

JOHN B

GREAT POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

In his time – an age of political giants – John Bright was seen as an extraordinary man and his achievements deserve to be better known. Yet he did not feature in the Liberal Democrat History Group’s contest to find the greatest Liberal (see *Journal of Liberal History* 55 (summer 2007)), for he was not a great politician or statesman, nor did he write any lasting books. **Antony Wood** reassesses the record, and asks: was Bright simply a great political campaigner, or something more?



BRIGHT

NER OR SOMETHING MORE?

JOHN BRIGHT was a great campaigner, an outstanding orator and a man of high integrity who had a strong impact on national life for over forty years. Nevertheless, there are issues such as female suffrage, home rule for Ireland and proposals for factory reform where his stance appears to sit uneasily with his strongly held Quaker beliefs, and these need to be examined if we want to come to a balanced view.

Although Bright's career and achievements have been well documented by historians, it may be that his special contribution to Victorian public life and the growth of Liberalism has been overshadowed by his inability to hold high office or to work comfortably with the inevitable compromises of political life. The interesting question this raises is therefore: how did Bright become such a powerful influence in his day?

Finding the right balance about Bright and his work is made harder by the fact that it is not the written word which defines him but the spoken. Bright's greatest talent lay in his ability to address large crowds or packed assemblies, which nowadays is almost a lost art. He was a master orator and, given the generally ephemeral nature of the spoken word, this may not have

helped his legacy. In his book *Victorian People*, Professor Asa Briggs describes John Bright as the 'the most important figure of mid Victorian radicalism.'¹ Similarly, A. J. P. Taylor claims that Bright's speeches were 'perhaps the greatest ever delivered in a Parliamentary Assembly.'² In his heyday, Bright would address thousands of people at a time³ and, although he died in 1889 his speeches were reprinted twice between 1900 and 1914.⁴

Born in 1811 to a Northern mill owner, Bright managed the family firm for most of his life, alongside being an MP. He first rose to local attention in Rochdale in the 1830s by opposing the introduction of compulsory church rates,⁵ and this local success led on to his involvement with the Anti Corn Law League, when he was only twenty-nine (in 1840). Although young, he nevertheless became a leading figure in a campaign of national importance, and it is wrong to think he had just a bit part in Corn Law repeal. At a time when the campaign had been going for some years and was faltering his arrival introduced vigour and direction as well as optimism. Bright always believed, even against the odds, that the League would succeed because of the justice of its cause.⁶

On the back of this success he then campaigned for the

Parliamentary seat of Durham on the twin issues of repeal of the Corn Laws and himself as an independent champion of the common people. During the campaign in Durham he said, 'I am a working man as much as you. I have no interest in seeking appointments under any government. I have nothing to gain by being the tool of any party and I come before you as the firm defender of your rights.'⁷ He won the seat in 1843 and, having become an MP, Bright remained one for the rest of his life. His next seat was Manchester (1847–1857), where there is still a fine statue of him in the city centre. After a temporary setback caused by his opposition to the Crimean War (to be discussed later), he went on almost immediately to be elected MP for Birmingham (1857). His long tenure there lasted until 1885 and was rounded off by a short period as MP for Birmingham Central until his death in 1889, aged 77.

Not surprisingly, given the influence and experience he gained in such a long career, Bright was offered high office, albeit not until he was in his late fifties. However, he had a dislike of the minutiae of administration and the compromises of power, so neither of his two stints in Cabinet lasted very long. He was President of the

John Bright
(1811–89)



Board of Trade for two years until he resigned in 1868, ostensibly on health grounds, and he held the sinecure of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster twice. The latter post he left in protest at the bombardment of Alexandria (1882) and it is typical of Bright that he should both be careless of the trappings of office and that he should resign on a matter of principle. But it is also symptomatic of his personality that he found being in the Cabinet difficult. As an orator he was at his best where he could outline the scope, seriousness and possibilities of problems rather than having to implement the solution.⁸

Having briefly reviewed Bright's career it is now time to examine his legacy more closely. His stature rests on his ability to oppose Government by arguing for what he felt was right, as opposed to what was popular, pragmatic or expedient. Evidence of this can be seen in Bright's stance on four emblematic topics of the day, namely: the Corn Laws; the Crimean War (1854–1856); the American Civil War (1861–1865); and, later, electoral reform.

