

THE MAKING OF 'THE PEOPLE'S WILLIAM'

William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98) attracted massive political support among large sectors of the working class, especially in the north of England (outside of Lancashire), Wales and Scotland. That Gladstone became 'The People's William' was a surprising development for one who had been a stern young Conservative and a person alarmed by the popular campaigns for parliamentary reform, which was achieved in 1832, and for the People's Charter, between 1838 and 1848, which was not achieved. **Chris Wrigley** charts the making of 'The People's William'.

THE HIGH ESTEEM – even adulation – in which Gladstone was held in the last two or more decades of his life was witnessed by the huge quantity of Gladstone memorabilia that was kept in many working people's homes. In terms both of the volume sold and of the span of the social groups who bought the plaques, mugs and plates produced in his memory, Gladstone's appeal is reminiscent of that of Napoleon Bonaparte in France and Abraham Lincoln in the United States. Such admiration was also marked by the day-trippers who went by train to Hawarden Castle (Gladstone's marital home in North Wales) in the hope of glimpsing the Grand Old Man and his wife Catherine. Gladstone's appeal crossed class and religious lines. One example of a Nonconformist day trip to Hawarden was in May 1890, when there was a mass political pilgrimage from Caernarfon. Organised by the Engedi Calvinist Methodist Chapel, a thousand people went by rail. The Liberal MP J. Hugh Edwards wrote of the journey, 'After the customary manner of Welsh people, when ecstatic in mood, they gave vent to their feelings by singing their favourite hymns'.¹

Gladstone's emergence as a highly popular politician was a complex process that was not as straightforward as he liked to suggest in his old age. In 1865 he observed of his early politics, 'the Reform Bill frightened me in 1831,

and drove me off my natural and previous bias'.² However, there is nothing to suggest that Gladstone earlier had been a crypto-Liberal, even though in 1894 he wrote, 'I do not think the general tendencies of my mind were in the time of my youth illiberal'.³ Indeed, there is much to the contrary. The Gladstone of 1886 would not have warmed to the two anti-Reform handbills he paid for in 1831, one of which read:

People of England!
Your Parliament is dissolved, for having voted on Tuesday night that the Papists of Ireland should not be permitted to return a larger proportion of Members of Parliament, than that which was solemnly established at the Union between the two countries. We add no comment: nor is any needed. Do not for a moment believe it to be an act of your beloved King. You are called on to exercise your suffrages in favour of men who wish to establish a NEW CONSTITUTION. Before you vote, ask yourselves the following questions and let no man
DIVERT YOUR ATTENTION FROM THEM.

1. What has *South America* gained by new constitutions?
Confusion.
2. What has *France* gained by a new constitution?
Disorganisation.
3. What has *Belgium* gained by a



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new constitution? Starvation.

4. What is 'Old England' to gain by a new constitution?

And

5. What am I to gain by a new constitution?

Answer these for yourselves:
vote for men who are solemnly pledged

1. To redress every grievance.

2. To remove every blemish.

3. TO RESIST

REVOLUTIONS TO THE
DEATH.

And may God send a happy
issue!

Briton.

Gladstone thus travelled a long way from the sentiments of 'Briton' to being a friend of nationalism and, more generally, to being 'The People's William'. Looking back, Gladstone attributed his illiberal views to his 'narrow Churchmanship', resulting in the fact that his 'politics ... were tinged with religious fanaticism'.⁴

Gladstone's religious faith was the bedrock of his career. He would have liked to have been an Anglican clergyman and often appeared to think that he had a special relationship with God, much to the irritation of many political opponents. However, earlier depictions by biographers of Gladstone as a far-sighted Christian statesman with clear-cut long term aims have been undercut by the publication (between 1968 and 1994) of his diaries and by much scholarly research often involving the diaries of Gladstone's contemporaries in parliament. While the diaries have made Gladstone appear less Olympian, they also have made him more human and even more complex. The reader of the published diaries is hard put to believe Gladstone to be a brazen opportunist and humbug, although this does not exclude him being a skilful political operator, attuned to exploit short-term favourable political openings. During his lifetime, those who had the opportunity of discussion with him were similarly impressed by his character. This was famously so with John Ruskin who, after long conversations with him, wrote to Mary Gladstone of her father that he could now 'understand him in his earnestness'. He went on to ask, 'How is it possible for the men who have known him long – to allow

the thought of his course of conduct now, or at any other time, having been warped by ambition, to diminish the lustre and the power of his name?'.⁵

