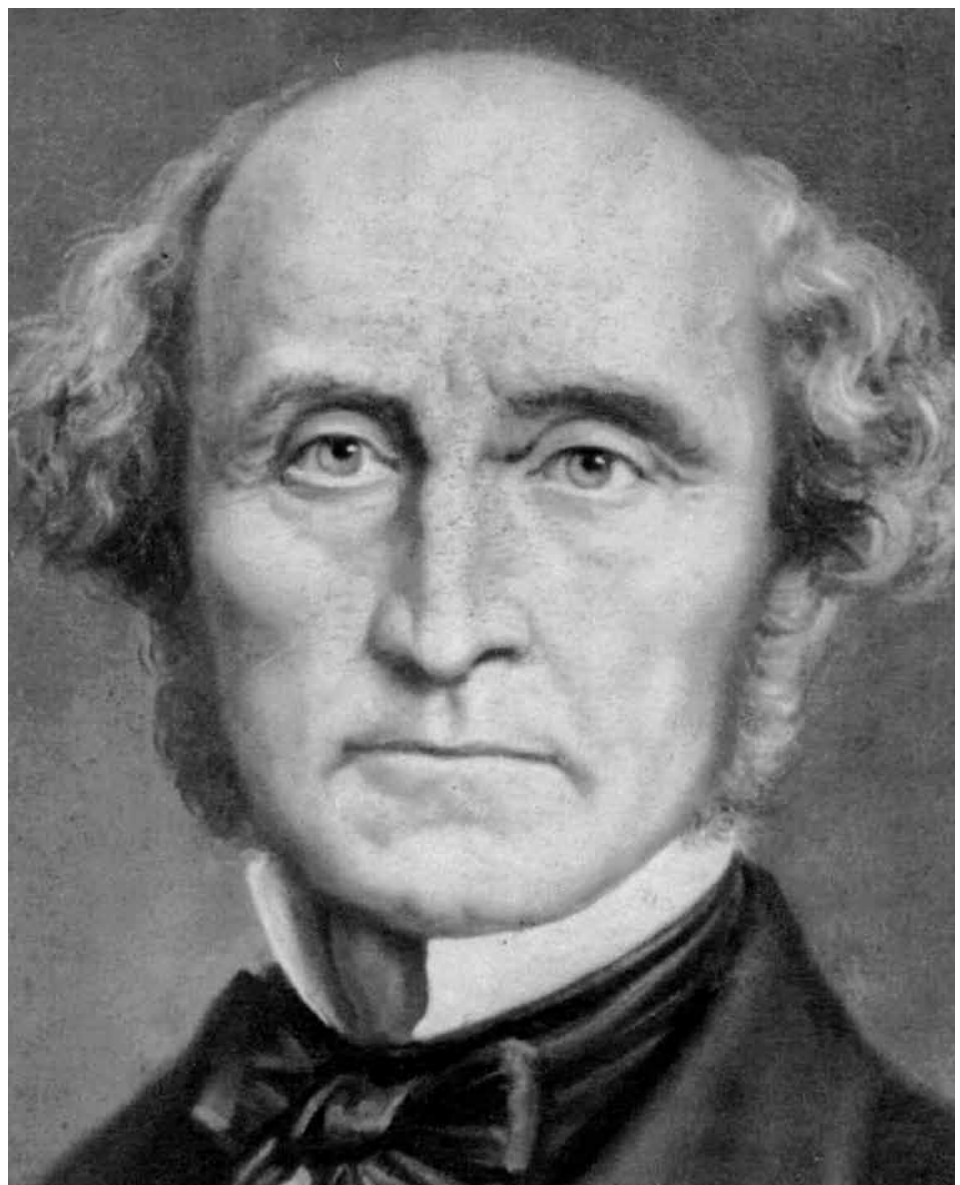


Alan Butt Philip adopts a revisionist approach for this assessment of John Stuart Mill as a politician.

For most of his life Mill was a civil servant in India House, which managed government interests in India, just like his father before him. His long-standing engagement with political debate, economics and political philosophy was undertaken in his spare time.

