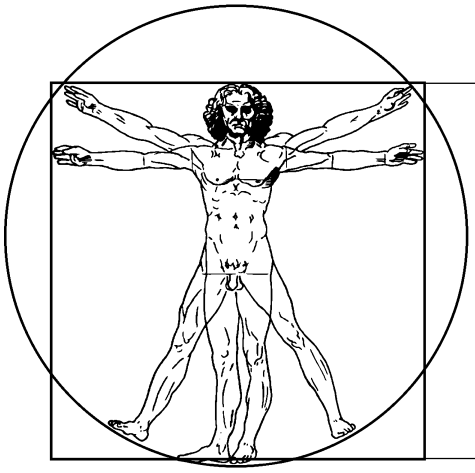

Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter 9 December 1995 £2.00

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.

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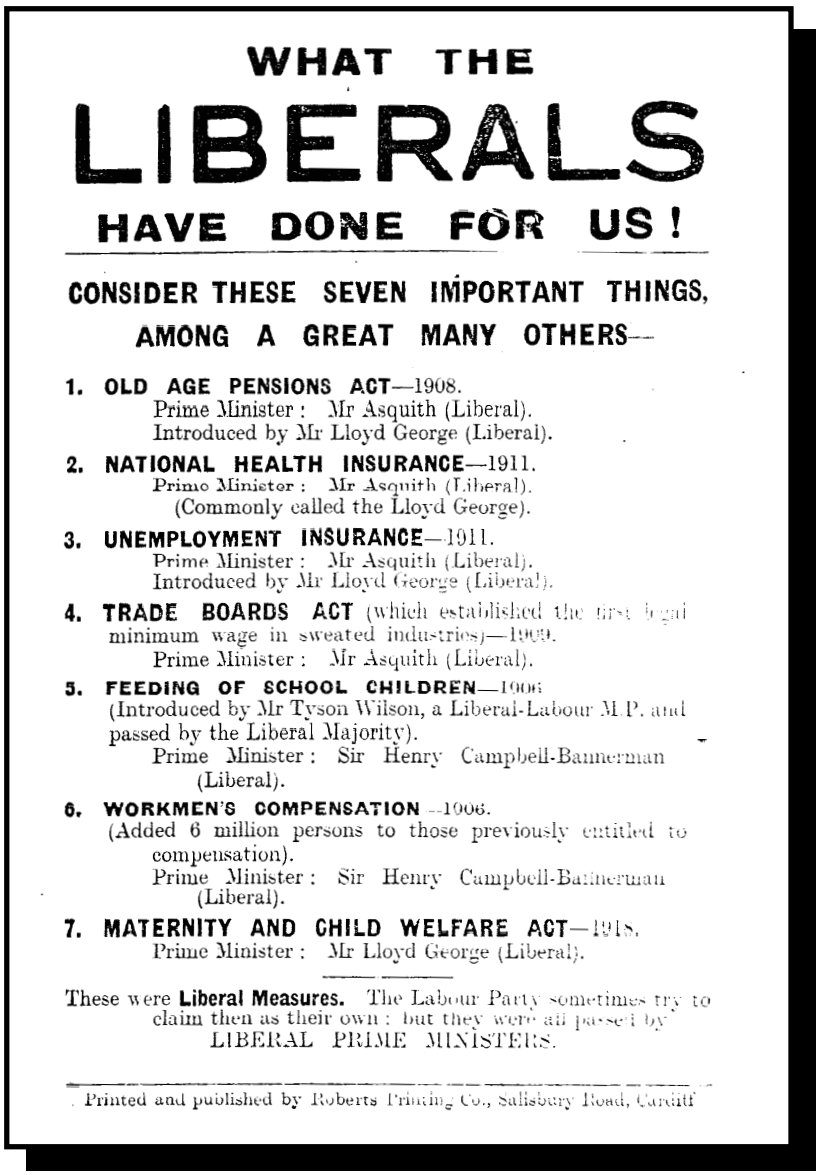

WHAT THE

LIBERALS

HAVE DONE FOR US!

CONSIDER THESE SEVEN IMPORTANT THINGS, AMONG A GREAT MANY OTHERS—

1. **OLD AGE PENSIONS ACT**—1908.
   Prime Minister: Mr Asquith (Liberal).
   Introduced by Mr Lloyd George (Liberal).
2. **NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE**—1911.
   Prime Minister: Mr Asquith (Liberal).
   (Commonly called the Lloyd George).
3. **UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**—1911.
   Prime Minister: Mr Asquith (Liberal).
   Introduced by Mr Lloyd George (Liberal).
4. **TRADE BOARDS ACT** (which established the first legal minimum wage in sweated industries)—1909.
   Prime Minister: Mr Asquith (Liberal).
5. **FEEDING OF SCHOOL CHILDREN**—1906
   (Introduced by Mr Tyson Wilson, a Liberal-Labour M.P. and passed by the Liberal Majority).
   Prime Minister: Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (Liberal).
6. **WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION**—1906.
   (Added 6 million persons to those previously entitled to compensation).
   Prime Minister: Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (Liberal).
7. **MATERNITY AND CHILD WELFARE ACT**—1918.
   Prime Minister: Mr Lloyd George (Liberal).

These were **Liberal Measures.** The Labour Party sometimes try to claim them as their own: but they were all passed by LIBERAL PRIME MINISTERS.

Printed and published by Roberts Printing Co., Salisbury Road, Cardiff

Liberal Party leaflet from the 1945 general election. Lead article, pages 2-4.

