

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 and 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.