

THE BRITISH LIB

From Gladstone to young Churchill, Asquith, and Lloyd George – is Blair their heir?

In this wide-ranging lecture, **Roy Jenkins** (Lord Jenkins of Hillhead, Chancellor of Oxford University), told the story of the rise and fall of the Liberal Party under prime ministers Gladstone, Churchill, Asquith and Lloyd George, and explored the place of the current prime minister, Tony Blair, in this tradition.

The British Liberal Tradition was the fourth annual Senator Keith Davey Lecture, delivered at Victoria University, University of Toronto, in 2000.

It is a great pleasure to me to pay what I think is my seventh visit to the city of Toronto, but my first for nearly four years; and to speak under the auspices of Victoria University but within the territory of the University of Toronto. As Chancellor of Oxford I am closely familiar with the complicated – sometimes delicate, but on the whole amicable – relations between free-standing colleges. We have thirty-nine of them, varying in age between 750 and 10 years – and varying in wealth, too – and an overarching but far from all-powerful university.

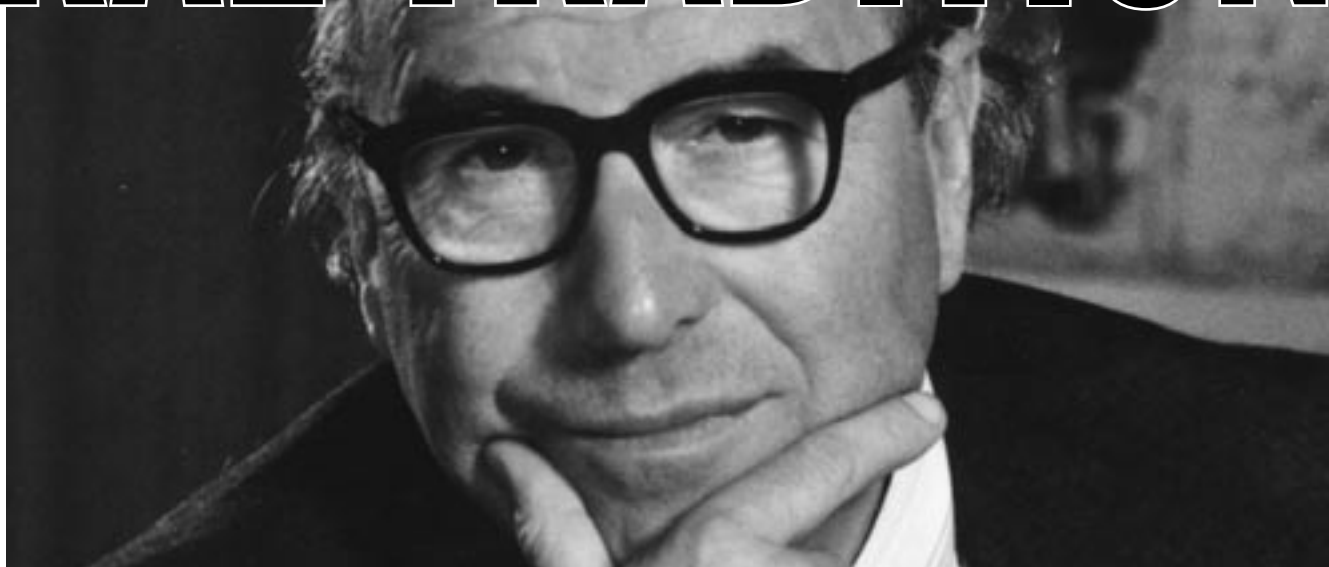
I am also delighted to be asked to give the Keith Davey lecture, which already in its four years of existence has achieved a considerable reputation – and not only for snowstorms. I have given quite a lot of named lectures, but only very rarely with the pleasure but also the challenge of having the eponymous figure present and sitting in the middle of the first row. I think the last occasion was when I gave a George Ball lecture at

Princeton, in the presence of that powerful personality who, of all the major US foreign policy advisers in the days of the so-called Imperial Presidency, had the distinction of being almost invariably (so I thought) on the right side. Senator Keith Davey is in that position today, and I am honoured that he and his wife are here.