A Liberal Democrat History Group Seminar

The Repeal of the Corn Laws

7.00pm Wednesday 14 February; for full details see back page

Liberals and the 1945 Election

Two recent articles both examined the experiences of the Liberal Party in the dramatic general election of 1945. **Mark Egan** *and* **Tony Greaves** *review them.*

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election
by Malcolm Baines (*Contemporary Record* 9:1, Summer 1995)

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election
by Peter Joyce (Liberal Democrat History Group, Sept 1995)

Reviewed by Mark Egan

Two articles, both entitled *The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election,* have recently been published; one, by Peter Joyce, was circulated with the last edition of this newsletter. The other was written by Malcolm Baines and published in *Contemporary Record* this summer. In this article I intend to review the arguments of both articles and put forward my own assessment of the reasons for the Liberal Party's poor showing in 1945 and of the significance of that election.

In the short 'no-man's land' period between the casting of votes in the 1945 election and their counting three weeks later, the Liberal Party headquarters announced that they anticipated winning between 80 and 100 seats. This immense optimism was based upon the perception, picked up by Mass Observation surveys, that there was a degree of popular good will directed at the Liberal Party. However, that goodwill was not translated into votes - partly because only 309 Liberal candidates stood, but more importantly because the Liberal Party was not perceived as a serious contender in the contest to form a new government.

Joyce correctly identifies the party's lack of a coherent image as the fundamental obstacle to success. The party was split ideologically between those who argued that the state could be used to secure reform and those who wished to reduce its role. The party leadership was wary of taking a lead in defining where the party should stand; it was primarily engaged in work within the government before 1945, and was heedful of the damaging splits over free trade in the 1930s. As a consequence, the party tended to describe itself in terms of the two other parties, as a possible moderating influence on the extremes of socialism and Conservatism. Moderation, allied with an emotional appeal to the party's social reforming past, constituted the Liberal image. While there may have been little hostility expressed towards this image it did not imply that electors had any intention of voting Liberal.

This ideological split within the Liberal Party was neither new nor damaging; what was damaging was the lack of direction given by the leadership. During the war years Radical Action, a small group of PPCs and senior party members, succeeded both in forcing the party leadership to declare its independence of any possible post-war 'National' coalition and in ensuring that the 1945 election manifesto was a radical document based on support for social reform. However, again as Joyce and Baines illustrate, fighting an election on those terms made it difficult to attack the Labour Party, the Liberals' main opponent on the left. The party leadership could have taken a more vigorous stand against nationalisation, rationing, conscription and monopoly; but it chose instead to use Beveridge to promote his report. But Labour was also committed to the social reforms proposed by Beveridge and, moreover, it at least fielded the required number of candidates necessary to form a government. It is no wonder, then, that voters could be both sympathetic to the Liberal programme and supportive of the Labour Party.

Joyce's main contention is that because the Liberal Party could not possibly form a government in 1945, it should have reevaluated its electoral objectives. Given that the party could not have contemplated any deal or arrangement with either of the main parties, following the electoral traumas of the 1930s, and that it could not have retreated into any sectional or regional bias without alienating much of the membership, this implies the party following *The Observer's* advice of 1951 and becoming a pressure group dedicated to persuading the two serious political parties to adopt Liberal ideas when in government. However, given that the party was geared almost exclusively towards raising money for and competing in Parliamentary contests - it barely contested any municipal elections in the 1940s - it is difficult to contemplate how it would have survived at all if it had decided not to aim to win general elections.

The party was split ideologically between those who argued that the state could be used to secure reform and those who wished to reduce its role.

The party was completely incapable of targeting resources into winnable seats, as it does now. Not only did national headquarters have no control over where candidates stood (Torrington, where the Liberal was second in 1950, and which was won in 1958, was not contested in either 1951 or 1955; hopeless Esher was contested in both elections), but also the party had no money to spend on individual seats. The party leadership was not forced into aiming for government by emotional activists, as Joyce states; indeed, many Radical Action members would have been happy to see the party work with Labour after the election. Instead, the party remained geared up, throughout all of its activities, towards fighting national elections and any attempt to reevaluate that aim in 1945 was impossible. The leadership could have made a better attempt at establishing a positive image of the party in the eyes of the electorate, but it would take time for the party to orient itself away from aiming for government and towards local government and byelection contests. Even now, the Liberal Democrats still aim to be the sole party of government after the next election, even if no-one really believes it will happen.

Whereas Joyce outlines the problems with the Liberal campaign in 1945, Baines sets out to describe four ways in which the election could be described as a watershed for the Liberal Party. First, and most importantly, the Liberal Parliamentary Party was reduced to a rump of mainly Welsh and south western MPs, with no representation in urban areas; and this shift away from the party's urban remnants was more or less repeated in the 1945 local elections. However, this retreat was simply the culmination of a process begun in 1924. After that election the Liberal Party could no longer claim to be one of the major parties of government in Britain and could no longer hold on to any urban seats, except in exceptional circumstances. In 1924 only seven Liberals won three-cornered fights, and only six were elected in Britain's eleven largest cities, with only Percy Harris defeating a Conservative. In 1935, only two of the Liberal Party's nine urban seats were won in three-cornered contests against the two other major parties. With the Conservative and Labour Parties both fighting more seats than ever before in 1945, those exceptional circumstances diminished still further, although seats in Bolton and Huddersfield were later won by the Liberal Party after arrangements were reached with the Tories.