Not only do Gladstone's diaries reinforce the reader's understanding of the importance of religion to Gladstone, they also repeatedly show Gladstone's concern about economical and orthodox financial behaviour. The son of a very wealthy Liverpool merchant, Gladstone had instilled in him from an early age the sanctity of commercial contracts and of sound finance. In 1859 he wrote to his brother Robertson, 'Economy is the first and great article ... in my financial creed'.⁶ Financial concerns often underlay Gladstone's attitude to other issues. For instance, even with something as close to his heart as his home rule proposals, one finds Gladstone very anxious lest the Irish beneficiaries of home rule should escape their share of naval and other imperial costs.⁷

Gladstone's skills as Chancellor of the Exchequer in preparing and presenting the 1853 budget firmly established him at the forefront of British politics. It was a major step in the emergence of 'Gladstonian finance' as the dominant financial force in the second half of the nineteenth century, in its devotion to frugal state expenditure and to free trade, with a strong desire to avoid expensive foreign involvement. His 1853 budget brought more people within the bounds of income tax, but explicitly excluded 'what I would call the territory of labour' – in other words, those earning £100 or less per annum. One widely attractive aspect of his budget was the reduction of duty on thirteen foodstuffs, most notably on tea. A French commentator observed of this budget, 'The bulk of the English feel that Gladstone is their champion against certain privileged classes. They wonder at his courage, admire his skill and are determined that he shall not be beaten'.⁸

Gladstone's budgets of 1860–6 strengthened his reputation as a financier and consolidated his popular standing. With his 1860 budget, Gladstone removed the last protective tariffs (though he kept a few tariffs for revenue purposes) and attempted unsuccessfully to remove the paper duty, the House

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of Lords taking fright at working people gaining access to cheaper books and newspapers. Gladstone observed in his budget speech, 'On dear books, which are published for the wealthy, it is a very light duty; on books brought out in large quantities by enterprising publishers for the middle and lower classes, it is a very heavy and oppressive duty'.⁹ He was successful in removing the paper duty in his 1861 budget, as well as reducing income tax by a penny in the pound.

Throughout this period, Gladstone continued to extol frugality in public finance. He commented during his 1861 budget, 'I am deeply convinced that all excess in the public expenditure beyond the legitimate wants of the country is not only a pecuniary waste ... but a great political, and, above all, a great moral evil'. He also spoke of free trade finance and tax cuts as lessening class bitterness and binding the country together. He was insistent that income tax should impact uniformly on all who could afford to pay. In his 1860 budget speech, he spoke of 'laws which do not sap in any respect the foundations of duty, but which strike away the shackles from the arm of industry, which give new incentives and new rewards to toil, and which win more and more for the Throne and for the institutions of the country'.¹⁰

While Gladstone admired entrepreneurs, being himself a scion of a prosperous mercantile family, he also had growing respect for labour, especially skilled labour. In his 1863 budget, Gladstone was most enthusiastic about the behaviour of the Lancashire working class during the cotton famine brought about by the US Civil War, which saw 'one of the wealthiest portions of the country, and perhaps the very wealthiest portion of its labouring population, in a condition of unexampled prostration and of grievous suffering'.¹¹ Together with his wife, Gladstone ran and funded a small-scale relief operation at Hawarden, where some young Lancashire women were trained for domestic service and some men employed on making roads and paths on the estate. Catherine Gladstone also visited distressed cotton towns: Blackburn (where she helped instigate soup kitchens), Preston, Darwin, Ashton-under-Lyne and

Stalybridge. Gladstone paid tribute to her in his diary in 1862, 'she is a great part of the whole business with the people everywhere'.¹²