Now this is essentially a historical lecture, centred around the figures named in the somewhat cumbersome title. It is the story of the rise and fall of the British Liberal Party as a governing party, with a final section on where Tony Blair stands in relation to the Liberal tradition. There may be some lessons for Canadian politics in the story, but if there are, I leave it to you to draw them. I have always found it unwise to lecture an audience on a subject about which they manifestly know more than I do.

I think, however, that I ought to give you a few introductory words on my own political position. I have always been a liberal with a small 'l' but I am proud

LIBERAL TRADITION



today to call myself a Liberal with a capital 'L' as well – a Liberal Democrat, of the party that was formed in 1987 by amalgamation with the SDP, made up mainly of those who had come out of the Labour Party in 1981 and had already fought three general elections in close alliance with the old Liberal Party. We are a party with a very strong base in local government – cities and counties – plus 46 seats in the House of Commons. And over the last four general elections we have polled an average of around 20 per cent of the popular vote.

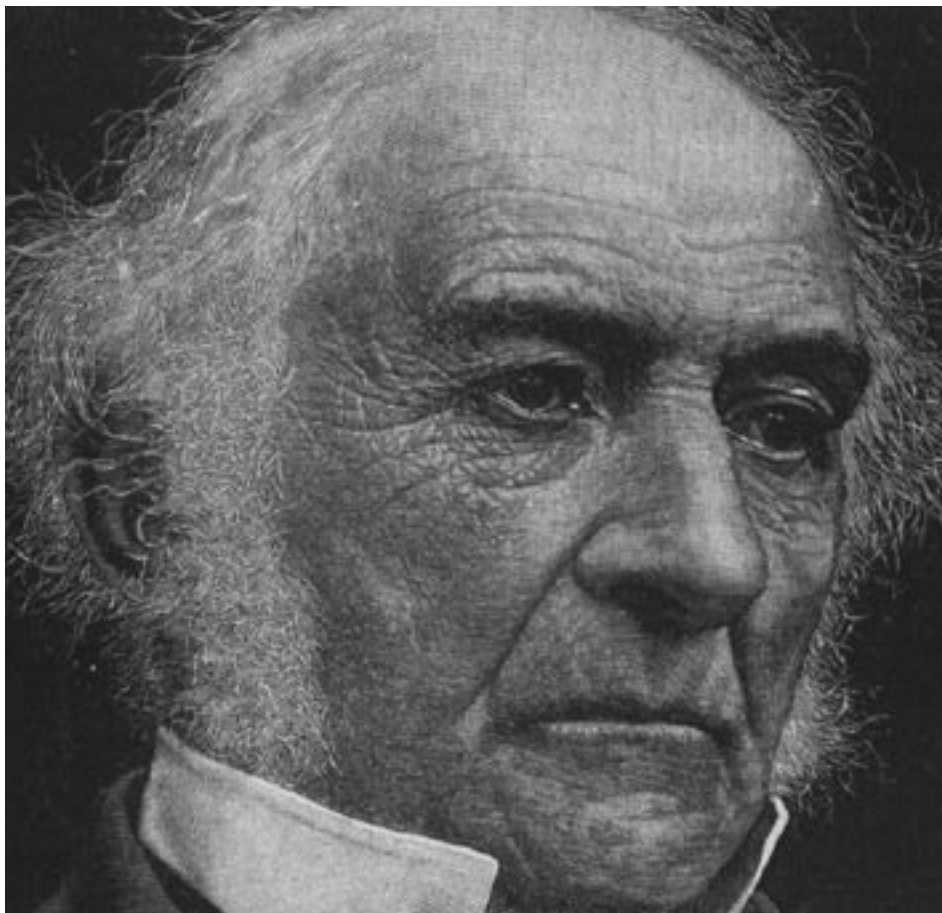
The Liberal Party was born at a meeting in Willis's Rooms, St James's, London, on the afternoon of the 6th of June, 1859. It was an odd place for the accouchement of what was to be a largely nonconformist, even in many ways a puritanical party, for Willis's Rooms, was, as its name implies, a faintly rakish locale. It was the successor to Almack's, a fine haunt of early nineteenth-century gambling and general dissipation. Furthermore, among the 274 MPs and many members

