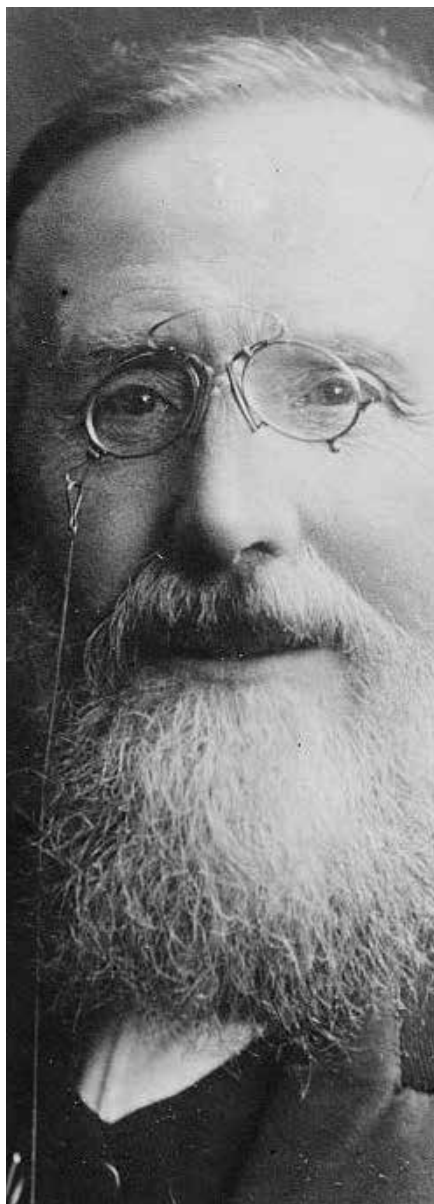


Trade unions

Did the Liberals miss an historical opportunity to become the party of organised labour and the trade unions in the 1870s? By Tim Hughes.

The Liberal Party and the



ON TUESDAY 27 September 1870, Gladstone met with a delegation from the Labour Representation League, an organisation created to promote the election of working-class MPs, but described by Gladstone in his diaries simply as a 'Deputn of working Men'.¹ They met to discuss the Franco-Prussian War. The initiative for the meeting had come from

Karl Marx and it stands, for all concerned, as a failure to focus on the real issue of the long-term relationship between organised labour and the Liberal Party following the Second Reform Act.²

It may seem strange that trade union representatives were meeting with the prime minister to discuss matters of foreign policy. They were, after all, representatives of emerging

trade unions in the 1870s



sectional interests rather than of a class. Certainly Gladstone had built a strong reputation with the unions in the 1860s as Chancellor of the Exchequer, when unions demonstrated an interest in his Post Office Savings scheme. This interest was founded on their need to keep union funds safe, and for Gladstone was evidence that the working man shared his

concerns for personal and public economy. He even referenced his meetings with the unions in his 'Pale of the Constitution' speech, which appeared to embrace universal male suffrage in 1864.³ This was a matter of state policy. Foreign policy was, however, an area on which popular support could be built, as Palmerston had demonstrated.

The Liberal Party and the trade unions in the 1870s

In doing this, a more knowing Gladstone could have opened up the possibility of creating a new political paradigm. Gladstone's foreign policy has come to be seen as rooted in moral convictions that had first surfaced in his 'Letters to the Earl of Aberdeen' on the abuses in the Neapolitan prisons. This has been seen as Gladstone's first meaningful alignment with an identifiable Liberal foreign policy.⁴ His 'Letters to Aberdeen' railed against injustice and was readily supported by Palmerston and republicans as an attack on the abuses of monarchical rule. Palmerstone distributed them, with no lack of glee for the embarrassment it caused Aberdeen, to the British embassies.

