

# THE CAREER OF FROM LEFT TO RIGHT?

**Ian Packer** analyses the political career of John Morley (1838–1923), a leading figure for thirty years in the late Victorian and Edwardian Liberal Party.

Morley combined a deep distrust of most types of social reform with a distinguished record as a proponent of Irish Home Rule and determined opposition to imperial expansion and an aggressive foreign policy. So where did he belong on the Liberal political spectrum? On the 'left' or on the 'right'?

John Morley represents many of the contradictions that historians face when using the terms 'right' and 'left' to describe Liberal politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> If the terms are given their contemporary meanings, then one of the most important methods of discerning whether a Liberal is to be assigned to the right or left of the party has been their attitude to taxation and welfare, with those dubious about the role of the state often being dubbed by historians as 'right-wing', while enthusiastic social reformers are 'left-wing'. From this viewpoint Morley was a Liberal of the 'right' in the early twentieth century. He ended his political career as the first and only Viscount Morley of Blackburn, the septuagenarian senior statesman of Asquith's Cabinet, and the butt of some of his colleagues' humour for his political timidity and dislike of the new agenda of social reform.

However, this is not the only modern definition of 'left' and 'right' in Liberalism. Attitudes to Britain's role in the world can also be used to locate Liberals on the party's spectrum, and on this basis Morley remained a 'left-wing' Liberal. He was a leading

proponent of Irish Home Rule, a fairly consistent opponent of imperial expansion and, at the age of seventy-five, he resigned from the Cabinet over its decision to declare war on Germany in August 1914. This doubt over whether Morley was on the party's 'right' or 'left' was shared by his contemporaries. His long political career illustrates how competing definitions of 'right' and 'left' (or moderate and Radical to use nineteenth-century terms) arose, ensuring, to many people's confusion, that Morley ended his days as a symbol of both 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' Liberalism, depending on which definition was used.

In the first half of his life it seemed unproblematic to most of his contemporaries that Morley was a Liberal of the party's 'left', or Radical, wing. He was born on 24 December 1838 in Blackburn, the son of a surgeon who had abandoned Methodism for evangelical Anglicanism.<sup>2</sup> After a varied education at local Congregationalist and grammar schools, University College School in London and Cheltenham College, he was sent to Lincoln College, Oxford, with the intention that he should become a clergyman. But at Oxford he experi-

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enced a crisis of faith and he left the university in 1859 determined to avoid the vocation his father had mapped out for him.

As he was without influential connections one of the few careers open to him was journalism and he was fortunate that the mid-Victorian era saw the heyday of the highbrow journal. Morley excelled at the kind of learned essay on literature, history and politics they regularly required and, at the age of twenty-eight, he became editor of the new *Fortnightly Review* and in his fifteen years in charge made it into one of the most important forums for intellectual debate in Victorian Britain.<sup>3</sup> Gradually, he achieved a degree of financial comfort, if not of security. On 28 May 1870 he married Rose Mary Ayling (1840–1923), probably after they had lived together for some years. She already had two children of uncertain paternity, though her marriage with Morley was childless. He also found time to write a steady stream of books, most of them on eighteenth-century enlightenment figures, including Burke, Diderot, Rousseau and Voltaire.<sup>4</sup> His most famous early work was probably his essay, 'On Compromise' (1874), which explored his agnosticism and the

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need to speak out against the forces of conformity in society. The essay both reflected Morley's own life and the influence of the Liberal philosopher, John Stuart Mill, who Morley knew well in his last years.<sup>5</sup>

But at the same time, Morley was actively involved in politics, standing as a Liberal at Blackburn in 1869 and Westminster in 1880 before being elected for Newcastle in 1883. He also edited the Liberal daily paper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, in 1880–83. In his journalism Morley insisted on the importance of the writer as a formulator, through free expression and debate, of public opinion, by which he meant the opinion of the intellectual elite of which he was a central component.<sup>6</sup> He believed it was the duty of this group to direct government into the paths of disinterested rule on behalf of all the community and to free society from state interference, which could only harm its 'natural' development and progress. His enemies were the traditional authorities who insisted on their divine or hereditary right to determine opinion and policy – primarily the Church of England and the aristocracy. These opinions made Morley seem a much more radical reformer than the party's leaders, such as Gladstone and his Whiggish colleagues. Certainly his association with issues like church disestablishment, secular education and reducing the powers of the House of Lords, and his friendship with the Radical figures Joseph Chamberlain and Sir Charles Dilke, put him firmly in Liberalism's advance guard.<sup>7</sup>