Secondly, the 1945 election brought Labour to power with an outright majority for the first time; this was followed by a degree of speculation about the possibility of Liberal-Conservative pacts. This speculation was encouraged by Churchill and by Liberal opposition to aspects of Labour's nationalisation plans. However, the resurgence of anti-socialism within the party, as opposed to the radicalism of the war years, did not occur until 1947, after Horabin defected to Labour, and only replicated the party's stance during the mid-1920s, another period when the Liberal Party defined itself primarily in terms of its opposition to other parties rather than in terms of its own policy aims.

1945 was a grim defeat for the party, but it was the 1950 debacle which inspired the changes which led to later revival.

Thirdly, the defeat of Sinclair and all of the Liberal members of the wartime coalition left a vacuum in the party leadership which the Parliamentary Party was not well equipped to fill. The job of leader was offered to Gwilym Lloyd George, who very soon joined the Conservative ranks. This was a serious problem for the party, especially as Clement Davies proved to be an ineffectual leader who did little to reinvigorate the party. However, it is debatable how effective Sinclair would have been as leader of the Liberals after 1945. His opposition to Liberal contestants in wartime byelections, and his aristocratic connections with the Churchills did not endear him to many party activists; his leadership would probably only have survived because of the paucity of challengers for his position.

Finally, in the aftermath of the 1945 election the Liberal Party threw itself into organisational improvements, stipulated in the report into defeat, *Coats Off For The Future!* This led in 1950 to the fielding of 475 candidates, enough to allow a Liberal government to be elected for the first time since 1929. However, if the 1924 election was a watershed in terms of signalling the end the pre-1918 electoral base of the Liberal Party, the 1950 election was a watershed for the aims and attitudes of party activists. As Baines rightly points out, the aim of party activists after 1945 was to ensure that enough candidates would stand next time to permit the election of enough Liberal members to form a government; and it was argued that this would persuade 'Liberal-buts' to swing behind the party. After 1950 this illusion was shattered and it took a quarter of a century for that number of Liberal candidates to stand again. After 1950 activists realised that Parliamentary contests were almost all hopeless, and activities had to be refocused elsewhere if the party was to survive.

Although the party remained committed to working for the election of Liberal Members of Parliament, ideas such as the targeting of resources, in operation by the 1964 election, and a realisation of the usefulness of byelections - a Liberal byelection team was in operation by the mid-1950s - became apparent. More importantly, activists began to switch their attention to local elections and the party's local strength began to pick up after 1953. It took a comprehensive electoral disaster for which no ameliorating circumstances could be blamed for the Liberal Party to reformulate its aims and its policies; 1945 was a grim defeat for the party, but it was the 1950 debacle which inspired the changes which led to later revival.

Both articles offer a significant contribution to our understanding of the 1945 general election - one of the most startling of modern times - and the Liberal Party's fortunes in it. Baines highlights the factors which, he argues, make the election a watershed for the party, especially the loss of many prominent Liberal MPs, defeated at the polls. He also emphasises the traditional nature of local Liberal campaigns and concludes that Labour, not the Liberals, was best placed to gain from the increased acceptance of social egalitarianism amongst the electorate. Joyce's analysis is different, concentrating on the tactical mistakes the party made. The decision by the party to fight the election as an independent entity was not matched by a clear redefinition of the party's identity, reflecting ideological splits within the organisation. Furthermore, the party could not possibly have formed a government after the election - and yet fought to achieve that aim. Both articles make depressing reading for Liberals, but they explore the factors and problems with which the Liberal Party has had to cope since 1945, and which still influence our party today.

The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election
by Peter Joyce (Liberal Democrat History Group, Sept 1995)

Comments by Tony Greaves

My first comment is one of congratulation on organising the production of this paper, together with some disappointment at the ephemeral nature of its format. Nor do I like the stilted academic prose style that Peter Joyce uses; surely if a paper is worth wider publication it is also worth the effort to make it more easily readable (I am arguing for elegance rather than tabloidese!).

My second observation is that Joyce does us a real service in

showing how the unavoidable dilemmas of a third party campaign which Liberals have all come to accept as part of the political scene (and so far failed to crack) are older than most of us had really understood. Joyce's arguments about party strategy in 1945 don't seem to have changed much in fifty years. Whether to go for government, balance of power, influence in a parliament; whether to emphasise the national or local campaign in winnable seats; how to achieve a clear third campaign message - what has changed?

Of course, we all have the advantage now of understanding the nature of these problems only too well, if not the solutions to them. It is therefore easy enough, perhaps, for Joyce to project them on to an older campaign in which the participants perhaps understood them less well or not at all. But he does enough in his paper to prove that he is right.

How often political parties (like armies) try to fight the last battle, because that is the one they understand!

My disappointments with the paper lies in other areas. His central thesis seems to be that the campaign failed as a result of an activist-imposed decision to 'go for government'. He states this at the beginning and restates it at the end, but I find no hard evidence in between that this particular decision had any effect on the result. It is not clear what other strategy was available that would have held the campaign together. Joyce argues that strictly limited resources should have been tightly targeted to winnable seats, but how that could have been done in the circumstances of 1945 is not clear. Liberal Democrats find it difficult enough to target even now, with modern communications and personal resources! What we do know, however, is that local targeting has to take place within the context of a strong national campaign.

