Introduction

Eugenio Biagini introduces this special edition of the *Journal of Liberal History*, marking 150 years since William Ewart Gladstone's first appointment as Prime Minister.

Gladstone's First Gov

A radical new departure?

The first Gladstone government (December 1868 – February 1874) has been widely regarded as one of the great game-changers in modern British political history. Few other administrations are in the same league, and they include the 1841–6 Peel government (which introduced a peacetime income tax and ushered in free trade), the Liberal governments of 1906–16 and the Attlee governments of 1945–51. From the start, observers were impressed. In 1872 Disraeli himself compared the Liberal frontbench to 'a range of volcanoes' (albeit, in view, already exhausted). In 1898, one of Gladstone's early biographers entitled the chapter which dealt with his first government, 'The Golden Age of Liberalism'.

In a sense it was. Overseeing the British economy at the apex of its power, in an age when laissez-faire and free trade seemed to pave the way to unlimited progress ('improvement') and social peace, it seemed to mark the culmination of Gladstone's own career. As the late Colin Matthew argued:

> Looking at the architecture of the State in the late 1860s, Gladstone saw the grand design largely fulfilled … [He] saw his first Government not as the new dawn of thoroughgoing liberalism emancipated by democracy, but as the setting of the sun at the end of the day on the building of the mid-century edifice. The long-term implication of the household suffrage was, no doubt, the destruction of this creation ... But … Gladstone … had promoted limited franchise reform in 1866 as a means of consolidating the mid-century order of State, Party, and politics, not of undermining it.[1]

However, by 1868 the 'pale of the constitution' had been dramatically enlarged by the Second Reform Act, which extended the franchise to a substantial number of artisans and workingmen

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(albeit only those who were resident in boroughs). Whatever complacency Gladstone might have felt about his past achievements, he quickly came to see the need to 'update' the country's legal framework. He faced some of the challenges which were to become familiar to twentieth-century politicians who would be operating under a full democratic dispensation. Trade union legislation, the improvement of elementary education, further electoral reform (the secret ballot) were just some of the burning issues of the day. In foreign policy, in the 1850s Palmerston had indulged in aggressive rhetoric and posturing which Gladstone had repeatedly denounced as both unwarranted and counterproductive.[2] Once in power, Gladstone insisted on international arbitration as the means to avoid escalations of tension between major powers (this was first applied to the resolution of a conflict with the Americans in 1869-72, to settle compensation claims for the damages inflicted on US trade by the British-built Confederate raider, the *CSS Alabama*). In this way, he helped to establish a practice and a model which would inspire liberals around the world for generations to come.[3]

Moreover, with his drive to 'pacify Ireland', Gladstone alerted the country to the seriousness of ethnic conflict, which was to prove far more intractable than class struggle (as John Stuart Mill had predicted in 1868).[4] While Gladstone's 1869 Irish strategy was still 'Unionist', already in the mid-1870s – having experimented with land reform, religious equality, and 'Coercion' (anti-terrorist legislation) – the Liberal leader was slowly moving towards the idea that Ireland needed devolution. Eventually he adopted this strategy in 1886, and, though he failed in his attempts to implement it, devolution set the agenda of UK constitutional reform until the end of the twentieth century. He understood that the challenge was how to reconcile parliamentary government with the rise of democracy

Previous page: Gladstone's Cabinet of 1868, by Lowes Cato Dickinson

in a multi-national state, which was, simultaneously, the head of a much larger and more diverse global Empire and 'Anglo-World'. Ireland stood at the heart of this system, hence 'pacifying' it was a matter of critical importance. In the process, Gladstone initiated a tradition of high-powered statesmen – including H. H. Asquith, D. Lloyd George, A. J. Balfour, Winston Churchill, John Major and Tony Blair – who devoted some considerable proportion of their credibility, energy and time to answering 'the Irish Question'.