As a background to these specific campaigns we should note three continuing themes. First is his distrust of war as a sensible act of policy. He did not feel 'it is our duty to meddle everywhere'.⁹ Secondly, he was

suspicious of Britain's 'accidental' Empire: '[It] may lead to a seeming glory to the Crown and may give scope for patronage and promotion, ... but to you, the people, it brings expenditure of blood and treasure, increased debt and taxes and the added risks of war in every quarter of the globe.'¹⁰ Finally, for much of his life, he had a mistrust of the ruling elite which he linked to a genuine compassion for the poor. 'You may have an historical monarchy decked out in the dazzling splendour of Royalty; you may have an ancient nobility settled in grand mansions and on great estates but, notwithstanding all of this, the fabric may be rotten and doomed ultimately to fall, if the great mass of people on who it is supported is poor and suffering and degraded.'¹¹

To understand the importance of the repeal of the Corn Laws we need to consider 'the condition of England' – to use Carlyle's phrase. The Corn Law of 1815 (and subsequent amendments) was designed to protect the profits of landowners by prohibiting imports of foreign corn below a certain price. This threshold price was set punitively high, in effect leaving the nation reliant on the home harvest and unable to balance out any shortages with cheap imports from abroad.¹² As a result, if the British harvest was bad, rents rose and the poor literally starved.¹³ At this time wealthier families generally ate meat, whilst the middle classes could mostly afford bread as their staple diet. However meat and bread was too expensive for the poor, which left many people surviving on a diet of potatoes, turnips and other poor foodstuffs – a practice known as 'clemming.' In 1842 the number of paupers in Britain was estimated at 1.4 million or 10 per cent of the population, and such people faced malnutrition or starvation on a regular basis.¹⁴ However, Cobden and Bright campaigned throughout the country, using every method of raising support (the press, public opinion and populist meetings etc.) and the Anti-Corn Law League became, perhaps, the first modern pressure group.¹⁵ These techniques brought them success in 1846, when the Corn Laws were repealed, and indeed presaged the form that political campaigning would take in the years ahead.

During this campaign Bright showed himself to be more than just

an outstanding orator, capable of rousing crowds. He displayed vision and a sound tactical sense by emphasising that free trade, when it came, would raise wages and shorten hours. Twenty years later, he was able to substantiate these claims, which his opponents had contested, for it was estimated that over the period nearly £500 million worth of food which the old Corn Laws would have prohibited had entered the country. Trade in general had expanded beyond expectation and also average wages in most parts of the country had risen between 30 and 40 per cent.¹⁶ In his own lifetime, this most eloquent of the League's two leaders saw his vision of the political and social benefits of repeal come to fruition.¹⁷

As might be expected, both Bright and Cobden enjoyed great popular acclaim for some years after the Corn Laws were repealed. But all this was to change and they became virtual outcasts on account of their opposition to the Crimean War, which started in 1854.¹⁸ They attacked the war as immoral, unnecessary and expensive (it cost £500 million) and this stance made them very unpopular.¹⁹ However, as Asa Briggs has noted, 'It is a sign of John Bright's greatness that he never trimmed his sails on this issue', and during the course of the conflict he made two of his greatest speeches.²⁰ On 23 February 1855, speaking of the excessive casualties he said, 'The angel of death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear his wings.'²¹ Then, in a speech about a year into the war, he ended with this peroration: 'Let it not be said that I am alone in my condemnation of this war and of this incapable and guilty Administration. Even if I were alone ... I have ... the priceless consolation that no word of mine has tended to promote the squandering of my country's treasure or the spilling of a single drop of my country's blood.'²² In only two and a half years the war had led to about 40,000 deaths (Bright's figure), and a commission of enquiry into the competence of the military was set up.²³ However, especially in the early stages, the conflict had touched a strong, even jingoistic, streak within the British, which Palmerston, as prime minister, cleverly manipulated and those who opposed the war, like Bright, were vilified as unpatriotic.

After one piece of compelling oratory about the war, Disraeli complimented him saying, 'I would give all that I ever had to have made that speech.' Bright's reply was typically severe: 'Well, you might have made it if you had been honest!'²⁴ Initially, however, the war was very popular and, as has been said, Bright's uncompromising anti-war stance took its toll. During 1856 and 1857 he had what we would now call a nervous breakdown and it took some time for him to regain his original vigour.²⁵ When he did recover, he once again became involved with two other campaigns with clear moral implications – the American Civil War and electoral reform.

1861 saw the start of the American Civil War, and, in common with much of public opinion, the British government was minded to support the South. Had this become official policy it could well have led to a worldwide revival of slavery, let alone severe damage to the good name of Britain internationally.²⁶ From a modern standpoint this may seem surprising, but at the time there was a feeling amongst the middle classes in Britain that the Southerners were brave, well-mannered gentlemen 'who were being bullied by the Yankees.'²⁷ Also the North was seen as having started the war against the 'gallant little South,' which believed in free trade and which, tellingly, had become home to many British former cotton workers.