Gladstone argued unconvincingly that these letters should be seen as a defence of monarchy rather than an attack on the tyrannies of untempered monarchical rule; for Shannon they 'retarded Gladstone's movement towards Liberalism'.⁵ It is certainly premature in the context of Gladstone's career to begin to call him a Liberal at this juncture and his foreign policy remained distinctive from either Palmerston or the Manchester School of Cobden and Bright, which embraced the dichotomy of free trade and peace. Gladstone would, however, go on to set the boundaries of a new 'liberal' foreign policy, creating a school of foreign policy now defined by scholars of international relations as liberal. If he could do this in the realm of foreign policy he could also have broadened this out in terms of organised labour within the emerging Gladstonian Liberalism.

Interestingly, suspicion of monarchy was also a theme in the September meeting, where the delegation sought reassurances that there were no pro-German 'dynastic influences' holding back Britain's involvement in the Franco-Prussian War, a less than subtle reference to Queen Victoria.⁶ For the delegation of working men there was a more pragmatic reasoning behind supporting a republican government in France: the broader primacy of the people and the principles of freedom in foreign policy. It is not that morality did not play a role in the thinking of the Labour Representation League – which has been convincingly linked to the thinking of the Republican, Italian nationalist, Mazzini more than the internationalist Marx in this respect – but that it was rooted in a different thinking to that of Gladstone.⁷ Republicanism was never an aspect of Gladstonian Liberalism, although it was present in a Liberal Party that contained Bradlaugh and Dilke. Marx stressed the fear of 'Prussian instruction' and it could be that he had laid down the grounds for suspicion rather than these coming directly from the delegation. Marx also mentions these as coming from the 'oligarchic part of the Cabinet'.⁸ Clearly Marx himself saw a division between the Whig and radical elements. It appears that Marx saw Gladstone as an unreliable ally. Marx was of course right to be suspicious of Gladstone, who brought to even foreign policy

a Conservative sensibility based on his Peelite beliefs rather than coming from an internationalist perspective that would have been shared by his working-class delegation. The delegation had reason to be suspicious of the monarchy, given Victoria's later interventions in foreign policy at the behest of Disraeli in order to put pressure on Cabinet members to support Disraeli's policies in the Balkans.⁹

Looking more closely at the Labour Representation League, this was created with the primary aim of registering working-class men for the vote and getting working-class men elected as MPs 'proportionate to other interests and classes at present represented in Parliament'.¹⁰ This was a significant ambition, with 30 per cent of working-class men having the vote in 1867 but – with few seats with a working-class majority – one that depended upon building alliances. Rooted in the London Working Men's Association and the embryonic TUC, their very presence in No. 11 Downing Street was the result of an impressive series of working-class successes that could be seen as culminating in the Trade Union legislation of 1871, which saw the trade unions achieve a legal status that gave them protection through the courts.

It is, however, too easy to see a separation between organised labour and Liberalism, a separation of tradition as well as creed. The meeting's significance comes from its taking place in a period of transience and consolidation which builds on the 'community of sentiment' and 'a coalition of convenience' of the 1860s to form a more robust Gladstonian Liberalism: a form of Liberalism which, while it should not be confused with Gladstone, was nevertheless focussed on his person.¹¹ It remains to be considered whether Gladstonian Liberalism was a change of substance rather than of sentiment, but it left room for the ascendancy of organised Nonconformity from its interest in disestablishment and church rates into becoming the foundation stone of a popular more radical liberalism.¹² This led through clear choices of policy directed by Gladstone, not least towards Ireland and the eventual Whig split from the Liberal Party in 1886.

Gladstone favoured working-class men entering parliament and would be the first to appoint a working man to his government – Thomas Burt, the leader of the Northumberland Miners' Association – as parliamentary secretary to the Board of Trade, even though he was not at that time a member of the Liberal Party. On being elected in 1874 as one of the first two Lib-Lab MPs, Burt was honoured alongside his fellow miners' leader, Alexander Macdonald, in a banquet held by the Labour Representation League. Here he spoke about how 'something had been done to break the exclusiveness which had hitherto kept the poor man outside the House of Commons' but that it would be a mistake to become an exponent of 'class representation and legislation'.¹³ He

Overleaf (page 20):

Thomas Burt
(1837–1922)

Alexander Macdonald
(1821–81)

Liberal Prime Minister
W. E. Gladstone
(1809–98)

Overleaf (page 21):

A. J. Mundella
(1825–97)

Robert Applegarth
(1834–1924)

George Howell
(1833–1910)

was instinctively Liberal in his politics and would refuse to take the Labour Party whip when the miners affiliated to the Labour Party in 1908. Interestingly, in 1870 he was active in the Workmen's Peace Association campaigning for British neutrality during the Franco-Prussian War, further evidence of the importance of foreign policy in the formation of political allegiances among the representatives of the working class.