of the House of Lords who were present, there were several Whig magnates, who could easily have accommodated the whole lot in their own London house. And there was also the Reform Club, built to Charles Barry's palatial design only sixteen years before, and then – as it no longer is – politically partisan, which would have been more than adequately welcoming. But Willis's Rooms it was. And what there took place had a remarkable impact on the political life of Britain for at least the next six decades. In this context it was the equivalent of Martin Luther nailing his notice to the church door in Wittenberg, or of the embattled farmers by the rood bridge at Lexington firing 'the shot heard round the world'.

Of the six (or maybe seven) Liberal prime ministers of the next sixty years, the first two, Palmerston and Lord John Russell, were present at the creation. Indeed, by their somewhat pro forma expressions of mutual respect, they made the occasion, to which John Bright, a greater orator than a minister,

also contributed. Another three future prime ministers – Rosebery, Campbell-Bannerman, and Asquith – were not present for the good reason that they were respectively aged twelve, twenty-three, and six at the time. Nor was Lloyd George, who was aged minus four, and who in any event was a somewhat doubtful member of the sextet or septet, for although he was a prime minister – and a most notable one – who was a Liberal, he never presided over a Liberal government, and indeed did a great deal to break the Liberal Party as an instrument of government. But the most surprising absentee was Gladstone, who was the greatest beneficiary of the event, and who in his four premierships was the dominant Liberal figure of the remaining forty-one years of the nineteenth century. He deliberately stood back.

Gladstone, who in my view was undoubtedly the greatest British prime minister of the nineteenth century, just as Churchill was of the twentieth, had not of course started his long political career, spanning



sixty-three years in the House of Commons, as a Liberal. Indeed, he had been referred to in 1839 by Thomas Babington Macaulay famously and somewhat satirically as ‘the rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories’. But he became a key figure in the 1841–46 government of Sir Robert Peel, which was nominally Conservative, although not nearly enough so for Disraeli, who made his name by splitting from Peel, although at the price of making the Conservative Party very nearly unelectable for twenty years.

Peel did a great deal to lay the foundations of Liberal England. At the beginning of the Peel government, Britain was far from being the stable and prosperous parliamentary semi-democracy of the middle and late Victorian period. Chartist agitation was at its height in the couple of years before the Peel government came in, and Britain was regarded as just as potentially eruptive a society as France, which bracketed those years with revolutions in

**William Ewart
Gladstone
(1809–98)**

1830 and 1848. Britain was also still suffering from a long, post-Napoleonic Wars depression, and her public finances were in an appalling state. Interest on debt accounted for half the budget, and the other half was substantially made up by the payment of a great number of sinecure salaries. Her revenue – admittedly only £47 million – came from a vast spread of over 750 mostly illogical customs and excise duties. The Peel reforms not only repealed the Corn Laws – which led to the split with Disraeli and other old-guard Conservatives – but also cleared up a good deal of the mess and gave Britain the opportunity to be the major free-trade/free-market industrial power of the world. And it made the third quarter of the nineteenth century – in complete contrast with the second quarter – the period of Britain’s most unchallenged industrial supremacy in the world, and with a marked spreading of quiet, unostentatious prosperity and greater political calm. It was also a period unsullied by the

imperial pretension and showiness of the fourth quarter of the century. There was no tendency to imperial braggadocio or expansionary wars in the post-Peel third quarter. Indeed, the tendency was to reduce imperial commitments, as in the British North America Act of 1867 – the first major move toward self-government and the surrender of power within the British Empire.