Joyce provides no evidence that a strategy based on getting the balance of power would have won more seats in 1945 (any more than at any election since then). His real insight however is that in 1945 the Liberal Party was still fighting the election that would have taken place in 1939 or 1940 if there had been no war. There is little doubt that the Liberal failure owed much to the party (like everyone else) not realising that there would be a Labour landslide; whether spending more time attacking Labour would have made any difference can only be guessed at. How often political parties (like armies) try to fight the last battle, because that is the one they understand! How like the Labour Party now!

Joyce is also correct in laying much of the problem at the constituency door; there is little doubt that in 1945 Liberal Party organisation in most constituencies did not exist in any serious campaigning way - and indeed in spite of the national efforts to promote a broad front in 1950, this did not change greatly until the start of the sixties. I think he is wrong in putting this problem down to the war; after all, the other parties had been through the same war. The fact is that the Liberal Party on the ground had started to disintegrate much earlier - soon after the formation of the Lloyd George Coalition. There were many reasons for this - the Lloyd George split; defections of working class members to Labour; the failure of the party to recruit many younger people in the 1920s; the Simonite (Nat-Lib) split; further defections both ways in the 1930s as power receded further and further from the party ....

It is true that with Sinclair as Leader and with a growing unhappiness with the Conservative dictatorship of the 1930s, there was a revival of Liberal morale and campaigning towards the end of that decade; but the party was organisationally already at a very low base. By the declaration of war in 1939, the grass-roots organisation of the Liberal Party had already collapsed; other than in parts of the rural Celtic fringe, what remained were relict islands of activity. Delaying the election a few months into the summer of 1945 might have saved a very few seats for sitting MPs (had they spent the time campaigning in them). It may have got more candidates in the field on the 1950 basis of giving them a one-way railway ticket from a London terminus and their deposit. But it would have had no real effect at all on the result.

There is one other observation in Joyce's paper which merits further discussion. He suggests the party was split in that many Liberal candidates had not accepted the full Beveridge programme of state intervention to secure freedom from want, ignorance, idleness, squalor and disease. Yet his anecdotal evidence comes only from one Independent Liberal candidate! Experience of the Liberal Party fifteen or twenty years later leads me to guess that in both 1945 and 1950 (and even more so at earlier elections) there were legions of old-style free-traders going to the polls under a Keynes/Lloyd George/Beveridge policy banner that they neither understood nor really supported. Is this true? It seems to me to merit a lot more investigation, for if it is true it might give more than a clue to the underlying rot which resulted in the debilitation of militant Liberalism for more than a generation.

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 Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922-88. Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.

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.

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 back page.

The Peacemaker

How many people know that the first British recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize was a Liberal MP?
Simon Hall-Raleigh *charts the political career of* **William Randal Cremer.**

The first British recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize was the Liberal MP William Randal Cremer. He received that international recognition in 1903. The Peace Prize was first awarded in 1901, the year of Queen Victoria's death and the beginning of the Edwardian era. As it was given to two persons in both 1901 and 1902, Cremer was the first individual to be the sole winner. It was richly deserved. His main interest in life was the quest for world peace; all other matters were of secondary importance.

Like Tom Paine, his country was the world, and his religion was to do good.

Cremer was born in Fareham, Hampshire, in 1828, in the reign of King George IV. He came from a broken home, and had to endure much deprivation in his formative years. He was doubly unfortunate because his mother was an over-enthusiastic Methodist. Her version of keeping the Sabbath was so strict as to prevent his going for a casual walk other than to and from the church where they worshipped. At the age of twelve Cremer left school and commenced employment as a pitchboy in a shipyard. For three years he worked a 72 hour week. From the ages of 15 to 21 he passed his time as an apprentice in the building trade. One evening during this early stage of his life he attended a public lecture on the subject of peace. The speaker argued for international disputes to be settled by peaceful means instead of by engaging in war. That lecture proved to be a watershed for him; so great was its impression that he came away firmly on course for a lifetime crusade in the cause of international arbitration.

On completion of his training he was a qualified carpenter. That was to be his sole trade prior to embarking on his distinguished service at Westminster. After a brief stint with a coach-builders in Fareham he moved on to Brighton ad then to London. If he bothered with such a thing as a CV, his employment record would have looked unimpressive. Yet a record of his leisure activities would have indicated an individual of great promise and energy. They included campaigning for a nine hour day (1858), helping to found the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (1860), championing the cause of the Northern states on the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861), helping to found the International Workingmen's Association (1865), and establishing a committee to advocate British neutrality during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. That pressure group evolved into the Workmen's Peace Association (1871), for which he served as secretary until his death.

Thirty-six years were to elapse from the end of his apprenticeship in 1849 to his first election to Parliament in 1885, at the age of 57. Nowadays a newcomer of that age would stand little chance of being adopted as an official candidate of a major political party. That he achieved so much in the remaining 23 years of his life should be viewed as a classic example of how much society can benefit by not treating citizens over the age of 50 as past their prime.

In the long period before becoming MP for Haggerston (in the Shoreditch part of the Borough of Hackney) he became nationally known through his involvement with the fledgling trade union movement, and developed close ties with fellow social reformers abroad. By the time he entered the House of Commons he had well and truly served his political apprenticeship, and appreciated more than most the importance of close cooperation with fellow representatives from other countries. Like Tom Paine, his country was the world, and his religion was to do good.

Cremer was one of the pioneers of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. At the inaugural meeting in Paris in 1889, he was elected as one of the vice-presidents, and he continued to play a key part in all its subsequent conferences. Recently I acquired a large British commemorative medallion. On the obverse it bears the head of King Edward VII, with his name and the words THE PEACEMAKER. On the reverse a female stands holding a laurel wreath. The inscription reads:

XIX CONFERENCE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION.
PALACE OF WESTMINSTER. 1906.