His published works, some of which are now iconic, were usually the product of discussion among friends, especially with his wife Harriet Taylor, over a period lasting many years. Thus Mill, who used his pen so effectively as his method of shaping politics, came to the real rough and tumble of political campaigning, face to face with the voters and the people, inexperienced and rather late in life.¹

JOHN ST AS PO



QUART MILL LITICIAN

MILL WAS elected one of two Liberal MPs to sit for the Westminster constituency in 1865 at the age of fifty-nine. His wife had died six years earlier; he had retired from India House; he already had a high public profile in London; and he had time on his hands. The traditional view – and one encouraged by Mill himself – has it that John Stuart Mill was a failure as politician and elected representative. After just three years in the House of Commons he was voted out by the electors of Westminster, just when his party was being swept to power under the leadership of William Gladstone. I will argue that, as a backbench MP, Mill achieved more in his first three years in the Commons than almost any other MP in history – with the possible exception of David Steel.²

In any assessment of Mill as a politician, it is necessary to understand the context of politics in the mid-nineteenth century. These were the days of constituencies with small electorates comprised of men with property and income, primarily the educated middle class. While those without votes did play a part in elections, those with votes were prepared to accept a more philosophical and principled approach to politics than would be acceptable today. Mill had been approached to stand as a Liberal candidate for an

Irish county seat in the 1850s, but had refused the offer. Even in 1865 he was a reluctant candidate, swayed to stand primarily by the enthusiasm of a number of Westminster electors who petitioned him. But at heart he did not think the voters would want to be represented by someone with his advanced Liberal and radical opinion.³

So what kind of a career move was Mill's candidacy and his election as an MP? His reluctance to make this move is clear. He was already a considerable public figure, as a result of his journalistic activities; he had authority, but not charisma. He was not seeking ministerial office, and when Gladstone invited Mill to dine with him shortly after he was elected, Mill turned the invitation down – not exactly the way to win friends and influence those in high places. Gladstone was, in fact, a great admirer of Mill's writings, and his own personally annotated copy of *On Liberty* still exists.⁴ Mill saw his role in the House of Commons as being primarily to influence other MPs, shoring up the position of the more advanced Liberals, among whom Mill was happy to be assigned. Mill became known for taking up particular causes, some of which were far from popular, such as his advocacy of female suffrage and his attacks on the policy of coercion against Irish insurgents.

**Even in 1865
he was a
reluctant
candidate
... at heart
he did not
think the
voters would
want to be
represented
by someone
with his
advanced
Liberal
and radical
opinion.**

So why was Mill defeated in the 1868 general election? It seems that he had annoyed the Tories in his constituency in describing the Conservative party as, 'by law of its composition, the stupidest party'.⁵ Although he was well known for his views on democracy throughout the 1860s, it appears that Mill's endorsement of plural voting (based on level of education) had endeared him to some Tory voters who were later disabused of their sympathy for Mill when he campaigned for the full enfranchisement of working-class men and equal votes for women. But probably the most damaging incident to Mill's chances of re-election was his decision to contribute to the election expenses of the radical atheist, Charles Bradlaugh, who was contesting Northampton for the Liberals. This action scandalised 'polite society' at the time and drew attention to Mill's own atheism, which he well knew did not chime well with the electorate.⁶ When offered candidatures in alternative seats to secure re-election to the Commons, Mill turned them down, preferring to enjoy 'a great and fresh ... feeling of freedom'.⁷

What, then, did Mill achieve as an MP for a meagre three years? There is no legislation to his name and he held no ministerial office. He was not a particularly strong speaker in the House, preferring to deploy reason rather than rhetoric.

JOHN STUART MILL AS POLITICIAN

He preferred to be more influential behind the scenes, bringing his arguments to bear on small groups of like-minded MPs or in one-to-one encounters. In today's parlance, the lobby journalists would have branded him a member of the advanced Liberal awkward squad. But his tactics may well have suited the politics of the time. The whips had nowhere near the power and influence they have today. Nor should we forget that the Whig section of the Liberal Party in parliament was still substantial – Mill's own fellow Liberal MP for Westminster, Lord Robert Grosvenor, being an example and a scion of one of the wealthiest landowning families in Britain, owning half of London's West End and most of fashionable Belgravia. Nevertheless, Mill certainly made his mark on several issues. Some of the most striking examples occur in his interventions on the Reform Bill, which sought to widen the franchise and improve the administration of elections. Mill was a firm advocate of full adult suffrage, but did not favour the secret ballot.⁸ On the other hand, he did argue strongly that the public purse, rather than the candidates themselves, should bear the costs of organising the ballot in the constituencies. Mill was also one of the earliest advocates of changing the traditional 'first past the post' electoral system to one of proportional representation.⁹

He was also most effective on one or two issues that happened to arise while he was an MP. He was particularly exercised at the possibility that the Royal Parks in London might be declared out of bounds for public demonstrations.¹⁰ Without Mill's timely intervention in 1868, the finale to the one-million-person demonstration against British military intervention in Iraq in 2003 might not have been held in Hyde Park. An even more unpopular cause which Mill took up concerned the extradition of asylum seekers which Disraeli's government proposed in 1866. Mill argued that a civilised society should accept that all human beings had certain rights, including the right to due process and for the courts to examine whether the basis of the proposed extradition was in fact political, in which case it should be refused. The government was shamed into withdrawing its proposals.¹¹ On other

issues, Mill was to take some very farsighted stands. He condemned the excessive violence used by Governor Eyre in Jamaica in trying to suppress a revolt there, and used the British courts to bring out the atrocities done in the name of the Crown. He argued strongly that London, as the national capital, should have its own tier of government. Mill also made himself something of an expert on Irish Land issues and spoke frequently in Irish debates.¹² Unsurprisingly he also spoke out on Indian affairs given his long experience at India House; and he made clear his support for Indian self-government.

