

Great Liberal Speeches

Tony Little and Duncan Brack introduce the Liberal Democrat History Group's latest publication

Remember the rights of the savage. 'Methods of barbarism.' 'Towards the sound of gunfire.' 'Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government.'

The soundbites have almost become clichés, but what was the context in which these phrases were first uttered? Newspapers no longer contain full reports of major speeches, focusing rather on their interpretations of what the speaker really meant. This style of reporting and the advent of television have changed the nature of public – and in particular, political – speaking.

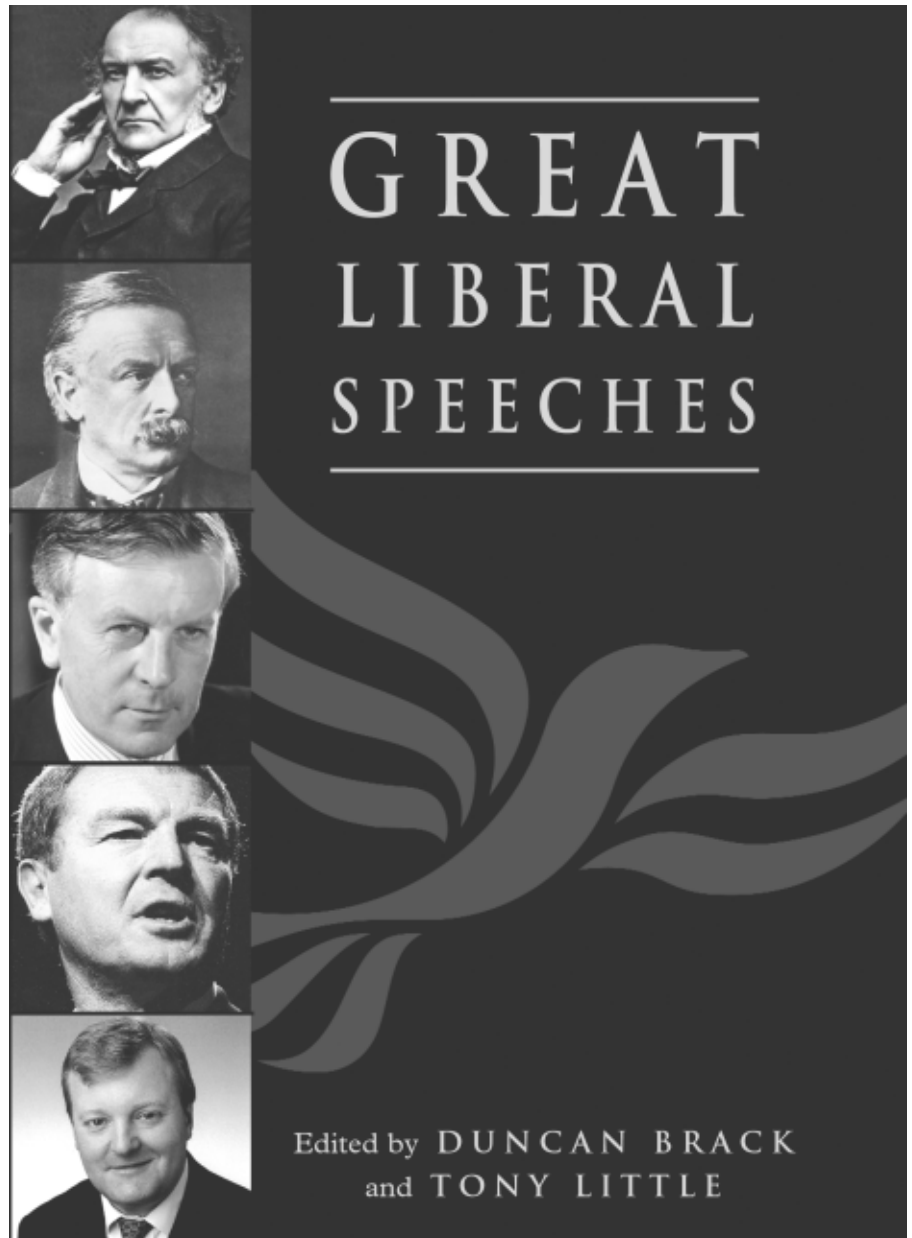
There is now an ideal opportunity to examine these changes. In *Great Liberal Speeches*, the Liberal Democrat History Group have brought together forty-seven of the greatest Liberal speeches by the greatest Liberal orators over the past two hundred years. Politico's are publishing the book in time for the Liberal Democrat conference in Bournemouth in late September.