For all these reasons, I agree with Derek Beales that Gladstone's programme of 1868, far from being merely a continuation of mid-Victorian liberalism, 'by comparison with the pledges of Palmerston and others before him, and Disraeli after him, and with his own plans of 1859 … was vast and radical.'[5] Over the next few years, such pledges resulted in a frantic process of drafting and passing new legislation. The government introduced 92 bills in 1869, 84 in 1870, 111 in 1871, 89 in 1872 and 104 in 1873. Despite the extraordinary pressure on parliamentary time, only a minority of these bills were abandoned (for example only nineteen in 1869, and twenty in 1873). Most of these were dropped because they were thought to be poorly drafted, though others were sidelined because they were serving 'sectional' interests (for example those of Scotland).[6] Many of the bills which were passed were complex and controversial, and took up an extraordinary number of nights as they went through second reading and the committee stage. Despite all the difficulties, the government pushed on relentlessly, resorting to unorthodox practices when necessary (most famously, Army Purchase was abolished by Royal Warrant, rather than Act of Parliament).[7]

While Gladstone remained constantly concerned about Ireland, his copious diaries disprove the often-repeated claim that he was a man of 'one idea at a time'.[8] As Beales has written, 'he … [presided] over the cabinet with uncommon efficiency, unexpectedly good temper and surprising balance. He [was] to be found promoting legislation and making policy in areas, like law reform and the affairs of Fiji, far removed from his specialisms. He [showed] himself ready to compromise even on issues affecting his deepest convictions, like the Cowper-Temple clause of the Education Act of 1870. So enormous [was] his capacity that almost the entire river of the country's business [seemed] to flow through his mind and pen.'[9] As the contributors to this issue make abundantly clear, the result of such prodigious efforts were not consistently and unequivocally successful. Yet, again, in a wide range of policy areas the 1868–74 government identified and addressed problems which would remain crucial for the next 150 years.

Posterity was duly impressed, with politicians of diverse orientation claiming aspects of his legacy. In the late twentieth and in the twenty-first century, the centre-left admired his vision and resolve, 'ethical' foreign policy, openness to the labour movement and ability to appeal to a wide cross-section of the population.[10] By contrast, free-market purists argued that he was a pioneer of the idea of a 'fiscal constitution'. This is the notion that effective limits to government expenditure (and thus reform programmes or foreign policy initiatives) can be enforced through the Treasury when the tax system limits rigidly the revenue, and makes it impossible to raise more taxes without renegotiating the terms in which the country is run.[11]

Allegedly, Gladstone's 1874 election manifesto, with its offer to repeal the income tax, encapsulated the spirit of such strategy.[12] However, this experiment was never enacted, because he lost the election and the incoming Conservative government (under Disraeli) was not prepared to deprive the government of the flexibility afforded by income tax (which allowed for the rapid increase of the revenue whenever central government expenditure demanded it, by simply adding to the rate of the taxation). In any case, in Victorian Britain a large proportion of public expenditure depended not on central government taxation, but on local rates, which town councils and school boards could increase to meet expense or raise funds for local needs. *Pace* the Virginia School, the Gladstonian 'fiscal constitution', such as it was, remained very vague and was primarily constrained by the electors' and ratepayers' willingness to pay – which was a *political process*, rather than a *constitution*.

Religion

Religion was the single most important source of controversy in Victorian politics. In particular, reforming the established Irish Protestant church had always been difficult and divisive. Britain was a solidly Protestant country, with the Loyal Orange Order flourishing in parts of England and Scotland as much as it did in Ulster. In Ireland taken as a whole, over one quarter of the population was Protestant. Though they were militant wherever they represented a local majority, Irish Protestants were aware of their vulnerability, had a collective memory of sectarian persecution and were very suspicious of the intention of their Catholic neighbours. Anti-Catholic, anti-Irish feeling had traditionally been strong especially in the North West of England – where Irish immigration was heavier.[13]

As John Powell writes in his perceptive and revealing analysis of Gladstone's *A Chapter of Autobiography*, it was difficult to persuade a staunchly Protestant electorate that the disestablishment and disendowment of the Episcopal Church in Ireland were desirable measures, at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was militantly anti-Liberal, and Liberalism was closely associated with anti-clerical, anti-Catholic

politics both at home and abroad.[14] It was even more difficult to reconcile such measures with Gladstone's own tortuous record on Church and State matters. While much of the British electorate was ready for a radical new departure in this area, as Tim Larsen has shown in his recent, outstanding study of John Stuart Mill,[15] Irish Church disestablishment was divisive and encouraged the voters who had hitherto supported the Liberals to consider instead Disraeli's reinvigorated, centrist Conservative Party, the self-styled defender of the 'English Constitution'. In 1868, despite the party's success across the United Kingdom, Gladstone himself lost his seat in South West Lancashire, where he came third, with two Tory candidates being returned. The Liberal party leader had to seek another seat (he moved to the London constituency of Greenwich).

