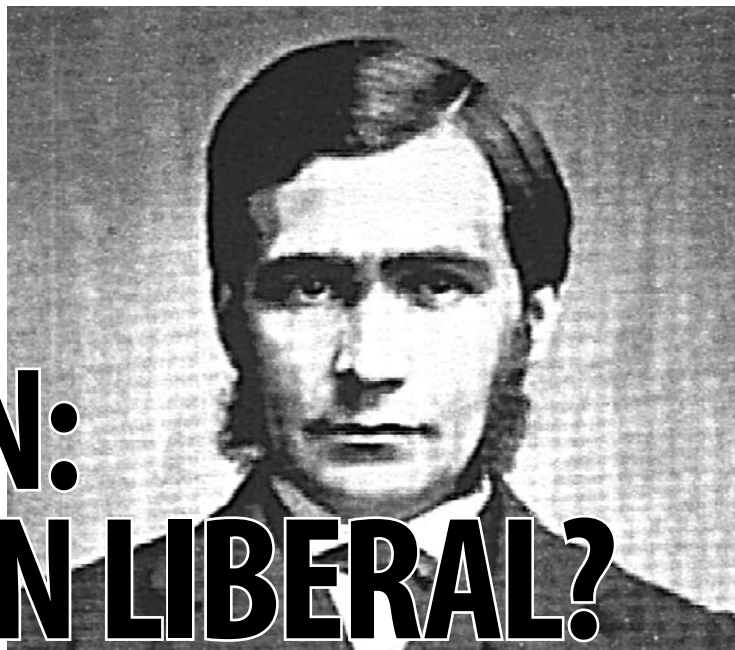


The Liberal Democrat History Group's 'Great Liberals' contest of last year – won by John Stuart Mill – continues to arouse controversy. **Dr Philip MacDougall** argues the case for a Liberal who should have won.



# T. H. GREEN: FORGOTTEN LIBERAL?

**T**HOMAS HILL Green, in the 2007 search for the greatest British Liberal in history (see *Journal of Liberal History* issues 55, 56 and 57), received a mere one first preference vote and was subsequently eliminated in the third round. Being the person who, by adding his name to the ballot paper, cast that single first preference vote, I am perplexed by his having received such little recognition in that particular election. T. H. Green outshines them all. He is not only the man to whom the modern-day Liberal Democrats owes its continued existence, but also provides the *raison d'être* for that existence.

Thomas Hill Green, whose brief life ended in 1882, fully involved himself in the political issues of the day, was an active member of the Liberal Party, and an elected member of Oxford town council, the first don to serve the citizenry as well as the university. Among his particular policy concerns were land reform, regulation of labour, education and temperance. Specifically, he favoured security of land tenancy for the Irish smallholders and the extension of compulsory state education, together with a widening

of opportunities for those who wished to enter higher education. These, however, are not my reasons for the claim that he was the greatest British Liberal in history, merely confirmation of his having the additional and useful credential of active membership of the party.

It is the writings of T. H. Green that are important. Through his various publications and ability to explain his ideas to a live audience, he transformed the Liberal Party. At the core of his thinking was the need to ensure that all individuals would be guaranteed a right of freedom. He considered freedom to be part of a clearly accepted common good that was at the heart of all societies. In doing so, however, Green recognised that while freedom was an important part of liberalism, it could not be achieved without the state establishing the necessary parameters that would allow everyone the opportunity of enjoying the same level of freedom. This, in particular, is where Green differs from classical liberalism, with its emphasis on a minimal state and *laissez-faire* economics. For Green the state was an important leveller, essential for the creation of the equality that would allow true freedom to develop.

In simplified terms, how can someone achieve freedom if they are denied access to medical care when they are ill, or adequate housing when they are in poverty, and how can they use their full potential if they are denied equality of education? From this premise the Liberal Party of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed itself through the doctrine of the New Liberalism.