That important international event was the pinnacle of Cremer's career as a member of parliament. In his role as honorary secretary of the union he was responsible for masterminding the gathering, held in the Royal Gallery of the House of Lords. A total of 617 representatives attended the conference; 356 were delegates from 21 other parliaments.

One has only to read chapter 28 of Howard Evan's biography of Cremer (published in 1909) to realise the extent of his influence and the widespread respect he commanded. That section is titled *The Nobel Dinner*, and refers to a banquet in his honour that took place in a restaurant in Holborn in 1904. The event was over-subscribed. Two hundred participated, including many from overseas - all the more impressive when one recalls how time-consuming foreign travel still was in those pre-flight days in the early years of the century.

A better way to gauge his worth is to reflect on the huge loss of life in the Great War which began just six years after his death in 1908. Fortunately he was spared that experience; he would have been totally devastated. If he had lived longer he might well have been able to play a part in trying to persuade the European powers to become more committed to international arbitration well in advance of 1914. Without any reservation I regard Cremer as a beacon of light to his generation. He was a splendid example for all time of what

can be accomplished by a backbench MP determined to help make the world a more civilised place. It is one thing to become involved in peacemaking at the eleventh hour, or after the balloon has already gone up, but quite another to devote decades of one's life to that noble cause regardless of how unfashionable it might appear, and of the ridicule with which prominent peacemakers have to contend when jingoism is allowed full rein.

France was the first country formally to recognise Cremer. In 1890 he was honoured with the Cross of the Légion d'Honneur. After the award of the Nobel Peace Prize thirteen years later he was made a Commander of the Norwegian order of Saint Olav, and was persuaded to accept a British knighthood. On an earlier occasion he declined. His work was more important to him than any state decoration if acceptance involved any possible misunderstanding amongst those who formed the bedrock of his supporters. He was on record as saying that the one honour that gave him most satisfaction was that he had been elected five times as MP for Haggerston.

It is a matter for regret that the National Portrait Gallery contains no picture of Cremer in its extensive collection. By virtue of his Nobel prize, he is well deserving of inclusion. But even if his career had not been crowned with that honour he still warrants inclusion as a tribute to one of England's finest public figures. In four years' time there should be a spate of books on the Nobel prizes to mark the centenary of the first awards. Hopefully the spotlight will then be turned on many forgotten heroes of yesteryear, and Cremer will be one of those whose work will once again be appreciated by the thinking British public as well as by all who identify with the international peace movement.

Does New Labour leave room for New Liberals?

Conference Fringe Meeting Report
Glasgow, September 1995
by Duncan Brack

The reforming Liberal Governments of 1906-14 helped lay the foundations of the British welfare state; amongst other achievements, they introduced old age pensions, national insurance and the principle of graduated taxation. Underpinning these political achievements lay the school of thought known as the 'New Liberalism'. New Liberal writers such as Green, Hobhouse and Hobson advanced the philosophical underpinnings of the Liberal Party onwards from Gladstonian individualism, developing the concept of community and drawing attention to the need for positive action to redress social and economic inequalities.

Later in the century, John Maynard Keynes was the most representative and distinguished bearer of New Liberal principles, but Labour politicians such as Ramsay Macdonald were also influenced by its thinking, and many New Liberals themselves ended up in the Labour Party. The History Group's most recent conference fringe meeting saw Martin Kettle, Assistant Editor of the *Guardian*, and John Curtice, of Strathclyde University's Department of Politics, debate the New Liberal inheritance and its relevance to the political debate today.

Martin Kettle highlighted the affinities between New Liberal and Labour politicians: both groups were interventionists, seeking to create a new harmony between capitalism, social reform and individual freedom. Although in the short run Fabian/Socialist principles may have played a bigger role in defining the Labour agenda, New Liberals such as Keynes and Beveridge provided many of the ideas which underpinned the success of the Attlee Governments, and New Liberal thinking clearly influenced the revisionist social democracy of Crosland, Gaitskell and Marquand.

Tony Blair, in his Fabian lecture marking the fiftieth anniversary of the postwar Labour Government, had explicitly accepted the contribution of Liberalism to the radical tradition - naming with approval Beveridge, Keynes and even Lloyd George - particularly in its sensitivity to the abuse of political as opposed to economic power. New Liberal concepts clearly have something to offer 'New Labour's' policy developments. In policy terms, the two parties were cousins.

John Curtice agreed with the judgement that while socialism won the first battles, New Liberalism had won the war. But would New Labour enjoy the spoils? The New Liberal approach was still identifiably a *liberal* and non-collectivist one, stressing the need for participative reformism, rather than seeking to impose reforms from above - in Peter Clarke's terms, the New Liberals were 'moral reformists' as opposed to Labour's 'mechanical reformists'. The difference can still be seen today, in the new Clause Four's emphasis on solidarity and reductions in inequality rather than on individual liberty.

And New Liberalism still has relevance to electoral strategy in the 1990s. Curtice pointed to psephological analyses indicating that 'centrist' voters have been moving away from the Alliance/Liberal Democrats towards both the other parties (more recently, of course, towards Labour) - but the party still exerts a strong appeal to voters favouring civil liberties, social reform and a strong welfare state (even at the cost of higher taxes). If the Liberal Democrats could emphasise their commitment to this agenda, stressing in particular the need for investment in education and health, the New Liberal emphasis on using the power of the state to enhance the role of the individual could prove as electorally popular in the 1990s as it had in the 1900s.

