Liberalism, peace and the First World War

Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, 30 June 2014, National Liberal Club, with Louise Arimatsu and Robert Falkner; chair: Martin Horwood

Report by **Douglas Oliver**

THREE DAYS AND a full century after Gavrilo Princip's Sarajevo 'shot that was heard around the world', the Liberal Democrat History Group and Liberal International met at the National Liberal Club to discuss the enduring legacy of the First World War on liberalism and the Liberal Party, and the broader implications that the catastrophic conflict had on liberal notions of international law, financial progress and peace. The panel also discussed the growing liberal international movement, which had its roots in the immediate years preceding the war and was left shaped by its outcome.

Appropriately, the discussion was held in the club's Lloyd George Room, and the panel and audience reflected actively on the role the Welsh prime minister and other Liberals played in the years of war and in the controversial peace that followed. As the war dragged on, the conflict put the party under enormous existential strain, and the internal and external political pressures inflicted on it may well have contributed to its eventual eclipse by the Labour Party.

Liberal Democrat MP for Cheltenham, Martin Horwood, chaired the event and discussed the influence that Lloyd George biographer and disciple Ken Morgan had had on the development of his own political philosophy as an Oxford undergraduate. Horwood today chairs the party's International Affairs Committee at Westminster and stated that the enduring spectre of despotism and human rights abuse gave liberals a lot of work, just as it had to the likes of Asquith, Grey, Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson, in the early twentieth century.

In his opening remarks, Horwood mused on the sometimes apparently stochastic nature of history, evinced by the seemingly eccentric circumstances of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand's demise. The heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne might have survived his visit to Bosnia in June 1914 had his chauffer not made an unpropitious detour into a Sarajevo cul-de-sac, where his armed Serbian assassin happened by chance to be standing. As it was, the bloody act which killed both the archduke and his wife, with only two bullets, set off a deadly domino chain of diplomatic escalation, which led to world war.

With the benefit of hindsight, the narrative of inevitable passage to war – including the re-armament of the British and Germans and the strains in the aging Austrian and Ottoman Empires – might perhaps seem easily persuasive. However, as Professor Falkner and Louise Arimatsu of Chatham House both pointed out, war might well have been avoided. Indeed, to many liberal political economists of the time, up to and including 1914, conflict seemed philosophically unthinkable.

As the panel explained, the previous ninety-nine years since Waterloo saw a period of relative European peace not seen on the European continent for many centuries – along with widespread improvement in economic circumstances for the vast bulk of its citizens. Macauley's works set the tenor for an optimistic trend in Liberal philosophical outlook, but this trend ought not to be seen in isolation. As the world economy became ever more integrated in a way foreseen by the likes of Smith, it seemed that war was sufficiently beyond the pale of individual as well as mutual self-interest that its occurrence in Europe would be avoided. As Falkner pointed out, the language of the great Liberals Locke and Cobden was often coloured by metaphors of peace, not just material security, and this remained a touchstone for the party throughout the period.

However, war followed swiftly in summer 1914, with the two groups of countries bound inflexibly by international treaty. Meanwhile, Liberal Interationalist attempts to stop or even merely blunt its excesses had apparently limited results. In the context of the end of the Belle Epoque, the unfashionable prophesy of Edward Grey, from 1914, that 'the lights had gone out in Europe' was rendered all the more tragic upon the panel's reflection. That said, both Arimatsu and Faulkner spoke optimistically about the legacy of Liberal Internationalism, a movement whose potency now owes much to the traumatic milieu in which it was originally conceived.

Falkner spoke of the vestigial effects of the conflict on his native Germany and how its shadow subtly coloured his own childhood in Bavaria, many decades later. In his boyhood, he had been partially looked after by a local woman whose husband had been badly injured in the war, and was hence unable to have children. He spoke of her conspicuous tendency to preserve rations and material goods in a way that was indicative of a deep habit developed in a time of scarcity and uncertainty, a habit that he had inherited to this day. The mark of memory was stubborn, as well as painful, for much of the European continent.