There is therefore some credence to seeing Gladstone as bringing 'the working man within the pale of the constitution'.¹⁴ However, while he promoted the careers of individuals, he did this in recognition of individual merit rather than recognising the rights of a class. For the leaders of organised Labour and their representatives who entered the House of Commons, the language of class did not necessitate class politics, as shown above. It is within this distinction that the opportunities lay for Liberalism to institutionalise the interests of organised labour within their own party. This opportunity could have been taken in 1871 with the Liberal government's Trade Union legislation but this required amendment through the 'bipartisan effort' of 1875 and effectively demonstrated the distance in perception that remained between Liberalism and organised labour.¹⁵

The original Liberal Trade Union Bill had proved highly controversial if not potentially toxic and had been divided into two at the instigation of a deputation from the Trades Union Congress led by the Liberal MP, A. J. Mundella, creating the Criminal Law Amendment Bill out of the third clause of the original bill. This proved sufficient to maintain the support of the unions for the main Trade Union Act of 1871. The Liberals had been slow to recognise the importance of picketing to the trade unions and the ambiguity of the term 'intimidation and molestation' as defined in the clause. This should not be a surprise given the manner in which Gladstone had built bridges with the unions through his perception of them as akin to friendly societies and agents of economy rather than agents within the realm of industrial conflict.

Recognised as requiring reform, the initial response of the working-class MPs Burt and Macdonald had been to support Disraeli's idea of a royal commission; but when it reported in February 1875, it proved unsatisfactory to politicians and trade unionists alike. A Conservative bill was introduced with which Mundella achieved much in the committee stage, only for the Conservative home secretary, Richard Cross, to work with Howell, the secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, to produce the Conspiracy and Protection Act. This met the demands of the trade unions. If the Criminal Law Amendment Act demonstrated 'clear fault lines running through the relationship between working-class radicalism and official Liberalism',¹⁶ it also showed a desire to transcend them. However, official Liberalism failed to recognise the potential

vulnerability of their support from organised labour. Howell wrote, 'Everyone vied with the other to do the best thing. Cross deserves our warmest gratitude for his conscientious work.'¹⁷

The failure of the leaders of organised labour was to not recognise Gladstone's limitations and conservatism at this point, although to be fair these limitations were also not clear to middle-class radicals sympathetic to the trade unions like Mundella. For Gladstone, when entrenching his Post Office savings accounts, he had spoken to the unions but responded to their Friendly Society characteristics.¹⁸ He related to the self-help they represented but he did not see their collective nature and never retreated from his commitment to a more libertarian individualism; he was never an egalitarian despite Bebbington linking Gladstone, via his Ancient Greek sensibilities, to modern concepts of New Labour communitarianism.¹⁹ Organised labour represented, with only 217,128 members, a small part of the practical 'collective self-help' that was developing among the working class alongside 300,157 members of co-ops and 1,857,896 members of friendly societies in 1872.²⁰

For the leaders of organised labour, they believed they shared a vision of international fairness and the promotion of liberal values of freedom. Indeed in September 1870, they shared the short-term objective of intervention in the settlement of the Franco-Prussian War, although Gladstone was seeking government intervention in order to maintain a balance of power in Europe based on mediation between the Great Powers which was central to the ideas of Aberdeen and the Concert of Europe. This was founded on essentially pre-Disraelian Conservative values. While meeting with representatives of Labour, his chief concern in the diaries appears to be Cardwell's army reforms and there could be no question of stronger measures being taken. Schreuder sees Gladstone as being more open to the use of aggression but certainly not as open as his allies.²¹ The second administration would make clear that Britain's strategic interests would come first with Gladstone.

