

PUBLIC OR PRIVATE?

1853, Gladstone Papers, British Library, Add. Ms 44570, ff. 169–73, p. 9.

- 14 For an excellent study of this process in the United States, see William G. Roy, *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the*

Large Industrial Corporation in America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

REPORT

Winston Churchill – Liberal politician

Evening meeting, February 2004, with Keith Robbins and Paul Addison

Report by **David Cloke**

The centenary of Churchill crossing the floor to join the Liberal Party was commemorated at the History Group's meeting in February. Chaired by the Group's Chair, Tony Little, the meeting saw consideration given to Winston Churchill as a Liberal politician. The discussion was led by Paul Addison, the Director of the Centre for Second World War Studies and author of *Churchill on the Home Front 1900–1945* and Keith Robbins, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales at Lampeter and author of *Churchill*.

Dr Addison outlined the reasons for Churchill joining the Liberal Party and his subsequent role as a minister and his relationships with fellow ministers. Professor Robbins continued with a consideration of Churchill's experience during the First World War and the reasons he left the Liberals. Before the speakers began Tony Little asked both of them also to give their view as to whether Churchill was ever a Liberal or whether he never ceased to be a Liberal.

Dr Addison began by noting that Churchill was the son and heir of the maverick Tory politician Lord Randolph Churchill. He was elected the Unionist (Conservative) MP for Old-

ham in the khaki election of 1900. Almost from the start, Dr Addison maintained, Churchill criticised his own government. And when in May 1903, Joseph Chamberlain started his campaign for tariff reform Churchill attacked not only him but also the Prime Minister, Balfour, for failing to get to grips with the issue and for proposing feeble compromises. In Addison's view, Churchill essentially talked himself out of the Conservative Party and on 31 May 1904, on entering the Commons, he sat next to David Lloyd George on the Liberal benches.

Churchill's defection brought with it handsome rewards in the following few years. Whilst, in Addison's view, the Liberals were never convinced that he was really one of them, they recognised his value and treated him generously: Campbell-Bannerman gave him his first ministerial post as Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office and Asquith subsequently brought him into the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade, making him the youngest cabinet minister since 1866. Asquith was impressed by Churchill, had faith in his political abilities and also genuinely liked him. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, in January 1910 he promoted Churchill, then

aged 35, to Home Secretary. In 1911, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he took charge of the largest navy in the world.

Nonetheless, Addison argued, in the long term Churchill's defection came with a severe penalty: the suspicion that he was motivated by personal ambition, that he was a cad and an unprincipled careerist. According to Addison the allegation that he was only in politics for his own ambition dogged and hobbled him until the Second World War.

As Churchill himself asked 'what makes one do things?', Addison felt that the limits of a historian's ability to explain anyone's motives, let alone a politician's, had to be recognised. Indeed, do politicians themselves know why they do things? Nonetheless, Addison declared that Churchill was particularly transparent: he had told his mother of his ambition. He had also stated in 1897 that, apart from the stumbling block of Home Rule, 'I am a Liberal in all but name'. In answer to questions from the floor, Professor Robbins indicated that Home Rule continued to be a stumbling block for Churchill as he felt that it was a betrayal of his father. He flirted with 'Home Rule all round' as a solution but did not follow it through. Addison added that he tried to resolve the problem by coming out in favour of special treatment for Ulster.

Addison reported that Churchill referred to himself as a Tory Democrat, thus drawing attention to the legacy of his father. He also showed independence from Tory party orthodoxy, veered from the party line and expressed sympathy for the Liberal opposition. The Liberal journalist, Massingham, said that he hoped Churchill would be Prime Minister and a Liberal one at that. Churchill was one of a group of young fractious Tory MPs led by Hugh Cecil. They maintained cordial relations with Liberals and Churchill particularly stayed in touch with Rosebery (an old

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friend of his father's) and Lloyd George. Addison argued that it was clear by the end of 1901 that Churchill and Lloyd George were close.