Gladstone was an adjutant of and the heir to Peel. He was left a powerful but uprooted politician throughout the 1850s. He was powerful because of his phenomenal energy and oratorical force – ‘the tremendous projectile’ was a sobriquet aptly bestowed upon him. But he was uprooted because the Peelites, after the death of their leader in 1850, became a party of high quality but of few numbers, who were in transit from a Tory shore to – probably but not certainly – a Liberal harbour. Gladstone’s trouble was that he found almost equally antipathetic the beckoning lights of both the departed shore (in the shape of Disraeli) and the other bank (in the shape of Palmerston). He distrusted them both – so he took some time to make up his mind. This was the reason he did not go to Willis’s Rooms. But he eventually decided that Palmerston had at least the advantage of being the older – twenty-five years his senior, whereas Disraeli was only five years so. Gladstone was never a cynic, but he could sometimes act in a way that cynics might regard as well calculated to suit his future political convenience. So in 1859 he formed a ‘hostile partnership’ with Palmerston under which he was for six years his Chancellor of the Exchequer, disagreeing with him on almost everything, for Palmerston by the 1860s had become a Liberal only in the sense that he believed in keeping the Conservatives out of office. Yet somehow the two jogged along together, with mutual respect mingled with disagreement, with each observing the other’s prerogatives, and with Gladstone

knowing that Palmerston could not last much longer. When he died, still in office and very old for the period, on the eve of his eighty-first birthday, there was a short Russell interregnum until 1867, when Gladstone succeeded to the full leadership, which he was to occupy until 1894, except for the few years of nominal withdrawal in the late 1870s in order to write theology. Yet this withdrawal enhanced rather than diminished his power and indispensability over twenty-seven years and four premierships.

These four premierships were of varying quality. The first was probably the best. It disestablished the Anglican church in Ireland, thus ending the anomaly of the religion of a tiny minority of the population enjoying full state privilege. Gladstone personally remained a passionately committed high Anglican to the end of his life, certainly more religiously committed than any subsequent prime minister except perhaps for Mr Blair, but he moved from a very authoritarian position on religion in his early books to a belief in full tolerance for others. The University Tests Act opened Oxford and Cambridge to dissenters and Roman Catholics. That first government also created the Ballot Act, which even with the limited franchise of less than three million was essential to fair as opposed to influenced voting. There was also an Education Act that for the first time provided a national framework of elementary schools to supplement the previous, religion-based system, which had been patchy. Internationally, Britain kept out of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, and in 1872 accepted the *Alabama* award, which involved Britain paying a vast sum in damages (5 per cent of the total budget) to the United States in compensation for the activities of a British-built and -launched Atlantic raider, which the Confederacy had used during the Civil War to inflict grave damage on Union shipping. This settlement was more than the greatest

nineteenth-century triumph of rational internationalism over short-sighted jingoism; it also marked the crucial divide between the previous hundred years of two Anglo-American wars and the twentieth-century habit of close North Atlantic cooperation.

All this, and other, lesser measures, too, added up to a formidable record for a single government. Like nearly all governments, it ended badly, but its five-and-one-quarter years of office made it in many ways the outstanding administration of the century.

Gladstone led three subsequent governments. He was the only man in Britain ever to achieve four separate premierships, and the only one ever to be in office until the age of eighty-four, beating both Palmerston and Churchill – his nearest rivals in this respect – by over three years. But none of these three subsequent governments compared in achievement with the first, although paradoxically he personally became an ever

more dominant figure in the country, both loved and hated. The phrase the Grand Old Man, or GOM, increasingly used, was coined only in 1881. His last two governments, the one lasting only six months and the fourth no more than twenty, were dominated by Gladstone's conviction that home rule (that is, without a separate foreign policy or military independence) was the only solution for Ireland. He arrived at this view by a solitary process of ratiocination over the summer of 1885, a process that involved much study of the Canada Acts of 1840 and of 1867.

