



Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter Seven

June 1995

A Liberal Democrat History Group
Evening Seminar

The Legacy of Gladstone

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7.00pm Monday 26 June
Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club
1 Whitehall Place, London SW1.

(The seminar will be preceded (at 6.45pm) by the AGM of the Liberal Democrat History Group; all members and prospective members welcome. Please remember the NLC's dress code!)

Jointly supported by the National Liberal Club and the Gladstone Club.

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP. We aim to fulfil this objective by organising discussion meetings, by spreading knowledge of historical reference sources, by assisting in the publication of studies of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties, and by publishing this Newsletter.

Membership of the History Group costs £5.00 (£3.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

Contributions to the Newsletter - letters, articles, and book reviews - are invited. Please type them and if possible enclose a computer file on 3.5" disc. The deadline for the next issue is 27 July 1995; contributions should be sent to Duncan Brack at the address below.

The Legacy of Gladstone

by H. C. G. Matthew

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It is not difficult to see the latter part of Gladstone's public life as a failure, and his sense of imperfectibility encouraged him to do so also: religion on the wane, the free-trade order of the mid-century giving way to militarism and protectionism which the Concert of Europe was powerless to prevent, Britain bloated by imperial expansions, Home Rule unachieved, the Liberal Party divided. And in certain moods Gladstone certainly felt himself to be 'a dead man, one fundamentally a Peel-Cobden man' whose time had passed.

Yet when we place him and his generation in a longer chronological context their record was remarkable. Gladstone was a chief agent in the process by which the Anglican university elite adapted itself and public life to the requirements of an industrial age while substantially maintaining traditional institutions and securing, for the most part, its own dominant political position. In the European

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context of the time it was uniquely successful in so doing. From the 1840s, Gladstone's view had been that this could only be achieved by sometimes dramatic measures - legislative and administrative proposals usually deeply shocking to conservative opinion. He had rarely been reluctant to propose such initiatives and in most cases was able to carry them through. The notable exception to the latter was Home Rule for Ireland, the greatest and most dramatic of Gladstone's proposals of radical conservatism.

This achievement was based on a coherent methodology of politics which skilfully fused theory and practice. Gladstone did not subscribe to the view that politics is merely a process, its content irrelevant. On the contrary, he held very firmly that the content of policy, the concepts that underpinned it, and the process of achieving it through political action were organically related. To remove any of the elements was to corrupt the whole: concepts - 'abstract resolutions' - were useless without formulation as to content and means of achievement; policies whose contents were unprincipled led to disaster; a process of politics removed from ideas and their related policies meant sterility in the body politic. It was the special function of the executive politician to hold these three elements in balance. Gladstone found the method of the 'big bill' the best way of bringing all three into coherence and by the subsequent controversy it generated linking the activities of Parliament dramatically and rhetorically with the interests of the country, legitimising the former and enlivening the latter.

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Politics and ideology, the focus of public discussion, necessarily changed as times changed, for politics was a second-order and largely secular activity whose nature was not, like theological dogma, set in stone. In a long life in politics, Gladstone was not always consistent in his policies, nor did he seek to be. His recognition of this - and the way he explained it - bewildered some of his contemporaries. A degree of inconsistency because of short-term political difficulties is the necessary occasional refuge of any politician. But Gladstone's political philosophy of learning by experience provided for a reasoned change in his political position on a number of major questions: church and state in the 1830s and 1840s, tariffs in the 1840s and 1850s, political reform in the 1860s, Ireland in the 1870s and 1880s. His consistency was, he contended, one of method of change rather than maintenance of content. Indeed the acknowledgement of the need to change, to move on, in the imperfect world of politics was, Gladstone thought, the best preparation for distinguishing between what required changing and what was best kept.

Representative government is founded on the assumption of change: it is a means of arranging and legitimising it. A chief purpose of such a system is to debate such changes, to reach conclusions upon them, and then to state those conclusions in laws and administrative acts validated by the community through its representatives. Such a system, and especially one such as the British where the executive and the legislature was fused, makes very high demands on its practitioners. None

gave more to it than Gladstone in a life-time's work as an 'old Parliamentary hand'.

Three aspects of Gladstone's career have proved of especial significance for posterity.

