

# LIBERALS AND INTE

**Richard S. Grayson introduces this special issue of the Journal of Liberal History, on Liberals and international policy**

International policy is at the top of the political agenda. With the Liberal Democrats playing a central role in offering a distinctive vision of current issues, this special issue on the roots of liberal internationalism is well-timed.

Understanding the basis of the Liberal approach can shed light on how the Liberal Democrats arrived where they are, and can also pose some challenges for the development of liberal internationalism in the future.

**'From triumph to triumph' (Punch, 5 May 1920). 'Mr Lloyd George: "I've made peace with Germany, with Austria, with Bulgaria, and now I've made peace with France, so there's only Turkey, Ireland and Lord Northcliffe left".'**



**T**his special issue covers a broad chronological sweep, beginning with the heydays of both the British Empire and the Gladstonian Liberal Party. In dealing with the Empire, Dr Andrew Thompson offers new thoughts on the relationship between imperialism and the development of both democracy and liberalism in the UK. He argues that there was an important interplay between the issues, with UK perceptions of the iniquities of the Empire helping to galvanise liberal opinion in favour of defending and advancing democracy.

Eugenio Biagini analyses Gladstone's approach to foreign

affairs, which is so often cited as the root of contemporary liberal internationalism. Dr Biagini challenges those who characterise Gladstone as an idealist, arguing that he approached international policy from a more 'realistic' perspective, based on careful consideration of British interests.

Two further articles move us into the 1920s and 1930s. With the Liberal Party falling apart electorally, Professor Martin Ceadel shows how, conversely, liberal internationalism had never been more influential. Similarly, Ian Hunter demonstrates how Archibald Sinclair, as Liberal leader, became one of the country's foremost critics of appeasement.

# INTERNATIONAL POLICY

Malcolm Baines and Julie Smith then draw together some of the main themes and events in the development of liberal internationalism. Dr Baines shows how, out of the embers of a near-dead Liberal Party, the case for European integration emerged – though not without tensions and debates. Dr Smith highlights the application of liberal internationalism to the development of a formal international body, namely, Liberal International.

Focusing on a specific event is the task of Michael McManus on the Suez crisis. This influenced the development of the Grimond Liberal Party and is still talked about by many party activists today. McManus highlights the effect that Suez had on the party's public profile, which has interesting parallels with the effect of the recent war in Iraq on the standing of the Liberal Democrats.

Aside from this broad range of articles, this special issue reprints a speech from Lloyd George. Made in September 1914, essentially as an encouragement to potential recruits to the army, it provides an insight into the Liberal mind at the outbreak of the Great War. Heavy on the language of sacrifice and patriotism, it had a major impact in terms of unifying the nation in pursuit of total war, and is a key example of how Liberal principles were applied to that concept.

Finally, this special issue includes two book reviews. Peter Truesdale's review of Margaret MacMillan's *Peacemakers* reminds us of the profound effect that Liberals had on the post-Great War settlement, especially in the person of that great

American liberal, President Woodrow Wilson. This process, of course, involved building nations out of the ruins of war, and the role of Liberals in nation-building is also tackled in Piers Hugill's review of *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy*.

A number of key themes emerge from these articles. The consistency of approach is clear, from Gladstone's time to the present: a belief in arbitration, international law, and building international institutions, based on a sense that nations can be made to behave like individuals if the right rules and procedures are in place. Meanwhile, Lloyd George's text illustrates the place of war in liberal internationalism.

There is also a clear pattern of liberal internationalism reaching out to people outside the Liberal Party. This was perhaps most clear through the work of the League of Nations Union, but also at the time of Suez and during debates on appeasement. Liberal internationalism has been a trend in British politics that has sometimes wielded influence well above the numbers of Liberal MPs in Parliament at any given time.

But perhaps the strongest theme to emerge is the centrality of international policy to Liberal Party politics, and to politics more widely. Andrew Thompson's article sets the scene for this in his analysis of the discourse between imperial debates and events and the development of ideology on more domestic issues. Furthermore, a key part of Gladstone's appeal to the nation was his enunciation of liberal interna-

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nationalism, and later, a similar vision had the capacity to inspire people to political action, entirely free of party activity, through the League of Nations Union.

This centrality of international policy to the daily business of politics has, of course, never been more evident than in the late 1930s and during the Suez crisis. It is encouraging that then, as in 2004, the principles of liberal internationalism have provided Liberal politicians with a sound basis for a coherent policy position on the issues of the day. That bodes well for the future.

However, liberal internationalists should be careful about resting on their laurels. Inevitably, liberal internationalism looks forward to a time when there are international institutions and laws in place which are respected and used by all nations. Before such a time, there are two challenges. The first is to develop the policies that will allow collective international action against nations which flout international law, for example, by abusing human rights. That means significant reform of the United Nations. The second challenge for today is the more short-term problem of building the international political will to act against such violations when the existing structures and relationships have been through such difficult times.

*Dr Richard S. Grayson is author of Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement and of Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe. He has been Liberal Democrat Director of Policy since 1999.*