Dr Addison also felt that Churchill's attitude to the party system was significant. He had strong reservations about it and said that it gave too much power to extremists. At this time Churchill aspired to some sort of coalition of Liberal and Tory forces which he hoped Rosebery would bring about. When Chamberlain came out in favour of protection, this encouraged him to believe that there would be a realignment of politics, as had happened in 1886. In the end, however, only he and a few of his closest parliamentary allies changed sides. In answer to a question from the floor, Professor Robbins added that he almost certainly did not bring with him to the Liberal Party any activists or sections of the electorate.

Despite his contemporaries' doubts about him, Addison argued that there was no doubt that Churchill was convinced of the merits of free trade. It was not only the Treasury orthodox but the position of all his closest political allies. He attacked protectionism because it would raise the cost of living for the poor and increase corruption as people lobbied for tariffs. Nonetheless, Addison felt that this was not a sufficient reason for Churchill to defect. After all, his closest political ally, Hugh Cecil, subordinated his belief in free trade to party loyalty. Although there was no reason why he could not both continue to support free trade and the Tory party, Churchill used the argument to justify his departure. Addison also pointed out that Cecil was a High Anglican whereas Churchill had no such attachment. In Addison's view the driving force was Churchill's ambition and free trade merely enabled him to clothe his ambition in respectability. However, Addison did not believe that he lacked convictions, but simply that they were

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not decisive and were compatible with his ambition.

Professor Robbins added that he felt that it was worth reinforcing the point that in 1903–04 it looked as if the Conservative Party was falling apart and one could have supposed that it was unlikely that the Tories would regain power at the next general election. Hence, if Churchill was as ambitious as was supposed, and it looked likely that there would not be a Tory government for a decade, then this would be a good reason for leaving the party.

Dr Addison then turned to what he described as Churchill's radical phase, the period between 1905 and 1911. Addison described him as an outstandingly successful radical politician and an enthusiastic and energetic social reformer. In alliance with Lloyd George he was a leader of the radical wing of the Liberal Party. Indeed, his radicalism eclipsed that of the Labour Party. However, Addison noted that this stance lasted for a relatively brief period and was in sharp relief to the rest of his career. This deep engagement with Liberal ideology was never repeated after he moved to the Admiralty. It has, therefore, been argued that this period was merely an accidental phase in the career of a political opportunist.

Addison felt, however, that this underestimated the importance of Churchill's relationship with Lloyd George. They were in constant contact, usually in agreement and delighted in each other's company. Lloyd George was the dominant power and psychologically the master; indeed, Churchill described himself as Lloyd George's left hand. Despite this, in Addison's view, Churchill's role should not be under-estimated. He was often ahead of Lloyd George in articulating the New Liberalism, for example over unemployment insurance, labour exchanges, minimum wage legislation and penal reform. Sometimes they were working so closely that it is not possible to tell who was

leading, for example during the Agadir crisis of 1911.

Nonetheless, even in this radical phase Addison pointed out that Churchill expressed his attachment to social order and capitalism both in speeches and in private with Lloyd George and Masterman. He disapproved of socialism even more than he did of protectionism. Professor Robbins added that in his view Churchill put forward the radical solutions seen in this phase in order to avoid socialism – but that this strategy declined, or even ceased, as the Labour Party grew in strength.

The 1910 elections raised the possibility of coalition government and Churchill seemed to begin to move towards an accommodation with the Conservatives. Addison reported that the Conservatives said that Churchill was moving to the right at this time and putting out feelers to them. However, they had scores to settle and their new leader, Bonar Law, had no time for Churchill.

There did not seem to be a simple explanation for Churchill's move to the right. His relations with Labour were deteriorating, partly because of his use of the police in a number of labour disputes. He also seemed to have had an awakening sense of his military destiny. He had initially been sceptical of the idea that there would be a European war, but his connections with the intelligence services persuaded him that Germany was a threat and Agadir confirmed this. Once he became immersed at the Admiralty in the preparations for war, party politics receded and the idea of coalition government grew.