He was overwhelmingly right on the issue. There was no other way that the albatross of the Irish problem could be cut from the neck of British politics. But he was not good at presenting this dramatic change of position to his major colleagues. As a result he lost two of them, Hartington, later Duke of Devonshire, from the right of the party and Joseph Chamberlain from the left, while the loyalty of several others was

Herbert Henry Asquith (1852–1928)



severely strained, though without breaking. The Hartington/Chamberlain defection was enough to defeat the first Home Rule Bill (that of 1886) in the House of Commons. The second (that of 1893) got through the Commons by a narrow majority of 34, but foundered in the House of Lords by a crushing majority of 419 to 41. It was one of the most short-sighted votes ever cast in that archaic chamber, the historical sagacity of which is often exaggerated, for with it there disappeared the last hope of Anglo-Irish reconciliation within a common British polity.

And with it too (or very soon afterwards) there disappears from my theme (but certainly not from history) William Ewart Gladstone. He was not necessarily the greatest prime minister – I think I would put Churchill higher because he so matched his hour and succeeded in his central purpose – but Gladstone was certainly the most remarkable specimen of humanity ever to inhabit 10 Downing Street. This was so first because of his phenomenal energy, both physical and mental, which led to his touching life at so many different points. This displayed itself in his climbing Ben Macduh – an eight-hour round trip – during a visit to Queen Victoria at Balmoral in his seventy-fifth year; and in his engaging with vigour in almost every theological and doctrinal dispute of the late nineteenth century, of which there were many; and in his filling in time, when he was prime minister, by translating the odes of Horace and writing slightly fantastical critiques of Homer, in which he endeavoured to portray him as part of the headwaters of Christianity; and in his claim, surprisingly well authenticated, that he had read 20,000 books – an average of nearly three hundred a year – during his reading lifetime.

And second because of the riveting nature of his oratory, which enabled him to hold great popular audiences spellbound for several hours at a time even when, without amplification,

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most of them could not easily hear what he was saying, and even when, if they could, it was pretty recondite stuff. His oratory was intensely physical – the flash of his eagle's eye, the swoop of his cadences, the drama of his gestures. It took a physical form that he might have used for perverse purposes, but did not. The Queen thought he might become 'a half-mad dictator' but few others did. He was deeply imbedded in the parliamentary process and gave almost too much respect to his cabinet colleagues, never sacking them. He believed in an international rule of law, as he showed in the *Alabama* case, and in the concert of Europe. *Securus judicat ortis terrarum* – the united verdict of the whole world must be accepted as conclusive – was his favourite precept, and mostly it was also his practice.

In spite of all this he did not leave much of an immediate legacy to the Liberal Party. He was never much interested in social reform – or constructive radicalism, as he sceptically called it – which was coming increasingly into fashion at the turn of the century. His immediate successor (although not his choice) for the tail end of that Liberal government of 1892–95 was the 5th Earl of Rosebery, who was perhaps the least satisfactory of all the Liberal prime ministers, despite being a powerful, somewhat florid orator and an elegant literary stylist. But he was extremely selfish, always complaining, and veered off far to the right soon after he left office. Nor was he a nice man. Just as Gladstone was the greatest human being to occupy 10 Downing Street, so Rosebery may well have been the nastiest. But even had he possessed more virtues he probably would not have had a successful premiership. 'Tail-end Charlies' – in other words, those who come in after a long and powerful prime minister of the same party – practically never do. This has been true not only of Rosebery after Gladstone but also of Balfour after Salisbury, Neville Chamberlain after

Baldwin, Eden after Churchill, Douglas Home after Macmillan, Callaghan after Wilson, and Major after Thatcher.

After Rosebery had flounced out, the Liberal Party was split into three factions by the South African war, and appeared for half a generation almost as unelectable as Disraeli had made the Conservative Party in the middle of the nineteenth century, and as the Labour Party was made by the defection of Ramsay MacDonald in the 1930s and made itself throughout the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. There were only three years of rather hesitant Liberal office between 1886 and 1905.