Falkner defined liberal internationalists as being those who value individual rights wherever they may be, even outside their own countries. As such, Liberals had a cosmopolitan outlook, and believed that the individual should be allowed to flourish anywhere in the globe. Liberal internationalists did not believe that realpolitik was all that should be employed in international objectives and that peace, justice, the betterment of individual rights around the world were critical. Whilst they were pragmatic about the value of the nation state, they were ultimately 'activist' in outlook and restless to improve individual opportunity and human rights where possible. Liberal internationalists were part of a progressive creed, and didn't just believe in more of the same in terms of war.

Falkner juxtaposed liberal internationalism with what he termed social internationalism. The latter wished to 'remake the world' on a socialist basis and with utopian goals, and was linked to international political networks. Liberal internationalists were more committed to protecting human rights from abuses such as torture, whilst emphasising a practical attitude to

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realpolitik. He also differentiated it from the closely related concept of liberal pacifism, which had opposed all forms of war, including the First World War, from the outset. Liberal internationalism was also associated with but distinct from the late-Victorian Liberal imperialist movement of Joseph Chamberlain, which offered a more statist domestic policy in reaction to the classical economic policy of Gladstone.

Perhaps not uniquely in the field of liberal scholarship, Falkner stated that the practical application of liberal internationalism was ambiguous. With a keenness to empathise with the individual need, Falkner argued that liberal internationalists could be argued to be proponents for and against intervention. Falkner argued that its philosophical descendants in the early twenty-first century in Britain probably included both Charles Kennedy and Tony Blair, who took markedly differing stances on the Iraq invasion, but based both their arguments upon an explicit humanitarian basis.

Liberal internationalists would also potentially give different answers to a number of questions. Should all war be avoided at all costs? Cobden said yes, others no. Where the democratic will of the people was for war, even on a non-liberal basis such as nationalism, would it be liberal to oppose it? Should so-called 'civilised' nineteenth-century nations seek 'liberal reform' in less democratic countries, or seek to preserve peaceful co-existence? Whilst William Gladstone spoke of foreign intervention, such as the attack on Alexandria in Egypt in the 1880s, as the 'Duty of England', there was no settled opinion, by the start of the First World War, of what liberal internationalism was.

Falkner therefore termed liberal internationalism a 'broad church', with varied goals that were at times ill defined: 'there was no simple blueprint'. Nor could the movement that characterised it be classified as belonging to an easily discernible faction: in the British context, it straddled both the Liberals and the emerging Labour Party. Proponents during the period of the First World War included Norman Angell and Edmund Morel, who became important figures in the Labour Party in the interwar

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period, after leaving the Liberal Party in part because of the war. Leonard Woolf, husband of Virginia, and the influential economist John A. Hobson had also already migrated to the Independent Labour Party before hostilities commenced. Each had been significant players in the Union of Democratic Control, which, whilst not exclusively pacifist, harshly criticised what it perceived as the military dominance of governments at the outset of war, and became increasingly critical of both sides, as the conflict became more bloody and protracted. However current liberal internationalism is, in Falkner's opinion, articulated with most zest by politicians in the right-hand corner of British politics, including those Conservative MPs who were influenced by the American neo-conservative movement to intervene in Iraq.

Three concepts underlined liberal international thought in the pre-war period according to Falkner. First was what he called 'harmony of interest' – or 'common interest' as outlined by Adam Smith – and is the notion that people do not naturally seek out war and conflict. Further, Falkner stated, this tendency was reinforced by the view that the natural progression from an agrarian to an industrial society had increased the potential opportunity cost that could accrue from conflict. Second was the notion that individual rights led to greater collective rights and success – an idea influenced by Kant's notion that democracies were unlikely to engage in war. Similarly, Thomas Paine had stated his belief that wars were typically rooted in monarchical self-interest; modern republics were less likely to go to war. Finally, liberal internationalists were committed to the rule of law, which was felt to be important as a form of defence of the individual from the state. This view had been expressed by liberal thinkers ranging from Jeremy Bentham to Woodrow Wilson, and was seen as a key tool for taming the state.