Of course, set against such issues as human rights and freedom these feelings were quite lightweight. Nonetheless, it took the best efforts of various individuals, including Prince Albert, the Duke of Argyll, Mill, Cobden and Bright, to reverse such views.²⁸ Nor should we think this was some arcane international issue. The blockade of Southern ports caused a shortage of cotton, which then threw operatives in the British mills out of work, including those in Bright's own factory. However, despite these pressures, British workers refused to fall in line with the government's wish to support the slave owners and speed the war's end.²⁹ It is interesting to note that, during the war, Bright, despite his pacifist background, wrote to President Lincoln to say that the fighting should not end until slavery had been abolished.³⁰

So, despite having opposed the Crimean War (together with

a possible of war against France), Bright took the courageous view that the American Civil War was different, since it was really about freedom – and the defence of freedom was a greater cause than being anti-war. Certainly, the Americans appreciated his contribution. After 1865 and the war's end, Bright was often told that he was the most popular man in America: '... if he came we would scatter flowers before him all the way to the sea.'³¹ President Lincoln had his picture in his office, and fifty years later Trevelyan summed up Bright's contribution during this period with the comment: 'When the wise were blind he made half England see.'³²

In the latter part of his career Bright championed the cause of electoral reform. Even though he changed his style he was still very effective and he tempered his oratory so as not to offend either the church or the aristocracy. Also, he mollified his stance with colleagues so that his influence became more of a unifying force. Rather than splitting those elements which eventually came together in 1859 (and the ensuing years) to form the new Liberal party, he worked hard to maintain unity.³³ Thus another of Bright's achievements was to be an important member of that group of Whigs, Radicals and Peelites who came together to plan the defeat of Lord Derby's Tory administration at a meeting in Willis's Tea Rooms in 1859. This meeting is generally considered to have consolidated the expansion of the Liberal Party. A year before this, in 1858, Bright had started his campaign for electoral reform with another famous speech, saying, 'Let us have a real (reform) Bill or no Bill at all.'³⁴ He now thought that, rather than trying to change the system of franchise, it was tactically better to concentrate on seeking fairer representation (i.e. the right balance of electors to MPs) and to introduce secret ballots.³⁵ Although the current electoral rules prevented five out of six men from voting, Bright realised that sorting out the franchise system, grossly unfair though it was, would have to wait. Strategically the time was not right.

In fact, during the years leading up to the introduction by Disraeli of the secret ballot (1872), steady progress was made on electoral

reform, even though a complex process was further complicated by regular changes of government (six in fifteen years) and by the various leaders playing musical chairs. It's true Bright was not a supporter either of universal male suffrage or of women having the vote, nonetheless by the mid 1860s he was, in effect both an advisor and an activist for the reform movement, constantly warning, exhorting and advising.³⁶ In particular, he alerted the nation to the need for land reform and, at a time when the cities were very much in limelight, he brought the issue of rural poverty to the fore.³⁷ Once again, campaigning meant an arduous programme of speeches, but these helped to increase the pressure on the government.³⁸ However, being the head of the campaign meant he also took the full brunt of the aggressive opposition to reform.³⁹ Eventually all the passion and hard work paid off and in 1867 a Tory instigated Reform Act was passed, which Bright thought more or less mirrored his own proposals of 1859.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, in an article of this length there is not space to cover all the areas of Bright's political involvement, such as India etc., nor is that the intention. A change in perspective is the aim, and others will need to carry out a more extensive evaluation. However, before taking stock of a man who was famous and influential in his time, there are three issues on which he has been severely criticised. First, Bright was a mill owner who from time to time opposed efforts to improve the lot of workers, for example Wilberforce's Ten Hour Act. In fact, all the evidence is that he treated his own workers well but objected to the proposed method of reform, via legislation. He thought this was the state interfering improperly between contracting parties, who should, he felt, agree necessary changes amongst themselves.⁴¹ Secondly, with regard to Ireland – another area for which he is criticised – Bright opposed Irish home rule becoming, in effect, a Liberal Unionist and fell out with Gladstone. He disliked and distrusted the 'rebel' Irish politicians and felt that what Ireland needed was proper protection for the Protestant minority, plus a period of consolidation for the land system.⁴² Finally, there is the question of Bright's objection to female suffrage, a stance for which he

'The angel of death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear his wings.'

came under regular attack, not least from his sister. At one point he had theoretically been open to the idea, even supporting a John Stuart Mill proposal to extend the franchise to women. However he was opposed in general to the idea of women MPs, and in 1871 he wrote, 'I do not think the bestowal of the Suffrage on Women will be of any advantage to them and I fear, at present, and perhaps always, it will tend to strengthen the Party which hitherto has opposed every good measure passed during the past thirty years.'⁴³

In summing up this paradoxical man it is easy to see why he upset people such as the aristocracy and Church leaders. Also, it is tempting to try and assess him for what he wasn't – an intellectual, a great writer or a towering politician.⁴⁴ It is also true that he was not good at legislative form, such as statistical analysis and the special demands of Cabinet Office for, as we have seen, Bright was more a man of the platform than the council chamber.⁴⁵ However, set against these criticisms are some truly major campaigning achievements, and it is these that underpin John Bright's legacy.