But what brought Morley to the forefront of politics was his attitude to Ireland and to imperial expansion.<sup>8</sup> He consistently argued that it was illegitimate for the British government to use coercion to govern Ireland against the will of its people. He regarded the Irish 'land war' as merely an attempt to redress real grievances and repression as only likely to lead to an interminable cycle

of violence and reprisals. It was intolerable for the government to repress rights of expression and organisation and to use arbitrary powers, and Morley feared that their use in Ireland would set a precedent for their use in Britain. Similarly, Morley opposed much of the imperial expansion that took place in Africa in the 1870s and 1880s, such as the Zulu War of 1879 and the Sudan expeditions of 1884–85, arguing that societies had to be left free to develop in their own ways and that Britain would not benefit from the massive expense involved in acquiring distant outposts. Instead, imperialism threatened open government by concentrating power in the hands of soldiers and officials.

These views were anathema to many Conservatives and moderate Liberals as they seemed to contradict Britain's national interests and to endorse violence against property and the forces of law and order in Ireland. Morley seemed a dangerous figure on the Liberal Party's far 'left'. When he moved into the party's leading group it was because Liberalism was perceived to have lurched towards radicalism, rather than because he became more moderate. In December 1885 it was revealed that Gladstone, the Liberal leader, had been converted to a policy of home rule for Ireland. Although Morley had not previously associated himself with this idea it was an entirely logical outgrowth of his own vehement opposition to coercion, and on 21 December 1885 he became the first leading Liberal publicly to support Gladstone.<sup>9</sup> When the latter formed his new Cabinet in 1886 he appointed Morley to the crucial post of Chief Secretary for Ireland.

This was the central moment in Morley's career. It irrevocably associated him with the cause of Irish home rule and the Liberal–Irish Nationalist alliance. Many Liberals refused to accept the new policy, because they saw home rule as leading to imperial disintegration, mob rule and the

requisition of property.<sup>10</sup> They split off to form the new Liberal Unionist party in alliance with the Conservatives. When Gladstone's home rule bill was defeated in the Commons it proved the crucial dividing issue between the Gladstonians and the new Unionist alliance at the subsequent election of 1886. If the Unionists were the party of the 'right' and the Liberals that of the 'left' then Morley was a key advocate of the policy which Unionists insisted made the Liberals most radical, irresponsible and 'left-wing'. He served as Chief Secretary for Ireland again in 1892–95 under Gladstone and Rosebery and shared with Gladstone the responsibility for the Irish home rule bill of 1893, which was defeated by the House of Lords. By this time he was very close to Gladstone, who was happy to declare 'I love John Morley'.<sup>11</sup>

This association with Ireland and Gladstone made Morley one of the party's leading figures, but he was unable to advance his position during the troubled 1892–95 governments and lost his seat at the 1895 general election, though a safer berth was soon found for him the next year at Montrose Burghs, which he served as MP until he went to the Lords in 1908.<sup>12</sup> Contemporaries commented that while Morley could be a fine speaker and was a competent administrator he was exceptionally vain and touchy and was often paralysed by indecision and self-doubt and these factors helped prevent him forcing his way to the top of Liberal politics. In opposition after 1895 he continued to press the case for home rule (against the wishes of those Liberals who wanted to backtrack on this commitment) and to express his doubts about imperial expansion, especially in the Sudan in 1898. In 1898–99 he co-ordinated his withdrawal from the Liberal leadership with Sir William Harcourt in protest against the pro-imperialist stance of some of their colleagues. Per-

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haps to Morley's chagrin, his fellow ex-Cabinet ministers did not plead with him to return and take up the Liberal leadership and selected Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman as their new chief. Morley turned much of his energies to his official, three-volume *Life of Gladstone*, which was published, to much acclaim, in 1903.