Falkner emphasised that, although liberal internationalists were unenthusiastic about the war from its very outset, they did accept it. Many liberal internationalists felt that the allied cause was necessary to preserve international law and the integrity of Belgium; there were no liberals arguing on behalf

of the German side. However, this began to change as the war went on. H. G. Wells coined the phrase 'war to end all wars' in 1914, but by 1916 he spoke of it as 'not being clearly of light against darkness, but wholesome instincts in a nightmare; the world is not really awake', and his ambivalence was indicative of a growing mind set: as the war went on, the memory of its initial purpose was diluted by the apparently senseless nature of the continuing slaughter. Wells' point was not that war should be opposed without equivocation, but indicated, instead, a desperate urge to reduce its evil when it was impossible to avoid.

Falkner concluded with three points about the conflict's legacy upon liberalism. The first was that the idea that trade could be used to guarantee peace was greatly challenged and consequently the notion of free trade was diminished in the post-war period. Duncan Brack of this journal contested this, pointing out that the importance of free trade remained underscored by a range of factors, including the Liberal contribution to the Bretton Wood talks on free trade, the Liberal Party's commitment to the common market and EU, and the party's enduring interest and celebration of Richard Cobden and John Bright. Whilst Falkner accepted this, he felt that the optimistic narrative of the Victorian period was never re-established and that when free trade was talked about after 1945, it was no longer framed as squarely within the context of peace. Second, Falkner stated that he felt the old notion that democratic states were inherently more inclined toward peace was challenged, and that as a result they opted for a more interventionist approach in later years. The growth in state planning in the 1920s was also seen to weaken this view. Finally, though international law became more salient and more deeply reified during the inter-war period, the effectiveness of the League of Nations was clearly a disappointment. That said, the United Nations' success after 1945 gave strong reasons for optimism and perhaps offered a sweeter form of irony, as the liberal project came in to fruition.

Whilst Gladstone's views were clearly coloured by his own theistic

inclinations, they were perhaps also influenced by the growing dissemination of news media in the Victorian period – a factor that has increased to an ever greater degree to the present day – with the result that the domestic audience has come to feel an ever more potent sense of human empathy for individual suffering, wherever it might occur in the world. Whilst Gladstone's Midlothian words about the universal 'sanctity of life' in the mud huts of Afghanistan were richly evocative, they were ahead of their time, as shown by the enduring public concern today about Human Rights around the world.

Louise Arimatsu opened her discussion by highlighting the Serbian response to Austria's ultimatum of July 1914. Whilst it gave Serbia little option to avoid war, the Serbs themselves responded by referring the standoff to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. Offering her own counterfactual, had the international framework been stronger, or had the Austrians been slightly more willing, maybe the period 1914–18 could have been remembered in the context of international law as being one of constant deliberation by the PCA.

Nonetheless, Arimatsu argued that, despite the tragedy of the war and the damage inflicted on liberal dreams of indefinite peace, the period ultimately laid the groundwork for the system of international law – including the UN Charter system – that greatly shapes today's conflicts and our response to them. Indeed, despite the perceived futility of the pre-war Hague treaties, the war damaged the case for the existing order and the pre-war classical model of might as right.

Arimatsu delineated the challenge faced by Liberal International in the form of the constant dilemma that, in order to solve war, liberals must be willing to threaten violence as a deterrent for violence; in other words, to use a cure potentially as damaging as the disease itself. This had led, Arimatsu felt, to a necessary confusion about whether effective means to solve human rights crises in an international context can ever properly be considered 'liberal'. In terms of finding a solution to this ambiguity, Arimatsu felt that a 'liberal' solution to an issue of international law

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always had to be one that championed 'pluralism' at the expense of 'anti-pluralism'.