First, the minimal state in whose construction he played so large a part proved remarkably enduring in practice and even more so in the rhetoric of public life in this country. Here, once he had established it, Gladstone experienced nothing which suggested a need to modify or to amend, only from time to time a need to perfect and to systematise. The powerful, almost schematic model of this state was of striking simplicity considering the complexity of the society to which it was applied. It was based on Treasury control and public accountability, a sharp and fundamental distinction between economic development and the government's duty as raiser and spender of revenue, and free trade in currency and commerce providing a moral as well as a fiscal context for development. Despite his Butlerian emphasis on the role of individual agency in shaping public life, Gladstone had an almost Marxian sense of State-structure, seen at its strongest in this area of the codification of the minimal state. The late-twentieth century Chancellor carrying his budget to the Commons in Gladstone's battered dispatch case - which he used to carry the 1853 budget - is making no mere symbolic reference to the past. Free trade remained intact until the First World War and staged a strong resurgence after it; the budgetary strategy which accompanied it lasted even longer, enduring long after it ceased to be an appropriate mechanism for the economy it claimed not to affect.

The character which Gladstone and those with him gave to the free-trade state was one of un-British rigidity. Free-trade absolutism was in marked contrast to the usual fluidity of British politics, exemplified by their adaptability in constitutional matters. When the Cabinet debated whether the registration of sellers of foreign meat would be a condoning of protectionism, it showed a bizarre fascination with dogmatic purism. The Gladstonian distinction between state and economy proved a heavy and distorting millstone around the nation's neck, and one that proved very hard to remove. When J. M. Keynes wrote that we 'are usually the slaves of some defunct economist' he probably meant Ricardo; but he could have better written 'defunct politician' and meant Gladstone. For it was the institutionalisation and politicisation of free-trade theory which were the vital elements in its remarkable hold on British political culture, and Gladstone had deliberately undertaken and achieved both. Keynes' *The General Theory* with its emphasis on imperfection, the psychological aspects of markets, the need to apply experience and to experiment, was quite consistent with an application to economics of Joseph Butler's theory of probability. It was a supreme irony that Keynes' book was designed, in effect, to undermine the intellectual foundations of the model of minimal state organisation in whose construction Gladstone - that arch-Butlerian - had played so central a role. The *General Theory* (1936) was the response of progressive twentieth-century Liberalism to Gladstonian economics. H. N. Gladstone commissioned F. W. Hirst's *Gladstone as financier and economist* (1931) to counter the influence of the Liberal Summer Schools from which Keynes' book emerged. It was remarkable, but true, that the tradition Hirst described was not merely of

historic interest but still the dominant ethos in the Treasury.

Gladstone and his generation accepted the implication of the concept of the minimal state: welfare-in its broadest sense-must be provided by voluntary agencies. He was an energetic participant in helping this system to function, taking part in a range of trusts, schools, hospitals, and other sorts of voluntary societies and raising money for them from others and from his own funds. The image of the young President of the Board of Trade slipping out to oversee a ragged school in Bedfordbury (off Trafalgar Square) represents the dedication of a generation of public figures to a view of 'active citizenry' which was energetically committed but ultimately inadequate.

Second, and in marked contrast to the inflexibility of the minimal state, Gladstone's evolving view of the constitution - so arrestingly stated in 1886 - posed a question which challenged the next century in almost every decade: how far was the unitary constitution of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland sustainable? Most of Ireland went its way out of the Union, the United Kingdom offering an agreed Home Rule settlement only after the constitutional movement in Ireland had been stranded by British inaction. The length of time Irish Home Rulers had been prepared to wait and their remarkable electoral solidity until 1914 testified to the strength of their commitment. Within Great Britain, no settled formulation for the devolution of power from Westminster was found. There was an unresolved conflict between Home Rule and regional devolution. The former would be an admission of the status of local and historic nationalism and thus would relate to existing local patriotisms; the latter would largely ignore or even cut across nationality, would set aside the discrepancy of size between England and her neighbouring countries, and would be administratively neater. The nationalism that Home Rule sought to accommodate was never as homogeneous as the Home Rulers claimed; the administrative convenience of regional devolution lacked sufficient passion to succeed.