Of particular importance in terms of Green's influence on Liberal Party thinking was a lecture given in 1881, subsequently published as *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*. Here, Green clearly laid down the importance of freedom:

We shall probably all agree that freedom, rightly understood, is the greatest of blessings; that its attainment is the true end of all our effort as citizens. But when we thus speak of freedom, we should consider carefully what we mean by it. We do not mean merely freedom from restraint of compulsion. We do not mean merely freedom to do as we like irrespectively of what it is that we like. We do not mean a freedom that can be enjoyed by one man or one set of men at the cost of a loss of freedom

to others. When we speak of freedom as something to be so highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common with others. We mean by it a power which each man exercises through the help or security given him by his fellow men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them.<sup>1</sup>

It was a freedom that was available to all and would be used to liberate the powers of all:

Everyone has an interest in securing to everyone else the free use and enjoyment and disposal of his possessions, so long as that freedom on the part of one does not interfere with a like freedom on the part of others, because such freedom contributes to that equal development of the faculties of all which is the highest good of all.<sup>2</sup>

To achieve such an aim, state intervention was essential:

This is most plainly the case when a man bargains to work under conditions fatal to health, e.g. in an unventilated factory. Every injury to the health of the individual is, so far as it goes, a public injury. It is an impediment to the general freedom; so much deduction from our power, as members of society, to make the best of ourselves, society is, therefore, plainly within its right when it limits freedom of contract for the sale of labour, so far as is done by our laws for the sanitary regulations of factories, workshops, and mines.<sup>3</sup>

As regards education, a core area of interest for Green:

Without a command of certain elementary arts and knowledge, the individual in modern society is as effectually crippled as by the loss of a limb or a

broken constitution. He is not free to develop his faculties. With a view to securing such freedom among its members it is as certainly within the province of the state to prevent children from growing up in that kind of ignorance which practically excludes them from a free career in life, as it is within its province to require the sort of building and drainage necessary for public health.<sup>4</sup>

Having argued the need for state intervention, Green finally concluded,

Our modern legislation then with reference to labour, and education, and health, involving as it does manifold interference with freedom of contract, is justified on the ground that it is the business of the state, not indeed directly to promote moral goodness, for that, from the very nature of moral goodness, it cannot do, but to maintain the conditions without which a free exercise of the human faculties is impossible.<sup>5</sup>

Most certainly Green was the pioneering mind that moved the Liberal Party away from the classical liberalism that is often associated with John Stuart Mill to the radical reforming party that was soon to pioneer steeper graduation of income tax (1907), pensions for the elderly (1908) and a minimum wage for miners (1912). Nor should it be doubted that Green's ideas on positive freedom were the ones that generated these changes. It is widely recognised that many of the leading Liberals of the age – among them Hobhouse, Haldane, Samuel and Asquith – were influenced by Green.<sup>6</sup> Between them, these were the individuals who drove the Liberal Party towards a policy agenda that was beginning to embrace New Liberalism in the period immediately before the landslide election victory of 1906.<sup>7</sup>

Consider, for a moment, the nature of the Liberal Party if Green had not developed and communicated his ideas on positive freedom. At the very least, the party would have lacked an intellectual foundation, or philosophy, to underpin the giant reforms that were to be pursued by the Asquith administration. Of even greater import would have been a failure in the coalescing of ideas that led to the party adopting the modern-day concept of liberalism. It is this concept – the careful balance between state and corporation while preserving the freedom of the individual – that has now come to define liberalism. Instead, if classical liberalism had continued to hold sway, or if a distinct and clear philosophy from that of state socialism had not emerged, then the party would not have survived. In the guise of the former, it would have been destroyed as an irrelevancy and in the case of the latter it would have been totally subsumed by the Labour Party.

However, Green is little credited by the modern-day Liberal Democrats, a fact amply demonstrated by the collection of policy writings by Liberal Democrats that appeared in the recent publication *Reinventing the State*.<sup>8</sup> The title itself gives the game away. While proclaiming itself a book about social liberalism in the twenty-first century it demands a requirement for the state to be reinvented. Why? Those who contribute to the book, without giving credit to him, are merely reformulating a state that had already been invented by T. H. Green. It is a state that, in accordance with both modern-day Liberals and early twentieth-century New Liberals, reaches a careful balance that is neither state- nor corporate-autocratic. Instead, it is a state that clears away those obstacles that would otherwise block the less wealthy and most disadvantaged from enjoying the same level of freedom and opportunity that would otherwise be

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monopolised by the most affluent and advantaged.