Arimatsu spoke of the importance of the post-1648 classical model of international relations. The Peace of Westphalia had been an important stepping stone in the transition from the city state toward the modern European nation state; by the late nineteenth century, relations were largely decided based on relative power, or as Geoffrey Best remarked, it was 'War governed by power'.

However, two trends emerged during the period to change such thinking. The rapid growth of European economies in the nineteenth century led to ever-greater economic interdependence as countries developed their industrial base and sought to exploit gains from trade with one another. Financial connections led to legal and political linkages and it was felt that these could make war less likely. The second separate strand were the overlapping liberal movements throughout the century, including campaigns against the slave trade, for women's suffrage and other peace movements. With both factors moulding a zeitgeist, it was no surprise that Czar Nicholas II of Russia sought to call a halt to the arms race. The 1899 and 1907 Conferences in The Hague sought to reduce the chance of war, but the impetus was nonetheless pragmatic and was also based on the idea of softening the impact of war when it inevitably did occur. Arimatsu highlighted the legacy of the 1899 and 1907 Hague Peace Conferences and the concept of 'codification'. The first aimed to reduce armaments such as poisoned gas, soft bullets, naval mines and the use of balloons to drop bombs. The latter focused on conventions for war on land and sea and for the settlement of disputes arising from war. The Permanent Court of Arbitration that arose was the first of its kind, and exists to this day.

The interwar period saw the advent of Wilson's League of Nations. Whilst it was not ultimately successful, it was a radical departure from the previous, ad hoc approach to international law, and was influential upon the UN Charter system. Meanwhile, more formal attempts to codify POW status, to properly discriminate

combatants from non-combatants, and to delineate war claims, maritime neutrality, asylum and extradition, were being explicated for the first time. Each of these principles has become pervasive and influential, if not universal, today.

Arimatsu argued that, given the bloodshed of the First and Second World War, it was easy with hindsight to dismiss the achievements of liberal internationalism in the period. However, she pointed out that it is the nature of any law that breaches occur and that the real test of a law is how such breaches are dealt with, rather than whether they are universally upheld from the outset. In the early twenty-first century, we now expect offenders, such as those accused of war crimes in the Western Balkans, to be punished for breaching international law.

Although the Third Hague Peace Conference was cancelled as world war began, the war led to ever-greater demands for a more humane and pluralistic approach, cultivated from roots in the pre-war Liberal International movement. The enduring legacy of the movement today, Arimatsu said, proves that it was not a failure a century ago.

As the meeting moved on to questions, there was a greater focus on the post-war period. It was asked whether the Versailles Treaty, with its punitive peace and heavy burden of reparations, much criticised and often cited as a cause of the Second World War, was a failure of 'liberal thought'. Falkner accepted that it was, and that despite the presence of liberal-minded leaders like Lloyd George and Wilson, the punishing agenda of French Premier Clemenceau did indeed result in a damaging settlement. That said, Falkner felt it was clear that the lesson had been learned by 1945 and that the generous attitude of the allies to the rebuilding of Europe indicated a belated triumph of liberal thinking.

Jonathan Fryer asked whether discussion of the war had fallen into a Eurocentric trap of excessive focus on the events on the Western Front, at the expense of what was occurring in the Middle East. As the Ottoman Empire fractured, were the Balfour Declaration and the much-criticised Sykes–Picot agreement perhaps the most significant legacy to international affairs, given

that both had received much coverage in the summer of 2014? Whilst Falkner accepted that the Middle East had experienced a difficult century, he felt it was necessary for us to live with historical mistakes and to make the best of them and that it would be a mistake to think we could go back to previous borders. Citing a recent Michael Ignatieff article in the *Financial Times* which spoke of his aversion to secession, Falkner felt it was worth recognising that 'every new nation creates a new minority group'.