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Gladstone's view that the unitary constitution was not sustainable was confirmed, not by devolution, but by Britain's signing the Treaty of Rome, thus merging its sovereignty with other European states in a dramatic constitutional change accompanied by financial transfer arrangements similar to those negotiated between Gladstone and Parnell in 1886. In recognising that constitutions can represent nationalities and their interests in a variety of ways and at several levels, the European Union was based on just the sort of flexible and evolving constitutional arrangements which the Home Rule bills were intended to introduce. The British within the European Union accepted a status not exactly of Home Rule, but one closer to Home Rule than to independence. But the English remained unwilling to make similar changes within what remained of the United Kingdom. Ironically, Gladstone's 'mighty heave in the body politic' - a major change in the

character of British sovereignty - was achieved upwards from Westminster, by a Unionist cession of power to the European Union, but not downwards within the United Kingdom itself.

Third, the politics of 'The Platform' of which Gladstone was the dominant exponent offered one solution to the question of how a governing elite could legitimise itself in the wider political franchises established by 1832, 1867 and 1884. The enfranchisement of 'capable citizens' (in Gladstone's phrase of 1884), the assumption that a healthy political community depended on their active involvement in politics and the development of the mass meeting rationally addressed and nationally reported was a concept of democracy important for the Western world, and influential in it. Gladstone also had a prescient sense that a political culture of 'capable citizenry' was one whose passing Liberalism would not long survive and that the leaders of the working-class organisations emerging at the end of his life could either develop or frustrate the democracy which it had made possible.

'Working the institutions' of the country - the day-to-day duty of the executive politician - had therefore always to be done in the context of this wider awareness, and those workings should be willingly explained and defended in the wider court of public opinion as well as in the traditional forum of Parliament.

Liberals, of course, saw the Liberal Party as the natural agent of this process. The Liberal Party which Gladstone helped to build was a rare and transitory phenomenon. It was not a 'party' in the twentieth-century sense: it had no formal structure and no membership. It achieved a degree of political integration unparalleled in Europe. It was constituted by a mutual association of class and religion whose delicate balance was the envy of its European equivalents. At its fullest, it comprised the Whigs, the free-trading commercial and industrial middle classes, and the working class's 'labour aristocracy' (a term now out of favour with historians but an accurate description of the working-class people the Liberals set out especially to attract). It contained the whole of the religious spectrum of the day, from Roman Catholics through a ballast of Anglicans to Nonconformists; and to all of these it also attached the secularists and the Jews.

The Liberal Party was thus a double rainbow of class and religion, and, like rainbows, depended on especial conditions of light: in this case upon a political culture which especially represented positive political self-consciousness. Gladstone was the chief facet of the prism through which the light of late-Victorian Liberalism gained coherence and, as we have often seen, he was a successful articulator of that political self-consciousness. Despite his cautions about the future, Gladstone was a powerful optimist. Though often full of alarms, and in the late 1870s almost a Cassandra, he could none the less make a gloomy warning seem a step forward, the proclamation of the warning being in itself a public atonement. And he had in abundance the capacity - required of any public figure of real staying power - to see victory in defeat. His private verdict on the defeat of the first Government of Ireland Bill was that 'Upon the whole we have more ground to be satisfied with the progress made, than to be disappointed at the failure.' One's immediate reaction is that such a remark is pure self-deception. But the historian is

not a Prime Minister. Gladstone had the capacity - useful in any party and vital in the 'party of progress' - to move onwards even when seeming to be thrust back.

Organisation around a dominant charismatic leader is obviously a danger to a political movement. Gladstone sensed this in his constant protestations of the temporary character of his political return, and the point was highlighted by the doldrums of Liberalism after 1894. Yet, operating very much within the Gladstonian tradition of platform rhetoric, the Liberals were able to launch their spectacular if temporary Edwardian resurgence on the very Gladstonian issue of free-trade. Moreover, the issue of constitutional reform provided a significant though limited basis for cooperation with the various elements of what became the Labour Party, just the sort of co-operation which Continental Liberals failed to develop with their socialist equivalents. The twenty years after Gladstone's final retirement saw, with the development and then predominance of a notion of 'positive welfare', as sharp a discontinuity in British public policy as had occurred since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846: Gladstonian issues - free trade, Home Rule, the Lords - gave, however unintended, a continuity to British politics generally and one of especial value to the 'party of progress'. The traditional areas of Gladstonian reforming concern provided the Liberal Party with a coherence in the twentieth century which balanced the ructions which the adoption of 'positive welfare' policies so often caused.