Many of the writers whose chapters appear in *Reinventing the State* ignore the debt they owe to Green. David Howarth, in the first of the essays, is a case in point. In setting out to explain the origins of social liberalism he traces its origins to the late nineteenth century but gives no explanation as to its genesis.<sup>9</sup> Given the importance of Green to the entire substance of this particular book, a mention of his name might have been a useful touch. Similarly, Duncan Brack, in his essay 'Equality Matters' (a title that lies at the very heart of Greenian thinking), states:

The Liberal commitment to equality derives from the Liberal commitment to freedom; it is neither separate from it nor subordinate to it. *This belief can be traced right back through the long history of British Liberalism and can perhaps best be expressed as a commitment to equality of justice [my italics].*<sup>10</sup>

Yes, the belief can be traced right back through the long history of British Liberalism, a history that clearly leads to T. H. Green. Chris Huhne is the only one who makes a direct reference to Green, in his essay on localism. Here Huhne argues that the size of the British state is failing because of its massive size, and that decentralisation is crucial. That he refers to T.H. Green, albeit briefly, is a salient reminder as to Green's pertinence to modern-day liberal thought. To quote Huhne:

The Liberal Democrats are for liberalism, which is essentially a doctrine about the individual and power. Liberals want to create a society that puts people first and enables them to thrive. That means that the undue exercise of power over individuals must be curbed, whether it is private or state power. People must be allowed to make their own lives

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and choice so long as they do no harm to others. But liberalism is also a positive commitment to enable people to thrive, from whatever background they come from and from whatever unfortunate circumstance they find themselves.<sup>11</sup>

To this Huhne adds:

That is the social liberal element that was introduced by the Edwardian New Liberals, such as L. T. Hobhouse and T. H. Green, but whose early stirrings are discernible in the work of classical liberals such as J. S. Mill.<sup>12</sup>

Huhne's solution, decentralising the state, is to be achieved through increased local decision-making. This is also in accordance with Green's thinking. Whenever possible, Green favoured actions being taken by local communities, believing that they tended to produce measures that were better suited to the reality of the situation.<sup>13</sup> It is a point that Huhne could well have developed in his earlier short reference to Green.

Thus my contention, and my reason for adding the name T. H. Green to the Greatest British Liberal ballot paper. His were the ideas that created the New Liberalism and underpinned it with an intellectual foundation that was to preserve the party in future years. Furthermore, and of not inconsiderable importance, it gave birth to the social liberalism of the twenty-first century. His was a philosophy of positive over negative freedoms, achievable only through state intervention. While a continuing debate exists within the party as to the degree of state intervention, even those who are most influenced by Mill, and his emphasis on unrestrained freedom, are not so extreme as to ignore the need for a proactive state. To that extent, they are also guided by the writings of Green.

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- 1 Thomas Hill Green, 'Lecture on Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract', in R. L. Nettleship (ed.), *Works of Thomas Hill Green* (Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1906), pp. 370–71.
- 2 Ibid, p. 373.
- 3 Ibid, p. 381.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid, p. 383.
- 6 For a summary of Green's impact on a variety of leading figures see: David O. Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2003), pp. 107–10, 124–30; Matt Carter, *T.H. Green and the Development of Ethical Socialism* (Impact Academic, Exeter, 2003).
- 7 In his recent history of the Liberal Party, David Dutton notes of this period, 'An impressive group of academics and journalists, influenced by the Oxford philosopher, T.H. Green, had taken on the task of reinterpreting Liberalism for a new age'. David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 11.
- 8 Duncan Brack, Richard S. Grayson and David Howarth (eds.), *Reinventing the State: Social Liberalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Politico's Publishing, London, 2007).
- 9 Duncan Brack, 'Equality Matters', in Brack et al., *Reinventing the State*, pp. 17–35.
- 10 David Howarth, 'What is Social Liberalism?' in Brack et al., *Reinventing the State*, pp. 9–15.
- 11 Chris Huhne, 'The case for Localism: the Liberal Narrative' in Brack et al., *Reinventing the State*, pp. 241–54.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 P. P. Nicholson, 'T. H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation', *History of Political Thought* 6 (1985), pp. 517–50. Reprinted in A. Vincent (ed.), *The Philosophy of T. H. Green* (Gower, Aldershot, 1986), pp. 76–103.