Thus, up to this time, in terms of what contemporaries perceived as being the central issues that divided Liberals from Conservatives, and Liberals from each other, Morley was a Liberal of the 'left', or a definite Radical, to use the terminology of the time. But this was only true as long as 'left-wing' policies were defined in terms of the vigour of a person's commitment to political freedoms, whether this meant hostility to authorities that claimed to rule with divine or hereditary sanction, opposition to imperial expansion or advocacy of Irish home rule. In the late nineteenth century another definition of 'left' and 'right' was coming to the fore, which sought to replace the older terms. Socialist and labour movements and collectivists within Liberalism and Conservatism all began to press for more state intervention in society. The new Labour Party, founded in 1900, and New Liberal journalists and politicians inside the Liberal Party, increasingly advocated that the state should produce social legislation to improve the conditions of the poorest members of society, even if this meant interfering with the workings of the free-market economy, and, if necessary, to pay for these measures by taxing the wealthy.<sup>13</sup> In their eyes, approval of these policies made a person 'left-wing'. To oppose them, or even to have doubts about them, was to be 'right-wing', even if the politician in question was an advocate of Irish home rule or an opponent of the House of Lords.

Thus, much to Morley's surprise, he began to be perceived by some people in politics as a 'right-wing' Liberal. This was unavoidable

in some ways. The Liberalism Morley had imbibed in the 1860s had not included this new collectivist agenda and he had staked his career on home rule and anti-imperialism. The Webbs were particularly scathing about Morley's ignorance of the 'new' politics.<sup>14</sup> This did not mean he had no interest in domestic matters. In the late 1880s he had acted as patron of younger Liberal MPs like Asquith, Haldane and Arthur Acland, who were interested in the new collectivist thinking.<sup>15</sup> He had become closely associated with both temperance reform and a 'rural programme' to appeal to agricultural labourers. But he was sceptical about many of the new social reform ideas that were being floated. In particular, in the late 1880s many trade unions took up the idea of a statutory eight-hour day, both on humanitarian grounds and as a way of alleviating unemployment by spreading work around. Morley opposed the proposal, leading to acrimonious disputes with local socialists in his Newcastle constituency. He noted that labour organisations were divided about the idea and that, for instance, miners in the North East were totally opposed to it.<sup>16</sup> Surely, he suggested, fewer hours worked would just mean lower pay for most people?

These were acute criticisms, but they were not necessarily wise. During the 1892–95 government, most Liberal MPs were willing to endorse the regulation of the hours of work of groups like the miners and railwaymen who had real electoral significance. Morley's high-profile rejection of this idea made him look isolated and out of touch. But Morley did not retreat. Indeed, he seemed to find some pride in swimming against the collectivist tide. Increasingly, he started to identify himself as a 'Cobdenite'.<sup>17</sup> He had written a biography of the mid-Victorian radical in 1881 and clearly found his anti-imperialism and opposition to an aggressive foreign policy congenial. But Morley also started to emphasise



John Morley in 1900 (drawing by F. C. Gould).

Cobden's laissez-faire economic thought and to make connections between these policies and his ideas on external affairs. To Morley, there seemed to be a real unity between opposing the expansion of the state abroad and objecting to extending its operations at home. Both were inimical to the liberty he held to be central to his creed.

This approach was the origin of the 'right-wing' Morley of the early twentieth century. In the early 1900s he returned to active politics and in 1905 Campbell-Bannerman made him Secretary of State for India in the new Liberal Cabinet – a post he exchanged for Lord President of the Council in 1910.<sup>18</sup> At the India Office Morley was not unaware of the irony of his translation into an imperial ruler. He shocked many of his admirers by presiding over deportations, detentions without trial and the suppression of newspapers in the course of the campaign against armed opponents of British rule in Bengal. But he also instigated

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the 'Morley-Minto' reforms of 1909 which made non-officials, many of whom were elected, a majority on all provincial councils and increased the powers of these councils. Though he remained an active participant in the Cabinet his behaviour often seemed petulant to colleagues, particularly in his constant threats to resign over both major and minor issues.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps he genuinely doubted his willingness to continue in politics as his age increased and his health declined. Possibly, having missed the highest prize of the premiership, he just needed to be reassured of his importance by being persuaded to remain in the Cabinet. Both Campbell-Bannerman and his successor, Asquith, went along with this behaviour. After all, through his friendship with Mill and Gladstone, Morley was a living link with the party's past and a guarantee that it remained true to its traditions.