Challenging Arimatsu's sanguine tone about the Liberal International legacy, Simon Drage asked if the apparently widespread use of drones by the Obama administration was proof that international law and oversight remained weak today. Arimatsu argued that, despite initial uncertainty about Pakistan, in the case of operations both there and in Yemen, it was clear that both countries had invited the Americans to intervene; in the case of the latter, the encouragement was forthright. Whilst liberals might query the approach of those individual governments, at the internationalist level, a structure was in place that respected national sovereignty and process of law.

Arimatsu concluded by saying that liberal internationalism was perhaps best understood as a state of mind. Whilst Blair might have asserted a commitment to personal

freedom in 2003, his anti-pluralistic actions were indicative of an outlook counter to the idea of liberal internationalism. That said, the international landscape was shaped profoundly today by the activities of those people inside and outside the UK Liberal Party in the internationalist movement who wished to foster a stronger peace, or at least a better war.

Falkner's conclusion was most optimistic about the future. For all its manifest contradictions, and the difficulties inherent in the so-called 'Right to Protect', international liberalism had changed the discourse of international affairs for the better. He concluded that 'we are all liberal internationalists now'.

As the ninety minute meeting drew to a close, Martin Horwood remarked on the myriad of issues the discussion had not even touched upon, as evidence of the complexity of what had been discussed: the Bolshevik revolution was not even mentioned, nor the effects of the conflict on Africa and Asia. Horwood said the fact that the topic was still relevant and emotive a century later, proved that the apparently ancient liberal battle to foster individual creativity and heterogeneity – against the foes of absolutism and despotism across the world – still had a long way to go.

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Democrats' handling of sexual harassment allegations. In fact, it comes from p. 36 of Dr Elizabeth Evans' book, *Gender and the Liberal Democrats – Representing Women?*, which is based largely on doctoral research undertaken between 2005 and 2009.

Despite the differing context of their report and doctoral research respectively, Helena Morrissey and Elizabeth Evans share a fundamental conclusion: that there is a woman-unfriendly culture in the Liberal Democrats. Morrissey (p. 57) notes that 'the Party (and politics generally) is struggling to genuinely develop an encouraging environment for women', while Evans argues that 'despite the equal opportunity rhetoric, the party is an institution embedded in a masculine ethos and ideology' in which there is a 'persistent privileging of male norms and values' (p. 146).

For both, the most glaring – but by no means only – manifestation of this cultural problem has been the continuing failure to elect more women Liberal Democrat MPs. It is this failure which leads Evans to ask whether Liberal Democrats are 'representing women'.

In answering the question she poses herself, Evans structures her empirical evidence – quantitative and qualitative data, including interviews with parliamentarians, candidates and senior staff – around three key criteria:

- descriptive representation (numbers of women in specified senior roles);
- substantive representation (the extent to which the party's policies may be described as 'feminist'); and
- symbolic representation (whether women are presented as 'tokens').

Evans finds the party most wanting in relation to the first and third of these criteria. She notes that, despite comprising approximately half the membership, women are largely absent from senior voluntary and staff roles. A senior party official is quoted remarking that 'Women do the work but aren't represented at decision-making level' (p. 32). Even at the grassroots, Evans finds 'an inherent gender bias within local parties which seek to reinforce the traditional sexual division of labour' (p. 148). Women are more likely to be baking cakes

REVIEWS

Women and the Liberal Democrats

Dr Elizabeth Evans, *Gender and the Liberal Democrats – Representing Women?* (Manchester University Press, 2011)
Review by **Dinti Batstone**

I just worry that the way the party behaves as an employer does not reflect our policies, I seethe about it. It's a wider cultural thing and a couple of senior people at the top don't think there's a problem but there is. There is a major problem.

That's obvious to anyone who sees Cowley Street close up.

BUT FOR THE reference to Cowley Street, this quote could have come straight out of Helena Morrissey's report last year into the Liberal