As well as being impressed by the restraint and sacrifices of the Lancashire cotton workers, Gladstone was also impressed by evidence of working-class thrift. Among the trade union deputations which he received as Chancellor of the Exchequer was one from the Amalgamated Society of Engineers on 10 May 1864 which requested to use the new Post Office Savings Banks, a request which he readily granted. He had also been much impressed by another trade union deputation on his Annuities Bill, which enabled people to buy low-cost government annuities through post offices.¹³ He was aware of similar values present in the cooperative movement, with its ethos of collective self-help and its leaders' declared opposition to members living on credit. Gladstone was delighted to find the skilled working class imbued with thrift, sobriety and seriousness, a long way from what he felt had been threatening moods displayed in 1815–20 and in the era of Chartism (when he had volunteered to be a special constable).

In pushing through the repeal of the paper duty with the 1861 budget measures – thereby making the House of Lords decide whether or not to reject all the financial provisions, as it had in 1860, by vetoing the repeal of 'the taxes on knowledge' – Gladstone scored a major constitutional success. It was a measure greatly desired by Radicals. When he was carrying it out, Gladstone urged John Bright to ensure that his procedure was not jeopardised by triumphal speeches against Palmerston (the prime minister) and the Lords: 'if we do what is right and effectual, we should all through say the very least possible about it'. Gladstone further enhanced his standing with Radicals with his famous observations on the franchise, made in the House of Commons on 11 May 1864. In his speech he said:

I venture to say that every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or of political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the

constitution. Of course, in giving utterance to such a proposition, I do not recede from the protest I have previously made against sudden or violent, or excessive, or intoxicating change; but I apply it with confidence to this effect, that fitness for the franchise when it is shown to exist – as I say, it is shown to exist in the case of a select portion of the working class – is not repelled on sufficient grounds from the portals of the Constitution by the allegation that things are well as they are.¹⁴

As well as praise for his financial measures, Gladstone also won popular acclaim for his support of nationalism. Even on this, however, his route to a Liberal view was a lengthy one. One of the many turning points in his move from Conservatism to at least Liberal Conservatism (as he long liked to describe his politics) came with his visit to the kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1850–1. He described the Bourbon government there as 'one of the most Satanic agencies upon earth' and 'the negation of God erected into a system of government'.¹⁵ While welcoming Garibaldi's visit to Britain in 1864, Gladstone was uneasy about this Republican hero going in triumph around the country. Richard Shannon has even gone so far as to suggest Gladstone did not wish to be upstaged: 'There could be only one embracer of the millions at a time'.¹⁶ It is more likely that Gladstone still shared Palmerston's conservatism regarding popular loose cannons, not approving of figures outside the circle of Westminster politics speaking to audiences around the country.

Gladstone initially did not seek working class applause. After his October 1864 Lancashire tour, he was emphatic about this in his diary:

... so ended in peace the exhausting, flattering, I hope not intoxicating circuit. God knows I have not courted them. I hope I do not rest on them. I pray I may turn them to account for good. It is, however, impossible not to love the people from whom such manifestations come.¹⁷