Speeches are included from all party leaders from Palmerston to Charles Kennedy; thinkers and philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill and John Maynard Keynes; leading Whigs, including Charles James Fox, T. B. Macaulay and Lord John Russell, together with radicals like Orator Hunt, J. A. Roebuck and John Bright; campaigners such as Richard Cobden, Violet Bonham Carter and Simon Hughes; and recruits to Liberalism from other parties, including Winston Churchill and Roy Jenkins. Major speeches from Liberal history – Gladstone's Midlothian campaign, Lloyd George on the People's Budget, Paddy Ashdown on realignment – are

included alongside such well-known orations as Jo Grimond's 'Sound of gunfire' and David Steel's 'Go back to your constituencies'.

Most of the speeches are reproduced in full, and each is given a concise intro-

duction explaining its context and impact. Collected and edited by Duncan Brack and Tony Little, editorial effort was also contributed by Dr David Dutton, Dr Richard S. Grayson, Ian Hunter, Robert Ingham, Dr J. Graham Jones, Michael McManus, Dr Mark Pack, Michael Steed and Peter Truesdale. Most of the speeches are reproduced in full; some of the longest nineteenth century speeches have been edited to help accessibility for the general reader but, even here, very full extracts have been given to convey the style and substance of the orators. The book opens with general introductions, by Tony Little and Duncan Brack, on the evolution of Liberal thinking and policy, as illustrated by the speeches, and by Max Atkinson (author of *Our Masters' Voices*), on the art of



political rhetoric. Earl Russell provides a foreword highlighting the continued relevance of the speeches featured.

The collection works at several levels. For those who were present at the more recent orations it may merely act as a souvenir. If you were one of those who cheered Simon Hughes' demolition of Alliance defence policy (incidentally, and perhaps surprisingly, the shortest speech in the book); who heard Roy Jenkins' thoughtful Dimpleby Lecture, the inspiration for the SDP, or were overcome with emotion at Paddy Ashdown's farewell address to party conference, you may wish for a permanent record of the occasion.

But there is a deeper purpose. Some of these speeches have never been published in book form and others have been out of print for very many years. To bring them together will provide not only a source of reference but also the materials by which students can compare changes in style of public address over two hundred years. Examples are given of platform oratory to the mass public meeting at a time when politicians were accorded the star status now only given to entertainers, of speeches made to partisan party conferences and of the more intimate styles favoured by the House of Commons. It is interesting to note that the oratorical techniques identified by Max Atkinson were well applied by popular Victorian speakers.

Most importantly, the book demonstrates the continuity of Liberal and Liberal Democrat thought over 200 years. The classical nineteenth-century liberal position of maximising the freedom of the individual to act and take personal responsibility for their actions remains surprisingly relevant in today's debates on the role of the state and the uses of markets. The Liberal foreign policy created in the same Victorian heyday contained the main ethical principles which informed Paddy Ashdown's approach to Hong Kong and the Balkans, as Ashdown makes clear by his quotation from Gladstone in his final speech in the Commons. Here also is the root of support for self-government, which informs the Liberal Democrats' current stance on the decentralisation of power within the British state, together with a strong internationalist strand which sees the Liberal Democrats as the strongest supporters of the European Union.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the social and economic reform of New Liberalism offered the prospect of the continued pre-eminence of Liberalism in a mass democracy. While the First World War destroyed these hopes, New Liberal thinking informed the policies of all three British parties throughout the century – not least through the work of the Liberals Keynes and Beveridge, also represented in *Great Liberal Speeches*.

The collection also illustrates the way in which the Liberal Party tried to grapple with its decline after 1918 – with Asquith, for example, prefiguring the Third Way in his reference to a 'tertium quid' in his 1926 resignation speech. Unexpectedly the twentieth century ended with renewed optimism both for Liberalism and the Liberal Democrats, and the final group of speeches shows how the party has grappled with its new opportunities. Particularly interesting is the way in which, by abandoning 'equidistance', Paddy Ashdown was able to shift the focus away from the difficulties of relations with other parties, which featured so strongly for Jo Grimond and David Steel, to concentrate on promoting Liberal Democrat policy. But even here history intrudes: Ashdown's penny on income tax to pay for education echoes Joe Chamberlain's call – as part of his Radical Programme of 1885 – for an additional three farthings on tax to make schools free for poorer families.

Great Liberal Speeches will be a unique source of reference for anyone interested in the contribution of Liberals to British politics, or in the importance and impact of political speech-making. For details of availability, see the leaflet enclosed with this *Journal*. It will be launched at two meetings, the first at party conference on 25 September (see back page) and the second in Politico's Bookstore in London in late October or early November.

Liberals cheer Mr Churchill

One speech we did not have room for in *Great Liberal Speeches*: **Winston Churchill** at the National Liberal Club, 22 July 1943

Mr Churchill had one of the greatest ovations of his life when he attended the unveiling of his restored portrait in the Smoking Room

of the National Liberal Club today.

The portrait, which shows him as a young man, was consigned to the cellars of the club during the Liberal quar-

rels following the last war, but it was reinstated to its place on the wall some years ago.

When a bomb hit the club early in