From the longer-term perspective of the late twentieth century - when twenty years at Cabinet level is an exceptional achievement and politicians claim to be little else - it is the range, depth and extent of Gladstone's public life and of the political culture which made it possible which is so striking and so alien. Though it is the combination of Gladstonian attributes which now seems so remarkable - executive politician, orator, scholar, author and, as Lord Salisbury called him, 'great Christian statesman' - its bedrock was a hard political professionalism.

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Gladstone was an exceptionally determined, resilient, and resourceful politician who was hardly ever caught out and, when he was caught, was at his most formidable. He used this professionalism to engage public life over the full range of his interests. Rarely in a representative political system can one person have had such a capacity to dominate the agenda of politics over so extended a period. Gladstone was able to do so because on the whole he moved with the mind of his age and indeed represented some of its chief characteristics. He was not like Churchill, in a restless battle against the tendencies of his century, but represented Victorianism more completely than any other person in public life, and certainly much more than the Queen. Even in his hostility to further acquisition of imperial responsibilities in areas of non-British settlement - which Gladstone saw as encumbering, corrupting, diverting the proper focus of British

attention which was the domestic economy - he represented a strong if ineffective tradition and his oratory, more than his actions, was a potent link between the British Liberal tradition and its fast-developing colonial and Indian equivalents. Since the empire was, even by the 1890s, a community of sentiment, that was a far more significant force for practical co-operation than the various schemes of economic and federal union which became fashionable among some of the supposed friends of empire in that decade.

To a curious extent, therefore, an assessment of Gladstone is a personification of an assessment of Britain's moment in world history. In offering freedom, representative government, free-trade economic progress, international co-operation through discussion and arbitration, probity in government and in society generally, as the chief objectives of public life, and in an ideology which combined and harmonised them, Gladstone offered much to the concept of a civilised society of nations. As the twenty-first century approaches, the Victorian world order, complex though aspects of it were, has a hard simplicity which starkly contrasts with the ambiguities of our own times. The Gladstonian moment showed much of what was best about public life at the start of the modern age. But it was a moment only. With the self-confidence and the articulation went a curious absence of self-awareness, an inability to sense that what seemed to be the establishment of 'normal' standards was in the world's context a very abnormal undertaking, hard to sustain and likely to be brief.

Colin Matthew's book, Gladstone 1809-1874, was reviewed by Tony Little in the second History Group Newsletter (February 1994).

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis - or if you know anyone who can - please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information.

The Young Liberals 1970-79: their philosophy and political strategy. MA thesis. Ruth Fox, 9 Chapel Terrace, Headingley, Leeds LS6 3JA.

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945-64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Ph.D thesis. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH. (See full article in this Newsletter.)

The Liberal Party in Southampton 1890-1945 (particularly 1890-1918). Sources needed for Ph.D thesis on the development of labour politics in Southampton. Graham Heaney, 132 Hayling Avenue, Copnor, Portsmouth, PO3 6ED.

If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the front page.

“He Would Not Stoop, He Did Not Conquer”

Book Review
by Tony Little

Robert Rhodes James: *Rosebery*
(Phoenix, 1995)

Part of the fun of history, especially for the amateur, is spotting parallels and seeing whether anyone has learnt the lessons or whether today's participants are doomed to repeat yesterday's mistakes. For example:

A charismatic leader has come to the end of the road without recognising it. Popularity in the country and with the party faded as the leader's relentless drive to change becomes unwelcome with the establishment. Eventually the leader is forced out and becomes a legend. The obvious replacement is an experienced cabinet minister who has served the party well but who has made enemies and so is passed over. Instead a powerful older woman indicates her support for a younger man with some limited experience of the Foreign Office and of London local government. He becomes the premier but is obliged to keep his opponent for the succession in the cabinet and fails to heal the party's divisions. John Major fighting off Michael Heseltine to succeed Mrs. T? No, Rosebery succeeding Gladstone, aided by Queen Victoria, leaving a disgruntled Harcourt to make mischief. The destruction of the unity in the cabinet and the party kept the Liberals out of power for ten years. Is there a significant difference this time? Well, Rosebery was as anxious to quit the premiership as Major is to cling tenaciously to it.

Lord Rosebery entered politics with all the blessings a good fairy might endow. Innate intelligence allowed academic achievement without struggle, his personality inspired worship in his followers who included the brightest and best in a new generation of Liberals. In Scotland he was immensely popular with the masses. He had much more than sufficient wealth, clear ideas and the ability to make decisions.