Middle-class radicals did recognise the significance of organised labour and their representatives. The Reform League, from its conception, was subsidised by Liberals such as Samuel Morley who contributed to the wages of George Howell, the full-time secretary of the Reform League. Howell would become secretary to the TUC Parliamentary Committee from 1873 to 1876. Like the International, the Reform League saw the need to be fronted by working men while having their agendas driven by middle-class intellectuals. Morley would provide further funds to promote working-class candidates in 1868, alongside an understanding with the Liberal chief whip, George Glyne, reminiscent of the later agreement between Herbert Gladstone and the Labour Representation Committee in 1903. Indeed the

similarities may well explain the lack of concern from official liberalism about the development of the Labour Party in 1906.²²

However, of the two candidates backed by the Reform League that stood for election in December 1868, neither was endorsed by the local Liberal parties, a problem that would re-emerge in 1903. Two would be elected in 1874, Alexander MacDonald from the Miners' National Association and Thomas Burt, agent of the Northumberland Miners' Association. The Lib-Lab tradition had begun but was based primarily on the links to a strong union rather than forging a meaningful channel with the emerging working class. Potential Liberal MPs – such as Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald – would still face rejection and become key figures in the foundation of the Labour Party. Yet in 1885, twelve working-class MPs were elected and historians have been challenged by Reid to explain 'why such a separate Labour Party should eventually have felt to be necessary at all'.²³

Could a Labour Party have emerged separate to the Liberal Party in this period? There were certainly union men of substance, including Randal Cremer who stood for parliament in 1868, who would be successfully elected for the periods 1885–1895 and 1900–1908, and who would eventually win the Nobel Peace Prize. However, he had resigned from the International as early as 1867, seeing it as too radical and was never going to lead a party of the left. Perhaps this could have come from Robert Applegarth, but he never stood for election and faded from view; or alternatively a figure like Howell, Liberal MP from 1885 to 1895; or Potter, who stood without success in Peterborough and Preston. The man who tried to form a party of labour was John Hales who sought to turn the English section of the International into a national party of labour and the working class. It never looked like he would succeed. Socialist parties would emerge in the 1880s and the Independent Labour Party in 1893, but even the cloth-capped Keir Hardie had sought to become a Liberal MP. A closer look at these men reveals the Liberal nature of organised labour, rather than offering an image of the socialist fellow traveller.

Applegarth was one of the delegation in the September meeting. He had already seen a key aim of organised labour to extend the franchise being achieved for urban workers in the Second Reform Act. The improved legal status of the trade unions was achieved through a royal commission to which he had acted as a prominent witness, having written to Gladstone in June 1866 and been interviewed by the home secretary, H. A. Bruce.²⁴ Only the aim of securing labour participation in parliament seemed an ongoing concern.²⁵ It is in this area of labour participation that a failure of imagination occurred. Applegarth collaborated with the various intellectual forces of his time – Marx, Beesley²⁶ and

Liberal MPs such as Mundella – but the reluctance of organised labour to set up broader objectives could simply be seen as their acceptance of the broader Liberalism they sought to represent²⁷. His role would end with his resignation from the Carpenters and Joiners Union and from the International to take up a role on a Royal Commission on Contagious Diseases. This however removed him from a pivotal role as a leading trade unionist and moderate link to the International. He was fond of the phrase 'As long as the present system lasts', but this demonstrated his belief in progress rather than socialism, and Humphrey cites an old socialist saying of him in his later years, 'the old man has never really been one of us'.²⁸

Owen has emphasised the significance of localism but also finds himself using different facets of Liberalism to explore the relationships between labour and Liberalism. While the title of the study focuses on 'organised Liberalism' a distinction is made with 'official Liberalism' in the text. It is this distinction which, while recognising the difficulty of accommodating working-class candidates standing for the Liberal Party, also opens up a space for official Liberalism and the leadership to do more to accommodate organised labour, the Labour League and later the Labour Representation League. While he identifies a 'genuine desire' from the National Liberal Federation, created in 1877 by Joseph Chamberlain, to promote working-class candidates, they are often unable to impose their will.²⁹ What was required was a 'People's William' who sought not only to open doors and be inclusive towards the working class in terms of recognising the leaders of labour and exceptional individuals but one who saw the need to be more proactive as a party leader in developing more structured links with organised labour.