The History Group would like to apologise for the late despatch of this Newsletter, originally due just before Christmas. Normal service will be resumed with Newsletter 10, due out in early March.

A Working Class Radical

George Jacob Holyoake
by Lee E Grugel (Porcupine Press, Philadelphia, 1976)

Reviewed by Tony Little

Throughout the Victorian era, politics remained the province of the upper classes. Even in the final decade of the century, the last two premiers were aristocrats, Rosebery and Salisbury. And yet, after 1832, politics were open to the middle classes and, after the second reform act, to the 'better sort' of skilled working class.

As popularly taught, history shows an upsurge in agrarian and urban unrest forcing the Great Reform Act through parliament and repeated popular agitation failing to carry the Charter in 1848, after which the working men only reappear as bit players in the rise of the unions or the Labour party. This view ignores the undertow of continuous working class political action - frequently outside the aristocratic political parties but after the 1860s as part of the mainstream. Of course the policies of both Liberals and Tories responded to aristocratic class interests and to the pressures from educated, organised middle class pressure groups. But, increasingly, policies were designed to incorporate working men within the bounds of the constitution and to respond to their economic and social needs. Whether through conviction, conversion or fear, the political elite were forced to look beyond their own immediate interests to the wider nation. Working men were sufficiently organised to articulate their interests and increasingly to achieve their objectives as the century progressed. Holyoake's life illustrates this development and while the particular direction his career took was probably unique, its combination of esoteric idealism and practical propaganda is illustrative of a typical Victorian pattern.

Born in 1817, George Holyoake was the son of a father who earned his living as a Birmingham mechanic and a mother who combined the manufacture of buttons with the rearing of eleven children. Although he received some schooling, at the age of nine he began to go to work with his father. Up to the age of 22 he worked successfully as a craftsman but after work continued his education. At evening classes he was drawn into religious and political discussions giving him a rationalist anti-religious view and an involvement in politics which were to take over his life.

The Chartist movement had its attractions but Holyoake was a practical man and its imperfect organisation prevented his wholehearted attachment. Instead he took up with Robert Owen's Co-operative movement which combined a secularist view of society with efforts to build a practical but idealistic community. Holyoake took up the role of propagandist for the movement but as the case for building a non-religious society tended to tip over into an anti-religious view of society prosecution, if not persecution, followed. Although Holyoake accepted his trial as an opportunity to argue his case he did not welcome martyrdom. In his view, achieving satisfactory earthly arrangements for society was more important than arguing about the hereafter. This debate among secularists was often bitterly fought and reappeared at regular intervals throughout his life, keeping the various rationalist societies at daggers drawn and inward-looking even at times when they could have made progress.

The ineffectiveness of Owen's co-operative community at Queenswood was a more devastating blow to Holyoake but did not deter him from preaching and writing about socialism and co-operation throughout his life. He recognised the success of the Rochdale pioneers in their alternative strategy for the co-operative movement which has ever since been the centre of the British co-operative movement. Holyoake became a propagandist for the new movement and was still around to take on the role of its first, if somewhat less than objective, historian.

In his long and varied career as an editor, journalist and propagandist, Holyoake was frequently ill and often in debt - politics never paid well - but he was never deterred from putting forward his views for the inspiration of others. If alive in our era, he would almost certainly have been a member of the Labour Party, but one with no time for left wing theorising when there were practical policies to be pursued. In the campaign for the second reform bill, he argued for what was achievable rather than the desirable ideal of one person one vote which had to wait for a new century. As it was he saw himself as a Liberal and worked for the achievement of Liberal victories and for Liberal policies. Some of his campaigning papers are still to found in the Bishopsgate Institute in the City of London.

Grugel never pretends that Holyoake is a major figure in British politics but as he tells you the life story of one campaigner, he builds up a picture both of the idealism of the Victorian working class activists and of the strength of their movement hidden beneath the more familiar veneer of aristocratic *haut politique.*

Grand Old Men

Gladstone
by Roy Jenkins (Macmillan, 1995)

Reviewed by Tony Little

A new biography of Gladstone, the Liberal Party's greatest leader, by Roy Jenkins, the Liberal Democrat Leader in the Lords and best known author, recommends itself without further comment from us. It is the first single volume biography since the publication of the Gladstone diaries, though of course it competes with the two volumes by Colin Matthews based on the prefaces written for the diaries. Jenkins' advantage is his experience of office - he too was a respected Chancellor of the Exchequer - and his knowledge of contemporary Liberal leaders such as Dilke and Asquith who have served as the subjects of earlier Jenkins books.

"Exchange Goods, Not Bombs"

Free trade was one of the cornerstones of the Victorian Liberal Party. **Duncan Brack** *examines the Liberal record on trade from the repeal of the Corn Laws to the Uruguay Round.*

In the wake of the Party Conference's recent debate on the Federal Policy Committee's policy paper on international trade, *The Balance of Trade*, it is worth casting an eye back over the stances adopted historically by the Party and its predecessors. For a large part of its life, the fortunes of the Liberal Party were closely related to the strength of popular feeling for free trade.