For such a serious young aristocrat, politics was the obvious career. He was tempted by Disraeli but made his entry into national politics by providing the organisation for Gladstone's Midlothian campaign of 1879-80. This was by far the most successful piece of political theatre in the nineteenth century. Typically, he fought off offers to join the Government in 1880 and only relented under pressure and when he felt that he might achieve more effective administration for Scotland. His promotion of course reflected his talents but also his loyalty. In a period when the bulk of the Whigs were drifting irretrievably away from Liberalism, Rosebery stuck by Gladstone and accepted Cabinet office at a time of government crisis when his action could be seen rather as foolhardy than the reward for Midlothian.

In the short lived Home Rule Government of 1886, he became Foreign Secretary in the place of Granville, who was recognised

as being no longer capable of such an exacting post, and instead of Dilke who was ruled out by a divorce scandal. While his tenure of office was not long enough to make much impact, in it Rosebery had found his *métier* and when Gladstone formed his final Government of 1892, Rosebery returned to the Foreign Office. This senior position marked him out as a possible successor to Gladstone and his approach to it cemented his good relations with the Queen. But his wider appeal depended on the radical approach he took on domestic issues. He supplemented his firm support in Scotland with a period on the newly formed London County Council, which he chaired between November 1889 and July 1890.

Gladstone's 1892 Government was frustrating, bogged down in a doomed bid for Home Rule and the ageing premier's efforts to insist on retrenchment. When Rosebery took over he found many of the frustrations beyond his unravelling. In the Lords his support was numerically small, but this is an area that Rhodes James, as a House of Commons man, does not dwell on. In the Commons, Harcourt and Morley were each prickly and each felt undervalued. As a peer, Rosebery was separated from the bulk of his party who looked to Harcourt as Leader of the House. As a cabinet, this reasonably talented team (it included two future premiers) lacked direction - the Government's main gift to posterity was Harcourt's death duties and some small extensions to the empire. When defeated on a minor matter in the Commons, the Government resigned in relief and lost the ensuing election. Rosebery led the opposition for a short while before finding in Gladstone's last public campaign a reason to abandon the bed of nails.

Inauspiciously, and still aged under 50, his official career was over, but Rosebery remained a public presence and potential leader until the formation of Campbell-Bannerman's Government in 1905 and did not die until 1929. From time to time he reappeared in public to proclaim his imperialist vision and each time he did so he raised hopes of a comeback but on each successive occasion he separated himself further from the party. His vision did have fervent followers but his failure to work as a leader and his lack of sympathy for Home Rule and for Campbell-Bannerman increasingly separated him from the party. By the time of the House of Lords Crisis of 1910-11 this former reformer was virtually a Conservative.

"I must plough my furrow alone"

For all his gifts Rosebery must be considered the least effective Liberal premier. The curse of the bad fairy outweighed all the blessings. The death of his wife Hannah Rothschild in 1890 was devastating, removing much of his ambition and determination. He suffered acutely from insomnia which must be peculiarly debilitating in such an arduous role as that of a party leader. But in truth the real failing seems to have been inherent in his personality.

Most Victorian politicians were very conscious of their honour and resigned more readily than today's Tories but Rosebery was unduly prickly. This made his ambition the more obvious the more he tried to hide it. He regarded each of his ministerial posts a burden he professed to be anxious to shed. He was insufferable to colleagues who should have been his equals

and regarded them as insufferable - in the case of Harcourt he was probably right. He conducted the Foreign Office as a fiefdom and resented the intervention of any other minister. In any politician these are fatal weaknesses. Whatever rivalry exists within a party it can only be effective when its leaders can work together, can argue out their case without rancour and can reach the compromise that is good for the country and the party. It may be unfair to say that Rosebery sought the glory without the work - the palm without the sand - but he did want a ministerial career without the politics, a government that did not require teamwork.