Morley's scepticism about social reform fitted in with this view of him as a grumpy old man, unimpressed by 'new-fangled ways', and a relic of the past at the Cabinet table. This was the Morley who always had a reason to oppose new measures: who was 'frightened' by the implications of the 1909 People's Budget;<sup>20</sup> or who declared on the subject of old-age pensions, 'It will be injurious to us with the lower middle-class, who after all are no inconsiderable contingent of our party strength. On the other hand, we shall hardly be able to produce proposals magnificent enough to make the workmen ardently enthusiastic, or even decently satisfied.'<sup>21</sup>

This picture of Morley muttering against the new agenda of social reform in Asquith's Cabinet makes a neat conclusion to his political odyssey from the 'left' of the party in the 1880s to the 'right' in the 1900s.<sup>22</sup> But it is also misleading. Morley was only a 'right-wing' Liberal if collectivism was the central political issue and the determining factor in who was on the 'left' and who was on the

'right'. But this was only intermittently true in the Edwardian era. The 'old' agenda that Morley had advocated in Victorian Britain stubbornly refused to make itself irrelevant. At the 1906 general election the great issue was free trade against tariff reform. In the 1910 elections it was the role of the House of Lords. In 1912–14 it was Irish home rule and the threat of armed conflict in Ireland. On all of these issues, Morley was in the advance guard of his party. He preferred reducing the Lords' powers to amending its composition and he remained one of home rule's firmest friends in the cabinet.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, it can be argued that within the Liberal leadership Morley remained one of its most 'left-wing' members on some crucial topics.

In 1899–1902 the great issue for most people in the Liberal and Labour Parties was the Boer War launched by the Conservative government. Morley, not unexpectedly given his previous record, was among its foremost opponents, declaring it simply to be 'wrong' to launch a war for imperial conquest.<sup>24</sup> So impressed was Keir Hardie that in an open letter in the *Labour Leader* in June 1900 he offered Morley the leadership of the Labour Party that had been founded four months previously – a curious offer if Morley was consistently perceived as a 'right-wing' Liberal.<sup>25</sup> Once the Anglo-French military conversations became known to the Cabinet in 1911, Morley was one of the most prominent opponents of any intervention in European war. Finally, in August 1914 Morley concluded his political career by resigning from the Liberal Cabinet, along with John Burns, rather than accept the decision to declare war on Germany.<sup>26</sup> His primary motivation seems to have been his long-standing loathing of the reactionary regime in Russia and fear that war would lead to its spread across Europe. In opposing the war, Morley aligned himself with twenty or

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so Liberal MPs, the leaders of the Independent Labour Party like Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden, and, in the rest of Europe, a smattering of radicals and socialists who found themselves condemned and persecuted for opposing the 'national interest' of their respective countries. He had started his political life as a pariah because his religious views were considered too unorthodox, only to end his involvement in politics in the company of pacifists, socialists and revolutionaries. His final years were spent in retirement at his home in Wimbledon and in composing retrospective works like his *Recollections* (1917).

The notion of whether Morley can be assigned to the 'right' or 'left' of Liberalism brings into stark relief the need to be careful in placing these terms within a closely defined historical context. On issues connected to social reform and redistributive taxation Morley was clearly a 'right-wing' Liberal to fellow Liberals in the early 1900s. But before the late 1880s at the earliest these issues were not significant enough to determine a politician's place on the political spectrum. Even in the early twentieth century they had to share the political stage with the agendas of political freedoms, anti-imperialism and a moral foreign policy that Morley had imbibed in his youth. On all these issues Morley was a 'left-wing' Liberal to his contemporaries. When he died at his home in Wimbledon on 23 September 1923 he could justly claim to be remembered both as a 'left-wing' and a 'right-wing' figure, depending on whether his obituarist felt that what mattered was his opposition to the First World War or his doubts about old-age pensions.

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(Woodbridge: RHS/Boydell & Brewer, 2001) and *The Letters of Arnold Stephenson Rowntree to Mary Katherine Rowntree, 1910–18 (RHS/CUP, 2002)*.