Wrigley has argued that, 'Gladstone, in his final active decade of politics, took careful notice of the growing strength of labour' and sees this as developing out of his experiences with the Lib-Lab MPs in the 1880s and also with the 1889 dock strike. While building on Gladstone's experiences in the 1860s, however there is little mention of the early 1870s in this evaluation.³⁰

How might these words, written in 1889, have been received in 1870?

In the common interests of humanity, this remarkable strike and result of this strike, which have tended somewhat to strengthen the condition of labour in the face of capital, is the record of what we ought to regard as satisfactory, as a real social advance [that] tends to a fair principle of division of the fruits of industry.³¹

Gladstone has clearly moved from seeing the trade unions as friendly societies. But Wrigley, while he does recognise Gladstone's caution towards the unions in the 1890s, still overestimates the change that has taken place in regards to Gladstone rather than the changing nature and leadership

Smothered by 'organised Liberalism' and misunderstood by the one figure within 'official Liberalism' who could have given it momentum, the trade unionists of the Labour Representation League could have been a bridge offering continuity between the radical working-class traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The opportunity was missed.

of the new, emerging, less-skilled trade unions. A year later, Cardinal Manning, a friend and confidant of Gladstone's, would commend Gladstone on his 'very wise reserve' on the 'relations of capital & Labour' regarding the dockers strike, while emphasising how the dockers 'have broken with the Socialist Theories, and are simply industrial and economic.' Manning clearly seeks more from Gladstone than he is willing to give. Here in microcosm are the expectations, disappointments and excuses – Manning cites Gladstone's focus on Ireland – that those who look to Gladstone have to accept.³²

Historians have come to recognise that working-class traditions and class consciousness, in the sense of being aware of one's class, can just as easily lead to Tory as to Liberal or socialist politics.³³ The trade union legislation of 1875 showed how Conservatives were as capable as Liberals as satisfying the demands of organised labour. The trade union reformists of the early 1870s can now be seen as Liberal, and one of the strands within the coalescing forces of liberalism coming together beneath Gladstone's umbrella. Smothered by 'organised Liberalism' and misunderstood by the one figure within 'official Liberalism' who could have given it momentum, the trade unionists of the Labour Representation League could have been a bridge offering continuity between the radical working-class traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The opportunity was missed.

A footnote on Marx

Returning to the meeting in September of 1870, Marx sought to counter the influence of monarchy and Russia by using the Labour Representation League to put pressure on Gladstone. Although his predictions regarding the subsequent need for France to move towards Russia were impressive and in effect foresaw the First World War, it is interesting that he did not proactively seek the development of a working-class party in England, based on the trade unions, which he could have influenced.³⁴ He had recognised the need for the working class in different countries to develop their own paths to representation and power but preferred to out-manoeuvre the marginal anarchist factions in Europe. He had also recognised that England represented the most developed position and that this position was founded on the trade unions but in the end preferred

to fight battles over ideology rather than power. He too may have missed an opportunity to divert the socialist tradition's trajectory from what would become the British Labour Party.