Within such a difficult context, it is to his credit and that of his cabinet that they pressed ahead with their Irish reforms. And if some of the latter were inadequate to address the relevant problems, we should not forget that Gladstone operated under a parliamentary system in which the Tory party controlled the majority in the House of Lords, and the latter had effective veto powers.

From 1870 the government was progressively weakened by disagreements about the way further reform could be reconciled with different understandings of the moral and religious duties of the state and the relationship between the churches and the educational facilities funded at public expense. Most Whigs upheld the traditional Erastian view, according to which only parliamentary control of the Church could shelter the country from the clash of opposing enthusiasms. By contrast, Gladstone, the Nonconformists and the High Churchmen defended the cause of ecclesiastical autonomy against state interference. As Jon Parry put it in an important article in 1982:

> [the] former group felt that the vital function of Liberalism was to spread enlightenment and progressive sentiment against the obstructiveness of clerical or dogmatic influence; Gladstone defined its most crucial task very differently. It was to allow all religions sufficient equality before the law, and sufficient independence from it, to enable them to undertake their spiritual responsibilities in mutual harmony, without restriction, and to the certain benefit of all peoples.[16]

In his contribution to the present issue of the *JLH*, Parry revisits a topic which he did so much to define over the past generation. His current reassessment of the Liberal statesman is more generous than his previous analysis. He now tends to see some of Gladstone's failures as due to a wide set of circumstances, more than to specific tactical or strategic mistakes. However, when dealing with Ireland and religious disputes in Britain, it proved impossible for him to establish the government's 'disinterestedness' – i.e., that claim to impartiality and therefore to 'justice' and moral authority – which had been so important in the making of Liberal power in the 1850s. Furthermore, disagreement about how to face the altered situation in continental Europe (following the Franco-Prussian war) contributed to weakening his ability to assess and handle the situation.

And then there was Ireland, again, with its multi-layered problems. Kanter skilfully unpacks the 'original sins' of Gladstone's approach to Ireland. However, such flaws did not prevent him from securing a resounding success with the disestablishment of the Episcopal Church, which became the self-governing Church of Ireland, run by synods of lay and clerical representatives as well as by bishops and Archbishops. While this turn toward synod-based self-government anticipated changes which later transformed the governance of the Church of England too, partial disendowment came at the last possible time when Irish Protestant could have coped with its economic consequences. From the late 1870s, the drop in agricultural prices and the start of the Irish Land League agitations seriously undermined their economic position.

Land reform was at the time largely intractable. But the 1870 Act had the merit of making a start and laying down some broad principles – including the need to qualify the power of the landed gentry and move towards some system of land purchase. Could more have been achieved? This is a counterfactual that cannot be tested, but Kanter rightly shows how Gladstone's margin of manoeuvre was constrained by both domestic and international events, including the Pope's proclamation of infallibility, which provoked Protestant outrage and a new wave of anti-Catholic feeling in Britain. The only catastrophic and avoidable mistake was the University Bill, which nearly killed off the government in 1873. Though the bill might have secured the support of the Catholic bishops, even had it passed parliamentary scrutiny, it would have been difficult to implement.

Next to Irish-related issues, primary education was the greatest source of controversy, as Geoff Chorley explains in his article. In charge of drafting the bill and navigating it through parliament was W. E. Forster, the Lord President of the Council. He was an Anglican of Quaker background, who had served in Ireland with the Friends' ambulance during the Great Potato Famine. Ireland had been given a very effective, but deeply sectarian, school system as early as 1830. The model of school management which Forster adopted was instead borrowed from the United States, and in particular the Massachusetts school board system. In their English version, school boards were elected by both ratepayers of both sexes through a complex voting system, which benefited female candidates as well as local minorities. This, together with the triennial