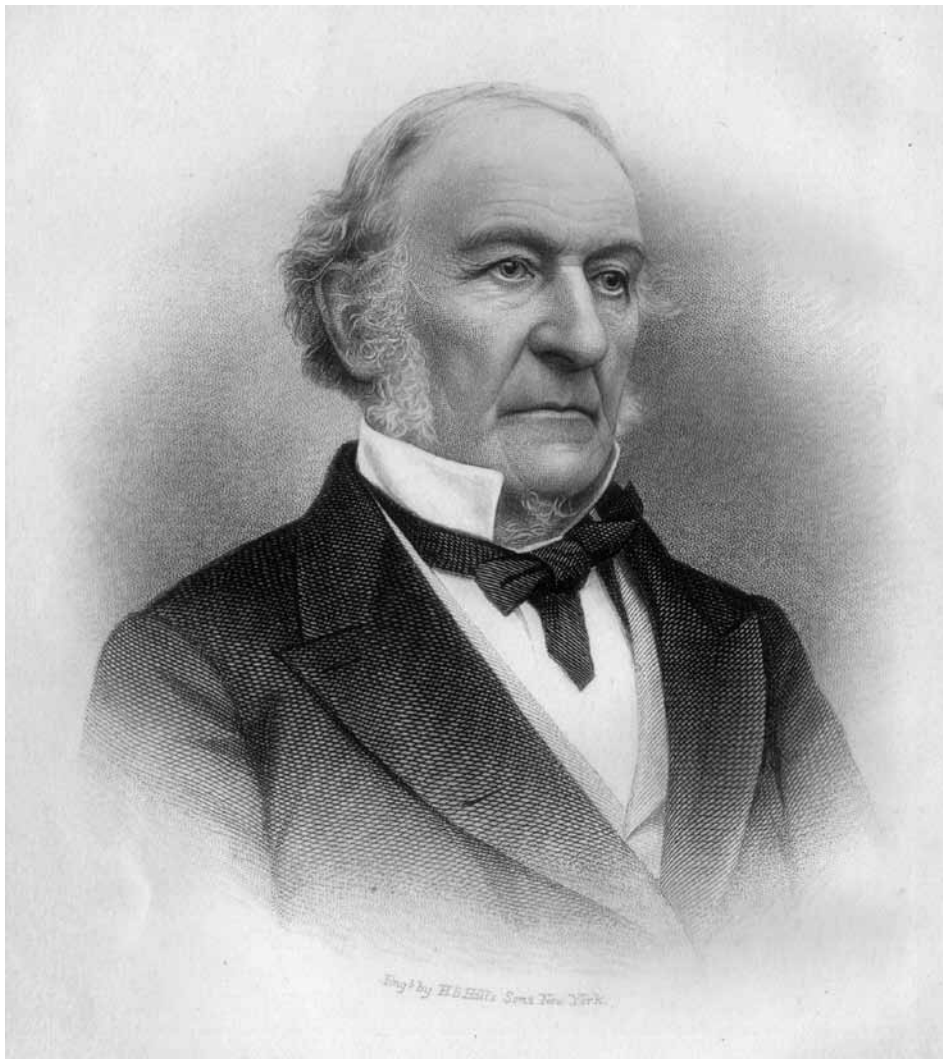
His early attitude was reminiscent of that later exhibited by Lord Salisbury towards those Whigs who were likely to join the Conservatives. Salisbury wrote to his nephew, Arthur Balfour, 'The leader even of a diminished Party must behave as an arbitrator between its various sections, and if he has fair ground for hoping to attract a new section they must come within the scope of the arbitration'.¹⁸ In Gladstone's case, he was pleased to have working-class support, but it had to be on his terms.

Gladstone had greatly appreciated working-class support when he had gone on what turned out to be triumphal trips to Manchester and the North East in April and October 1862 and Lancashire in October 1864. However, after Gladstone was defeated at the general election of 1874, he came to appreciate working-class support more, especially during the Bulgarian agitation of 1876–7. As the Whigs and much former middle-class support left him in the 1880s, so his appreciation of sober, self-improving working people increased.

Yet, from at least the early 1860s Gladstone had carefully boosted his standing outside of parliament by careful management of the press, especially in conjunction with public speaking. He was not the first to build up an extra-parliamentary reputation through public meetings. Palmerston had done so, but with mixed success. Palmerston provided John Delane, editor of *The Times*, with much information and also fed stories to the *Morning Post*, *The Globe* and the *Daily Telegraph*.¹⁹

Gladstone was equally adept, or perhaps even more so, in following this lead. In the early 1850s, Gladstone benefited from the advice of John Douglas Cook, the editor of the *Morning Chronicle*. He was closest to the *Daily Telegraph* from 1860 until he first retired from public life in 1875, after which the newspaper came to support Disraeli's imperial policies. Gladstone's contact, during this period, was Thornton Leigh Hunt, who was the *Telegraph's* leading political journalist (and son of the distinguished writer James Leigh Hunt). The *Daily Telegraph* was grateful to Gladstone for the repeal of the paper duties which