Free trade was one of the great rallying cries of the Victorian Liberal Party. It had its origins in one of the first and most successful pressure groups, the Anti-Corn Law League of the 1840s. The League's objective was to secure the abolition of the high duties on the import of grain established after the Napoleonic wars to protect British agriculture from foreign competition. Manchester, the centre of the cotton industry whose products were denied access to European markets because of continental grain-growers' inability to export to Britain, became the headquarters of the League; the radical Liberals Cobden and Bright were its leaders. Employing lecturers, public meetings, pamphlets and direct electoral pressure, the League achieved its aim in 1846 when Peel abolished the Corn Laws, splitting the Conservative Party and helping to drive some of his supporters (including Gladstone) towards the Liberals in the process.

The doctrine of free trade appealed to the growing manufacturing and business interests, precisely those groups most attracted to the nascent Liberal Party. As early as the eighteenth century, Adam Smith had pointed out that the country with the largest volume of world trade would naturally benefit most from open markets. Until the 1880s, Britain was that country, with the power to out-produce and out-sell all its competitors. Furthermore, it was increasingly unable to feed its rapidly growing population from its own resources, and had to trade to survive. Lower tariffs meant cheaper food together with more employment and bigger profits in manufacturing. In 1852, there were still more than a thousand dutiable articles in the British tariff. After Gladstone's budget of 1860 (in what is generally recognised as the first government of the modern Liberal Party), only sixteen remained. Free trade became a national obsession; *"like parliamentary representation or ministerial responsibility,"* commented *The Times* in 1859, *"not so much a prevalent opinion as an article of national faith."*

Liberals saw more than economic justification for open markets. They looked to free trade as the agency which would promote internationalism and end war. *"For the disbanding of great armies and the promotion of peace,"* wrote Bright, *"I rely on the abolition of tariffs, on the brotherhood of the nations resulting from free trade in the products of industry."* During the Palmerstonian intervention in Spanish affairs in 1847, Cobden wrote to Bright asking him if *"you and your other Free Trade friends .... would try to prevent the Foreign Office from undoing the good which the Board of Trade has done to the people."* Trade promoted interdependence and a sense of international community, building links between peoples and nations and rendering conflict less likely.

Free trade remained an article of Liberal faith for decades, even after it became somewhat harder to justify economically. By the 1870s, British pre-eminence in world markets was under attack from European, American and colonial producers, not just of food but also of manufactured goods. Many countries resorted to protectionism, subsidising exports and erecting high tariff barriers to keep up prices at home and keep out foreign goods. As the trade balance grew steadily worse, pressure for British protectionism mounted; in 1887 the Conference of the National Union of Conservative Associations passed a resolution in favour of tariffs on imports. 'Tariff reform' was taken up most strongly by the former radical leader Joseph Chamberlain, who had departed the Liberal Party in the split over Irish Home Rule in 1886. Chamberlain's objectives were not only to protect domestic industry; he also wished to bind the self-governing countries of the Empire more closely together through a system of 'Imperial Preferences' and to use revenue from the tariffs to increase public expenditure on defence and social services.

But free trade had too great a grip on the national mind. Chamberlain's Imperial Preference campaign, launched in 1903, split the Conservative/Unionist Party and reunited the Liberals. Many businessmen and manufacturers, fearing a trade war, came back to the Liberal fold they had deserted over the previous twenty years, and working class support grew at the prospect of dearer food. Liberal candidates habitually appeared on platforms with two loaves of bread, contrasting the Liberal 'big loaf' with the Tory 'little loaf' which would follow the imposition of grain duty. Coupled with the other failures of Balfour's ministry, the result was one of the greatest electoral landslides of this century, as the Liberals swept back to power in 1906.

The cause of free trade was to perform much the same function in 1923. The Liberal Party, split between its Asquith and Lloyd George wings after wartime divisions, was reunited by the Conservative Prime Minister Baldwin's sudden conversion to tariff reform and his decision to call an election on the issue. The result was an interruption of the interwar decline in Liberal fortunes, with an increase in seats from 116 to 159. The Party was by now too firmly established in third place, however, and collapsed to 40 seats in the 1924 election as the voters increasingly opted for a straight choice between Conservatives and Labour following their experience of the first Labour Government. Free trade still formed a major plank of the Liberal election platform of 1929 (the most intellectually distinguished manifesto ever put before the British voters, according to the historian Skidelsky), though it is quite possible that the radical reflationary strategy espoused by Lloyd George would have run into severe balance of payments problems as

a result. However, the Party had no chance to implement it, as the second Labour Government's cautious and orthodox economic policy led the country into the great international depression.

Liberal ministers joined the crisis National Government of 1931, though the strains of cooperating with what became an overwhelmingly Conservative administration split the Party into three groups. But free trade had by now comprehensively lost its grip over the nation. The descending spiral of ever higher tariffs and ever lower trade that overtook the world in the wake of Wall Street's Great Crash of 1929 was impossible for any single country to resist, and the international framework that could have offered a resolution of the problem was collapsing under the strains of fascism and nationalism. The National Government's introduction of a general tariff in February 1932 produced the 'Agreement to Differ' under which the Liberal Leader Samuel and his two colleagues were permitted to remain in government even while opposing its policy; but the Ottawa Agreements entrenching protection within the Empire finally forced them out in September, ending the last peacetime participation in government by the Liberal Party. Simon's Liberal National faction endorsed protection, stayed in government and eventually (in 1967) merged with the Conservatives.