But Mill's most lasting achievement was to be the first MP to argue for votes for women on an equal basis to men. The Reform Bill offered him the opportunity to propose amendments to this effect and, although the proposal was very unpopular and soundly defeated, Mill and his friends were delighted to find that they had the support of over eighty MPs in a recorded vote.¹³ What Mill cannot have anticipated was that this parliamentary campaign was then to stimulate the setting up of the female suffragist movement outside Westminster, whose struggle was to come to fruition fifty years later. An illuminating side issue is worth highlighting at this point. The major public campaign movement in favour of franchise reform was the Reform League. It was their great demonstration in Hyde Park that Mill had sought to safeguard (see above) and for which he had acted as intermediary to broker a compromise location for the demonstration acceptable to the Metropolitan Police. But Mill always refused to join the Reform League. Why? Because the Reform League, which championed universal suffrage, would not argue for universal suffrage for men *and* women. This tells us something about Mill's stands on principle. He could make compromises on small matters (for example, where to hold a demonstration) but on major matters of principle he was uncompromising.

Accounts of Mill's candidature for the Westminster constituency are full of revealing anecdotes about his behaviour. I take the view that, if John Stuart Mill had applied for approval as a parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Democrats in

2009, his application would have been turned down; first, because he had so little campaigning experience generally; second, because he refused to canvass for votes; and third, because he had never been a local councillor or stood for election previously. Mill was not prepared to tailor his views to the whims of his audience or his electors. When challenged at one public meeting to defend a remark he had made that the working class were liars, he admitted this was his view and explained why he thought that, despite good intentions, the working class often could not avoid telling lies. Mill's questioner said in reply that here was an honest man who deserved his vote.¹⁴ Mill's idiosyncrasy as a candidate (in twenty-first-century terms) did not stop there. He always made it clear that he would not canvass the electors for their vote. He took the view that his views were generally well known, as a result of his extensive journalism, and that it was enough for him to address a few public meetings. Moreover he also made it clear that he would not pursue his constituents' private interests, such as seeking positions in the civil service. Nor would he respond to constituent's correspondence unless there were matters of national political or general philosophical significance at stake – in which case he might well correspond at length. Eventually Mill felt compelled to restrict even these activities, as correspondence was taking so much of his time.¹⁵ It was remarked at the time that, with Mill's approach to campaigning, even the Almighty himself would have failed to be elected! To compound matters, Mill also thought it was corrupt to personally contribute funds for his own election. He had no objection to contributing to other candidates' election campaign funds, as in Bradlaugh's case, but he would not seek to bribe his own way into the House of Commons.¹⁶ As noted earlier, Mill was one of two Liberal MPs elected for the Westminster constituency; his fellow MP being on the Whig side of the party, the Liberal ticket was well constructed. By all accounts they appeared to run separate campaigns, raise separate election funds and to have little or nothing to do with each other. When Mill was defeated in 1868 his 'colleague' was elected, but the poll was topped

Mill's most lasting achievement was to be the first MP to argue for votes for women on an equal basis to men.

by the one Tory candidate, W. H. Smith, founder of the chain of high street stationery shops. Smith was to be the subject of an election petition on the grounds that he had grossly overspent on the election, but this petition was ultimately unsuccessful even though the substance of the petition appeared to be justified.¹⁷

One possible bone of contention between Mill and his electors was the fact that for much of each year he was resident in France, near Avignon, to be as close as possible to the grave of his wife. During the parliamentary sessions, which were shorter than they are now, Mill was in London; outside of these sessions, Mill preferred to go to Avignon if it was worth making the journey. Of course Mill's journalism and other writings could be undertaken from anywhere, but he was clearly not the omnipresent MP attending every conceivable constituency function and networking locally every hour of the day or night.