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had restricted the circulation of the popular press. Indeed, it was the *Daily Telegraph* which christened Gladstone as 'The People's William'. One prominent editor and journalist, W. T. Stead, observed in his diary:

Gladstone's admiration for the *Telegraph* dates from the time that Lawson [Edward Levy Lawson, 1st Baron Burnham] used to begin and close every leading article by crying 'Hosanna to the People's William!'. That kind of support Mr Gladstone always appreciates.²⁰

Gladstone also established good relations with the Press Association. On his whistle stop tours of northern England and Scotland he would allow Walter Hepburn, the Press Association's reporter, to travel in his private railway coach. Apparently, on one occasion, when the leader of a Liberal deputation on a station platform was long-winded and the train's guard blew

his whistle before Gladstone could deliver all his speech, Gladstone dictated what he would have said to Hepburn and it was duly published. On another occasion, when in a remote area, Gladstone gave the Press Association a copy of his speech in advance with a time embargo on its publication.²¹

If Queen Victoria came to detest him, Gladstone was in several ways in tune with the Victorian age, or at least a good part of it. As well as moral earnestness, he had a strong belief in the power of rational argument, in progress and in the merits of a widening participation in parliamentary politics. The contrast between Gladstone's views and those of John Ruskin was well made by Canon Scott Holland:

The one trusted in the democratic movement, however chaotic and vulgar might be some of its manifestations: the other had learnt from his master [Thomas Carlyle] that the only hope for the great mass of mankind lay

in the strong will of the strong man who would know so much better for them than they would themselves, what it was their true life needed.²²

Gladstone's belief in self-help and his earnest seeking for knowledge resonated with many of the skilled workers who predominated in the trade unions, cooperatives and friendly societies.

While the sobriquet of 'The People's William' was bestowed on Gladstone by portions of the press grateful for his financial reforms, it did reflect the popular appreciation of his financial measures which benefited all classes. It also reflected the growing confidence that Bright and other Radicals had in him as a result both of his success in outmanoeuvring the House of Lords to achieve the repeal of the paper duty and of his expressions of support for widening the franchise. He himself developed further into 'The People's William' when, after noting working-class demonstrations against the Bulgarian massacres of 1876, he joined a wave of protests already breaking upon Disraeli's government. With the Midlothian campaigns of 1879–80, Gladstone used the politics of the mass platform to appeal both to the electorate of that constituency and to voters beyond.

Chris Wrigley is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Nottingham. Amongst his many books are studies of David Lloyd George, Arthur Henderson and Winston Churchill.

- 1 J. Hugh Edwards, *The Life of David Lloyd George*, Vol. 3 (Waverley Book Company, 1913), p. 11.
- 2 Letter to a friend, 1865, quoted in John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, Vol. 1 (Macmillan, 1903), p. 70 and also in D. M. Schreuder, 'The Making of Mr Gladstone's Posthumous Career: The Role of Morley and Knaplund as "Monumental Masons" 1903–27' in B. L. Kinzer, *The Gladstonian Turn of Mind* (University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 2.
- 3 'Autobiographical Retrospect', 22 June 1894, printed in John Brooke and Mary Sorensen (eds.), *The Prime Ministers' Papers: W. E. Gladstone*, Vol. 1: *Autobiographica* (HMSO, 1971), p. 38.
- 4 Brooke and Sorensen, *Autobiographica*, Appendix 3, pp. 230–1 and p. 38.