Then, in the strange way that parties recover, sometimes when they are least expected to do so, the tail end of the long Conservative government provided the Liberals with a number of defensive rather than adventurous issues on which they could come together. Joseph Chamberlain, perhaps the greatest wrecking genius of British politics, having split the Liberals over home rule in 1886, proceeded to split the Conservatives over protection and Imperial Preference in 1903. Balfour equivocated, and the Liberals, fortified by a few Conservative floor-crossing recruits, of whom by far the most notable was twenty-nine-year-old Winston Churchill, rallied to the defence of traditional free trade. A Conservative Education Bill, which, while rather progressive, nonetheless offended the sectarian susceptibilities of the mainly Liberal nonconformists, was another piece of cement for the Liberals.

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, a benign walrus of a man who had been drafted in as leader at the time of greatest schisms, successfully put together a government at the end of 1905, after the Balfour government collapsed, and proceeded to win one of the only three (the others were Labour in 1945 and 1997) left-of-centre landslide majorities in the largely Tory-dominated



twentieth century. Campbell-Bannerman was quite a successful if easy-going prime minister for two-and-one-quarter years. He combined a taste for French culture and fashionable German spas with a determined Scottish radicalism. Edward VII paid him the compliment – very high from that self-indulgent gourmand source – of saying that ‘Bannerman knows how to order a good dinner in all the best restaurants of Europe’. But from the beginning, the real lynchpin of the government was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Herbert Henry Asquith, who succeeded effortlessly to the top job when Campbell-Bannerman’s health failed in 1908. Bannerman died in 10 Downing Street, the only prime minister to do so, for power is generally speaking a considerable preservative.

Asquith was the last head of a Liberal government. He was a highly educated classicist from a lower-middle-class background, with as natural an aptitude for fashionable life as

for the speedy and calm discharge of public business. He did not have the charisma of his distinguished lieutenants Lloyd George and Churchill, but for at least the first six years of his premiership he had the natural authority to remain in reasonable control of them, and the confidence to give them room for plenty of initiatives. He did not have an adventurous mind that breached new frontiers, but he had knowledge, judgment, insight, and tolerance. He was a great peacetime prime minister, and I would place him very high among the nineteen of the twentieth century’s, either second or third. Like those other considerable radical prime ministers, Gladstone before him and Attlee (Labour prime minister from 1945 to 1951) afterwards, he was a man of rather conservative, establishment tastes in everything outside politics.

Throughout the Campbell-Bannerman period it did not matter that home rule was not proposed, for virtually every

David Lloyd George (1863–1945) and Winston Churchill (1874–1965)

controversial bill of the new government – education, licensing (of alcoholic sales), a Scottish land bill – was destroyed by the House of Lords. Until that veto could be limited, the government with the biggest majority in recent history was locked in a vice of impotence.

It was Asquith’s great achievement that he loosened that vice. He encouraged Lloyd George, whom he made chancellor when he became prime minister, to take command of the cavalry advance guard in this battle, and Churchill to be his second-in-command. But it was Asquith himself who retained calm control of the central operation, after the two general elections in one year that were necessary to persuade the King that he had no alternative but to agree, if necessary, to create enough new peers to override the massive Conservative majority in the Lords and to replace the absolute veto with a suspensory one of just over two years. This put home rule back on the agenda, for although the

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Liberals had won the two general elections in the sense of leaving the Conservatives in a Commons minority and without allies, they were now dependent on Irish Nationalist and Labour support.

Lloyd George and Churchill, working for a time in close alliance and each always fascinated by the other's streak of political genius, were the so-called heavenly twins of radical social advance. They cut themselves firmly adrift from Gladstonian distrust of state interference in the coalition of the people. Lloyd George produced the so-called People's Budget of 1909, which, although very modest by later standards, was alleged at the time to amount to a several-pronged attack upon property. It was a free trade budget in the sense that it showed how the modestly mounting costs of social security and Dreadnought battleships could be paid for without resorting to import duties. It provoked the Conservative peers to rashly overextend their battlefield. In rejecting this budget they were challenging the doctrine that the Commons had exclusive control over finance, a doctrine that had been perceived as secure for several centuries; in so doing, they planted themselves on ground that ensured their defeat in the Parliament Act of 1911. Both Lloyd George and Churchill were active fighting generals in this battle, although Asquith remained firmly in the commander-in-chief's seat. Both were also eager skirmishers for various pieces of social legislation: health and employment insurance, minimum standards and wages in the sweated trades, and the setting up of labour exchanges to reduce frictional unemployment. All this made Churchill the sorcerer's apprentice to Lloyd George's sorcerer (the latter was over eleven years his senior). It also meant that they had turned their backs very firmly on the old Gladstonian tradition of concentrating on libertarian political issues and leaving 'the condition of the people' to look after itself.