Because Rosebery was a failure he has not been blessed by many good biographies. Because he was one of the protagonists of imperialism he seems a dated, forgotten man. But as Enoch Powell has said, every political career must end in failure, and often the reasons for failure are of much greater value than the recitation of long outdated successes. So we must be especially grateful for the paperback reissue of Robert Rhodes James' elegant work. As always he covers the life in a straightforward way, not bogged down in forgotten trivia but emphasising the key elements of the events and the personality. He outlines the development of Rosebery's Liberal imperialism - Rosebery may well have been the first to envisage the British Empire as a Commonwealth in the way that it subsequently developed. He does not forget the influence that Rosebery exerted over Grey, Haldane and Asquith who, as more practical men, were able to develop Rosebery's approach in the final flowering of Liberal government before the First World War. If Rhodes James cannot finally bring himself quite to agree with Churchill's judgement of Rosebery he cannot in all honesty differ much from it.

Old Heroes for a New Party

*Conference Fringe Meeting Report
Scarborough, March 1995
by Patrick Mitchell*

Scarborough welcomed the return of the Liberal Democrats with a fine display of east coast weather conditions. A large audience took shelter from the cold and the wind for the second showing of 'Old Heroes for a New Party' in the comfortable, if somewhat gloomy, surroundings of the billiard room of the Royal Hotel, otherwise known as the Prince Regent Room.. The speakers managed to share the one reading lamp available.

The 'heroes' for our 1994 meeting had been Voltaire, Acton and Burke, not all of whom might occur to most of us as a first choice (which is one of the interesting things about the occasion). Our speakers this time had each chosen someone with special appeal to them.. Alan Beith, who spoke first, outlined the career of W.T. Stead (1849-1912), the Liberal journalist and activist, who had been a great innovator as editor of the *Northern Echo* in Darlington, and then of the *Pall Mall Gazette* after John Morley. He was an unorthodox man who articulated the religious radicalism which had supported Gladstone, and campaigned on the basis of a radical view of

Christianity. His great causes had been peace, temperance, and the rights of women. His determination to expose the vice of child prostitution led to his imprisonment for a short time. He died on the *Titanic*.

Sir William Goodhart, as a lawyer of American descent, introduced us to Judge Learned Hand (1872-1961), son and grandson of lawyers, who practised fairly unsuccessfully as a lawyer until 1909 when he became a Federal District Judge, later becoming an Appeals judge (though he never rose to the Supreme Court). His reputation was made both as a judge and as a political philosopher. In politics he was initially a Republican, but always a liberal, who became known from the 1920s onwards for his speeches on liberty.

It is less easy to see the particular appeal of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman to Tony Greaves. Unfortunately we were unable to learn more, because Tony was unable to get to the meeting, so we will have to wait for a future occasion to discover what he would have had to say. In his absence Gordon Lishman, who chaired the meeting, treated us to an impromptu seminar in which members of the audience were asked to propose their own heroes. The discussion ranged widely, covering politicians from Oliver Cromwell to Helen Suzman, economists from Adam Smith to J.K. Galbraith, philosophers and novelists. No doubt some of them will feature in the next instalment of what seems sure to become a regular feature of our conference activities.

What is Liberal Democracy? The Importance of History

by James Lund

This series of articles has been overtaken by the recent course of politics. When it began, John Smith led a Labour Party still committed to public ownership of the means of production. Given the emergence of Tony Blair and the prospect of New Labour, what occasioned these articles, the possibility of winning increased, sustained electoral support for Liberal Democracy at the national level, looks much more difficult to fulfil.

Continuing success in local elections, in which only a minority of the electorate vote; a growing part in local government, the powers of which have been substantially diminished; the repeated stimulus of often spectacular by-election victories: none of these, we know from hard experience, will bring the sort of support at General Elections that the party wants. Nor will single issues, important as education is; as if the party were a populist pressure group.

The foregoing articles have apparently indicated little to improve this prospect. Yet in truth there is everything to play for in the longer term.. Thatcherism has largely destroyed traditional conservatism. What New Labour is to be or could be, no one yet knows.

What the Liberal Democrats need is what has been called 'a hegemonic project', such as the Liberals had in 1906, Labour

in 1945 and the Conservatives in 1979. This is a vision of what a majority of the electorate can accept and support as a practicable and desirable future for society, issuing from a reasonably adequate and coherent grasp of the present and how it came to be what it is. Such a majority represents a coalition of interests, not necessarily compatible with one another in the longer term.

Such a project is not to be confused with a battery of policies, characterised by David Marquand in a recent *Guardian* article as 'the professional deformation' of the British Left. And not only of the Left. What a party after reflection thinks ought to be done, ideally, in the different sides of national life and in unforeseeable future circumstances, is politically important, but it should not be confused with the actual political stance of the party.