The cause of free trade and the Liberal Party both seemed to be finished in the succeeding two decades. An opinion survey in 1942 showed that the only Liberal policy the public could identify was free trade, but that the vast majority had no idea what the Party stood for; like free trade itself, it seemed a relic of a bygone age. The postwar period, however, brought change. The establishment of new international institutions - the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF - brought the hope of effective action to prevent another trade war. The Liberal John Maynard Keynes was largely responsible for the plans for the establishment of an International Trade Organisation. Although the proposal was vetoed by the US, its 'provisional' substitute - the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade - was able over the following forty years to coordinate successive rounds of tariff reduction, culminating in the Uruguay Round (concluded in 1993) and its own transformation into the World Trade Organisation. As on so many other issues, Liberal ideas came to be adopted by other parties as trade liberalisation once again became the accepted faith.

Ironically, the Liberal Party itself suffered from divisions over trade as its Parliamentary representation came to rest increasingly in rural areas. After a 1953 Assembly vote for a policy of gradual abandonment of guaranteed markets and fixed prices for agriculture, Jeremy Thorpe seized the microphone and proclaimed that he and other candidates for rural seats would disown such an electorally damaging position. In 1958 moves to delete the word 'unilateral' from a motion on free trade ended in uproar. The 1959 manifesto, however, still demanded the dismantling of all protectionism within one parliament, ending with the slogan 'exchange goods, not bombs'. It was not until Grimond's policy innovations, reemphasising the Party's social liberal inheritance, took root that the Liberals came to be widely identified with any policies other than free trade.

The moral argument for trade was still powerful. In 1956 the Liberals became the first party to argue for British participation in the Common Market: the Cobdenite vision of trade building links between peoples was an important factor, overriding concerns over potential European protectionism against the rest of the world. The EC's Common Agricultural Policy resolved the argument within the Party between trade and farming, until the CAP's own contradictions forced reform in the 1980s. New trade issues, unthought of in the days of Cobden and Bright, such as the interaction of trade and environment, are now the topics of discussion - but that is another story, told in *The Balance of Trade.*

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, major magazines and academic journals 1988 - May 1995. A new addition includes articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals.

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 back page.

20th Century Liberalism

Tony Greaves has requested help from History Group members in compiling a collection of modern Liberal pieces - writings and speeches - for publication.

The purpose is to set out the development of Liberal ideology, philosophy, ideas and themes, and policy and practice insofar as they reflect those ideas. Tony's intention is to take New Liberalism as the starting point rather than the end result of 19th century developments, and to concentrate on the period from 1918 to the present. The typical length of extracts will be 250-1000 words.

Please send Tony proposals for inclusion; ideally photocopies but if not, lists, sources and ideas of all kinds. He aims to ensure a good mix between the famous, the dimly remembered and the completely obscure - the quality of the piece is what counts.

Please send ideas to Tony Greaves, 3 Hartington Street, Winewall, Colne, Lancashire BB8 8DB.

History Group News

Treasurer's Report
by Patrick Mitchell

This issue of the Newsletter contains the Accounts of the Group for the year to 30th September 1995, including the comparative figures for the initial period to 30th September 1994 which were laid before the inaugural general meeting earlier this year.

Expenditure on administration and holding meetings has, as expected, increased as the Group has grown in size. However in both periods we have found that contributions from non-members, principally in the form of collections at the door at our Conference fringe meetings, have covered a significant part of the costs, so that with subscription income we have had a surplus of income over expenditure. Indeed in cash terms our resources at the end of September 1995 exceeded £500.

Although expenses are likely to go on increasing as our activities expand, the steering committee felt that we should not ask members to contribute funds by way of subscription simply to build up the balance at the bank. The inaugural general meeting therefore agreed that all existing members - that is those who joined before 1st July 1995 - should have their membership extended to 30th September 1996 without being asked for a renewal payment. New members, whose subscription also covers the joining costs, will continue to pay as before.

It may be helpful if I say a little about the membership arrangements. In order to keep the administration as simple as possible, all members have a common subscription year ending on 30th September, no matter when they joined. The only exception is that new members joining after 30th June in any year become members until 30th September in the following year. The rate of subscription is determined by the annual general meeting for the year then following; at present the full rate is £5 a year, with a reduced rate of £3 for unwaged members.

Membership of the Liberal Democrat 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 ***14 February;*** *contributions should be sent to Duncan Brack at the address below.*

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January 1996.

Liberal Democrat History Group
Accounts for the year ended 30th September 1995

	1995	1994
Income		
Subscriptions	£305.00	£225.00
Donations	132.45	125.14
Publication Sales	30.00	-
	467.45	350.14
Expenditure		
Postage and Stationery	80.30	29.00
Meetings	188.75	94.00
	269.05	123.00
Surplus for the Year	£198.40	£227.14
Balance Sheet as at 30th September 1995		
Cash at Bank	£548.54	£293.14
less Subscriptions in Advance	(123.00)	(66.00)
	£425.54	£227.14
Balance at 1st October 1994	£227.14	-
Surplus for the Year	198.40	227.14
	£425.54	£227.14

A Liberal Democrat History Group Seminar

The Repeal of the Corn Laws

with John Vincent

Professor of Modern History, Bristol University; author of The Formation of the British Liberal Party

The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 split the Tories for a generation, laid the foundations of the Victorian Liberal Party and ushered in nearly a century of free trade orthodoxy in economic policy. One hundred and fifty years later, the Liberal Democrat History Group invites you to discuss this momentous event with one of the period's leading historians.

7.00pm Wednesday 14 February

Lawrence Robson Room, National Liberal Club,
1 Whitehall Place, London SW1