In summary, Addison argued that Churchill was never bound in his own mind to party politics: he was more interesting than that. There were 'tough' and 'tender' elements to his personality. Whilst his militaristic side perhaps veered towards the Tories, his compassion for the underdog and belief in a moral force in domestic and international affairs was congenial



**Liberal allies:
David Lloyd
George and
Winston Churchill**

to Liberalism. He was not, however, in Addison's view a Liberal. He was a hybrid, perhaps achieving a balance between the errors of the two parties. Nonetheless he was married to a Liberal and maintained a life-long affection for his Liberal friends.

Professor Robbins argued it was important to consider a number of aspects of Churchill's political character. As a 'democrat' his was the liberalism of a limited male franchise. (Dr Addison added that Churchill continued to oppose the extension of the franchise whilst in Baldwin's government.) He had no first-hand experience of poverty, and consequently his commitment to land reform did not match that of Lloyd George. He had a vision of himself as a great military thinker.

Robbins also argued that his concept of what Britain and its Empire was and its relations with Europe were also significant. Churchill did not probe the nature of continental relationships – few cabinet ministers pursued this issue – and he had no sentimental attachment to Europe or to parts of it. However, he did see the rivalry between states as a given and was aware of the struggle for mastery in Europe. There

was a particularly strong sense of this at the time of the Agadir crisis and he became more closely aligned with the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey. Robbins argued that Churchill seemed to have a facility for getting on with people and he was keen for his relations with Grey to be good; Grey eventually became the godfather to his son.

Churchill assumed the post of First Lord of the Admiralty with these issues in the background. For the Liberals his appointment was something of a double-edged sword. It caused about a third of the party (the nonconformist/pacifist wing) some anxiety. With Liberal Imperialists at the helm and Churchill at the Admiralty Robbins argued that this wing of the party feared that their leaders were taking the Liberals to places they did not want to go.

Robbins argued that Churchill's drive and determination were clear. He would bully people and sack them if they were not up to his standards. But what did he know? In fact, Robbins argued, he knew a great deal and had the capacity to absorb detail and master topics. Amongst the issues he had to consider were the Dreadnought crisis, the challenge from Germany and the maintenance of naval supremacy at almost any cost. He responded by seeking technical improvements, such as the use of oil for fuel. Robbins noted that many of the characteristics seen in World War Two were revealed at this time: prodigal talents spread widely. His career, therefore, went well, though it distanced him from the radical wing of the party.

By the summer of 1914 Churchill believed that a European war was bound to happen and that Britain had to take part. As Robbins noted, one would expect a war to be something that Churchill would do best and that he would emerge as the consummate war leader. In fact, that was not to be the case, and Churchill suffered a major political catastrophe over the Dardanelles in 1915. Robbins

questioned how much Churchill was culpable but, nonetheless, it was a disaster for his political career. Many supposed that he had had his come-uppance.

His close relationship with Lloyd George revived his career; after an interval, Lloyd George reappointed him to the Cabinet and in a context that Churchill was happy with. Coalition government and the Asquith – Lloyd George rupture in the Liberal Party had established a new context for political calculation.

Robbins also argued that an additional factor in the changing political landscape was the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. This gave added impetus to a Liberal/Conservative coalition as a way of preserving social order. Churchill had a pivotal role at the close of the war and after it became Secretary of State for the Colonies. Amongst his responsibilities was sorting out the frontiers in the Middle East.

However, the political butresses supporting Churchill were collapsing and the election defeat in 1922 made it unclear where he should turn. Could the Liberal divide be healed? Could he turn to the Conservatives whilst tariffs remained on their agenda? He could not contemplate a move to Labour and, consequently, if Labour emerged as the coming party Churchill would have to move to the right.

Robbins stated that he felt that if the Liberal divide could have been healed in 1918–22, Churchill might have stayed in the party. When it seemed that this was not going to happen, if he wanted to regain high office he would have to go back to the Tories. In Robbins' view this did not mean for Churchill a rejection of what he had said in the decade from 1904. However, the situation had changed radically after the First World War, and the Tories simply represented the safest and most plausible ticket for Churchill's own purposes.

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