The electorate at large is, I think, confused by the Liberal Democrat stance. This is hardly surprising. The merger which gave rise to such a party was very recent. When two parties join, there must necessarily arise some degree of uncertainty about how united the newly merged party is or can be and what it really stands for. The confusion is partly inherent in the constitution of the party, partly in the electorate's conception of the political in relation to the economic in our affairs.

The Liberal Democrats need a vision of what a majority of the electorate can accept and support as a practicable and desirable future for society

In the light of Will Hutton's *The State We're In* (to be reviewed next issue), it can well be said that what we need is a more democratic society, liberally administered. Whether the Liberal Democrats are wholeheartedly intent on bringing about such a society is what is in question in the party and among the electorate. According to Hutton, the very considerable economic weaknesses and injustices of our society are the integrally related counterpart of its system of government, insofar as this determines, not who votes when, but how we are actually governed by those we vote into power. What he calls 'gentlemanly capitalism' in the economic sphere, greatly preoccupied with the short-term liquidity and high yield of all investment at the expense of efficient productivity and levels of employment, pay and security, is the counterpart of the way we are governed. This is oligarchically in the name of the Crown over subjects, not citizens, and to some extent independently of whatever party is in power.

Writing in a recent issue (12 May) of the *Liberal Democrat News*, à propos of a *Sunday Times* headline 'Ashdown and Blair forge anti-Tory pact', Sheila Ritchie was moved to say "that there is a huge amount of evidence that about half of those who vote for us prefer the Labour Party and about half prefer the Conservatives". Setting aside what that evidence is and how true her conclusion, this seems a remarkable state of affairs in the aftermath of some sixteen years of what R.W. Johnson (*London Review of Books* 9 March) calls 'social vandalism'. Yet it is one that is generally agreed to have a considerable measure of truth.

Insofar as it is true, it confirms the view already advanced

here, that part of the actual stance of the Liberal Party, formed in the half century before the First World War, when the party struggled for and gained political power, continues today to be oligarchical rather than democratic. It was after all the Social Democratic Party that contributed the democratic element to the name of the merged party. So long as the party does not have to face the prospect of power, it can continue apparently united. But when that prospect is in sight, however distant, as the conclusion of Sheila Ritchie's article indicates, the old and new Liberalism starts to come apart. The fact that the formalised philosophy of the party continues to be grounded in the beliefs of such philosophers as Kant, J.S. Mill, and J.R. Green is an indication of its undemocratic foundations, insofar as these derive from the old Liberalism with its mind-body dualism in philosophy.

Perhaps the greatest current weakness of the party in the perception of the wider electorate is its inescapably political identity. One of the consequences of some three hundred years of oligarchical government, which intended to keep the power it had and to keep secret the conditions of successfully doing so, has been the general belief of the electorate that society is an economic and not a political institution. Understanding to the contrary was generally confined to those who actually led, and was kept from those who were content to be or could not think of themselves as other than subjects.

The democratisation of the electoral system through the extension of the franchise to the majority who had learned to think of themselves as subjects and not as citizens, and who had not actively exercised political power, meant that they reconceived the society they had in fact joined in terms of the sort of relations and the sort of aspirations they did understand, namely, the economic.

But a party like the Liberal Democrats who do stand for a political idea of what is in fact a political society - it is not our economic relations that ultimately hold us together as a society but our political proceedings - is potentially a party that can lead in a 30-30-40 society, which has been made such, partly by deliberate political action to that end. The generous, the fair-minded, and those others among the contented who sense their potential insecurity, could be brought together with the politically aware among the insecure and the impoverished by a party that really intended to be what it said it was: democratically concerned with the whole society; respectful of socially concerned freedom of action; active on behalf of the interests of those unable to act effectively for themselves.

1945-1964: The Gory, Gory Years

by Mark Egan

The history fellow in my college once asked me what I was researching for my D.Phil in politics. When I told him, the Liberal Party between 1945 and 1964, he replied, "What a depressing subject!" Well, I happen to disagree, but that reply at least highlights the two major problems in approaching the Liberal Party during that period - the party was staggeringly

unsuccessful at winning elections and, partly as a consequence, the records kept during the era were scanty. The two broad aims of my research stem from these problems - I hope to uncover and assess as much information as possible about the Liberal Party during that era and I intend to explain how it survived and, more importantly, how it developed into the party of Thorpe, Steel and Ashdown.