Together Bright and Cobden helped saved thousands of lives through their successful efforts to repeal the Corn Laws and many, particularly those in the poorer classes, never forgot what he had done for them.⁴⁶ Almost single-handedly Bright opposed the Crimean War, especially at the start. Between 1861 and 1865 he led the successful movement to support not the South but the North in the American Civil War. Bright then successfully headed the campaign for electoral reform which resulted in improved representation, a fairer franchise and, eventually, in the ballot becoming secret in 1872. As much as anyone he created the conditions for the formation and survival of the Liberal Party. Whilst working towards this latter goal he altered his style, so that the aggressive, trenchant Bright became more tolerant of both colleagues and opponents. He moderated his language, but not his values, for the greater good.⁴⁷

His legacy in terms of the survival and growth of Liberalism should not be understated. He left Gladstone his supporters and his method and made Liberalism more than just a creed.⁴⁸ Despite being a

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Northern mill owner and of relatively humble origins, he provided the Nonconformist movement with political leadership and gave a voice to the grievances of many poor people. To do all this took a very special person for on many issues he had the exceptional gift of being able to connect politics with emotion and use 'poetry' to invest old feelings with confidence and clarity.⁴⁹ It is a measure of the man that, in 1883, on the anniversary of his forty years in parliament, half a million of his constituents lined the streets of Birmingham. The old radical had been accepted.⁵⁰

On this record John Bright stands comparison with many other great Liberals, and his story deserves to be more widely known. Bright – the first Quaker in Cabinet; champion of free trade; scourge of a complacent establishment; pillar of electoral reform; key founder of the Liberal party; anti-war leader; enemy of over-interference by the State and man of principle in the murky world of politics – perhaps deserves better than he has got so far. Add to this his power as an orator and successes as a campaigner and you have a man to outlast the years. Of very few people was it ever said, 'MPs would rush into the House if they heard he was to be called,'⁵¹ and this oratory still resonates today:

[For we] are bound by the sacred duty to examine why it is, with all this trade, all this industry and all this personal freedom, there is still so much that is unsound at the base of our social fabric.⁵²

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- 1 Asa Briggs, *Victorian People* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 205. On p. 206 he also makes the point that Bright's politics were concerned not with expediency but moral principles.
- 2 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (Hamish Hamilton, 1957), p. 62.
- 3 G. M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (Constable, 1913), pp. 80 and 88.
- 4 Keith Robbins, *John Bright* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. xvi.

- 5 Duncan Brack (ed.) *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (Politico's, 1998), p. 55. See also a good summary of Bright's career in Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government* (Yale University Press, 1993), p. 320.
- 6 Miles Taylor, *Dictionary of National Biography online* (Oxford University Press, 2004–10), p. 3 of the entry on Bright.
- 7 G. M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (Constable, 1913), p. 113.
- 8 John Vincent, *Formation of the British Liberal Party* (Constable, 1966 and Harper and Row, 1976), p. 171.
- 9 Duncan Brack and Tony Little (eds.), *Great Liberal Speeches* (Politico's, 2001), p. 139.
- 10 Duncan Brack and Robert Ingham (eds.), *Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* (Politico's, 1999), p. 29.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 12 G. M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (Constable, 1913), p. 53.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 15 Brack and Little, *op. cit.*, p. xix.
- 16 Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 83. Bright speaking in his home town of Rochdale and quoting Parliamentary figures for imports.
- 17 Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 214.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 19 Olive Anderson, *A Liberal State at War* (St Martin's Press, 1967), pp. 163 and 207. During the war, Sir Arthur Elton published sixty-seven penny tracts saying that, since the original *casus belli* had been removed, then the war was simply interventionist and opportunist. It is reckoned that in one year the war cost 92 per cent of the value of British exports.
- 20 Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
- 21 Brack and Ingham, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
- 22 Brack and Little, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
- 23 Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 248. It is almost impossible to find accurate figures for the total number of dead over the two and half years of the war. However in a speech in Birmingham on 28 October 1858 Bright talks about '40,000 men sent to perish ... in the Crimea,' whilst on p. 251 Trevelyan quotes Bright's letter to Charles Villiers: 'the Russian War spent about £500 millions.'
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- 25 Taylor, *Dictionary of National Biography online*, p. 7 of the entry on Bright.
- 26 Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 297.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 301. However, to get the sense of why so many people initially supported the South and how this view was changed, with the consequent effect of improving England's