What is certain is that Mr Blair would like to see cross-voting continue, would like a strong Liberal/Labour alliance, would like almost a re-creation of the old governing Gladstonian party, thereby avoiding the split on the centre-left of British politics.

Both Churchill and Lloyd George were, however, never very strong party men, even though they often appeared violently partisan. Lloyd George, who came from a modest but pastoral (and therefore not squalid) North Wales background, was until 1914 seen as a scourge of the prosperous classes. Yet as early as 1910 he had written a memorandum strongly urging a Liberal/Conservative coalition, with a trade-off of advantages for both sides. This had been strongly supported by Churchill, whose background was quite different – he was a duke's grandson and firmly upper-class. That much aside, in those pre-1914 days both were radical opportunists, natural partisans so long as the battle was joined, but always looking out for the opportunity of a favourable truce.

Churchill in those days was even more unpopular with the right than was Lloyd George. Both were seen as noisy firebrands, although Churchill, perhaps because his oratory was less musical, had an even greater capacity to jangle nerves. He was also seen as a class traitor and a turncoat; neither of these epithets was remotely applicable to Lloyd George in his radical days.

Their oratory was remarkably contrasting. Besides being more musical, Lloyd George's was far more spontaneous; Churchill's was more literary and high-flown and always meticulously prepared. The physical presence of an audience was crucial to Lloyd George, who wrapped himself around his listeners, as it were; for him, a successful speech was an emotional catharsis. Churchill depended far less on an audience. That was one reason why, from the 1920s onwards and above all during the Second World War, he was such a brilliant broadcaster. He could perform as well with only a microphone before him as in front of 2,000 people. Lloyd George could not.

Churchill was nonetheless very successful, even as a young minister – and he started

as a full minister when he was thirty-one, the youngest for a century – at creating memorable phrases, which were strongly partisan, anti-Tory, and designed to enthuse the Liberal faithful. Yet there were always some who doubted whether he ever was a real Liberal. He had of course started as a Tory MP, and by 1924 (and the age of fifty) he was back as a Tory and Chancellor of the Exchequer in a Conservative government. By then the hope of another Liberal government had become very thin. Lloyd George as prime minister had presided over a war-winning but largely Tory coalition, and had continued that alliance, on a still more Tory base, for the first four years of the peace. But in so doing, and as a result of his rupture with Asquith, he had destroyed the Liberal Party as an instrument of government. And Churchill was very much interested in government as opposed to the sterility of opposition.

But how good a Liberal was he in his Asquith Government days? He certainly believed in social reform, and during his year-and-a-half as Home Secretary he was strongly Liberal on penal policy. He was instinctively on the side of the underdog, and favoured him at the expense of the middle dog, especially provided he himself could remain a top dog. He was instinctively in favour of a hierarchical society and did not envisage reforms that would drastically upset the established social order. This did not, however, differentiate him from Gladstone, who pronounced himself to John Ruskin as a firm inegalitarian. What did differentiate him from Gladstone was his intuitive imperialism and the stimulus that he derived from the clash of arms. This latter quality was of crucial benefit to the Western world in 1940, but it was not Gladstonian. Gladstone would have been a rotten war leader, and he was very lucky that his sixty-two years in politics were among the most peaceful in British history.