- 1 For biographical studies of Morley, see D.A. Hamer, *John Morley: Liberal Intellectual in Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); F.W. Hirst, *Early Life and Letters of John Morley*, 2 vols (Macmillan, 1927); J. H. Morgan, *John, Viscount Morley. An Appreciation and Some Reminiscences* (Murray, 1924); J. L. Morison, *John Morley: A Study in Victorianism* (Kingston, Ontario: Jackson Press, 1920); W. Staebler, *The Liberal Mind of John Morley* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943). Also, J. W. Bicknell and C. L. Cline, 'Who was Lady Morley?', *Victorian Newsletter* (Fall, 1973), pp. 28–31.
- 2 Morley dealt with his early life in his *Recollections*, 2 vols (Macmillan, 1917), vol. 1, pp. 3–35.
- 3 See Hamer, *John Morley*, especially pp. 70–74, 79–85. Allegedly, Morley expressed his agnosticism by allowing God to be spelled with a small 'g' in the pages of the *Fortnightly*.
- 4 *Edmund Burke: A Historical Study* (Macmillan, 1867); *Diderot and the Encyclopaedists*, 2 vols (Chapman & Hall, 1878); *Rousseau*, 2 vols (Chapman & Hall, 1873); *Voltaire* (Chapman & Hall, 1872); 'On Compromise' appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*, new series, 88, 90–1 (1874).
- 5 *Recollections*, vol. 1, pp. 52–67.
- 6 The best guide to Morley's early thought remains Hamer, *John Morley*, pp. 16–80.
- 7 Hamer, *John Morley*, pp. 104–11; *Recollections*, vol. 1, pp. 147–63.
- 8 See Morley's articles in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 October 1881, 23 February 1883, 10 August 1882.
- 9 *The Times*, 22 December 1885 reporting Morley's speech at Newcastle.
- 10 The Liberal split of 1885–86 has been much analysed. See in particular A. B. Cooke and J. Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain, 1885–6* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1974); T. A. Jenkins, *Gladstone, Whiggery and the Liberal Party, 1874–86* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); W. C. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis: The British House of Commons in 1886* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).
- 11 Stuart Rendel to Morley, 18 September 1888, quoted in Hamer, *John Morley*, p. 180.
- 12 For the Liberal troubles of the 1890s and Morley's role in the party, see P. Stansky, *Ambitions and Strategies: the Struggle for the Leadership of the Liberal Party in the 1890s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).
- 13 On these developments, see M. Freedman, *The New Liberalism: an Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); P. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); S. Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- 14 B. Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1929), p. 306.
- 15 M. Barker, *Gladstone and Radicalism: the Reconstruction of Liberal Policy in Britain, 1885–94* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1975), pp. 175–99.
- 16 A. G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt*, 2 vols (Constable & Co., 1923), vol. 2, p. 171; Hamer, *John Morley*, pp. 255–62.
- 17 *The Life of Richard Cobden*, 2 vols (Chapman & Hall, 1881); *Recollections*, vol. 1, pp. 134–44 for Morley's later thoughts on Cobden.
- 18 S. A. Wolpert, *Morley and India 1906–1910* (Berkeley, Ca., University of California Press, 1967) and S. E. Koss, *John Morley at the India Office, 1905–10* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) for this period.
- 19 After Morley's threat to resign in 1908 over the timing of a statement he was to make in the Lords, Asquith referred to him as a 'regular old woman', *A Liberal Chronicle: Journals and Papers of J. A. Pease, 1st Lord Gainsford 1908–1910*, ed. C. Hazlehurst and C. Woodland (Historians Press, 1994), p. 97.
- 20 Morley to Lord Crewe, 13 December 1908, Cambridge University Library, Crewe papers, 37.
- 21 Morley to Lord Bryce, 6 January 1908, quoted in Hamer, *John Morley*, p. 355.
- 22 See, for instance, Hazlehurst and Woodland, *Liberal Chronicle*, pp. 74–5 for Morley's opposition to support from the rates for unemployment relief.
- 23 B. Murray, *The People's Budget 1909/10: Lloyd George and Liberal Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 281–3; P. Jalland, *The Liberals and Ireland: The Ulster Question and British Politics to 1914* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 163.
- 24 *Recollections*, vol. 2, p. 86.
- 25 *Labour Leader*, 16 June 1900.
- 26 Hamer, *John Morley*, pp. 360–9.

## British Liberal Political Studies Group Winter Conference 2006

### Call for Papers

The British Political Liberal Studies Group winter conference will be held on the weekend of the 13–15 January 2006, at the University of Wales Conference Centre in Gregynog, Powys. This conference is held in conjunction with the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Proposed panels for papers include:

1. The Liberal Democrats and the 2005 general election
2. The Liberals of 1905: 'on the road to a landslide'?
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4. The SDP a quarter of a century on
5. The Liberal Democrats: campaigning, gender and candidate selection
6. Prime Ministers, leaders and other important Liberal figures
7. The Liberals and issues of policy, past and present

Paper-givers are required to submit a 200-word summary of their paper to the Conference Convenor. If the paper is deemed of the required standard for the group then a space will be allocated for it on a relevant panel. Papers should be submitted by 1 September 2005. Please submit ideas to the Conference Convenor, Dr Russell Deacon (rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk).

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