In 1945 the Liberal Party fielded 306 candidates and secured around 19% of the vote cast in seats where those candidates stood. There then followed 20 years of turmoil, during which the votes cast for Liberal candidates fell to around 12-14%, where Liberals stood, and where the number of Liberal candidatures collapsed. Not until 1964 did the Liberal Party recover its electoral strength of 1945. Much of the history of the party nationally during this period is well known - the Tory overtures to Clement Davies; the Torrington and Orpington by-elections; and the inspirational leadership of Grimond. However, little is known about the activities of the party's local associations.

I have identified around 75 constituencies for whom records of the Liberal Association exist for my period. Apart from providing raw data on the financial position of the party and its membership, the key issue these records can tackle is the extent to which 'community politics' methods were employed by Liberals in the 1950s. Liberal local election results began to pick up from 1953, a year when the party's councillors could comfortably fit into one room. Rapid success was recorded in Bolton and Focus leaflets appeared in the late 1950s in Liverpool. The methods and aims of community politics, adopted by the party as a whole in 1970, clearly originated in the Liberal Party's desperation for any electoral success during the 1950s, but community politics techniques developed in a piecemeal fashion across the country and, in places such as Birmingham, did not always result in any substantial electoral gain.

Beyond collecting data on the state of the party during the 1945-1964 period, I also aim to test the multitude of theories which have been put forward to explain the survival and revival of the party. It is often suggested that the party survived because it managed to retain its traditional vote in the Celtic fringe, an area which still supplies the bulk of Liberal Democrat votes and Parliamentary seats. However, this is more a description of the Liberal vote than an explanation of it: there must be some reason why people in certain parts of Britain clung to Liberal voting whereas in other, once equally traditional areas such as South Wales, north east England and Yorkshire, the Liberal vote evaporated.

Another explanation is that the Liberal Party articulated the concerns of those alienated by the collectivist, centralised British political system and that the growth of government, especially the welfare state and economic planning, provided opportunities for the party to seek the votes of those excluded from the benefits system or disadvantaged by planning decisions made at a distance, in London. A further thesis, still expounded today, is that the Liberal Party benefited from short term protest against the government of the day. These theories are well known but not well tested - no doubt elements of all can contribute to an explanation of how the Liberal Party survived the 1945-1964 era. In order to discover which

explanations best explain the survival of the party, and its course since 1964, I intend to analyse the data contained within the early British Election Studies, covering 1963, 1964 and 1966, to examine specific characteristics of the Liberal vote, linked to the theses I have outlined. This analysis should provide, for the first time, a thorough explanation of why people kept voting Liberal at a time when most pundits thought it was a habit to be given up.

Finally, there are one or two episodes of Liberal Party history during this period which are not yet fully researched. Although the relationship between the Tory and Liberal parties during the 1950s has been well covered by Baines, the relationships between the Liberal Party and its various off shoots, such as Radical Action and the National Liberals, has not been adequately assessed. Radical Action, a small group of young Liberals which originated in a campaign against the wartime electoral truce, existed in some form for more than ten years, before many of its leading members defected to Labour. I hope to use some of the private papers of the group to examine their influence on the party and any characteristics the group shared with the Young Liberals of the 1960s. The National Liberal Party is also little studied after 1945 - some of their members were clearly Tories in (often transparent) disguise, but the appeal of that party clearly affected the Liberal cause. Defections to, but mainly from, the Liberal Party were common until the mid 1950s and these can help explain the problems the party faced at this time, and its ability to regain a sense of direction as the decade came to a close.

My research is still in its early stages but I hope to reach conclusions which would be of interest to all Liberals, both on the history of our party and on the dilemmas facing us today. I would appreciate any comments or suggestions anyone has to make on my work, especially if they know of the whereabouts of any constituency records, private papers or potential interviewees who can help with my research.

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Membership Services

The History Group is pleased to make the following listings available to its members.

Mediawatch: a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers and major magazines and academic journals (all those listed in the British Humanities Index, published by Bowker-Saur). Starting in 1988, this now extends to September 1994.

Thesiswatch: all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats!)

Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy of either of these free of charge; send an A4 SSAE to Duncan Brack at the address on the front page.