A more fundamental problem was Mill's lack of religion in an era of high-Victorian morality and a largely middle-class electorate. Mill's approach was not to raise the subject himself and, for the most part, certainly at the 1865 election, his lack of religion was not much of an issue. Mill was clearly a very moral man, even if he was not a Christian, but his atheism did come into play at the 1868 election, even if only by proxy as a result of helping to finance the election campaign of a fellow atheist, Charles Bradlaugh. A more streetwise politician might have refrained from making a public donation to Bradlaugh's campaign, but Mill would not have wished to conceal his support. Bradlaugh, in his view, deserved to be elected an MP. Mill wanted to help financially to achieve this, and thought it was his public duty to do so whatever the political or personal consequences for himself.¹⁸

In essence, Mill was very much a campaigning parliamentarian whose impact was felt, either at the time or subsequently, on an impressive list of issues. He ensured that the cost of elections fell on the public purse and launched the movement to get votes for women. His legal challenge to Governor Eyre's actions in Jamaica ensured that British colonial administrators were more circumspect before resorting to the violent suppression of

In essence, Mill was very much a campaigning parliamentarian whose impact was felt, either at the time or subsequently, on an impressive list of issues.

demonstrators. His challenge to the government kept the Royal Parks free for use as sites for demonstrations. He launched the parliamentary campaign for proportional representation – still unfulfilled in part. He argued against the suspension of habeas corpus in Ireland as counterproductive in dealing with the violence of the Fenians. He defended the civil rights of minorities, including asylum seekers, when few others would.

Mill's influence continues to this day – both as a writer and as a parliamentarian. He was and he remains an iconic and uncompromising figure. He has achievements to his credit as a philosopher, as a politician and as a human being. He is renowned for his championship of the application of reason to politics and his ability to apply this to his own political intercourse; and his works still appear on the reading lists of sixth forms and universities. He provided the platform upon which a social liberal political philosophy was developed, much of which underpinned the actions of the great reforming Liberal government of 1906–15. On a personal level, his transparent relationship with Harriet Taylor and the equality he sought between them makes him a thoroughly modern man. I doubt that he was ever to be found doing the washing-up in their kitchen, but by all accounts you would be unlikely to find Harriet doing so either. Mill mourned her early death enormously and paid this tribute to her influence on *On Liberty* in his autobiography:

The Liberty was more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name, for there was not a sentence which was not several times gone through by us together ...¹⁹

In short, Mill was and is a major influence on British politics and liberalism more generally. He was a man of enormous political courage and of daunting integrity. He was a man of principle who sometimes could compromise on matters of minor importance. When the House of Commons did eventually vote in 1928 to give women the vote on equal terms with men, one of the leaders of the suffragist movement, Millicent Fawcett, insisted to her supporters outside parliament

that they must walk immediately to the nearby Embankment so as to pay tribute, at his statue there, to the man who had started their public campaign – John Stuart Mill.²⁰ I suggest you do not pay heed to Mill's own modesty in discussing his failings as an MP. The record speaks for itself, and I rest my 'revisionist' case.

Alan Butt Philip is Jean Monnet Reader in European Integration at the university of Bath, and has been a Liberal and Lib Dem parliamentary and European candidate on several occasions. This paper was first given at the History Group / LSE / BLPSG seminar on John Stuart Mill in November 2009.

- 1 In preparing this paper I have drawn primarily upon two important sources of information about J. S. Mill. First, Mill's own *Autobiography* is a short but invaluable guide, first published in 1870. Much more recently Richard Reeves's *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (2007) has thrown a great deal of light upon the man and his times.
- 2 David Steel, later leader of the Liberal Party from 1976–1987, was elected Liberal MP for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles at a 1965 by-election. In 1967 he drew first place in the ballot of all MPs for parliamentary time to promote new legislation. He chose to sponsor what was to become the Abortion Act 1968 which legalised abortions for the first time, but with certain limits. This was a famous parliamentary battle which continued over many months in both Houses of Parliament and Steel made a national reputation as a new and young MP on the back of this campaign.
- 3 J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 160.
- 4 Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand*, p. 377.
- 5 Mill, op. cit., p. 165.
- 6 Reeves, op. cit., p. 405 ff.
- 7 Reeves, op. cit., p. 408.
- 8 Alan Butt Philip, *John Start Mill and Modern Liberalism*, p. 9.
- 9 See J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861).
- 10 Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 167.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 12 J. S. Mill, *Chapters and Speeches on the Irish Land Question* (1870).
- 13 Mill, op. cit., pp. 73–74.
- 14 Mill, op. cit., pp. 162–3.
- 15 Mill, op. cit., pp. 174–9.
- 16 Mill, op. cit., pp. 160–1.
- 17 Reeves, op. cit., pp. 407–8.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 405.
- 19 Mill, op. cit., pp. 144–5.
- 20 Reeves, op. cit., p. 448.