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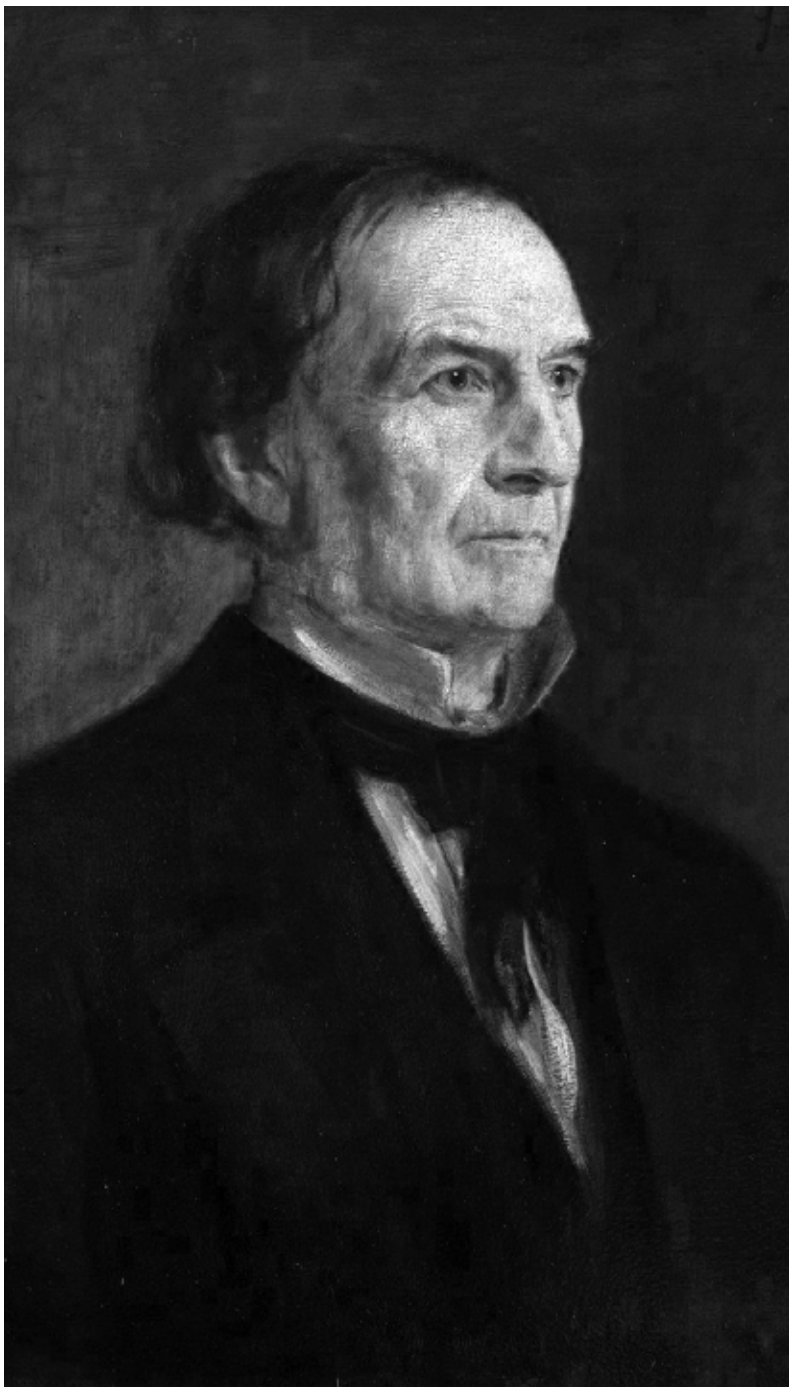
elections, helped to defuse religious animosities in the long run.[17] However, the immediate aftermath of the act was characterised by internecine fights among Liberals in board elections, while W. E. Forster was viciously attacked by radical Nonconformists.[18]

Backbench rebellions, three-cornered contests in by-elections, the challenge of both trade-union parliamentary candidates in England and the Home Rule Association in Ireland kept bleeding the majority. Such impatience among both the British left and the Irish was due to overconfidence, as Parry notes. By 1870 many reformers behaved as if they believed that the Tories were in terminal decline, and the UK was about to leap into a democratic 'brave new world', in which the real struggle would be between radicals and Whigs. The extraordinary bitterness generated by the Education Act in Nonconformist circles was a function of such overconfidence. Many believed that Gladstonian improvements were not the *maximum*, but the *minimum* to which true reformers should aspire under the forthcoming 'democratic' dispensation. After all, the almost millenarian vision of the Chartists – who had been a power in the country as late as 1848 – was still fresh in the radical memory. Contemporary observers – including Disraeli and Karl Marx – shared this essentially post-Chartist expectation that working-class voters were naturally oriented to the left. With so many of them being enfranchised, the 'forward march' of radicalism would break up the Liberal Party and dwarf the Tories. The case with the desertion of the Irish Liberals was different, but was nevertheless based on the assumption that the government should have done more for them. Gladstone had to find a way to hold the party together under such peculiar circumstances. A snap election on a 'safe' platform – driven by the Treasury, as in the good old days – was one option. Yet, as Mahel has written:

> Until December [1873], Gladstone did not conceive of the budget proposals as an election cry. Rather, he thought of the financial programme as a mechanism, consistent with political principle, by which to obscure the issues that were dividing the liberals and to unite the party once more on a measure of overriding importance. He planned to rally the Liberals for the 1874 session around their fundamental policies of retrenchment and economy, after which he intended to appeal to the country on the basis of the party's accomplishment in finance, a field in which many of its past glories lay. Only as he encountered the resistance of Cardwell and Goschen did the idea of dissolution appear and slowly grow into a resolve.[19]

These two ministers were in charge, respectively, of the Army and the Admiralty, whose activism was now almost out of control. For Gladstone, the real challenge was not how to stop Conservatism, whose resurgence he grossly underestimated, but how to contain the 'profligate' ambition of the military departments, emboldened by the need to rearm after the recent wars in Europe and excited by opportunities of further colonial expansion in Africa.



William Ewart Gladstone in 1874; portrait by Franz von Lenbach

Defeat

Brooks' article on 1874 approaches this important election – when the Conservatives first established their ability to win a very large share of the popular vote under a (quasi) democratic electoral system – by focusing on two key factors: Disraeli's rebuttal of Gladstone's rather nebulous election manifesto, and the backlash against Liberal reforms in small and medium-sized boroughs. It is

questionable whether either of these factors would have been so important, had it not been for the way the distribution of seats over-represented small borough constituencies, resulting in the Tories securing a substantial majority of seats with a minority of the popular vote.

Brooks offers an important contribution to our understanding of how British political discourse had changed between 1868 and 1874. Yet, rather than a radical rejection of Liberalism, Disraeli offered continuity, or rather a return to Peelite reform in social and economic politics, Palmerstonian assertiveness in international relations, and, for the rest, constitutional consolidation and continuity.

Some of the public concerns that Disraeli exploited were about the Liberals' alleged intention to curtail the powers of the House of Lords. The latter's relationship with the Gladstone government is the theme of Tony Little's contribution. It is well known that the 1868 Liberal administration included many peers: in fact, fourteen out of thirty departments had hereditary noblemen as their head, with some holding more than one office. However, the Liberals had steadily been losing support in the Upper House. In the long run, this was bound to pose serious constitutional questions for the country as a whole, especially once Lord Salisbury reinterpreted the Lords' remit and encouraged them to be more assertive. However, as Little shows, the situation began to deteriorate as early as 1869, and soon the government fell back on the old Whig strategy of requesting the monarch to create new peers, who might help to rebalance the position of the government in the Lords. Even this proved inadequate to bend the Lords on the issue of the Army Purchase, as noted above. Likewise, the Secret Ballot Bill was so difficult that at one stage Gladstone contemplated dissolving parliament on a 'Peers *versus* the People' platform.

While all of this has contemporary resonance in our Brexit world, it is important to bear in mind that the Upper House with which Gladstone dealt was very different from its namesake in 2018. It consisted exclusively of hereditary peers, most of them being large landowners. Their wealth and territorial roots made them more 'representative' (because farming was one the largest employed of labour in the country), but also more narrowly focused on issues which could be divisive and excite class antagonism. However, the main constitutional problem was that – at a stage when the country was slowly becoming more democratic – the House of Lords seemed determined to resist popular pressure and frustrate the House of Commons. This in turn pushed Gladstone and part of the Liberals towards more radical positions, and certainly more populist rhetoric. If in 1872 such populism was largely a matter of posture, the conflict resumed from 1880, when the Gladstone was returned to power, and lasted long enough for the Liberals to conclude that drastic reform was necessary. As Gladstone himself was to indicate in 1894, in his last speech in parliament, 'the question [was] … whether the judgment of the House of Lords is not only to modify, but is to annihilate the whole work of the House of Commons'.[20] He would not live to see how such question would eventually be answered. But the challenge that it implied was picked up by Asquith and Lloyd George, whose 1911 act secured the single most radical reform of parliament since Oliver Cromwell.

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