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- 1 M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 7 (Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 371.
- 2 Marx to Engels on 10 Sep. 1870. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 44 1870–73, p. 70.
- 3 Borough Franchise Bill Second Reading, Hansard CLXXV, May 11 1864.
- 4 Derek Beales, 'Gladstone and Garibaldi', in Peter J. Jagger (ed.), *Gladstone* (Hambledon Press, 1998), p. 150.
- 5 Richard Shannon, *Gladstone*, vol. 1 (Hamish Hamilton, 1982), p. 242.
- 6 *The Times*, 28 Sep. 1872, cited in footnote in Foot and Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 7, p. 371.
- 7 Henry Collins, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement* (Macmillan, 1965), pp. 285–286
- 8 Marx to Engels, 10 Sep 1870; op. cit.
- 9 Milos Kovic, *Disraeli and the Eastern Question* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 311.
- 10 Minutes of the General Council of the Reform League, 4 Dec. 1867, cited in James Owen, 'The Struggle for Political Representation: Labour Candidates and the Liberal Party, 1868–85', *Journal of Labour History*, 86, Spring 2015, p. 15.
- 11 John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857–68* (Pelican Books, 1972), p. 290.
- 12 For a history of the Liberation Society see J. P. Ellens, *Religious Routes to Gladstonian Liberalism* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
- 13 *The Bee-Hive*, 21 Mar. 1874, cited in Lowell J. Satre, *Thomas Burt, Miner's MP 1837–1922: The Great Conciliator* (Leicester University Press, 1999), p. 38.
- 14 Simon Peaple and John Vincent, 'Gladstone and the working man', in Peter J. Jagger (ed.), *Gladstone* (Hambledon Press, 1998), p. 83.
- 15 Jonathan Spain, 'Trade unionists, Gladstonian Liberals and the labour reforms of 1875' in Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid, *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 6, p. 109.
- 16 James Owen, *Labour and the Caucus: Working class radicalism and organised Liberalism in England, 1868–1888* (Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 14.
- 17 Howell to Robert Knight, 14 Jul. 1875, cited in F. M. Leventhal, *Respectable Radical: George*

Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 184.

- 18 Chris Wrigley, 'Gladstone and Labour', in Quinault, Swift & Windscheffel (eds.), *William Gladstone: New Studies and Perspectives* (Ashgate, 2012)
- 19 David Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 303. For Gladstone, the unions saw more favour than under Blair, who famously didn't invite them to No. 10, but neither man was interested in embracing class politics. This emphasises the liberalism of New Labour rather than the egalitarianism of Gladstone.
- 20 Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class: Labour in British Society 1850–1920* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 49.
- 21 D. M. Shreuder, 'Gladstone as "Trouble Maker": Liberal Foreign Policy and the German Annexation of Alsace Lorraine, 1870–1871', *Journal of British Studies*, 17 (1978), pp. 106–35.
- 22 Owen, 'The Struggle for Political Representation', p. 15.
- 23 A. J. Reid, *United We Stand: A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (Penguin, 2004), p. 149.
- 24 Copy of the letter dated 25 Jun. 1866, in A. W. Humphrey, *Robert Applegarth: Trade Unionist, Educationist, Reformer* (HardPress Publishing, 2013; originally published 1913), p. 142.
- 25 Report of the Fourth Annual Congress of the International Men's Association, pp. 4–5, cited in Collins, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, p. 153.
- 26 Edward Spencer Beesley, English positivist and Comtist who had links with Marx and the trade union movement. See Christopher Kent, *Brains and Numbers: Elitism, Comtism, and Democracy in Mid-Victorian England* (University of Toronto Press, 1978).
- 27 Asa Biggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes 1851–1867* (Pelican Books, 1965), p. 204.
- 28 Humphrey, *Robert Applegarth*, pp. 94, 319.
- 29 James Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, p. 98.
- 30 Wrigley, 'Gladstone and Labour', p. 70.
- 31 *The Times*, 24 Sep. 1889, cited in Michael Barker, *Gladstone and Radicalism: Reconstruction of Liberal Policy, 1885–94* (Harvester Press, 1975), p. 92.
- 32 Cardinal Manning to Gladstone, 27 Aug. 1890 in Peter C. Erb (ed.), *The Correspondence of Henry Edward Manning and William Ewart Gladstone, 1882–1891* (OUP, 2013), p. 69.
- 33 Matthew Roberts, 'By-elections and the Unionist Electoral Ascendancy', in T. G. Otte and Paul Readman (eds.), *By-elections in British Politics, 1832–1914* (Boydell Press, 2013); for the impact of positive Unionism and the importance of working-class Tories to Conservative electoral success.
- 34 Collins, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, pp. 182–3.