In Britain any early hope of a



Tony Blair – anything of the British Liberal tradition?

future Liberal government perished in the 1920s; but this did not mean that the influence of liberalism disappeared from British politics. Baldwin was a liberal Tory prime minister in the 1920s and 1930s. So was Macmillan in the 1950s. There were considerable liberal influences in both the Labour and Conservative parties – but few Liberal parliamentary seats. In 1983, after new strength was injected into the old Liberal Party through its amalgamation with the short-lived but powerful catalyst the Social Democratic Party, the new alliance got 26 per cent of the popular vote but only 3.5 per cent of the seats.

Any significant recovery in parliamentary seats came only in the 1997 election, when Tony Blair was swept into power with 417 seats, nearly two-thirds of the House of Commons. The Conservatives were reduced to 165, and the Liberal Democrats secured 46 seats, the best Liberal showing in twenty years. But at least half of these 46 seats were gained – as were many of Mr Blair's 417, for he polled only 44 per cent of the popular vote – on the basis of spontaneous cross-voting between Labour supporters and Liberal Democrats. There was no formal pact. There was no withdrawal of candidates in each other's favour. But the electorate, feeling very strongly that the eighteen-year-old Conservative government had far overstayed its welcome, took matters into their own hands and created an unbaptised, almost unacknowledged, popular alliance. When it was thought that the Liberal

Democrat candidate was more likely to beat the Conservatives, he or she got Labour support, and vice versa. This was welcome to Mr Blair, as it was to me and to most Liberal Democrats. It gave him, in a very loose sense, a 62 per cent as opposed to a 44 per cent mandate. What does this hold for the future? Was it purely a one-off phenomenon that will not repeat itself in new circumstances? No-one yet knows. The Liberal Democrats mostly support the Labour government rather than the Conservatives, but by no means always.

What is certain is that Mr Blair would like to see cross-voting continue, would like a strong Liberal/Labour alliance, would like almost a re-creation of the old governing Gladstonian party, thereby avoiding the split on the centre-left of British politics that made the twentieth century overwhelmingly a Conservative century, in a way that the nineteenth century never was and that he and I very much hope the twenty-first century will not be either. He would like all these things more than would much of his party. He has been a strong leader, partly from temperament and partly from his vote-winning ability, which does not yet show great signs of diminution.

This raises the question, how good a Liberal is he? The answer is mixed, but with the positive somewhat predominating. He has certainly rid the Labour Party of much of its old ideological baggage. Far from wanting further nationalisation, he has been almost as keen a privatiser as was Mrs Thatcher. He has laid to rest the view that the Labour Party is essentially a class party. He has pursued active policies of constitutional reform much in line with the Liberal tradition, policies that include devolution to Scotland and Wales, the removal of a large part of the hereditary element from the House of Lords, and the introduction of proportional voting systems for the Scottish, Welsh, and London assemblies

and for the British members of the European Parliament. But he has so far balked at extending that to the Westminster Parliament, which is a central desire of the Liberal Democrats.

He is also torn between his commitment to decentralise power and his strong desire to maintain centralised control over his own party. This is half understandable, given the mess he thinks his party made of its electoral prospects in the 1980s. But he has not exercised his control at all skilfully, especially in relation to his choice of Labour candidate for the new, directly elected Mayor of London, and of the leader of the Welsh Assembly.

Furthermore, he is not instinctively a Liberal on social libertarian issues. He tends to want to tell people what they ought to do, rather than pull back the law from interference in people's decisions about their own lives and conduct where this does not clearly damage others.

He is, however, instinctively internationalist and pro-European, which is a very important item in the Liberal Democrat creed. He is the most pro-European British prime minister since Edward Heath, who left office twenty-six years ago. I think he wants to see Britain part of a single European currency, but has been hesitant – I think too cautious – about the timing.

So the balance sheet from a Liberal point of view is by no means bad, but not perfect either. But very few things in human life are perfect. Also, it is too early to make full judgments about Mr Blair's prime ministerial performance. It is unwise to tip the waiter before the meal is over. It is unwise to judge a prime minister in the context of history before he has run his course. Mr Blair has certainly shown himself a competent prime minister. Whether he will be a great one and a true Liberal heir to those others – Gladstone, Asquith, Churchill, and Lloyd George – remains to be seen. But I am not without hope.