- 5 Ruskin to Miss Gladstone, 18 January 1878 in John Ruskin, *Letters to MG and HG* (Privately Printed, 1903), pp. 32–33.
- 6 Quoted in Francis W. Hirst, *Gladstone as Financier and Economist* (Ernest Benn, 1931), p. 241.
- 7 Memorandum, 14 January 1893, printed in H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 13: 1892–1896* (Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 179–80 and following.
- 8 Rémusat quoted in Hirst, *Gladstone as Financier*, p. 154. The relevant parts of the 1853 budget are printed in Rt Hon. W. E. Gladstone, *The Financial Statements of 1853, 1860–1863*, (John Murray, 1863), pp. 55 and 88–91.
- 9 Gladstone, *The Financial Statements*, p. 169.
- 10 Gladstone, *The Financial Statements*, pp. 257 and 186. See also Martin Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan: The Politics of Taxation in Britain 1799–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 97–8.
- 11 Gladstone, *The Financial Statements*, p. 339.
- 12 Thomas Archer, *Gladstone and his Contemporaries, Vol. 4* (Blackie, 1890), p. 129; Joyce Marlow, *The Oak and the Ivy* (Doubleday, 1977), pp. 110–12; Diary entry, 9 October 1862, in Matthew (ed.), *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 6* (Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 153.
- 13 Diary entries, 5 March and 10 May 1864 in Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 6*, pp. 261 and 275; Mark Curthoys, *Governments, Labour and the Law in Mid Victorian Britain*, (Clarendon Press), pp. 58–9.
- 14 G. M. Trevelyan, *John Bright* (Constable, 1913), p. 294; *House of Commons Debates*, 175 (11 May 1864), col. 324, quoted in Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 6*, p. 275.
- 15 H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–74* (Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 80–1.
- 16 Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: God and Politics* (Hambledon Continuum, 2007), p. 170.
- 17 Diary entry, 14 October 1864 in Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 6*, p. 307.
- 18 Salisbury to A. J. Balfour, September/October 1880, quoted in Blanche E. C. Dugdale, *Arthur James Balfour: 1848–1905* (Hutchinson, 1939), p. 48.
- 19 Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Vol. 1* (Hamish Hamilton, 1981), pp. 155–6.
- 20 W. T. Stead diary, 28 July 1886, quoted in Koss, *The Rise and Fall*, p. 293.
- 21 G. Scott, *Reporter Anonymous. The Story of the Press Association* (Hutchinson, 1968), pp. 41–5. For the reporting of Gladstone's speech at the foundation ceremony of University College, Nottingham, see 'How Mr Gladstone's Speeches were reported', *Nottingham Journal*, 29 September 1877.
- 22 Canon Scott Holland, 'Ruskin and Gladstone' in Ruskin, *Letters to MG and HG*, pp. 113–14.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/cobdenproject). Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com.

The emergence of the 'public service ethos'

Aims to analyse how self-interest and patronage was challenged by the advent of impartial inspectorates, public servants and local authorities in provincial Britain in the mid 19th century. Much work has been done on the emergence of a 'liberal culture' in the central civil service in Whitehall, but much work needs to be done on the motives, behaviour and mentalities of the newly reformed guardians of the poor, sanitary inspectors, factory and mines inspectors, education authorities, prison warders and the police. Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.

The life of Professor Reginald W Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans' Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. Dr Yury Boshyuk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk.

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.

Four nations history of the Irish Home Rule crisis

A four nations history of the Irish Home Rule crisis, attempting to rebalance the existing Anglo-centric focus. Considering Scottish and Welsh reactions and the development of parallel Home Rule movements, along with how the crisis impacted on political parties across the UK. Sources include newspapers, private papers, *Hansard*. Naomi Lloyd-Jones; naomi.n.lloyd-jones@kcl.ac.uk.

Beyond Westminster: Grassroots Liberalism 1910–1929

A study of the Liberal Party at its grassroots during the period in which it went from being the party of government to the third party of politics. This research will use a wide range of sources, including surviving Liberal Party constituency minute books and local press to contextualise the national decline of the party with the reality of the situation on the ground. The thesis will focus on three geographic regions (Home Counties, Midlands and the North West) in order to explore the situation the Liberals found themselves in nationally. Research for University of Leicester. Supervisor: Dr Stuart Ball. Gavin Freeman; gjf6@le.ac.uk.

The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002

Research on the Liberal party and Lib Dems' political communication. Any information welcome (including testimonies) about electoral campaigns and strategies. Cynthia Boyer, CUFR Champollion, Place de Verdun, 81 000 Albi, France; +33 5 63 48 19 77; cynthia.boyer@univ-jfc.fr.

The Lib-Lab Pact

The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk.