

# Journal of Liberal

# HISTORY



## Honor Balfour, broadcaster

Helen Langley

**What Honor did next** The pioneering broadcasting career of Honor Balfour

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Simon Heffer

**William Ewart Gladstone**

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Tudor Jones

**Some cornerstones still in place** The endurance of British Liberalism, 1945 – 1955

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Duncan Brack

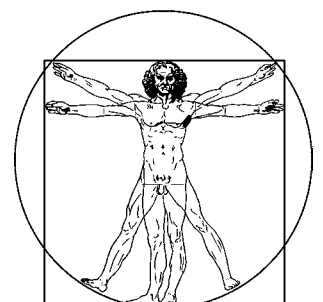
**Tories and the Coalition** Review of Conservative ministers' autobiographies

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Alison Grover

**Roy Douglas** Liberal historian

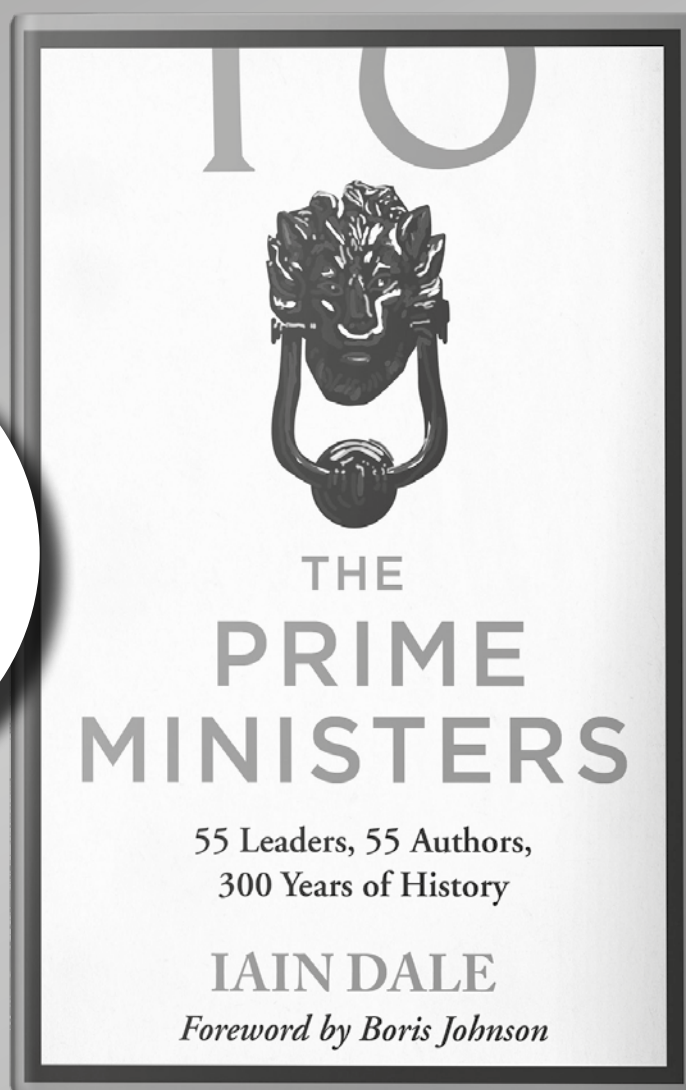
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## Journal of Liberal History

The *Journal of Liberal History* is published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

ISSN 1479-9642

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An annual subscription to the *Journal of Liberal History* costs £25 (£15 unwaged) (print) and £45 (online). This includes membership of the History Group unless you inform us otherwise. Non-UK subscribers should add £10.00.

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Cover design concept: **Lynne Featherstone**

Published by the Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN

Printed by **Kall-Kwik**,

Unit 1, 37 Colville Road, London W3 8BL

January 2021

# Issue 109: Winter 2020–21

## Liberal history news

4

Editorial; Roy Douglas; Ann Winfield; Commemorating Asquith; Thanks to Patrick Mitchell

## Letters to the Editor

7

Lady Howard of Llanelli (**Michael Steed** and **Jaime Reynolds**)

## What Honor did next

8

The pioneering broadcasting career of Honor Balfour (1912–2001); by **Helen Langley**

## William Ewart Gladstone

22

**Simon Heffer's** chapter on Gladstone from Iain Dale's new book, *The Prime Ministers*

## Some cornerstones still in place

30

The endurance of British Liberalism, 1945–1955; by **Tudor Jones**

## Reviews

44

Clarke, *Kind of Blue: A political memoir*, Cameron, *For the Record* and Letwin, *Hearts and Minds: The battle for the Conservative Party from Thatcher to the present*, reviewed by **Duncan Brack**; Hargreaves, Laybourn and Toye (eds.), *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations: J. H. Whitley (1866–1935) – Halifax Radical and Speaker of the House of Commons*, reviewed by **Michael Meadowcroft**; Blaxill, *The War of Words: The language of British elections, 1880–1914*, reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

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## Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal of Liberal History* and other occasional publications.

For more information, including historical commentaries, details of publications, back issues of the *Journal*, and archive and other research resources, see: [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk).

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# Liberal History News

## Winter 2020–21

### Editorial

Welcome to the winter 2020–21 issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

We include three main articles in this issue: on the broadcasting career of Honor Balfour, by Helen Langley (who wrote on her political career in issue 78 (Spring 2013)); on William Ewart Gladstone, by Simon Heffer (a reprint from Iain Dale's new book, *The Prime Ministers*); and on the Liberal Party's efforts to retain and articulate its political distinctiveness in one of the darkest periods in its history, 1945–55, by Tudor Jones.

We also record, in 'Liberal History News', the sad deaths of long-time Liberal activists Roy Douglas and Ann Winfield. Roy Douglas must have been amongst the last – perhaps *the* last? – of those Liberals who fought the 1950 general election. (As far as we are aware, there are no survivors of any earlier election.)

In 1950 the party made a major effort to contest as many seats as possible, and in the end fought 475; many candidates were recruited at the last moment, often from university Liberal societies. No fewer than 319 of them lost their deposits (candidates then had to win 12.5 per cent of the vote to retain their deposit), which helps to explain why the party fought only 109 and 110 seats in the following two elections, in 1951 and 1955.

The large number of – often obscure – candidates in the 1950 election means that it has been hard to track their whereabouts. If any reader has any information on any still-living Liberal candidates from any election in the 1950s, we would be glad to hear of it; please email me at [journal@liberalhistory.org.uk](mailto:journal@liberalhistory.org.uk).

*Duncan Brack (Editor)*

### Roy Douglas

My father, Roy Ian Douglas (95), who died following a brief illness, was an academic specialising in modern history, law and politics. Born in 1924, he was the only child of Percy Douglas, Company Secretary at *The Lady*, and his wife, Lilian (nee Bowley).

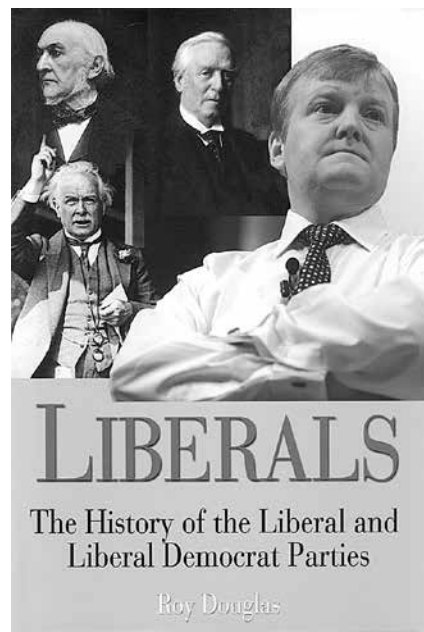
Following his BSc at Kings College, London, he completed a doctorate in zoology at Edinburgh University. He subsequently decided to read for the Bar, hoping eventually to make use of his scientific background to work in patents; he was called to the Bar in 1956 as a member of Gray's Inn.

Roy's academic career commenced at Battersea College of Technology, which became the University of Surrey in 1966. Roy became Emeritus Reader at the university, where he lectured for over 50 years. He formally retired in the late 1980s, but continued to lecture part-time until his late eighties and produced books in his nineties. His final lecture was given at Guildford Institute in January 2017. Throughout his teaching career he invested his knowledge into thousands of under and post-graduate students, many of whom still kept in contact with him. He wrote or contributed to more than twenty books on UK or international history, local history and law.

Roy joined the Liberal Party (Streatham Liberal Association) when he was sixteen. While at King's College London he served as Chair of its Liberal association, and later served as President and then Chair of the National League of Young Liberals. He stood for the Liberal Party at five parliamentary elections: in Merton & Morden in 1950, Bethnal Green in 1951 and 1955 and Gainsborough in 1959 and 1964. By this time, he was serving on

the council of the Liberal Party. In the run-up to the 1975 European Communities membership referendum, he chaired the Liberal 'No to the Common Market' campaign. He knew all Liberal and Liberal Democrat leaders since Jo Grimond.

He maintained his membership of the party until they entered into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010, a topic about which he had a robust exchange of views with Nick Clegg at the time. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of UK-wide constituencies, by-elections and national election results and a phenomenal memory for minutiae and obscure facts. Two of his books were on Liberal history: *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971), and *Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democratic Parties* (Hambleton & London, 2005). He also served as a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Liberal History* and contributed a



number of articles and book reviews to it. In July 1996 he spoke at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting on the Liberal Party and the question of land policy, called 'God Gave the Land to the People!'

He retained a boyish curiosity about all subjects and retained his enthusiasm for life. He was exceptionally well read and could converse on a variety of topics. He was actively working on his latest book on World War One (which will be published posthumously) right up until a few months before his death.

In 1955 he married Jean Roberts, whom he met through the Young Liberals. He would often say his marriage to Jean was the wisest and happiest thing he ever did in his life, and he would not have achieved half what he did without her. It is a measure of

his devotion to Jean that he agreed to move from his beloved Coulsdon in Surrey to Wannock in East Sussex in 2008. Roy attached enormous significance to both his immediate and extended family. He was closely interested in the lives of his four children and four grandchildren, and is survived by Jean, their children Alison, Mick, Claire and Nigel and grandchildren Aimee, Mollie, Kate and Callum.

*Alison Grover*

## **Ann Winfield**

My wife Ann Winfield, Liberal Parliamentary candidate for Newham North East in the 1983 general election, former Assistant Secretary of the London Liberal Party, and Leader of the Liberal

group on Newham London Borough Council from 1982 to 1986, died in Bronglais General Hospital (Aberystwyth) at 8pm on Christmas Eve, 24 December 2020. She was 69 years old.

Born Ann Spriggs in Ladywood, Birmingham, in mid 1951, she was recruited into the Liberal Party (at the tender age of 9!) by Wallace Lawler, who subsequently became a councillor and later (briefly, 1969–70) Liberal MP for Ladywood. Wallace was the pioneer in the 1960s of what became known as community politics, prior to the Eastbourne declaration by the party in 1970; Ann was his lieutenant in that early period. Ann remained a committed and active Liberal for the next sixty years. Due to the extreme poverty of her (non-political) family, Wallace paid her sub for the first few

## **On This Day ...**

Every day the History Group's website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three. To see them regularly, look at [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk) or [www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup](https://www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup) or follow us at: **LibHistoryToday**.

### **December**

*29 December 1809:* Birth of William Ewart Gladstone. Born in Liverpool, the son of a prosperous merchant, Gladstone's political career lasted for over 60 years and included four periods as Chancellor of the Exchequer and four as Prime Minister. Gladstone entered parliament in 1832 as the Tory MP for Newark and served in both administrations of Sir Robert Peel. Gladstone's devotion to Peel led him to side with him in the Tory split over the Corn Laws and to serve as Chancellor under Aberdeen, Palmerston and Russell. As Prime Minister, Gladstone and his ministers instituted profound changes to British society. His first administration, arguably the greatest of the nineteenth century, reformed the army, opened up the civil service, reformed the Poor Law, established elementary education and brought in secret ballots for elections. During his third government, Gladstone's espousal of Irish Home Rule split the Liberal Party and led to its defeat. His popularity earned him the sobriquet 'the People's William'. When he died in 1898 he was given a state funeral, and two future kings acted as pallbearers.

### **January**

*10 January 1919:* Following victory in the 'Coupon Election' at the end of the previous year, Lloyd George makes changes to his wartime government. He retained the small war cabinet which he had set up on becoming Prime Minister in 1916 and which was not disbanded until October 1919. Labour MP George Barnes and South African leader Jan Smuts left the war cabinet, although Barnes remained in the government as Minister without Portfolio until January 1920, and were replaced by the Unionist Sir Eric Geddes. Although the government was dominated by Unionists, Lloyd George was able to ensure that Coalition Liberals headed a number of important departments, including Edward Shortt (Home Office), Herbert Fisher (Education), Christopher Addison (Local Government Board), Winston Churchill (War Office), and Ian Macpherson (Ireland).

### **February**

*9 February 2006:* Liberal Democrat candidate Willie Rennie wins the Dunfermline & West Fife by-election, turning a Labour majority of over 11,000 into a Lib Dem majority of 1,800. The by-election was caused by the death of the sitting Labour MP, Rachel Squire, after a long illness. Despite poor opinion poll ratings at the start of the campaign, and reports that Liberal Democrat ambitions were confined to holding off the SNP to retain second place, Rennie and his team pulled off the first by-election defeat for Labour in Scotland since they lost the Govan seat to the SNP in 1988. The by-election took place during the Lib Dem leadership election which followed the resignation of Charles Kennedy, a difficult time for the party. .

years, but by the age of 12 she was running his ward (or constituency) surgery in Ladywood.

In the 1970s Ann moved to Lytham St Anne's and later to Ferndown, East Dorset, where she stood for the council. In 1979 she and I met at Liberal Assembly in Thanet, and Ann soon moved in with me in Ilford; we married there in June 1980. Through campaigning in the next two years, we were both elected to Newham Council in 1982, gaining the 'safe' Labour ward of Little Ilford. Ann also became the PPC for the constituency, standing there in 1983. Seven-day-a-week activity sapped Ann's precarious health (she had a heart attack in 1984, in the middle of a notorious by-election campaign) and in 1987 we moved to Pembrokehire, where we lived for three years before repositioning to Ceredigion, our home ever since.

Here our joint role has been primarily cross-party, organising Charter 88 forums for all candidates in the 1992 and 1997 general elections, convening in Ceredigion the successful campaign for devolution in 1997, and taking a leading role in the voluntary sector and on the Community Health Council. Ann also served as National Secretary of the residual (post-merger) Wales Liberal Party until its final dissolution. Increasing disability left her wheelchair-dependent from 1982, but did not impinge on her commitment to campaigning. In 2001 she was appointed as an independent member of Ceredigion County Council's Standards Committee on which she served the maximum allowable term of ten years, first as Vice-Chair and subsequently as Chair.

Notwithstanding her disabilities, we travelled widely together, from the Mediterranean to the Far East. But by the time her term of office ended in 2011, Ann's eyesight was failing as well as other deteriorating physical conditions, and she swiftly became totally blind. Intellectually unimpaired, she remained a well-known campaigner (especially as an acknowledged expert advisor for disability rights) right up until her last cardiac attack on Tuesday 22 December.

*Rif Winfield*

## Commemorating Asquith

I am writing to you on the recommendation of Cllr. John Pugh of Southport, who kindly suggested that I get in touch with you regarding a query that I had about an old Liberal Party commemorative item.

The object, which I recently acquired, is a Victorian paperweight in the form of a book (see pictures), which was inscribed as a presentation gift to H. H. Asquith upon his appointment as Secretary for Home Affairs under Gladstone's government in 1892. As the front inscription follows a general form, with Asquith's name and the word 'home' appearing to have been carved in separately (owing to a different preparation of the surface beneath them) I wondered if a few of these paperweights might have been made to form and then carved for individual presentation, perhaps being commemorative gifts presented by Gladstone's government to members of his 1892 cabinet?

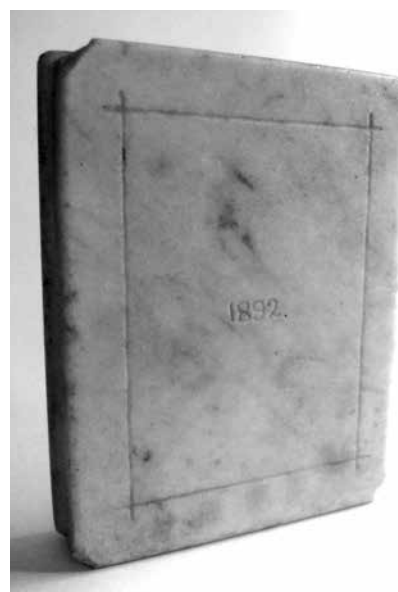
I was wondering if you might know whether any records of such presentation gifts might exist, or if you had come across such an object before and might be able to shed a little light on the thing? I am aware that Gladstone was a prolific reader and collector of books, so thought that a gift in this form might make sense as a commemorative piece commissioned by him.

*Tom Farrow*

### Response

I am afraid I cannot give a definitive answer to your question but my best guess would be that it is more likely that Asquith's local constituency Liberal Association or a working men's group made the presentation to him, or a regional Liberal Association sought to commemorate a particular occasion, than that Gladstone presented this to his cabinet.

I have visited Gladstone's study and it is peppered with the gifts (axes especially) and scrolls presented to him but there is no sign of such a presentation from any of the prime ministers he served. I have not noted any comment in his diaries that he made any such gift to colleagues. While no doubt many of



The full inscription reads –  
Front: THE RT HON H. H. ASQUITH  
QC MP. COMMEMORATIVE OF  
YOUR HONORABLE POSITION AS  
SECRETARY FOR HOME AFFAIRS  
Back: 1892

Gladstone's books are collector's items now, I came across a 1534 religious text lying casually on a window ledge in the study; my sense is that he valued books primarily for the contents rather than their appearance.

If you will excuse my saying so, and judging solely from the appearance in the pictures, the engraving has a 'rural' character rather than the professional appearance one would expect from something professionally commissioned by someone of Gladstone's wealth. None of this detracts of course from the historic character of the artefact.

*Tony Little (Chair, Liberal Democrat History Group)*

## Thanks to Patrick Mitchell

Patrick Mitchell has decided to stand down from the management committee of the Liberal Democrat History Group at the 2021 Annual General Meeting.

Patrick has been with the History Group from its beginning when it started to publish the *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter* (now the *Journal of Liberal History*), and has served on the committee in a multitude of roles.

Patrick drafted the constitution of the Group, which has been sufficiently brief and clear that it has served efficiently, and virtually unchanged, for the thirty-plus years of the Group's

existence. He was the Group's treasurer for some years and was the membership secretary for an even longer period.

Chair of the Group, Tony Little, said: 'Patrick brought a quiet efficiency to his roles on the committee, particularly as our membership secretary. We have been very fortunate to have had his diligent services over such a long period.'

'I would like to express the gratitude of his fellow committee members for his help and advice and wish him well for the future.'

# Letters to the Editor

## Lady Howard of Llanelli

I was interested in the article on Lady Howard of Llanelli in the last issue (Jaime Reynolds, 'Another Madam Mayor: Lady Howard of Llanelli and the strange case of the Cowell-Stepneys', *Journal of Liberal History* 108 (autumn 2020)). Although the authors writes that it became an absolutely safe Labour seat after 1922, citing as evidence the 1931 majority of 16,033, this was simply because no Liberal stood in 1931. In the four elections between 1922 and 1929, the Labour majority over Liberal never reached 10,000 and was only 2,259 in 1924. Thereafter the constituency did become very strongly Labour indeed, but its Liberal vote resisted the rapid erosion which occurred in most of industrial south Wales.

There are only rare three-cornered fights, in 1929 and 1950, to show this. Most seats had these in 1929: in Llanelli, the Liberal vote (37 per cent) was higher than in any of the industrial South Wales valley seats and much higher than the average Liberal vote in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire (27 per cent). By 1950, the average Liberal

vote in industrial South Wales had dropped to 11.8 per cent (based mostly on coastal towns, as the party was too weak to fight most mining seats), but Lanelli still pulled in 14 per cent, the only industrial Welsh seat in which the Liberal vote was ahead of the Conservatives (by 7,700 to 6,362) and one of only a handful across Britain.

Then, despite this second place, Liberals dropped out in Llanelli until 1964. Nationally, in seats fought in both 1950 and 1964, the party's percentage share rose by 5.4; in Llanelli, the vote dropped to 12.2 per cent. Its locally higher parliamentary support had by then evaporated. Maybe that vote had simply reflected its more Welsh linguistic character, or maybe the influence of Meriel Howard-Stepney can be discerned.

*Michael Steed*

## Lady Howard of Llanelli: response

Michael, many thanks for your comments on the article.

I am sure you are correct about the enduring Liberal strength in Llanelli

into the 1950s, which is not surprising given the Liberal hold on the surrounding Carmarthenshire seat and the presence of a sizable Welsh-speaking and Nonconformist population in the constituency. There may also have been some residual Howard influence, though I suspect that this was on the wane after the 1920s. Interestingly, Stafford Vaughan-Howard, Meriel's son, was mentioned as a possible Liberal candidate for Llanelli in 1948 but he chose instead to stand for South Gloucestershire in 1950 and Penrith & the Border in 1951. Instead, the candidate for Llanelli was Hywel Gruffydd Thomas.

The fact remains that Labour polled over 50 per cent of the votes in every election from 1922, and even where there was a single Liberal or Tory candidate, as in 1924 and 1931, this was insufficient to overturn the Labour lead (perhaps, as you suggest, because a significant number of Liberal voters preferred Labour).

*Jaime Reynolds*

## Honor Balfour

Helen Langley tells the story of the career of the Liberal activist Honor Balfour in the BBC's current affairs and political coverage.

# What Honor

## The pioneering broadcasting career



**H**ONOR BALFOUR'S BROADCASTING career lasted over thirty years. This article, a companion to that of 2013,<sup>1</sup> focuses primarily on her contribution to the expanding, often innovatory, coverage of topical issues by BBC radio, which formed the mainstay of her work, and to afternoon television programmes for women. The files held in the BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC) detail much

of the extent and content of her broadcasting career (some programme files do not survive); they were the key component for this article – especially newly released files – in reconstructing this previously unexplored aspect of Balfour's life.<sup>2</sup> The article also draws on recorded conversations between the writer and Honor Balfour in 1997–98.<sup>3</sup> Work on the article was boosted by invitations to give a talk on



# or did next

## er of Honor Balfour (1912 – 2001)

Honor's career, and to contribute to the blogs of Vote100 and BBC history research.<sup>4</sup>

Researching the article opened up unexpected byways into the careers of two once-prominent Liberals who were at the forefront of BBC innovation: Stephen Bonarjee (1912–2003) and Doreen Gorsky (1912–2001), known professionally by her maiden name, Stephens. Inevitably, it became apparent that Honor's relationship with the Liberal Party differed from that described in the 2013 article. Her gradual disengagement from the party is symptomatic of its then decline. Stephens made a similar journey. Bonarjee took a different route. After he retired from the BBC he returned to work for the Liberals. The post-war party rarely featured in Honor's journalism, but several leading Liberals such as Lady Megan Lloyd George (1902–66) and Sir Dingle Foot (1905–78) remained close friends. Honor temporarily broke with the party in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis. But in the mid-1960s her donation to the appeal for funds to reduce the party's overdraft suggests residual sympathy.<sup>5</sup>

Honor's interviews are briefly mentioned in *Mothers of Liberty: Women who built British Liberalism*.<sup>6</sup> The intention in this article is to reveal how she became, arguably, the first significant woman broadcaster on current affairs.

### London print journalism

Honor already had 'form' as an innovator in journalism, so it is no surprise to find her at

the forefront of innovation in the BBC's handling of topical issues. After graduating from Oxford, she wrote for the *Oxford Mail*, but she was always set on London. As a founding member of and the only woman on *Picture Post*'s editorial team in 1938, she contributed numerous articles, from the dummy issue onwards. Observing the way in which the gifted editor, the Hungarian-born refugee from Nazi Germany Stephan Lorant (1901–97), used photographs to narrate a story made a lasting impression on her.<sup>7</sup>

After Lorant left for America in 1940, his successor, Tom (later Sir Tom) Hopkinson (1905–90) marginalised Honor's contribution to the magazine both then and in later accounts of *Picture Post*. Consigned 'to the attic to write obituaries',<sup>8</sup> Honor knew she must leave; but the manner of her departure – whether Hopkinson sacked her in 1944, or she forestalled him by resigning – is unclear.<sup>9</sup> Intent on a career in Whitehall, Honor instead found herself scooped up by Walter Graebner (1909–76) into first *Life* and then *Time*, the American magazines owned by Henry Luce (1898–1967). With the war reaching a critical stage, coverage of Anglo-American relations required strengthening. As the only British member and, again, the only woman on the London editorial team of *Time* (with her freedom to contribute to non-American media outlets),<sup>10</sup> Honor had a base from which to relaunch and develop her career in the British press and in broadcast journalism.<sup>11</sup>

Left: Detail from *Radio Times* advertisement for *It's My Opinion*, 21 May 1958. (© Radio Times/Immediate Media)

## What Honor Did Next: the pioneering broadcasting career of Honor Balfour (1912–2001)

### 'My outlet was really the BBC'<sup>12</sup>

Honor's first connection with the BBC was literary. In December 1942 she unsuccessfully submitted a short story for consideration. She next appears in the BBC files in October 1944, fortified with the backing of Lady Violet Bonham Carter, later Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury (1887–1969), then a governor of the BBC. In later life Honor would do an amusing parody of Lady Violet's comments during meetings of the Liberal Party's national executive. The BBC WAC files reveal a warmer connection. Lady Violet probably alerted Honor that the BBC would be looking for a successor to Ernest Atkinson for the programme *Parliamentary Summary* – the vacancy was not generally known and Atkinson's departure for the United States still unconfirmed (he later decided not to go). The controller of news, conscious of the director general's reminder that Honor's status as a parliamentary candidate might be seen as compromising her suitability, could only advise her that there may be other opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

In February 1945, Honor made her broadcasting debut<sup>14</sup> on *London Calling Europe*. A six-minute contribution to 'Letterbox' on *London Calling* in October closed her first year as a broadcaster. In the following year, 1946, she was contracted to make three broadcasts, appearing on the Home Service and the Light Programme.

### Woman's Hour

Her appearance in January 1947 on the Light Programme's new *Woman's Hour* (first broadcast in October 1946), in the 'What's Going On' current affairs slot, was a career game changer. On average she appeared on the programme once or twice month in the late 1940s.<sup>15</sup> She covered mainly social and economic issues, starting with the White Paper on manpower – further explored in July's talk on 'Wages and the Direction of Labour'.<sup>16</sup> For her talk on the Marshall Plan in July she could draw on her knowledge of Anglo-American relations.

The *Woman's Hour* work allowed Honor to develop what became her speciality: short commentaries and/or interviews on topical issues, the scripts delivered by 11.30 am on the day of the broadcast (*Woman's Hour* was, at that time, broadcast in the early afternoon). Studies of the programme's early years reveal the challenges. One was to appeal both to housewives and stay-at-home mothers, and to women who had had or wanted to have a career. How women were regarded, and the roles in society they were to adopt in the decade after the war,

influenced the programme. It is a topic rarely addressed by Honor: her outlook, as the titles of most her talks suggest, was different.<sup>17</sup> The programmes paved the way for her later television career.

### Stephen Bonarjee and topical talks

In January 1949 the radio producer responsible for topical talks programmes on both the Home Service and Light Programme, Stephen Bonarjee, with whom Honor would work over many years, invited her to join the expert panel composed of serious journalists – he was averse to what he termed 'pundits' – on a new, fifteen-minute programme to be broadcast initially twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, and subsequently five days a week, after the Ten O'Clock News on the Light Programme.<sup>18</sup> Originally titled *Tonight's News Topic*, it was soon renamed the more snazzy *Topic for Tonight*.

Many are familiar with the contribution of Grace Wyndham Goldie (1900–96) and her male acolytes to the BBC's development, but newly released material in WAC suggest that the working partnership of Bonarjee and Honor Balfour is significant in its own way. From *Topic for Tonight* onwards, Honor was invited to participate in the dummy runs, and eventual panels, of virtually all the new topical radio programmes introduced by Bonarjee. When you are trying to convince your bosses that a programme will 'fly', it is vital to use people you know can deliver and have potential. Honor met those criteria. And while she is not the only one who did, it is striking how often she was called upon to fulfil that role – especially given contemporary attitudes towards women's voices. It took decades to shift these. The broadcaster Libby Purves (b. 1950) was told, 'a woman's voice would be heard as one of four things: "schoolgirl, schoolmarm, mumsy or vamp". Of course there were exceptions, but, on the whole, professionally ambitious women avoided the trap of being demonstrably feminine'.<sup>19</sup>

While researching this article I discovered that Bonarjee, like Honor, had contested a school mock election as a Liberal. In retirement he became press secretary for the Liberals, and chair of the National Liberal Club, 1994–97. In his 1980 oral history interview with George Scott (1925–88), Bonarjee described Honor as the first significant woman current affairs broadcaster.<sup>20</sup>

In the official history of the BBC, Asa Briggs described *Topic for Tonight* as the 'progenitor of hundreds of programmes' dedicated to events

Her appearance in January 1947 on the Light Programme's new *Woman's Hour* (first broadcast in October 1946), in the 'What's Going On' current affairs slot, was a career game changer.

# What Honor Did Next: the pioneering broadcasting career of Honor Balfour (1912–2001)

of the day. It was aimed at ‘the average Light Programme listener who had left school at 14 or 15 and whose ideas on economics are nebulous and parochial’.<sup>21</sup> Its longevity suggests success – despite a disparaging report in 1952 which accused it of talking over the heads of most of its audience.

*Topic for Tonight’s* significance as a pioneer of topical radio has been overshadowed by the prominence given to *Home and Abroad*, the fore-runner of magazine programmes including, in its original format, the *Today* programme. But *Topic for Tonight* was a trailblazer. It fed into the ‘cultural pyramid’ strategy: the ‘notion listeners start with easier stuff and progress ...’ to the Home Service and, very rarely, the Third programme:<sup>22</sup> an ambition rooted in the regeneration of post-war Britain. In September 1955, Bonarjee selected her for the panel to trial the introduction of the occasional five-minute *Topic* interview.<sup>23</sup> How much she was aware of the rivalry between Bonarjee in the Talks

department and the older, bigger, News department, keen to promote and protect their pool of news analysts, is unclear.

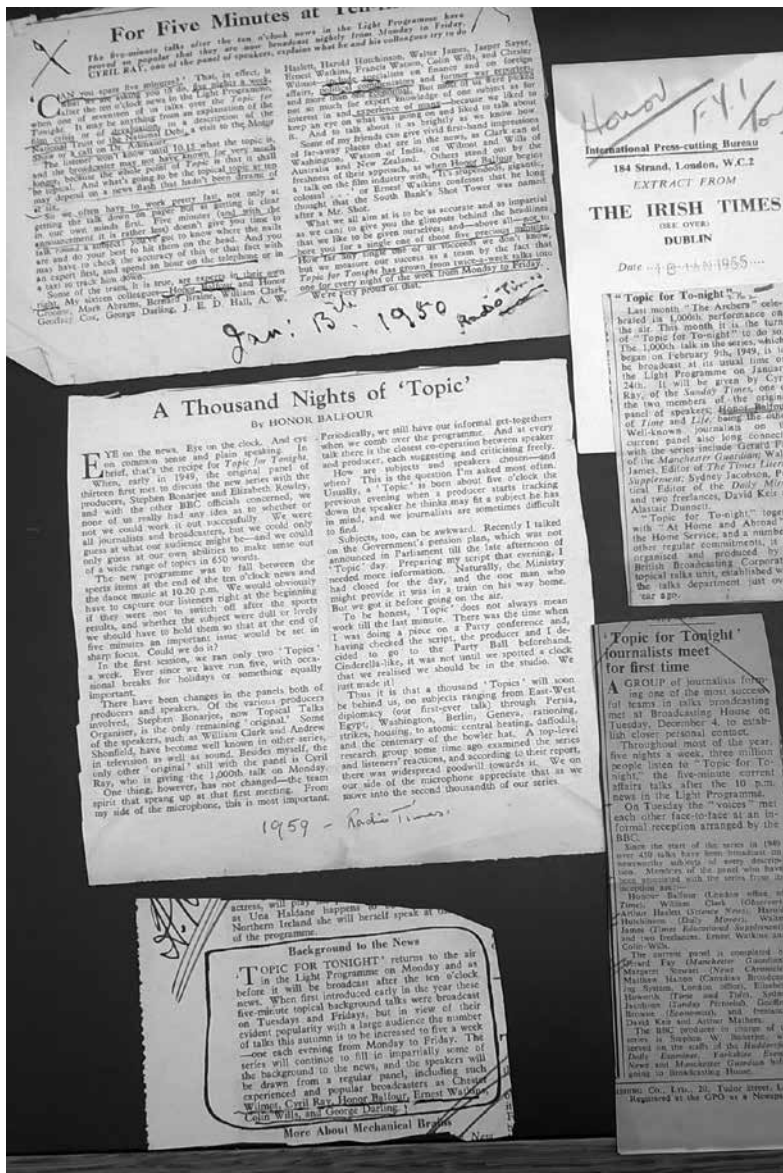
To Bonarjee, *Topic* was ‘... a breakthrough ... the first dent in the tyranny ... of the scrutiny system ... a script had to be seen by a senior person, generally an assistant head ... [or similar] ... who would comment ... ask for changes – even in the language ... However, with TOPIC because it was five nights a week [and] scripts didn’t normally arrive until 8.30 or ... later[;] senior staff ... had gone home ... [so] for the first time ... they had to trust us. ... They [saw] it the following morning. One had to deliver a p-as-b script ... But ... that’s not the same thing’.<sup>24</sup>

‘[*Topic*] ran for 440” ... we were given a pretty tight brief. There was no question of course of personal interpretation on the part of the contributors. But they were allowed considerable freedom to analyse an issue or a situation or a subject in a nonpartisan way. They were basically ... designed to inform, and inform at a popular level – because remember this was on the Light Programme ... not the speaker’s personal view, but trying to summarize ... informed comment and opinion whether in the Press or elsewhere’.<sup>25</sup>

Sir Ian Jacob (1888–1993), the ‘most underrated of post-war directors of the BBC’, was supportive, taking an interest in programmes like *Home and Away* because ‘he wanted more topicality and so on’. Jacob was ‘... involved in a number of quite direct situations ... and on every occasion he made the right direction ...’<sup>26</sup> Choice of subject for *Topic* was mainly by producers. Honor’s remit hardly altered throughout the years the programme ran. In 1951 her areas were politics, descriptive, women’s interest, general topics. By the 1956–57 session she had shed women’s topics (possibly with some relief); her remit now comprising home affairs, the United States, and general.<sup>27</sup> During the five years in which she combined membership of the panels for both *Topic* and the Home Service *Home and Abroad*, launched in 1954, Honor’s voice was heard most often on the former programme. (See Figure 1.)

Rarely was Honor’s broadcasting criticised. The first time, in 1949, could have derailed her career. The formidable Mary Somerville (1897–1963), then the assistant controller of the Talks Division,<sup>28</sup> was thinking of dropping Honor from the *Woman’s Hour* current affairs slot because although ‘... undoubtedly a good journalist, careful in checking her facts and sensible about policy matters ... I don’t myself think she has much talent for simplification ... and has

Fig. 1. A selection of Honor Balfour’s newspaper cuttings relating to *Topic for Tonight*. (Bodleian Library, MS. Balfour dep. 100)



shown little or no flair for ... what would interest the less well-educated listener'. Fortunately, others in the meeting to suggest contributors to a *News Commentary* panel valued Honor more highly, Louise Cochrane (1918–2012) remarking that 'women who can do this work are extremely rare'.<sup>29</sup>

Cochrane's faith was later validated. In the 1950–51 session, listeners judged Honor to be *Topic's* best speaker.<sup>30</sup> There was scope for improvement, however. An assessment panel in 1952 noted, 'The figures show her to be consistently popular with audiences. She always writes too much, but the material is lively and reliable. Microphone style excellent, but is now rather over-doing some of the "tricks of the trade"'.<sup>31</sup> These were not just matters of personal performance. The director general wanted to know how well broadcasters were communicating to the 'middle ranges'.<sup>32</sup>

In her scripts for *Woman's Hour*, and even more so in her mid-1950s television appearances on women's television programmes, Honor – and others working in the same field – were involved in a delicate balancing act. Audience research for *Woman's Hour* had shown the ways in which middle-class and working-class women approached current affairs topics. Middle-class women were said to engage with such topics, with a preference for general ones rather than ones specifically for women. Working-class women were seen as preferring 'more practical items' over current affairs. Notions of advancing 'good citizenship' were complicated by class and gender.<sup>33</sup>

Honor's voice was heard beyond Britain in the coverage of current affairs. She was a regular contributor to *London Calling*, a programme produced by Keith Kyle (1925–2007)<sup>34</sup> for the North American Service. She contributed to Forces Educational; General Overseas, European, Midland Home Service, and Schools broadcasting. She was often 'on the road' as a panellist. On one occasion this took her to Copenhagen, to appear on *Town Forum*, broadcast in March 1950. Nothing survives of these early recordings.

Honor was adept at managing what today might be termed her portfolio career, presumably as much from necessity as taste. Sound investments later made her comfortably off,<sup>35</sup> but in the 1950s most women were still a long way from equal remuneration. The passing of the 1954 Equal Pay Act was a benchmark, but initially it applied only to civil servants and, later, teachers. Time Life International paid their overseas editorial staff according to the local or 'native rate'. Honor later recalled her

annoyance when she discovered that her new, young, American assistant was not only paid more than her but was living in a furnished Mayfair flat provided by the company.

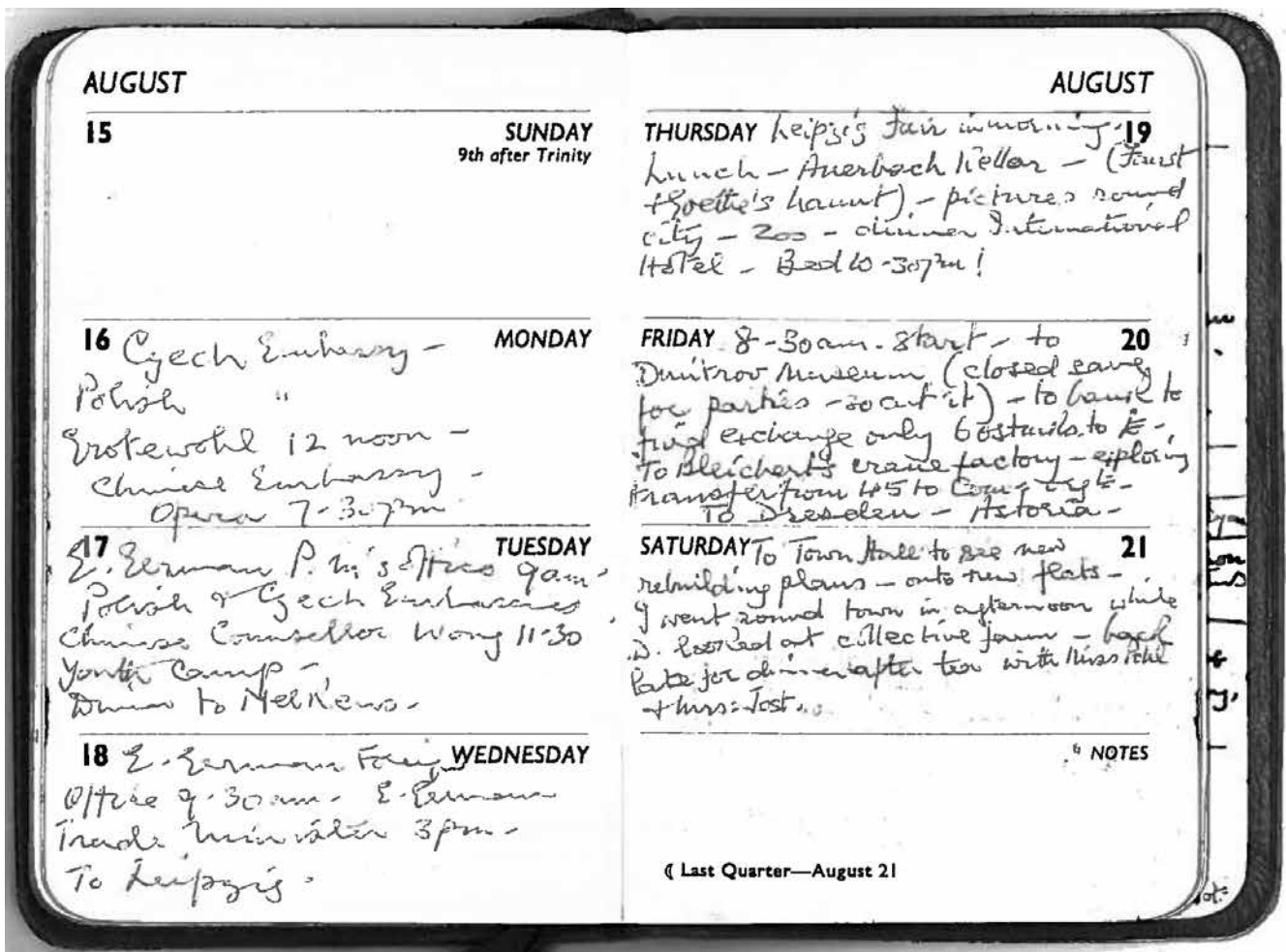
Perhaps the situation was all the more galling because his engagement arose from Honor requesting assistance with the coverage of the government's decolonising policies, which were gaining momentum. Honor came to know many of the nationalist leaders, often through her friendship with Dingle Foot. Tom Mboya (1930–69), a founder of modern Kenya and Archbishop Makarios (1913–77), first president of Cyprus, were two she remembered particularly; recalling, too, that her liberal friends used to quip that any nationalist defended against the British government by Dingle Foot – a gifted lawyer, and Liberal (and, later, Labour) MP – inevitably became a future leader of his country.<sup>36</sup> But her workload became excessive. There was no point in complaining about different treatment: '... that's the way things were'.<sup>37</sup> At the BBC, where there was a standard payment, she fared better. For *Topic for Tonight*, where delivery could be at very short notice, the original eight guineas fee for contributors was higher.

### A singular journey

Honor was never short of ideas. Her drive can be partly attributed to having to push against considerable odds to fulfil her early ambition to be a political journalist, and then to maintain her position in a highly competitive, male-dominated field. The story of her extraordinary visit to East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1954 is one of 'derring-do': Honor driving her little car with its GB plates – the first unofficial British car to make the solo journey, her East German secret service 'tail' in the passenger seat – at her suggestion.<sup>38</sup> On the eve of her departure, Sir Frank Roberts (1907–98), then a deputy under-secretary at the Foreign Office, tried to dissuade Honor from the highly risky project. Should anything go wrong the Foreign Office would not be able to rescue her.

She had not intended to make the journey alone but as part of a group. But the list of British journalists she had selected, and their itinerary, were not officially endorsed. Undaunted, she was intent on seeing things for herself, and not the usual factories or infrastructure.<sup>39</sup> There were some hair-raising moments. A young guard, having checked Honor's papers, reached through the open window for her rolls of film. Instinctively Honor rapped his knuckles,

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saying, ‘No, naughty ...’; the hand quickly withdrawn. Amazingly she was allowed to proceed.<sup>40</sup> (See Figure 2.)

She was home on Sunday 5 September and at her Time Life desk the next day. Towards the end of the week she had a meeting with Peter Matthews at the Foreign Office.<sup>41</sup> For Friday’s *Home and Abroad* she recorded her item ‘Grotewohl’ [and] ‘Visit to East Germany’.<sup>42</sup> Thursday 16 September saw her delivering to *The Observer*’s offices her article on her path-breaking trip before switching her coverage to the upcoming political party conferences.

From 1948, Time Life International facilitated Honor’s visits to the United States to meet key staff and tour parts of the country. Ahead of her month-long visit in March 1956 to report on the presidential primaries, she approached the BBC, who gave her contact details for the corporation’s New York and Washington offices, and through these, ABC broadcasters.

Schools broadcasting responded enthusiastically to her proposal for a programme on the New Hampshire Primary or whatever else she looked at.<sup>43</sup> Her *Topic for Tonight* on 4 March, ‘The political effects of Presidential Eisenhower’s decision to run again’, ‘... was a jolly good piece, except that in your campaign enthusiasm

Entries from Honor Balfour’s diary recording her journey behind the ‘Iron Curtain’, 1954. (Bodleian Library, MS. Dep. Balfour dep. 72)

you went on for a min too long and some of your gems had to be cut out. If you could possibly restrain yourself and not exceed 4½ mins for a Topic, you could be sure not one of your colourful words would be omitted.<sup>44</sup>

### 1955 general election

The entry in her 1955 appointment diaries gives no hint of just how significant a role Honor played in the BBC’s first-ever live coverage of election results.<sup>45</sup> And nothing was made of it in *Radio Times*’s publicity. The enormous computer received more coverage than the panel.<sup>46</sup> She was the only woman of the five contributors to the radio coverage. It is not a distinction Honor would wish made: if she had considered it, she would probably have attributed her presence to her knowledge and expertise. Her view, widely held, was that to succeed in a man’s world one had to be even better than a man.<sup>47</sup> For reporting on the 1950 general election, Honor had been assigned to the Labour Party headquarters, so she had experience of covering the unfurling story. The 1955 general election promised to be especially interesting, being the first fought by the Conservatives under Sir Anthony Eden (later 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Avon,

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1897–1977) – Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965) having finally resigned in April.<sup>48</sup>

### The Sixties: *Ten O'Clock*

The 1950s were Honor's peak years as a broadcaster. Her career then briefly dipped. In 1960 she worked mainly for the European English Service, in the form of two-minute contributions to the *What People Are Talking About* slot.<sup>49</sup> She was also doing the occasional piece for *Roundabout*, on the Light Programme's early-evening schedule. In later years, BBC budget cuts would limit editors' engagement of freelancers like Honor, and, as she ruefully reflected in 1977, once you are off air you are quickly forgotten.<sup>50</sup>

Her career was rebooted in September 1960 by Bonarjee's invitation to participate in a trial for a new series, *Ten O'Clock*; the chosen topic for the five-minute discussion – 'Labour's critical 25 days', for which she was paid seven guineas. Her 45" interview of the Conservative MP Carol (later Sir Carol) Mather (1919–2006) for the programme on 9 January 1961 was the first of many contributions over nine years. Initially in runs of one a month for three months; sometimes twice a month; tapering off to one or two a year by 1967.<sup>51</sup>

While the recordings have not survived, the invoices do; and we learn whether the interview was unscripted – Honor's preference. Of the two interviews she did for 15 March 1962, one was in the studio and the other a five-minute pre-recorded item on 'National Opinion Polls & Liberal Success at Orpington'.<sup>52</sup> Honor resisted scripted interviews because she believed she performed better, and the outcome was better, when conversation flowed naturally. This sometimes led to fraught exchanges with ministers, or their 'P.R. man' – a category loathed by Honor because they tried to interpose themselves between her and her interviewees.<sup>53</sup>

Honor's career continued ticking over: there was little to suggest that some of her best work was yet to come. The early 1960s do, however, provide a couple of rare archival survivors from her broadcasts.

### *Any Questions*

The 6'43" snippet from the *Any Questions* broadcast from Lymington on 6 April 1962<sup>54</sup> probably survives because it includes Sir Gerald Nabarro (1913–73), a right-wing Conservative MP and business man known for his 'trenchant views'.<sup>55</sup> His response to the question 'Why

do politicians spoil this programme?' was: '... party politics is the art of advocating something you know to be bad as the only alternative to something you know to be a good deal worse'. Honor was not '... quite sure whether politicians spoil the programme' or whether it is 'liable occasionally to spoil politicians'. The programme gave them a '... platform [to] four or five million people'. Politicians 'say things which they think clever but [are just] darn stupid.' Her voice is typical of the day: very received pronunciation, her crisp tones quite stern.

The Labour MP and future cabinet minister Richard (later Lord) Marsh (1928–2011) suggested journalists needed politicians to fill their pages, and Nabarro reminded everyone of the success of *Any Questions* with its millions of listeners. The exchanges have a knock-about quality to which C. J. Joyce (1900–76), headmaster and former borstal governor, added little. The extract draws to an end with Honor asking to make a 'serious' point: 'I only wish this programme could be beamed to Iron Curtain countries, to contribute to freedom of thought and expression' – perhaps remembering her visits to Eastern Europe in 1954 and 1957.<sup>56</sup>

Honor appeared on over twenty *Any Questions* between 1950 and 1971, so it is disappointing that this is the only recording we have of her. The programme followed what Jonathan Dimbleby (b.1944), chair 1987–2019, called the 'town hall forum'.<sup>57</sup> Women panellists were not uncommon but, according to the first chair, Freddy Grisewood (1888–1972), their 'personal and individual answers' and the absence of politics made the programme less serious than nowadays.<sup>58</sup>

The second surviving recording is the *Frankly Speaking* interview with Edward (later Sir Edward) Heath (1916–2005), then Lord Privy Seal in the Macmillan government – an encounter which had been postponed several times since November 1962. It eventually took place on 3 January 1963, and was broadcast on 27 February.<sup>59</sup> This was an altogether different experience for Honor from her pleasurable BBC interview that morning with Earl (Clement) Attlee at his home to mark his eightieth birthday.<sup>60</sup> She shared the Heath interview with a *Frankly Speaking* regular, Leslie Smith (1912–?). The series was renowned for its ferocity, and Heath sounds uncomfortable from the outset. Honor later congratulated Joyce Ferguson: 'I thought you did a very good editing job on what must have been a difficult recording on the ... programme'.<sup>61</sup>

### The Weekly World

1966 saw a decline in Honor’s appearances on the radio. Her voice was only heard twice: a 4½” minute interview, ‘Doubts about Liberal Leadership’, for *Ten O’Clock* on 3 January and, for the same programme, a talk on ‘Rebel Labour MPs’ on 4 August.<sup>62</sup> This may have been by choice, or circumstances: her mother, to whom she was close, had died in July 1965. Progress on the projected book on the 1945–51 Labour government was stuttering, largely due to the lack of accessible archival sources. Renegotiating her Time Life contract to facilitate working on the book had had the unintended outcome of absorbing more not less of her days, or so it felt. There was also a new generation of broadcasters coming up behind her; and the BBC was changing.

The years 1967 to 1970 are punctuated by runs of presenting *Weekly World*, a review of weekly magazines running since 1963, to which she brought her characteristic innovation, extending the remit beyond the political weeklies to include *Campaign*, *New Scientist* and *Nature*: ‘By degrees we spread our wings’.<sup>63</sup> (See Figure 3.) She was booked for a month of Saturdays at a time, surviving a re-imagining of the programme in 1970 as a slot on *Saturday Briefing*.

She conducted only one interview for *Ten O’Clock*, but made her Radio 2 debut in February 1969, recording a comment for *News Time’s* item on Viscountess Asquith of Yarnbury’s death. Through their broadcasting careers, Honor’s earlier acquaintance with Lady Asquith had developed into friendship.

### Whatever You Think

Just when it looked as though her radio career was coming to an end, Honor got an offer to appear on a trial for a new programme, *Whatever You think*. The BBC was making a fresh attempt at a live phone-in programme. Honor was not new to the concept: she had appeared on the dummy run for the Light Programme’s *The Floor is Yours* in April 1956, a re-imagining of a short-lived version with the same title televised over two months in 1953. The 1956 session invited listeners to submit questions by postcard.

*Whatever You Think* was chaired by the amiable Cliff Michelmore (1919–2016). Panellists answered questions submitted live as well as beforehand. No subject, other than party political was excluded.<sup>64</sup> From the outset Honor, billed as ‘an award-winning Anglo-American

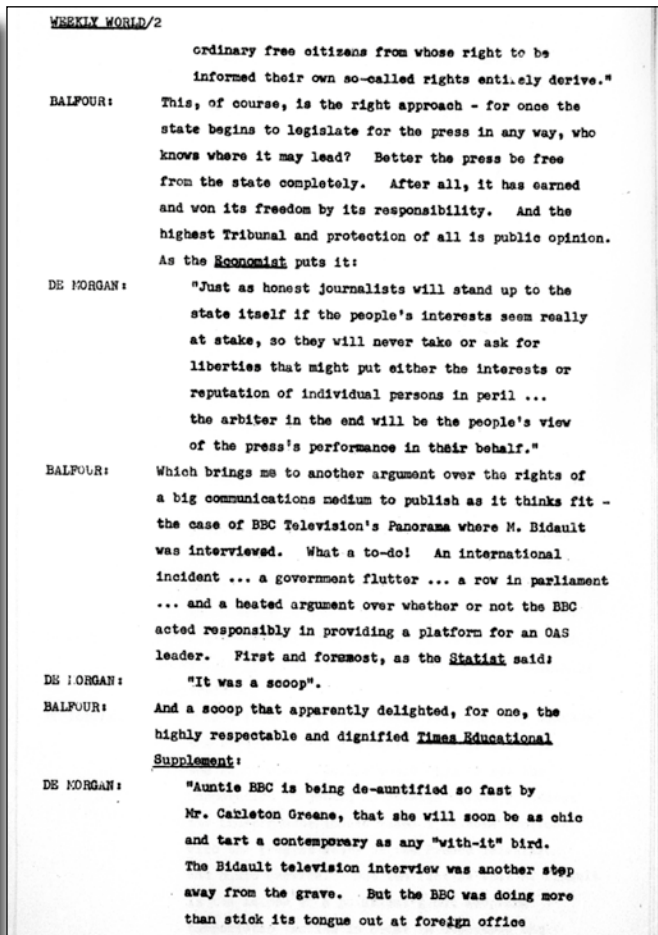
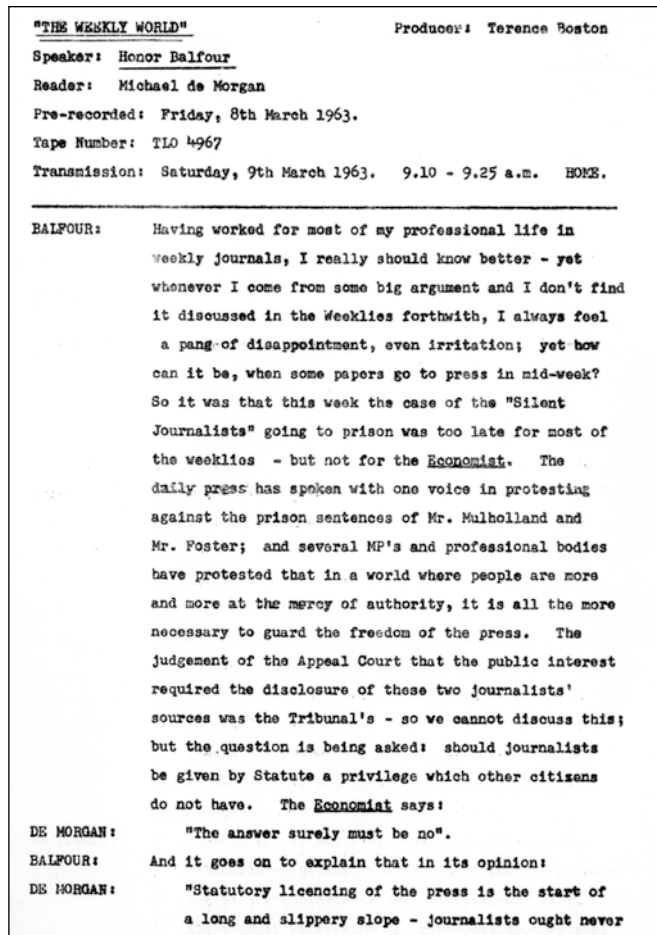




Fig. 4 *It's My Opinion* televised from Bridgwater, 21 May 1958. From left: Frank Byers, Honor Balfour, Denzil Batchelor, Alan Bullock, and a member of the public who asked one of the questions. (© BBC Photo Library) Frank (later Lord) Byers (1915–84) then a broadcaster, was a former Liberal MP and Chief Whip. In 1967 he became leader of the Liberal peers.

journalist', was a regular (though not among the most frequent) – twice deputising for Michelmore while he was on holiday. Of the four panellists, one was usually a woman. Marghanita Laski (1915–88) with whom Honor had often appeared on radio, was another regular. Newer voices included the novelist Fay Weldon (b. 1931) and the philosopher Mary (later Baroness) Warnock (1924–2019).

Honor retained vivid memories of the experience of the programme. The BBC was worried that 'cranks' might phone in. Requiring feats of concentration – listening simultaneously to the producer's voice through the earpiece, panellists, and the questioner – she likened it to taking part in a choral work.<sup>65</sup> The programme ran until June 1973, with Honor appearing in May, but by then her broadcasting career really was fizzling out.

There were still occasional appearances on Brian Redhead's (1929–84) *A Word in Edgeways*;

but Honor's own criticism of her performance alongside Elizabeth (later Baroness) Howe (b.1932) in 1975 – 'I should have been more assertive, though my part OK as far as it went'<sup>66</sup> – and her diary entries in the years after her retirement from Time Life in 1972 suggest it may have been a relief to preside over the last *Weekly World* in April 1976, making way for *Saturday Briefing*'s new feature: a newspaper review.

Her broadcasting years were seemingly over. Then, in May 1979, out of the blue she was invited to contribute to Redhead's *Countdown to No. 10*. Sadly, her comments did not survive the edited highlights archived, but her diary entries assessing Mrs (later Baroness) Thatcher (1925–2013) do. Honor had welcomed Mrs Thatcher's arrival as party leader – a first for women – but observed 'she needed to match her intelligence and skills with requisite compassion and humanity'. This turned into a lament in May



1979: it was good to have a woman PM, ‘just a pity it had to be Mrs Thatcher’.<sup>67</sup>

### Television career

Archivally the highlight is the recording of the *Press Conference* interview with Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962) on 3 April 1959, reshown on *Late Night Line Up* in 1965. It is the only televisual recording of Honor’s work known to survive.<sup>68</sup> One wishes there had been more, but nearly all of her television career was on the margins, in women’s afternoon programmes. The only other BBC visual sources are photographs taken for the 1946 Cassington Home Service programme and a 1958 still from *It’s My Opinion*.

### Press Conference

A consequence of the arrival of Independent Television in 1955 was a sharpening of the BBC’s coverage of current affairs (another, which also impacted on the careers of Honor and Gorksy, was to cut the funding of women’s afternoon television). *Press Conference*’s style owed something to American television. The interview opens by introducing the panel to Mrs Roosevelt, in London on her way home after traveling through the Middle East and Europe with her granddaughter.<sup>69</sup> Along with Honor, then political correspondent of *London Star* and *Time*, the panel included H. V. Hodson (1906–99) of the *Sunday Times*, Keith Kyle, formerly the BBC’s Washington correspondent, then of the *Economist*, and Francis Williams (later Lord Francis-Williams, 1903–70) of the weekly *Forward*.<sup>70</sup> Topics included Mrs Roosevelt’s views on the Middle East situation, the position of women in the region, the role of the US presidency, and the Soviet leader Khrushchev. Kyle and Honor come across as the most engaged and lively interviewers.

### It’s My Opinion

The still from *It’s My Opinion* depicts the programme’s distinctive characteristic. As producer Peter Bale explained, it was intended as a televised version of *Any Questions*, the major difference being that contributors from the audience had a bigger role. Each would join the chair on the platform to give an opinion on their subject that was then opened up to panel discussion, after which they returned to the platform to respond. It was intended as a very informal affair, with four to five minutes per

subject. Initial feedback had been very encouraging. The still captures the moment a woman audience member leaves the platform (see Figure 4).

Bale was effusive in his praise of Honor’s ‘... admirable efforts ... You delivered an excellent performance which has been frequently commented upon by my colleagues and by viewers. I have a feeling that your regular appearances on television helped you a lot in this broadcast. In particular we noticed your approach to the camera and I am sure this made your performance all the more effective’; rather spoiling the affect with the patronising ‘Full Marks’.<sup>71</sup> Would he have used these words for a male contributor?

### Honor’s Round Up

After her breakthrough television broadcast in 1951 – *Women’s Viewpoint*, broadcast on 11 June 1951 – and occasional appearances in 1952 and 1953, her career had taken off in 1955. Her forte was the fifteen-minute topical talks or interviews which appeared after the mid-afternoon women’s television programmes.<sup>72</sup> As a freelancer, Honor had to rely on her own resources, doing most of the pre-broadcast research herself and often lunching contributors at the Time Life office. Her correspondence with contributors is a window into mid-1950s’ society and social mores. With a tiny budget, producers had to make do with second-hand sets. In a rare surviving example of a studio floor plan, the usual combative format – men with nameplates seated round a table – was feminised. The inclusion of a writing desk and bookcase conveyed seriousness, to counter prevailing notions that women’s discussion might be lightweight.<sup>73</sup> (See Figure 5.)

Honor last appeared on women’s afternoon television in *Mainly for Women* on 28 May 1958. Apart from *It’s My Opinion* and *Press Conference*, her only other known appearances from this later period are two for commercial television: Southern TV’s *Up the Poll*, on American influence in Britain, 12 August 1964; and, on 1 June 1973, on Tyne-Tees Television, as a panelist on *Front Page Debate* together with George (later Lord) Wigg (1900–83), *The Sunday Times*’s Peter Harland (1934–2005), and a local editor, Ian Fawcett.

### Doreen Gorksy/Stephens: the first editor of women’s television programming

The experimental 1951 television programme *Women’s Viewpoint*, beamed from Alexandra

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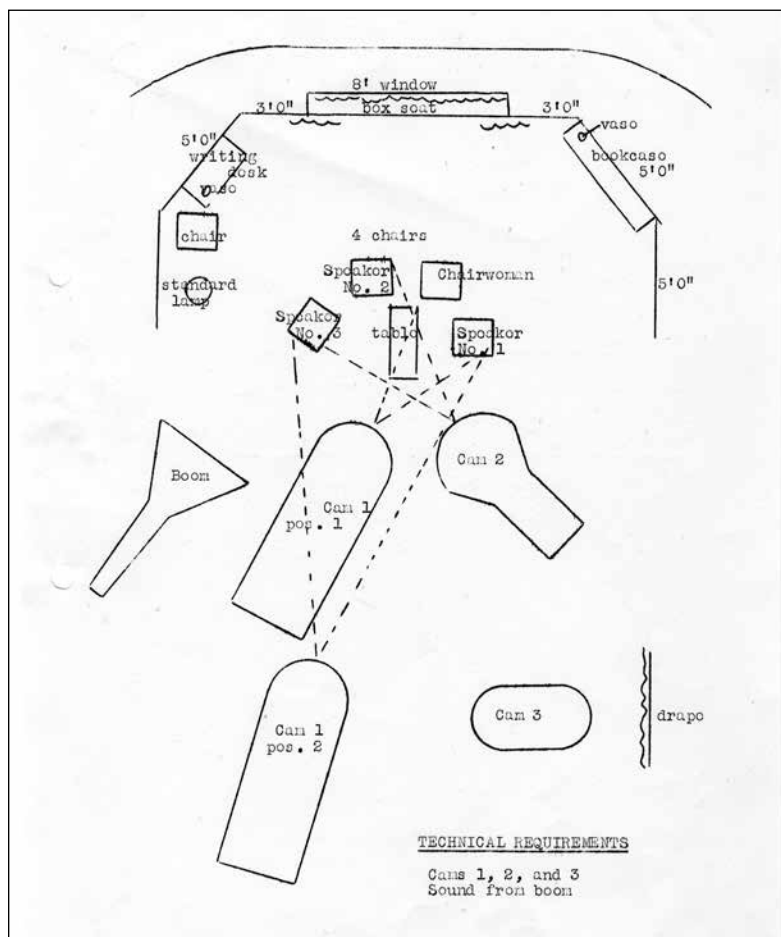
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Palace, brought together Honor and another former leading light of the Liberal Party and an exact contemporary: Doreen Gorsky. The BBC WAC files are a pathway into those heady but frustrating times when Gorsky (obliged to revert to her maiden name, Stephens, to distinguish her from her political past) grappled as the first editor of women's television programming with the constraints and negativity of her senior managers. There is not enough archival evidence to determine how Stephens and Honor actually regarded each other, but exchanges suggest their working relationship was friendly and productive. *Honor Balfour's Round Up* became a regular feature. Surviving moves to axe it, the fifteen-minute slot was extended in 1957 to half an hour.<sup>74</sup>

A trail blazer in her own right, Gorsky first contacted the BBC June 1948 as president of the Women's Liberal Federation. Writing to *Woman's Hour* to thank them for reporting on the resolution on the financial inequalities of women she had piloted through WLF's AGM at Blackpool, she included three script ideas of her own. Inspired by feminism and contemporary social issues:

I should like to do ... a series dealing very simply with current problems from the angle of the interest of the ordinary housewife should find in them, and the need for her to be politically alive. It still horrifies me when I go round at election times, the number of women who know absolutely nothing, and vote blindly as told by their husbands! I do not know what length you would require, but should be most grateful for any criticisms you care to make on the idea.<sup>75</sup>

This, and her later scripts and suggestions, only elicited largely dismissive responses from the *Woman's Hour* team.<sup>76</sup> Undeterred, in October 1953 she applied to the advertisement in the *Evening Standard* to be the editor of women's television programmes. Among her referees were Philip Fothergill (1906–59), honorary chair of the Liberal Party, and Lady Helen Nutting (1890–1973), her deputy on the Council of Married Women: 'Never at a loss for new and original ideas; I am sure you will find her a great asset.'<sup>77</sup> The new programmes were scheduled for April 1954. From the outset she had to contend with men like Cecil McGivern (1907–63), head of television, who doubted the worth of women's television, Stephens' abilities, and her team of programme makers, some of whom later held senior posts in the BBC. By



1958 McGivern grudgingly admitted there had been 'improvements' – more programmes were worth him watching. Nowadays her 'diverse and ambitious weekly [schedules]' are fully acknowledged.<sup>78</sup>

Ironically, what may have affected the afternoon programmes was the abolition of the Toddler Truce in 1957. (To coincide with children being put to bed, television had previously closed down between 6 pm – the end of children's programmes – and the beginning of the evening schedule at 7 pm.) This created more time for evening television programmes but drained resources from limited budgets. At first Stephens fought the cuts then, bowing to the inevitable, sought to shape the outcome.<sup>79</sup> In 1960, on her recommendation, management of women and children's television were combined and rebranded as afternoon television. Stephens' annual review in 1963 noted her 'remarkable abilities', but her application that year to be the BBC representative in the United States suggests that she wanted to change direction.<sup>80</sup> Her career at the BBC ended acrimoniously in 1967 after she accepted an invitation by David (later Sir David) Frost (1939–2013) to join London Weekend Television (LWT) as head of women, children and religious programmes at twice her BBC salary.

Fig. 5. BBC Floorplan for *Women's Viewpoint*, 1951; a televised experimental unscripted discussion. Chaired by Honor Balfour, the guests were Doreen Stephens (Liberal Party; later, as Doreen Gorsky, innovative women's television programmer); the Labour MP Jennie Lee and the Conservative MP Pat Hornsby-Smith. (BBC WAC T32/363.)

### Honor and the satirists: ‘the satire was spiky but wholesome’

Invisible best describes Honor’s contribution to the sixties’ satire boom. Her name does not appear in the index to Humphrey Carpenter’s definitive study.<sup>81</sup> Hopes that she might be the ‘unknown’ woman in the photograph of ‘The Establishment [Club], 1961’ could not be substantiated.<sup>82</sup> Honor did not expect to be remembered. But we have her recollections of stepping into the club at lunchtime, pooling her political gossip (presumably with other journalists), feeding into skits on the BBC’s *That Was the Week That Was*, or columns in *Private Eye*. Honor enjoyed ‘constructive gossip’.<sup>83</sup> The bare wooden floors, scrubbed benches and tables were like a school but with cheese and beer: ‘We [Ned Sherrin (1931–2007), John Bird (b.1936), John Wells (1936–98), and others] all used to pitch in ... then lean back to laugh at it all.’ The satire was ‘spiky but wholesome; could be prickly ... a bit like a prefects’ room; amateur; not “poison pen”’.<sup>84</sup>

### Conclusion

Honor Balfour led a remarkable life. With a solid but, at times, problematic base at Time Life International, she forged a career at the BBC. She was a key contributor to the development of current affairs programmes, exploring concepts of citizenship in rebuilding society. In *Mothers of Liberty*, Robert Ingham describes Honor as ‘an incisive commentator and interviewer’ and notes her ‘furious networking’.<sup>85</sup> She had not had the easiest start in life, which may be why she enjoyed networking widely – putting people in touch with each other, to their advantage. Sir Robin Day (1923–2000) was one such beneficiary; Bonarjee recalling Day’s debt to Honor.<sup>86</sup>

She was a confident woman’s voice, analysing and talking about political, economic and social issues: not unique but rare, and hugely significant in the early years. Could Honor have achieved more at the BBC? Probably not, given the organisation’s structure, and the attitude towards women. And without the long working relationship

with Stephen Bonarjee, she might, as a freelancer, with mainly short slots, have achieved less despite her obvious ability. The BBC may have been a congenial environment for Liberals and the left-inclined, presumably attracted by the organisation’s remit and scope, but, as both Bonarjee and Stephens discovered, there were shortcomings.<sup>87</sup>

Like Bonarjee and Doreen Stephens, her exact contemporaries, Honor had once been a luminary of the Liberal Party. Like them, in its decline she carved a distinguished career outside the party. In a parallel universe Honor might have been a cabinet minister. As a broadcast journalist her contribution was profound. Her contribution deserves to be fully recognised.

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- 1 Helen Langley, ‘Honor Balfour and the Liberal Party’, *Journal of Liberal History* 78 (Spring 2013), pp. 6–19.
- 2 Honor’s Radio Talks files have been available since 2009; her television file, and Bonarjee’s oral history file were released July 2018, and January 2019.
- 3 Presently with the writer.
- 4 [https://ukvote100.org/2018/12/17/honor-balfour-westminster-and-a-](https://ukvote100.org/2018/12/17/honor-balfour-westminster-and-a-womans-voice/)

[womans-voice/; https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbchistoryresearch/entries/55a963b3-66e5-4ce8-877f-9bd-cb38f6b82](https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbchistoryresearch/entries/55a963b3-66e5-4ce8-877f-9bd-cb38f6b82). With thanks to Dr Anne Summers, chair, Friends of the Women’s Library, LSE, London, for the invitation to give a ‘work in progress’ talk in November 2018; Mari Takayanagi, Parliamentary Archives; Kathleen Rowe, Sound & Vision, British Library; Elisabeth Luard; and Professor David Hendy for pointing me to the BBC website on pioneering women. Kate O’Brien, her BBCWAC colleagues and Rob Seatter, Head, BBC History, were key to the researching and sharing of Honor’s story. Thanks to the BBC Photo Library team for their assistance with images. The writer also owes a special debt to Lady (Marina) Vaizey for both sharing her recollections of Honor and reading the article’s penultimate draft. Her insights were invaluable. Any errors or omissions are this writer’s.

- 5 MS. Balfour dep.5. Donated £25 (£440.40 in 2017 value) in 1967 and 1968, the latter appeal to clear the overdraft. Honor never voted Labour.
- 6 Robert Ingham, ‘Honor Balfour’, in *Mothers of Liberty, Women who built British Liberalism* (Liberal Democrat History Group, 2015), pp. 52–3.
- 7 Balfour conversation, 24 Jul. 1997. Copies of the magazine’s dummies, subsequently annotated to identify her authorship, are in Honor’s papers: MS. Balfour dep.49, file 1.
- 8 Conversation, *ibid*. The attic reference may be figurative rather than literal.
- 9 Event, described in 2013 article, revolved around campaigning for Bury St Edmonds Liberal candidate, Margery (later Dame Margery) Corbett Ashby (1882–1981).
- 10 Stipulated by Honor Balfour in her contract.
- 11 Her *Time* work mainly reached American audiences; the focus on analysing and summarising the week’s news. Balfour conversation, 17 Apr. 1998: she covered industrial, city, economic and parliamentary; maintaining her links to *The Observer* and *The Guardian*.
- 12 Balfour conversation 17 Apr. 1998.
- 13 BBCWAC, R. Cont 1 Talks, Balfour, Honor, File 1, 1942–50.
- 14 She may have been interviewed during her 1943 Darwen by-election contest.

## What Honor Did Next: the pioneering broadcasting career of Honor Balfour (1912–2001)

- 15 Speaking for eight to ten minutes. BBC standard rate was one guinea (gn.) per minute. A guinea was one pound one shilling; in 2017 value £32.77 (National Archives historical currency converter).
- 16 Contributed to *Woman's Hour* until 1953; once each in 1960s and 1970s.
- 17 A *Topic for Tonight* on a woman's angle on the Festival of Britain, 9 May 1951, a rare exception.
- 18 BBC WAC R<sub>51/114/1</sub> Talks, Current Affairs, Topic for Tonight File 1A, 1948–49. Honor did not appear in the draft list of panellists; she was the only woman of the eleven on the launch list, 28 Nov. 1949. With Cyril Ray (1908–91) Honor marked the thousandth edition of the programme.
- 19 Libby Purves, 'Would Becky Sharp come to the diary room', *The Times*, 17 Sep. 2018; *The Times* obituary of Meryl O'Keefe (1929–2019) on the persistent obstacles, 25 Oct. 2019. Anne Karf, *The Human Voice: The story of a remarkable talent* (Bloomsbury, 2006).
- 20 BBCWAC R<sub>73/503/1</sub> Oral History Project, Bonarjee, Stephen. File released 14 Jan. 2019 for writer. George Scott (1925–88) journalist and broadcaster (including *Home and Abroad*); worked with Honor; chaired the Political Division of the Liberal Party, 1962–3. He stood four times as a Liberal parliamentary candidate between 1962 and 1983.
- 21 Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. iv, Sound and Vision* (OUP, 1978), p. 533. W. A. Benson, Audience Research department, BBC, 'Topic for Tonight, a study of comprehensibility', *The BBC Quarterly*, vol. 7, Apr. 1952–Jan. 1953, (BBC, 1953) pp. 94–9.
- 22 Hugh Chignell, *Public Issue Radio: Talks, news and current affairs in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p. 58.
- 23 BBCWAC R<sub>51/114/4</sub>. Bonarjee changed name from rota to panel to encourage bonding.
- 24 BBCWAC R<sub>73/503/1</sub> Oral history, Bonarjee, Stephen, 21 Apr. 1980 (released 14 Jan. 2019) p. 11.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid., pp. 13–14.
- 27 BBCWAC R<sub>51/114/2</sub> Talk, Current Affairs, Topic for Tonight/File B, 1950–1951; Talks file IV, 1955–[1960] Current Affairs/Topic for Tonight, 1956–7.
- 28 Grace Wyndham Goldie, 'Somerville, Mary (1897–1963) educationalist and broadcasting executive', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).
- 29 BBCWAC R Cont 1 Talks, Balfour Honor, File 1, 1942–50, May 1949.
- 30 BBC WAC R<sub>51/114/2</sub> Talks, Current Affairs, Topic for Tonight, File 1B, 1950–1.
- 31 BBCWAC R<sub>51/114/3</sub> Talks Current Affairs, Topic for Tonight file 2 1952–3. 26 May 1952.
- 32 BBCWAC R<sub>51/114/2</sub> Talks, Current Affairs, Topic for Tonight, File 1B, 1950–1, 15 Jan. 1952.
- 33 Dr Kristin Skoog, 'Neither worker nor housewife but citizen: BBC's *Woman's Hour* 1946–1955', <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/78074476.pdf>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2019. This article includes a quotation from a 1947 interview by the Talks Department's Peggy Barker, at that time a producer on *Woman's Hour*.
- 34 Keith Kyle (1925–2007). Broadcaster and writer; SDP candidate for Braintree, 1983 general election.
- 35 Funded concerts in Cheltenham; substantial bequest to St Anne's College, Oxford.
- 36 Balfour conversation, 17 Apr. 1998.
- 37 Balfour conversation [1997], date lost in conversion from tape to CD.
- 38 Balfour conversation [1997]. Honor made the novel suggestion to Prime Minister Grotewohl (1894–1964) during their meeting, at which Peter Nelken (1919–66) acted as interpreter; subsequently passenger.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid. Crossing the border from Czechoslovakia to Austria. Honor's Czechoslovak broadcast was picked up by the BBC's Monitoring Service.
- 41 MS. Balfour dep.72 (BEA diary entry of 9 Sep. 1954).
- 42 Ibid. (diary entry of 10 Sep.1954). 'Grotewohl 7pm for 9.15pm'.
- 43 BBC WAC RCont1 Talks, Balfour, Honor, file 3, 1955–7. John Reed.
- 44 Ibid. C. F. A. (Toby) Clarke, 12 Mar. 1956.
- 45 Ibid. Forty guineas for election results coverage.
- 46 The BBC audio-visual archive accessed at the British Library only has a discussion about the computer: 23SX1654. Television's inaugural coverage fared better.
- 47 Balfour conversation, 14 Nov. 1997.
- 48 4 Apr. 1955, Honor's *Topic for Tonight* on the farewell dinner at No. 10.
- 49 Balfour conversation, 11 Nov. 1998. The producer, Anne Symonds, née Harrison (1916–2017) was an Oxford contemporary; their friendship began through their mothers, both war widows bringing up daughters alone. Hilda Harrison had been one of H. H. Asquith's epistolary confidantes. Symonds marked the birthdays of Asquith – 'Uncle Henry' – by placing flowers on his grave in Sutton Courtenay.
- 50 MS Balfour dep.36. Letter to Peter Shear re her tax return, 18 Oct. 1977.
- 51 BBCWAC RCont1 Talk, Balfour, Honor, File 4, 1958–62.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Balfour conversation, 14 Nov. 1997.
- 54 BBC Audio Visual recording, *Any Questions*, 6 Apr. (Lyminster) 28SX11109/DD04251014.WAV (British Library).
- 55 John Ramsden, 'Sir Gerald David Nunes Nabarro, 1913–1973', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 56 In 1957 Honor returned to Eastern Europe, this time accompanied for at least some of the trip by others, including the Labour MP Desmond Donnelly (1920–74), a close friend. The visit was the topic of her 'As I See It' Home Service talk, 30 Jun. 1957.
- 57 BBC Radio 4 programme *Any Questions is seventy*, broadcast 13 Oct. 2018.
- 58 Freddy Grisewood, *My story of the BBC* (Oldhams Press Ltd., 1959) p. 174.
- 59 BBC audio visual recording *Frankly Speaking*, 27 Feb. 1963, 28SX1212/DD04179072.WAV (British Library). Honor's sharpness is interesting: friendship did not hold her back.
- 60 Balfour conversation (unrecorded). Attlee interview broadcast on *Ten O'Clock*, 3 Jan. 1963.
- 61 BBC Audio visual 28SX1212/DD04179072.WAV (British Library). BBCWAC RCont12 Talks, Balfour, Honor, File V, 1963–7, Honor to Jocelyn Ferguson 1 Mar. 1963. Honor was personally well-disposed towards Heath.
- 62 BBCWAC RCont12 Talks, Balfour, Honor, File V, 1963–7.
- 63 Balfour conversation, 14 Nov. 1997.
- 64 D. Hendy, *Life on Air: A history of Radio Four* (OUP, 2007); references the Brains Trust format, p. 71.
- 65 Balfour conversation, 14 Nov. 1997.

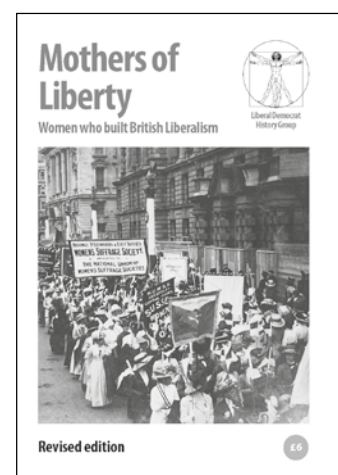
- Bonarjee was sent to the United States to 'see how it was done'. Honor was paid sixty guineas for chairing *Whatever You Think*.
- 66 MS. Balfour dep. 73 (diary entry for 5 Apr. 1975); programme recorded 4 April. Elsie Clayton, president, National Union of Teachers, the other panellist.
- 67 *Ibid.*, (diary entries for 11 Feb. 1975 and 4 May 1979).
- 68 BBC audio visual resources: TVLCA7409H/00 accessed at the British Library. This was not Honor's debut on the programme; she appeared occasionally between 1953 and 1957. [https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/Press\\_Conference](https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/Press_Conference), 'People who make the news face questions from people who write the news', 3 Apr. 1959, 22:15; *Late Night Line Up*, 9 Oct. 1965, 22:15, 'Weekly raid on the archives'. BBC 2 only began broadcasts to the north later in the month.
- 69 Mrs Roosevelt's son was an exchange professor in Iran.
- 70 Panel introduced with these epithets.
- 71 MS. Balfour dep.3, folder 2; [ ]April; 23 May 1958. Programmed primarily for West Country audiences, so probably limited its wider significance.
- 72 Selection of topics appears to have been left to Honor. Her original fee fifteen guineas and ten guineas expenses.
- 73 BBCWAC T32/363/TV Talks 'Women's Viewpoint'/1951. Floorplan for 11 June 1951 programme. Contributors paid fifteen guineas. Chaired by Honor with guests Jenny (later Baroness) Lee (1904–88), Pat (later Baroness) Hornsby-Smith (1914–85) and Doreen Gorsky, in her Liberal Party role. See also Mary Irwin, 'Women's Viewpoint', in Maggie Andrew and Sallie McNamara (eds.), *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain 1900 to the Present*, Routledge Research in Gender and History (Routledge, 2014). Only four programmes made but layout widely adopted.
- 74 MS. Balfour dep.3.
- 75 BBCWAC RCont2 Doreen Gorsky. Letter to editor of *Woman's Hour*, Evelyn Gibbs. File released 9 Jan. 2019.
- 76 *Ibid.* Stephens did a couple of overseas broadcasts in 1948, but in May 1951 *Woman's Hour's* Isa Benzie (1902–88) dismissed Stephens' approach as seeking publicity as Liberal candidate (Carlisle) in forthcoming general election.
- 77 *Ibid.*
- 78 Mary Irwin, 'What Women Want on television: Doreen Stephens and BBC television programmes for women, 1953–1964', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 8(3), pp. 99–122. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.135>. Providing women's programmes had become priority for evolving roles of post war women.
- 79 Janet Thumim, *Inventing Television Culture: Men, Women and the Box*, Oxford Television Studies (OUP, 2004), p. 86.
- 80 BBCWAC L1/1742/1, Stephens, D. M.
- 81 Humphrey Carpenter, *That Was the Satire That Was* (Faber, 2002).
- 82 Elisabeth Luard, 'Peter's Friends made the 60s swing', *The Oldie*, Nov. 2017, pp.14–16.
- 83 An aspect of Honor's friendship with John, later Lord Vaizey. Lady (Marina) Vaizey, 25 Feb. 2020.
- 84 Balfour conversation, 11 Nov. 1998, recorded as Honor read through her appointment diaries.
- 85 Ingham, 'Honor Balfour', p. 53.
- 86 Lady (Marina) Vaizey, 24 Feb. 2020. BBCWAC R73/503/1 Oral History Project, Bonarjee, Stephen, p. 29. Honor had known Day since he was president of Oxford University Liberal Club, a post she held in the 1930s.
- 87 Three of Honor's colleagues were, or had been, active Liberals; how representative this was of the BBC is unquantifiable.

## Mothers of Liberty Women who built British Liberalism

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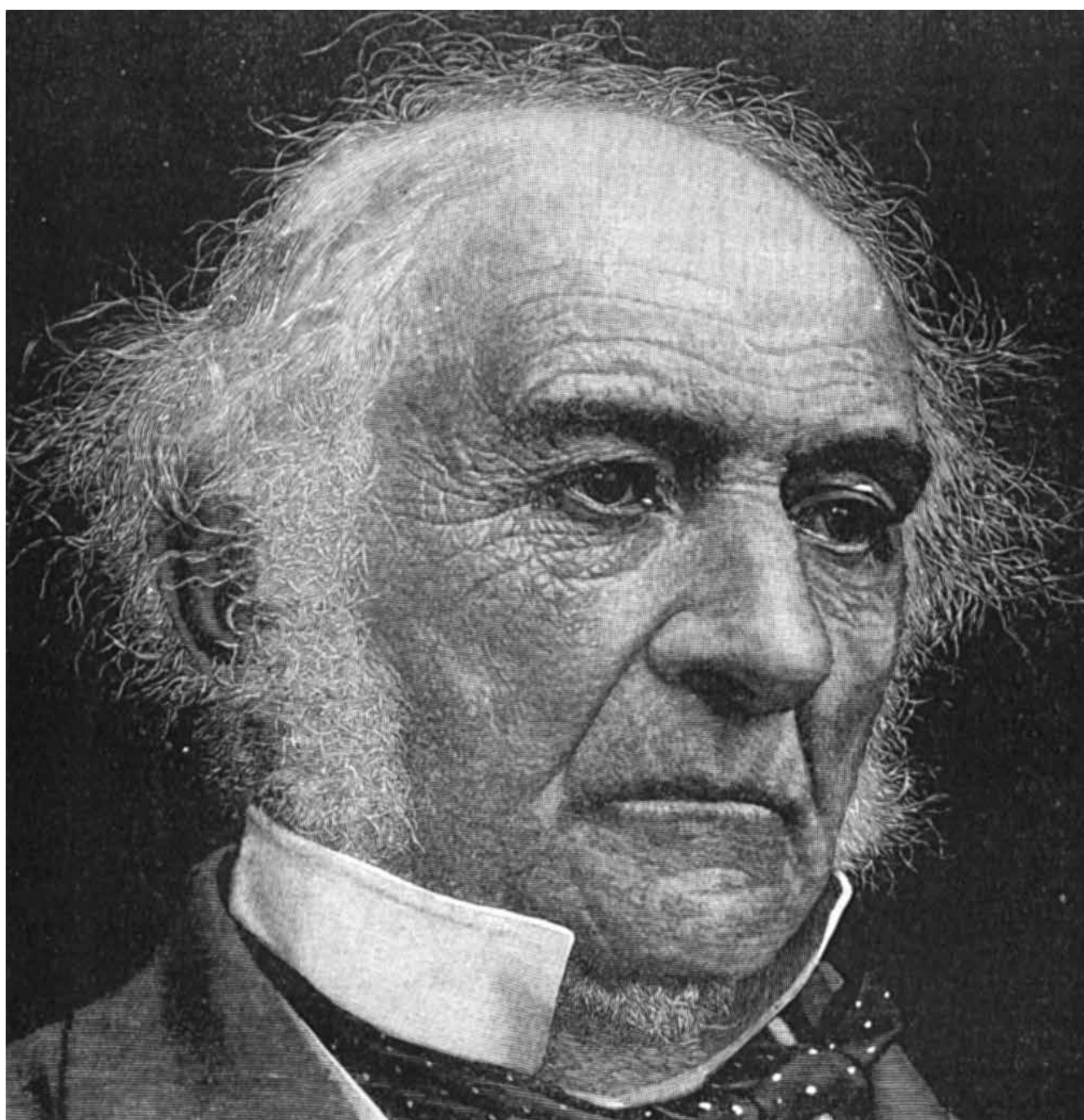
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## Prime Ministers

Iain Dale's new book, *The Prime Ministers*, includes fifty-five profiles by fifty-five different writers, politicians, journalists and academics of every prime minister, from Walpole to Johnson. Here we reprint the chapter on Gladstone, by Simon Heffer.

# William Ewa



# rt Gladstone

**G**LADSTONE'S REPUTATION ALMOST a century and a quarter after his death relies too much on folk memory and too little on the hard facts of history. He was an unbending religious zealot who used to flagellate himself; he took prostitutes into Downing Street and sought to reform them; he spoke to Queen Victoria as though she were a public meeting; he saw the means of settling Ireland's differences with Britain but was thwarted by reactionary Tories; he was a rigid economist who believed in the small state; he was a fanatical chopper-down of trees (what is less well known is that he was an equally fanatical planter of them) and he spent much of the mid nineteenth century sparring with Benjamin Disraeli, his Tory counterpart. There is enough truth in all those statements to make one understand why so many people hold them to be entirely accurate, but as with all aspects of a man as complex, brilliant and long-lived as Gladstone, they are nowhere near the whole truth. And his is a life about which we know a great deal; from the age of sixteen he kept a diary, which runs to fourteen published volumes, and left behind a vast correspondence.

Gladstone is the incarnation of nineteenth-century liberalism, yet he started his privileged political career (he was given a pocket borough by the Duke of Newcastle at the age of twenty-two, fresh from Eton and Oxford, where he took a Double First in *Literae Humaniores* and mathematics) as a Tory, and as a Tory fiercely opposed to one of the main political movements of his youth: the abolition of slavery. This was not least because the Gladstones were a family of slave owners; when slavery was abolished, the family received over £100,000 in compensation: more than £15 million, tax free, in today's values. He had grown up in an intensely politically minded family, and his

interest in politics had driven him to become President of the Oxford Union. The wealth of his mercantile family meant he did not need to work for a living; a political career, if he could find a patron, was the obvious next step. Newcastle was that patron. In his first election at Newark, Gladstone demonstrated his power as a stump-orator and campaigner, qualities that would mark him out throughout his political career. In a further irony, given the direction of his later career, he argued forcefully in his first campaign against Whig plans for parliamentary reform, as he had in his career in the Oxford Union. Even then, he was not against a measure of reform; he just feared the Whigs wanted too much too soon.

Gladstone's immense talent was spotted as soon as the Whigs left office, when Sir Robert Peel – his first and most important political influence – gave him a junior position in the Treasury at the end of 1834. Within a month he was moved sideways to a job at the War Office, but soon Peel left office. In opposition, Gladstone's main cause became to attack British encouragement of the Opium trade in China, which Britain fought to ensure could continue. His sister Helen had suffered as a result of taking the drug, and Gladstone considered the Whig government's support for the trade immoral. It would not be the last time he would savage a government for what he considered its ethical shortcomings.

Gladstone had not only imbibed Tory politics as a young man: he had also imbibed Christianity, a creed that, unlike Toryism, would stay with him for life. It underpinned his ethic of public service, even if it made him, in the eyes of some of his critics, priggish or, at times, messianic; some of his Oxford contemporaries found him so insufferable that, in 1830, they went to his rooms and beat him up. He

**Gladstone's reputation almost a century and a quarter after his death relies too much on folk memory and too little on the hard facts of history.**

**Full name:** William Ewart Gladstone

**Born:** 29 December 1809, Liverpool

**Died:** 19 May 1898, Hawarden Castle, Flintshire. Buried at Westminster Abbey

**Education:** Eton; Christ Church, Oxford

**Married to** Catherine Glynne; 4 sons, 4 daughters

Prime Minister: 3 December 1868 to 17 February 1874; 23 April 1880 to 9 June 1885; 1 February 1886 to 20 July 1886; 15 August 1892 to 2 March 1894

**Quotation:** 'All the world over, I will back the masses against the classes.' (Liverpool, 28 June 1886)

considered offering himself for ordination, but his family talked him out of it. However, religion would increasingly inform his political decisions and, in many respects, necessitate in his estimation his move from Toryism to Liberalism. In 1839 he published *The State in its Relations with the Church*, his first great intellectual treatise, which caused him to be denounced by Macaulay as 'the rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories'. When Peel returned to office in 1841, Gladstone was reluctant to join his ministry, because of what he saw as the Tory Party's equivocation over the opium trade, but he accepted the post of Vice-President of the Board of Trade; he was promoted to President, and the Cabinet, in 1843. This would have a seismic effect on the future of Britain, in more ways than one.

Gladstone's first legislative priority was also morally driven: it was to ensure some degree of security for the large number of men employed as 'coal-whippers', the name given to those who moved coal from vessels to barges at docks. There was not only no security, but the men, in order to get work, had to frequent dockside pubs and have the approval of the landlord, which meant they spent most of their earnings on alcohol, and were frequently drunk. This appalled Gladstone. He intervened in what he considered to be the most 'socialistic' act of the era, and set up central employment exchanges for them.

However, his main job at Trade was to manage the outbreak of 'railway mania' – the desire to link up towns and cities across the country by the revolutionary new means of the steam train. He streamlined legislation to assist the construction of long stretches of line; he also laid the foundations of the modern regulatory state, by forcing railway companies to provide cheap fares. This had an immense effect on the British economy, enabling greater physical mobility of labour and establishing around London and other major cities a commuter belt,

allowing the expansion of those cities and the growth of a clerical, middle class. Gladstone ensured two other important by-products of the railway boom: he ensured that the equally novel invention of the telegraph could run on wires and poles alongside the new network of railways; and he put a contingency in the rail legislation that, in times of emergency, the network could be commandeered by the state. Long after Gladstone's death, in the Great War and the Second World War, this contingency would prove invaluable.

Yet the most influential and far-reaching act of Gladstone's time at the Board of Trade was his advice to Peel that, if Ireland were not to starve during the potato famine of the mid-1840s, the government should repeal the Corn Laws to enable the importation of cheaper grain. The laws had been passed by Lord Liverpool's administration after the Napoleonic Wars to safeguard the income of Tory landowners; tariffs placed on imports of cheap grain from overseas kept the price of home-grown crops artificially high. But it also caused immense hardship to poorer people, and when the potato crop failed in Ireland, there was no chance of most of the starving population being able to afford grain, and therefore bread, as a substitute. Gladstone succeeded in convincing Peel that basic humanity demanded a reversal of thirty years of Tory policy; the process of repealing the Corn Laws followed in the teeth of opposition from Peel's own party, and was completed only with the help of what was now called the Liberal Party. The internal opposition was led by Disraeli, in a series of morally shameful speeches made in his capacity as a client of the landed Cavendish-Bentinck family: it confirmed Gladstone's dismal opinion of the man who would soon become his main political adversary. No one at the time could realise just what a profound effect Gladstone's advocacy to Peel of free trade in cereals would have on British prosperity. When prices fell and people



felt their purchasing power, and therefore their standard of living, increasing, it became apparent that free trade in all commodities – not just in grain – was likely to improve prosperity. More fundamentally, as Britain removed tariffs from all sorts of imports, so did other countries lift their taxes on goods imported from Britain. At a time when Britain was the leading manufacturing nation in the world, this was hugely significant. From 1846 to 1873, when an agricultural depression started, the country enjoyed almost three decades of non-stop growth. This was Gladstone's triumph as much as Peel's, and one of his greatest legacies.

But before the repeal could happen, Gladstone had left the Cabinet, for the most abstruse moral reasons. The government made an annual grant to a Catholic seminary at Maynooth in Ireland; Gladstone had long objected to the taxpayers of a country with an established Protestant church funding a training school for clergy of what he saw as an alien religion. So when the government decided to increase the grant in 1845, he voted for it, under collective responsibility, but then resigned in case anyone should think he had done so out of hypocrisy in order to keep office and further his ambitions. Later in the year Peel restored him to office as Colonial Secretary. Under the law at the time, he had to resign his seat and fight a by-election on receiving his new office, but because of his support for the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Duke of Newcastle (an avid Protectionist) removed his patronage. Gladstone kept his post while searching for another seat, but soon the search lost its urgency, as Peel's government was defeated within weeks on a measure unrelated to the Corn Laws.

The behaviour of the Tory Party over the repeal ended Gladstone's affiliation with the party: but he did not yet join the Liberals. He became, after Peel himself, the most prominent member of the Peelite faction, a group that can now be seen as 'transitioning' from the Tory Party to a Liberal Party, which, under the growing influence of men such as William Cobden and John Bright, was becoming increasingly associated with free trade in all its forms. Gladstone managed to get elected for Oxford University in 1847, and would never be without a parliamentary seat again.

While out of office in the late 1840s, Gladstone continued to do important work. He lived on his wife's family's estate at Hawarden in Flintshire, and applied his mind to making it profitable, in which he succeeded. He was a founder of a school at Glenalmond in Scotland – this was an era of the establishment of

numerous private schools – rooted in the principles of Anglicanism. He also, in 1848, founded the Church Penitentiary Association for the Reclamation of Fallen Women: from the following year he started to encounter prostitutes on the street, and would take them back to the kitchens of his house in Carlton House Terrace where he would sit, often with his wife, and talk to them, and try to persuade them to end their life of vice. He helped support institutions for them, and to find work for them, often overseas in the colonies. This work brought ridicule and suspicion upon him, but in his papers after his death was found a sworn declaration by him that he had never been unfaithful to his wife. He did, however, feel severe temptation, and between 1845 and 1860 often flagellated himself as a punishment, noting the act in his diaries.

Peel died in 1850, but Peelism lived on, and when Aberdeen formed a government in 1852 it was with a coalition of Whigs, Liberals and Peelites, and the free-trading strict economist Gladstone – who had already exhibited, in his attitude towards Maynooth, an almost religious zeal in spending taxpayers' money responsibly and frugally – was the obvious choice as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Gladstone had dismissed with predictable distaste an approach by Disraeli, his predecessor as Chancellor, on behalf of the Tories to swallow his principles and bring the Peelites back to the Tory Party. Disraeli was desperate to cling to office, Gladstone desperate to cling to his principles; the twain would never meet, and the cynicism of Disraeli's approach further disgusted Gladstone, and lowered his opinion of the latter still further.

Once in the Treasury, Gladstone proceeded in a familiarly Peelite way. His first priority was further tariff reform. He also made a strategic plan to cut government spending so that, in time, he could abolish the income tax, and put more weight on indirect taxes. In his 1853 Budget he cut the threshold on income tax from £150 to £100, believing that the more people he forced to pay it, the more they would demand its abolition by supporting an administration that promised to cut public spending; and the sudden increase in revenues helped make up for what was lost from import duties, until rising consumption of goods bearing indirect taxes made up the shortfall. The 1853 Budget, and the five-hour speech in which it was delivered, was regarded as one of the greatest financial measures ever introduced, and one of the finest parliamentary performances ever heard. Again, the moral underpinning of the speech was profound: Gladstone believed, plainly and

**From 1846 to 1873, when an agricultural depression started, the country enjoyed almost three decades of non-stop growth. This was Gladstone's triumph as much as Peel's, and one of his greatest legacies.**

simply, that the state had no right to help itself to a share of people's income, and that the fairest form of taxation was levied on goods such as alcohol, tobacco, sugar and other luxuries that people chose, but did not need, to buy.

His determination to eliminate income tax was thwarted by the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854, when he had to raise the rate from 7d in the pound to 1s 2d in the pound over two Budgets in two months. When the conduct of the war led to a demand for an enquiry, all the Peelites in the government resigned, and from 1855 to 1859 Gladstone was out of office. It was during this respite that he discovered the pleasures of forestry, not merely felling trees (principally as part of generating income for his estate) but also extensively planting them. In 1858 Lord Derby formed a Conservative government in which, once more, the Peelites refused to serve because of Derby's and Disraeli's rigid commitment to Protectionism. When Palmerston returned to power in 1859, the Peelites went in with him, and Gladstone was once more Chancellor.

The underlying principle of his seven years at the Treasury – he would be there until the Liberals went out of office after the defeat of their Reform Bill in 1866 – was a refusal to borrow to cover the deficit he had inherited from the Tories. So income tax, which had been cut to 5d in the pound, was raised to 9d, with a 1s 1d rate for those on higher incomes. Gladstone continued to promote free-trade arrangements with countries resistant to them, his first success being with France. He had a further moral purpose in this, believing that countries who traded with each other would not fight each other, and so Europe would continue to be at peace.

In the 1860 Budget, Gladstone abolished 85 per cent of the remaining duties on imported goods, and by 1865 he had cut income tax to 4d in the pound. It was in this period that he talked of preferring to allow money to 'fructify in the pockets of the people' rather than have it wasted by the government. In 1861 he encouraged the spread of knowledge by removing the duty on paper; this was the era in which he became 'the people's William', being credited with making the essentials of life, notably food, more affordable, and fuelling the rise of British industry through his deregulatory policies. Working people came to see Gladstone as a man who believed – to use a phrase from a later era – in social justice. In less than twenty years since the repeal of the Corn Laws, wealth in Britain had, slowly but unmistakably, come to be shared more evenly; and Gladstone was celebrated for having been the main agent of this.

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It was a natural progression from this belief in enriching the working man to enfranchising him; and by 1864 Gladstone firmly believed there should be another measure of reform, and argued for it passionately in Cabinet – not least because he believed that by giving the working man a stake in the country's future he would rise to his responsibilities, and above all would support the Liberals for having given him the vote. Palmerston, the prime minister, violently disagreed: but when he died in 1865 his successor, Lord Russell, was more amenable. The bill he and Gladstone tried to get through Parliament in 1866 failed because of opposition from Whigs, led by Robert Lowe, who doubted the ability of the lower classes to cope with the challenges of enfranchisement, and who joined forces with the Conservatives to defeat it. Disturbances broke out around Britain in the autumn and winter of 1866–7, terrifying the Tories so much that Disraeli ended up piloting through the Commons a Reform Bill far more liberal than Russell and Gladstone had tried to secure. Lord Derby handed over the leadership of his party to Disraeli, and Russell to Gladstone: the peak of the rivalry of the two men thus began in 1867, and when Disraeli was forced to call an election in 1868, Gladstone's chance to hold the highest office came at last.

In that era, elections were held over several days, and Gladstone, famously, was cutting down a tree at Hawarden in December 1868 when he had word that General Grey, the Queen's private secretary, was on his way to him to invite him to an audience with the Queen, to kiss hands and become prime minister. It was at this point that, somewhat ahead of the game (though there had been Fenian outrages during the 1860s, notably some bomb attempts in London in 1868 itself), he said that 'my mission is to pacify Ireland'. The Queen, a few years later, equally memorably told her daughter, the Crown Princess of Prussia, that Gladstone spoke to her as if she were 'a public meeting'. The two of them would never get on, especially after 1880 when the Queen had had six years of Disraeli fawning and grovelling to her in a way she was too stupid to see through. Disraeli told Matthew Arnold at this time that, when flattering royalty, the secret was 'to lay it on with a trowel'; no one had a bigger trowel, or laid it on more lavishly, than he did. Gladstone, who quite probably had more genuine respect for the Queen than Disraeli did, demonstrated it by treating her with sincerity rather than with flannel, and speaking to her as someone on his intellectual level (which she plainly was not) rather than patronising her.

Gladstone's administration of 1868–74 was one of the greatest, perhaps *the* greatest, of the nineteenth century. It was informed by his profound sense of morality and belief in justice and meritocracy. He did not believe in the latter – the word itself would not be coined until a hundred years later – for its own sake, but because he saw how acting on its principles would enrich the country. The measure whose effects still echo today was the 1870 Education Act. It did not provide a free school place for every child; but it did ensure that every child up to the age of twelve had access to such a place. This accelerated the opportunities for working-class children to be educated, and to enhance social mobility and prosperity in Britain, and was fundamental to the development of society.

His administration did two other things that brought radical change to Britain. He abolished the purchase of army commissions, which meant that promising men could become army officers without having a fortune behind them. And he ensured that admission to all senior jobs in the home civil service was secured by examination rather than by patronage – the diplomatic service finally followed suit after the Great War. He also brought the secret ballot into parliamentary elections, began the reorganisation of the English courts system, and introduced a Licensing Act that regulated the sale and content of alcoholic beverages. The main policy front on which Gladstone made no advances during his first administration, ironically, was Ireland, where matters largely pacified themselves during the period; though Irish politics were changing, and matters would not remain quiet for long.

He had, through his Chancellor Robert Lowe, maintained a determination to cut spending and taxation, and with nearly two years of what was then a seven-year mandate still to run, he called an election in the winter of 1874 to seek a mandate for the complete abolition of income tax. He lost. The main reason for his defeat was that Disraeli, in opposition, had developed a serious organisation for the Conservative Party, which was mobilised to enlist the support of what was still a relatively new electorate. The Liberals had made no such provision. The result was that Gladstone, having lost, gave up the leadership of his party, and departed mainly to Hawarden to fell trees and pursue his intellectual interests, notably in theology and classical studies. His first task was to write and publish a pamphlet attacking the doctrine of papal infallibility. His antipathy to the Roman Catholic Church, which he regarded as a repository of superstition, was deep-seated

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and lifelong. At the time of his death he had a library of 32,000 books, and consumed information greedily.

His adherence to Christianity led him to denounce the Disraeli administration's toleration of attacks by Ottoman Muslims on Bulgarian Christians: what became known as the Bulgarian atrocities. At the same time, Russia was persecuting the Jews, and British Jews waited in vain for Gladstone to speak up against this. However, he felt motivated to attack the morality of the Conservative Party's foreign policy between 1878 and 1880, not merely over Bulgaria, but also over the war it was conducting in Afghanistan and in southern Africa against the Zulus. This vigorous assault on the government has come to be known as the Midlothian campaign, after the constituency he was contesting: and it is regarded as having been a template for election campaigns for decades to come. It was in any case obvious to the electorate that the Conservatives had run out of ideas, and lacked vision; the Liberals won the ensuing election comfortably.

However, Gladstone had not led the party in the campaign, whatever had seemed to be the case: since his 'retirement' in 1874, it had been led in the Lords by Lord Granville and in the Commons by the Marquess of Hartington, the heir to the Dukedom of Devonshire. Queen Victoria, who regarded Gladstone as some sort of madman – a word she used frequently to describe him – pleaded with each man separately to form her government, but each said, quite accurately, that the country would only accept Gladstone as leader; and thus it was, with immense reluctance, that she invited him to become her prime minister for a second time.

This administration, though, was to endure far more problems than its predecessor. It coincided with the start of the 'land war' in Ireland and the rise of Parnellism – the demand by the Irish to be rid of absentee landlords, to be allowed a greater stake in their country and to have an element of self-rule. Gladstone was also sufficiently concerned about the neglect of sound economic principles under Beaconsfield (as Disraeli had become in 1876, with the acquisition of his earldom) that he was, until 1882, his own Chancellor of the Exchequer. But his workload became so fraught that he had to give up his second job; and Ireland became increasingly the main cause of his anxiety.

The disturbances there, notably the rise of the boycott – named after the County Mayo land agent ostracised by his local town over his policy of evictions – led to Gladstone's having to pass a Coercion Act in 1881 that, among

other things, allowed detention without trial. However, matters got worse rather than better, and in May 1882 the new Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish, was assassinated alongside the country's most senior civil servant as they walked through Phoenix Park in Dublin on his first day in the country. This initiated a period of increased tension and repression that was entirely at odds with Gladstone's intentions. Further afield, there were other challenges. Gladstone himself was no imperialist, and his party was mostly against the expansion of Empire; but in 1882 the government decided to intervene in Egypt because of a nationalist uprising that threatened Britain's rights to the Suez Canal and the passage to India. It led, however, to a British presence in Egypt for the best part of half a century. Gladstone's main achievement in this otherwise difficult administration, however, was to extend the franchise to the rural working class, and to secure a redistribution of parliamentary seats in 1884–5.

Yet it was events, again, far from home that brought down the administration. Matters remained restive on Egypt's southern border, with the Sudan, and in 1884 General Charles 'Chinese' Gordon, one of the most remarkable soldiers in the Empire, was asked by Gladstone to go out there and take control of the situation. Gordon was a religious maniac with a death wish; he did not expect to come back from Khartoum, and he did not. Communications were poor, and Gordon was slow in asking for reinforcements. They were sent eventually, but by the time they arrived Gordon had been killed. The public were outraged, and Gladstone's reputation collapsed; no one voiced the outrage better than the Sovereign herself, for whom this represented a superb opportunity to vent years of spleen at her prime minister. Normally telegrams between her and her ministers were sent encrypted; the one she sent to Gladstone expressing her disgust at his casual treatment of Gordon was sent from Balmoral to London *en clair*, which meant it was read by every telegraph operator between whom it was relayed. Her views were soon public knowledge and printed in the newspapers. She did, though, offer Gladstone an earldom when he resigned in June 1885, in a state of demoralisation, which he refused.

Salisbury then came to office, but relied on Parnell's Irish nationalists to keep him in power. Gladstone saw a natural comity between the Liberals and the Parnellites, and in December 1885, having thought about the question extensively, sent out his son Herbert to suggest to the press that a measure of Home

Rule should be offered to the Irish – what history has called 'flying the Hawarden kite'. The Conservatives – who quickly became the Unionist party, as the question came to define British politics – were horrified, as were a number of Liberals, including Gladstone's leading lieutenant Lord Hartington and the charismatic Joseph Chamberlain. With Gladstone offering Home Rule, the Parnellites defeated Salisbury, and Gladstone's third, and briefest, administration began in February 1886. The measure had little hope of reaching the statute book; even if it got through the Commons (which, thanks to the Liberal Unionists, it did not), there was no chance of its being approved by the Lords, where the Tories predominated and absentee landlords were thick on the ground. When the Commons threw it out, Gladstone had no choice but to resign, and this time Salisbury was back in power for six years.

Many of Gladstone's contemporaries thought that the Grand Old Man (as he had become known, before the abbreviation was reversed and he became the Murderer Of Gordon) would retire: but the fires of righteousness still burned within him, and he planned to do nothing of the sort, despite being in his seventy-seventh year. He used the years of opposition to step up his crusade for social justice. He wanted more civil rights for the Irish; he supported the London Dock Strike of 1889 on the grounds that the wages dockers were paid were exploitative; and he began to make the case for a country so wealthy as Britain to consider old-age pensions, rather than consigning the indigent elderly to the workhouse after a lifetime of labour. In this way he set out the intellectual agenda for successors such as Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith and Lloyd George. He did, however, raise hackles: his radicalism having been too much for the Liberal Unionists, he now found himself accused by some of veering towards socialism in his old age, in his attacks on the greediness of capitalists.

Gladstone went to the country at the 1892 election on a programme spearheaded by a promise of Irish Home Rule and the disestablishment of the Scottish and Welsh churches. The Liberals won fewer seats again than the Tories, but the Tories lacked a majority, and were soon defeated in a vote of confidence; thus Gladstone, in August 1892 and to the Queen's horror, found himself prime minister for the fourth time. This time Home Rule passed the House of Commons, but was heavily defeated in the Lords in September 1893. By now it was clear not only that Gladstone's considerable powers were failing, but that his doctrinaire

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refusal to countenance greater public spending put him greatly out of step with the rest of his party. For example, his Cabinet wanted expansion of the navy to help keep growing German sea power in check; Gladstone would not have it, sticking to the principles he had exercised as Chancellor forty years earlier. He was also horrified by the proposal of his Chancellor, Sir William Harcourt, to impose death duties that would lead to the break-up of Britain's network of landed estates, and threaten the stewardship of that land. Similarly, he felt it was immoral to inflict a burden of taxation on so small a group of people: the rich, in his view, were as entitled to justice as the poor. His Cabinet opposed him on that too, and by February 1894 he recognised, at the age of eighty-four, that it was time for him to go. He was the oldest man ever to form a government in British history, and remains the oldest ever prime minister.

He left the premiership on 2 March, two days after his last audience with the Queen, who made a point of not thanking him for his services. Nor, having turned down an earldom, was he offered a peerage again. In his papers after his death was found an exasperated memorandum in which he expressed his bemusement about why the Queen was so relentlessly hostile to him; but then part of his Christian charity was that he never brought himself to see what an incipiently stupid, vain, narrow-minded and ignorant woman Victoria was.

He left Parliament at the 1895 election, and maintained the vigour of his mind as best he could, amid his massive library at Hawarden. He was well enough to travel to Cannes in 1897, where he encountered the Queen, who, like him, was there for her health: and civilities were observed to the extent that she shook hands with him for the first time, he thought, in fifty years. Friends who visited him found that his main political concern, in the era of Joe Chamberlain as Colonial Secretary, was the growth of jingoism and imperialism; he died months before that movement reached its nadir in the prosecution of the Second Boer War. His faculties gradually declined, and he died, aged eighty-eight, on 19 May 1898, after the extensive ministrations of the Church. To the Queen's disapproval he was accorded a state funeral in Westminster Abbey, and to her horror her son and grandson – the future kings Edward VII and George V – atoned for her beastly behaviour towards Gladstone by acting as pallbearers.

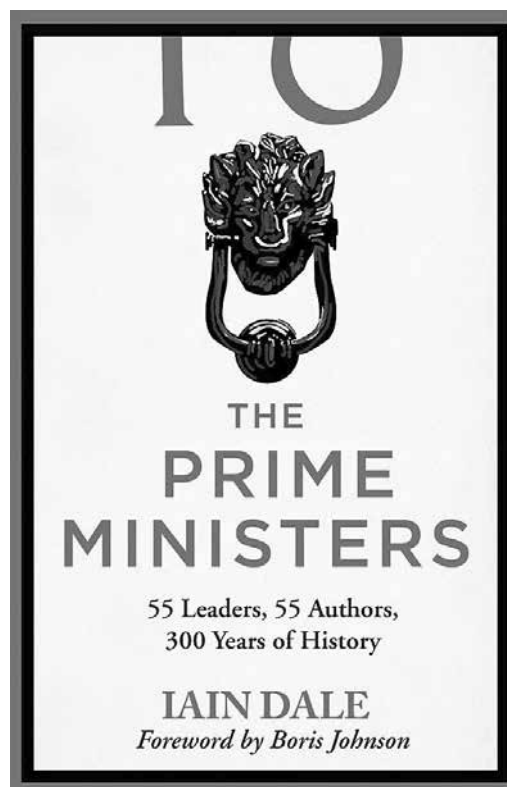
Gladstone has a claim to be the greatest of all our prime ministers, despite the failures of his second administration. He was certainly

morally titanic, in a way that puts him beyond equal. His greatness consists not just in the sincerity of his belief in public service, but in the correct application of his immense intellect. His most profound achievement came before he held the highest office, in persuading Peel to reform the Corn Laws, and thereby laying the foundations of Britain's prosperity for the rest of the nineteenth century. His first administration directed society away from advancement by patronage and towards advancement by merit, recognising the moral and economic imperative to maximise the potential of the country's human capital. The second administration expanded the franchise, recognising the inevitability of social progress; the third and fourth recognised the inevitability of Irish Home Rule. What a later prime minister called 'the forces of Conservatism' thwarted Gladstone in his aims, but this visionary's ideas for the extension of democracy and liberty were all achieved within a quarter-century of his death, and together comprise his legacy.

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Iain Dale's *The Prime Ministers: 55 Leaders, 55 Authors, 300 Years of History*, is available at a special discounted price to subscribers to the *Journal of Liberal History*: see inside front cover.

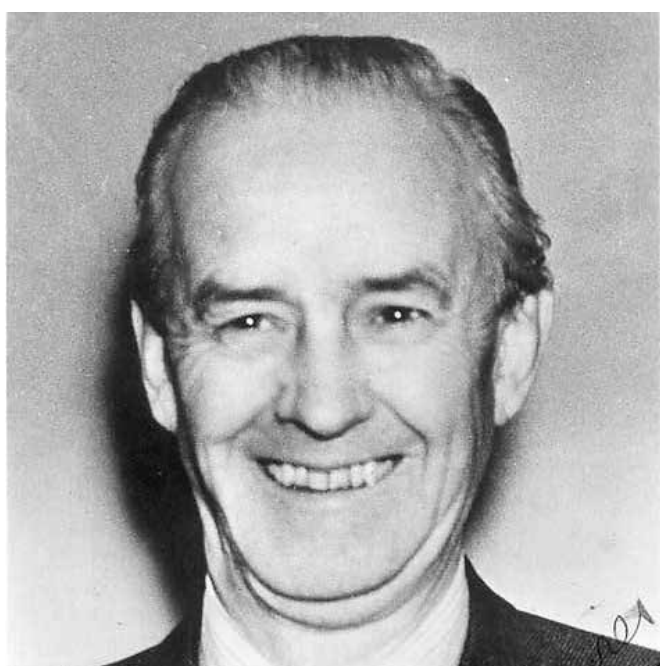
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**Liberal thought**

Tudor Jones analyses developments in the Liberal Party's ideology during one of the darkest periods in its history.

# Some cornerstones The endurance of British



# Liberalism still in place Liberalism, 1945 – 1955

**T**HE 1945 BRITISH general election proved disastrous for the Liberal Party. In spite of campaigning on its most radical election platform since 1929, the party won just twelve seats, in scattered rural constituencies, with only a 9 per cent share of the total national vote. Its high-profile individual casualties included its leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, the party's chief whip, Sir Percy Harris, and Sir William Beveridge, the principal architect of what was to become the post-war British welfare state, and a Liberal MP for barely seven months.

After this debacle, the central strategic problem facing the Liberal Party was how to ensure its political survival. When it reached the nadir of its electoral fortunes six years later, winning only six seats at the 1951 general election, with its lowest-ever national vote share of 2.5 per cent, that struggle for survival was greatly assisted by the decision of Clement Davies, the party's leader since 1945, to decline Winston Churchill's offer in October 1951 of a place in his cabinet, following the Conservatives' election victory of that year.

Davies' decision has since been widely viewed by historians as, in the words of his biographer, '... critical to the future survival of the Liberal Party as an independent political force', and hence as a 'defining moment' in its history.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, Davies' commitment to that cause was reinforced by the efforts of a handful of senior figures within the small party elite – including, notably, Frank Byers and Philip Fothergill – who helped keep the Liberal Party alive in what was to be the most desolate period of its history.<sup>2</sup>

But the party's survival, to which Clement Davies and a few others had thus vitally contributed, was not accompanied by any

overarching vision or firm sense of direction and purpose provided by its leadership. As William Wallace has observed, during its darkest years the party really 'had no clear strategy, no objectives beyond the preservation of the Liberal tradition and of Liberal principles'.<sup>3</sup> Did, then, the Liberal Party possess, in the period from 1945 to 1955, a coherent political ideology – a cohesive set of core values and beliefs that could form the basis for a strategy for revival now that its extinction had been so narrowly averted?

A central difficulty facing the Liberal Party in this respect was how to establish a distinctive identity and ideological stance within a political environment largely shaped by the policy ideas of its own most influential intellectuals – Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge. For the stark political reality was that their social-liberal commitments – to a managed market economy, to the goal of full employment, and to a welfare society – no longer appeared to clearly differentiate the Liberal Party from its rivals. Its social-liberal tradition, stretching back to the Edwardian era and the inter-war years that followed, was consequently largely overlooked in the way in which the party was widely perceived from outside its ranks. Furthermore, the enduring influence exercised by Keynes and Beveridge upon British economic and social thought and policy in the post-war era was gained, as Rodney Barker has observed, 'despite or without reference to their party allegiance', their views permeating areas 'where partisan resistance might otherwise have excluded them'.<sup>4</sup>

It is also true, as David Dutton has pointed out, that by 1945 Beveridge's ideas 'were not a Liberal monopoly' and that the proposals of the Beveridge Report were not seen as

Top: Clement Davies, Violet Bonham Carter  
Bottom: William Beveridge, Andrew McFadyean  
(© National Portrait Gallery)

## Some cornerstones still in place: the endurance of British Liberalism, 1945 – 1955

an exclusively Liberal cause.<sup>5</sup> With varying degrees of emphasis, many of those proposals featured in the election programmes of both the Labour and Conservative parties. Paul Addison has gone further in arguing that ‘the Liberal claim to include Keynes and Beveridge in the party pantheon has to be regarded with vigorous scepticism’ since they were ‘first and foremost powerful technocrats, experts in certain areas of policy who looked upon all parties and governments as potential vehicles for their influence’.<sup>6</sup> But this interpretation underestimates the depth of Keynes’s involvement in Liberal thought and policymaking during the 1920s, as well as the extent to which both his ideas and those of Beveridge, in spite of the latter’s belated formal association with the Liberal Party, were, at the very least, shaped by their underlying liberal ideological convictions or sympathies.

Moreover, the political absorption of Beveridge within the post-war, cross-party welfare consensus tends to overlook the implications of what has been described as his ‘reluctant collectivism’, of his attempt, that is, to combine advocacy of a high degree of state intervention and planning in both social and economic policy with his consistent defence of personal freedom and individual initiative and his firm emphasis on voluntary action.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Ian Bradley has argued that the voluntarist element in Beveridge’s conception of a welfare society, or ‘social service state’, was distorted by the Labour government that fashioned the main structure of the British welfare state.<sup>8</sup> In support of that view, it should be noted that, with regard to the Attlee government’s legislative proposals for social security, Beveridge was critical, for example, of the exclusion of friendly societies from the administration of benefits.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, while praising the National Health Service Act of 1946, he favoured a significant role for voluntary and private healthcare both inside and outside the National Health Service (including, for instance, the provision of pay-beds in NHS hospitals) and a supplementary role, too, for the voluntary sector in performing some of the medical functions of the National Health Service. These were all aspects of his proposals for social security and healthcare provision which, in its policy and legislation, the Labour government had either modified or rejected.<sup>10</sup>

Bradley has also maintained that after 1945 both Labour and Conservative governments lacked the vision of a welfare society as Beveridge had envisaged it: that is, as ‘an organic, interdependent relationship between

individuals, communities, voluntary organisations and the state’.<sup>11</sup> Certainly Beveridge himself later stated, whilst reviewing the effects of his report of 1942, that he had not sought to establish a welfare state, but rather to build social security around cooperation between the State and the individual.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, in spite of the manner in which Labour and Conservative governments after 1945 applied the ideas of both Keynes and Beveridge, it did appear by the early 1950s that the main proposals and commitments of those Liberal intellectuals had become essential elements of a cross-party collectivist consensus in British government, understood at least as the shared, broad commitment of the elites of the two major parties to a mixed economy, to Keynesian demand-management techniques designed to maintain full employment, and to the main structure of the post-war welfare state.

The effect, however, of such developments upon the Liberal Party was to narrow the distinctive political space within which it could survive and begin to revive; for, to many observers in the early 1950s, it seemed, as Vernon Bogdanor has commented, that ‘in the era of centrist politics, there was no room for a centre party’.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the party itself during its most desolate years was not well equipped to position itself clearly within this prevailing elite consensus in British politics and government, let alone to challenge it at certain points.

To a large extent this shortcoming arose from the loose-knit, ill-disciplined and disunited state of the parliamentary Liberal Party between 1945 and 1951, and consequently from the party leader’s preoccupation with somehow holding it together. In his letter of May 1950 to the distinguished classicist, Gilbert Murray, in which Clement Davies had complained of the disparate and divided nature of his parliamentary team, he had gone on to highlight his dilemma as leader:

My own position is one almost of supine weakness for if I give full expression to a definite course of action that at once leads to trouble and a threatened split. It is that split that I am so anxious to avoid ... We have suffered so much in the past from these quarrels – Chamberlain and Gladstone, Imperial League and Campbell Bannerman, Asquith and Lloyd George, and the National Liberal one of 1931. Any further division now would, I fear, just give the final death blow.<sup>14</sup>

**‘My own position is one almost of supine weakness for if I give full expression to a definite course of action that at once leads to trouble and a threatened split. It is that split that I am so anxious to avoid ...’**



**‘Do not run away with the idea that Liberalism provides the middle way between the other two ones. Still less that it is a compromise between them. Liberalism is a distinct creed – a distinct philosophy: distinct from Socialism, from Communism, and from Conservatism.’**

Certainly the parliamentary party, along with the party as a whole, was already split ideologically, if not yet fatally so, between those, on the one hand, such as Megan Lloyd George who saw themselves as belonging to a non-socialist radical tradition with an essentially anti-Conservative orientation and those, on the other, such as Rhys Hopkin Morris and Megan Lloyd George’s brother, Gwilym, ‘whose primary political concern’ was, as Dutton has noted, ‘resistance to the spread of socialism’.<sup>15</sup>

The Liberal leadership at that time resisted, for two main reasons, calls from Megan Lloyd George and other ‘radical Liberals’, as they were then known, on the left of the party for closer links with the Labour Party. In the first place, Clement Davies and the rest of the small party elite maintained that fundamentalist socialism, as enshrined in Clause Four of the Labour Party Constitution, would become the dominant ideology underlying and inspiring any alliance of progressive forces in post-war British politics. Such an ideological position, based on large-scale state or collective ownership of the means of production, was incompatible, they stressed, with the defence of the rights and liberties of the individual – a concern which lay at the very heart of Liberalism.<sup>16</sup>

The second reason for the Liberal leadership’s opposition to closer links with Labour during this period was the more strategic desire to preserve and sustain the existence of the Liberal Party as an independent political force. That concern was increased by recognition of the fact that, since 1950, the Labour Party, rather than recommending the tactical withdrawal of their parliamentary candidates from selected constituencies where the Liberals were the main challenger to the Tories, as had been the case in some areas in 1945, was instead seeking to lure away progressive Liberal supporters, thereby further weakening the Liberal Party’s electoral prospects.<sup>17</sup> Labour’s tactical stance during the early-to-mid-1950s was thus in contrast with that of the Conservatives who, by withdrawing candidates from a few Liberal-held rural Welsh constituencies and by forming electoral pacts in Bolton and Huddersfield, had at least, whatever their political motives, helped to ensure the Liberals’ parliamentary survival.

The Liberal leadership was thus committed to preserving the Liberal Party’s distinct, independent identity. That had been underlined in broad ideological terms by Clement Davies in 1949:

Do not run away with the idea that Liberalism provides the middle way between the

other two ones. Still less that it is a compromise between them. Liberalism is a distinct creed – a distinct philosophy: distinct from Socialism, from Communism, and from Conservatism.<sup>18</sup>

But as Dutton has pointed out, it was ‘doubtful whether many of his followers fully understood what the creed was, or at least whether a consensus existed on it’;<sup>19</sup> for, in reality, the Liberal Party that he led at that time embraced, in John Stevenson’s words, ‘a kaleidoscope of positions, bound together by sentiment and a generalized sense of what Liberalism stood for’.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Davies himself, preoccupied with holding together his fractious party, was ill suited to offering a clear and distinctive vision or sense of direction for his party since he appeared to lack a capacity for innovative policy thinking.

His difficulties in this area were compounded not only, as he himself recognised, by the residual effect of the Liberal splits of the inter-war years, but also by the electoral impact of class-based voting, which during the early 1950s was at its height. The resulting two-party squeeze on the Liberal vote was being reinforced, too, by a situation in which, whether justifiably or not, ‘many erstwhile Liberals determined either that Labour had become the modern vehicle of their progressive instincts or that the liberalised Conservative party of Butler, Eden and Macmillan was their best chance of resisting the encroachments of the “socialist” state’.<sup>21</sup> Among those in the latter group was, for example, Donald Johnson, the original founder of the ginger group, Radical Action, who joined the Conservative Party in 1947 after reaching the conclusion that ‘the main political objective of any liberal-minded person in the present day world must inevitably be the defeat of socialism’.<sup>22</sup>

In the same spirit, Churchill had written to Clement Davies shortly before the 1950 general election urging an arrangement between their two parties, which was justified, in his view, on the ground that:

There is a real measure of agreement between modern Tory democracy and the mass of Liberals who see in Socialism all that their most famous thinkers and leaders have fought against in the past.<sup>23</sup>

Davies dismissed this suggestion at the time as an ‘unworthy subterfuge’.<sup>24</sup> But Churchill returned to the same theme shortly afterwards when, alluding to a recent dispute with Davies over the use by at least four Conservative

Associations of the title ‘United Liberal and Conservative Associations’, he referred disdainfully to:

... the very small and select group of Liberal leaders who conceived themselves the sole heirs of the principles and traditions of Liberalism, and believed themselves to have the exclusive copyright of the word ‘Liberal’.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, two years later, in the bleakest of circumstances, Davies reaffirmed his commitment to the preservation of his party’s distinctive political identity and ideological character, declaring at the 1952 Liberal Assembly:

We refuse to be stamped out. In spite of all temptations, we still prefer our own doctrine and we are determined to maintain our independence.<sup>26</sup>

It may well be, that Davies, in view of his shortcomings as a policy thinker, was not the leader best equipped for defining and communicating the Liberal Party’s particular identity and role in British post-war politics, and that consequently, as Dutton has commented, ‘the party was left to drift with little sense of purpose or direction while he remained at the helm’. Yet Dutton has also conceded that ‘it is at least open to question whether any alternative leader would have been more successful than Davies in carving out a distinctive Liberal identity in the decade after the end of the Second World War’.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the problems facing Davies, or any possible leadership challenger, in this respect were magnified by the harsh reality that, as Malcolm Baines has pointed out, ‘in the mid-twentieth century the Liberal party, like all third parties, was essentially reactive rather than proactive’, with ‘virtually no control over the political environment’.<sup>28</sup>

In the face of those difficulties, the party tended, therefore, in its official statements of principles, to depict itself as a centrist political force and hence as a moderating influence on the extremist elements in both of the major parties. The 1951 Liberal general election manifesto, *The Nation’s Task*, thus declared that ‘the existence of a strong, independent Liberal Party’, as well as conferring the benefit of its being ‘the only party free of any class or sectional interests’, would ‘strengthen the liberal forces’ in both the Conservative and Labour parties, neither of which was ‘genuinely united’, and would thereby ‘act as a brake on class bitterness and create a safeguard against

**This official emphasis, then, on Liberalism as a middle way between the extremes of state socialism and monopoly capitalism was a response to the difficulties both of holding together a politically diverse party and of positioning it distinctively in the conditions of two-party dominance prevailing during the immediate post-war years.**

the deadening power of the great political machines’.<sup>29</sup>

This self-assigned centrist, moderate role could be defended as ideologically plausible since there was some kind of centre ground in post-war British politics that could be broadly distinguished from that occupied by both Labour and the Conservatives. For, unlike Labour, Liberals, it was asserted in 1945, ‘believe in private enterprise and the value of individual effort, experiment and willingness to take risks’. But their advocacy of a market economy also led not only to ‘their support of the small trader and their desire to diffuse ownership as widely as possible’, but also to ‘their opposition to cartels and price-fixing rings which, often abusing the name of private enterprise, create conditions of monopoly and hold the community to ransom’.<sup>30</sup> These attitudes, evident in Liberal policy commitments to free trade and co-ownership, therefore also clearly distinguished the Liberal Party, it was argued, from the Conservatives.

This official emphasis, then, on Liberalism as a middle way between the extremes of state socialism and monopoly capitalism was a response to the difficulties both of holding together a politically diverse party and of positioning it distinctively in the conditions of two-party dominance prevailing during the immediate post-war years. It was certainly not an emphasis, as we have seen, that satisfied the ‘radical Liberals’ in the party. Yet, as Baines has observed, there was ‘no one unified strand of Liberal thought in this period’; indeed, in his view, ‘Liberal ideological thinking was coherent in that it centred on the supremacy of the individual, but was united over little else’.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, this apparent lack of overall ideological coherence within the party was aggravated by ‘a dearth of substantial, partisan works of Liberal political thought between *Britain’s Industrial Future* published in 1928 and George Watson’s editorship of *The Unservile State* which appeared in 1957’.<sup>32</sup> In their place, a wide range of Liberal ideas was expressed in such varied sources as speeches, pamphlets, policy statements, and articles in periodicals and newspapers. By these means, many Liberals developed and promoted a diversity of ideas which often appeared to underline the tensions inherent in liberalism as a broad and flexible ideology – in particular, tensions between individualism and collectivism, and between support for a market economy and advocacy of a high degree of state intervention. Beveridge provided a good personal example of this kind of ambiguity with

his endorsement both of state planning and control in the economy and society, on the one hand, and of private enterprise and voluntary action, on the other.

For all that, political ideas, and ideological conviction, remained important to Liberals during that period. A major reason for this was that, as Baines has noted, they ‘did not have a firm base in either class or interest around which they could unite’ and therefore ‘had to rely on a shared ideological heritage to hold the party together’.<sup>33</sup> Evidence for this view was provided by a survey of the attitudes of Liberal Party members in Jorgen Rasmussen’s 1965 academic study, which found that, during the 1950s, 83 per cent of respondents were motivated by ideological beliefs in actively supporting the party, and that such a factor had become the most prominent influence shaping their support in that period.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, in spite of the diversity of Liberal ideas in the decade immediately after the Second World War, there was some overall coherence discernible in the leading policy ideas developed and promoted by the party during this period. This was evident, first, in its firm defence of civil liberties; second, in its advocacy of political and constitutional reform (including proportional representation for elections and decentralisation of political power); and, third, in its support for international cooperation. All of those policy positions could be perceived as rooted in core liberal values of personal and political liberty and rational progress. They therefore helped to give some semblance of unity to an otherwise disunited and fragmented party.

In the period from 1945 to 1955, the Liberal Party repeatedly declared its commitment to these unifying causes. In defence of civil liberties, its 1945 general election manifesto pointed out that, during the war, the Liberal leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, on joining the Coalition in 1940, had obtained an assurance from the prime minister not only that it was the government’s intention ‘to preserve in all essentials a free Parliament and a free Press’ but also ‘that the Emergency Powers ... would disappear with the passing of the emergency’.<sup>35</sup>

Three years after the 1945 general election, the former Liberal MP Dingle Foot drew attention to another, more recent occasion ‘when the liberty of the subject has been preserved by Liberals in Parliament.’ That was in 1947, he pointed out, when the Labour government’s Supplies and Services Bill, which gave government departments greater powers to govern by decree, was amended under pressure from

Clement Davies. As a result, none of those powers could be ‘deemed to authorise the suppression or suspension of any newspaper, periodical, book or other document’. On that and other occasions that Foot cited, the Liberals, ‘then a small minority in the House of Commons, had secured the acceptance of their proposals by a majority’. Such examples underlined the fact, Foot concluded, at that time somewhat implausibly, given the parliamentary circumstances and arithmetic of the day, that ‘without organised Liberalism, the case for freedom would go by default’.<sup>36</sup>

In broader ideological terms, the Liberal 1955 general election manifesto, *Crisis Unresolved*, confirmed that view, reaffirming the central importance for the party of the core liberal value of individual freedom, stating that:

We exist as a Party to defend the rights of the individual, his liberty to live his own life subject to respect for the rights of others, to hold and express his own views, to associate with others of his own choice, to be granted all possible freedom of opportunity and to be subject to no penalty or discrimination by reason of his colour, race or creed.<sup>37</sup>

On the question of political and constitutional reform, a second unifying cause, the 1945 manifesto had clearly underlined Liberal support for the devolution of government to Scotland and Wales, stating that:

The Liberal Party recognises the desire of the people of Scotland and Wales to assume greater responsibility in the management of their domestic affairs, and has long been in favour of suitable measures of Devolution.

The manifesto also called for electoral reform, arguing that ‘our present system of voting produces Parliaments which are not representative of the people’s will’, as well as a situation in which a party with only a minority of the national vote at a general election could secure a majority in the House of Commons.<sup>38</sup>

The 1950 manifesto, *No Easy Task*, widened the scope of such proposals, and advocated, too, reform of the composition of the House of Lords ‘so as to eliminate heredity as a qualification for membership, which should be available to men and women of distinction’. In addition, it declared that the authority of parliament should be restored ‘by reversing the trend towards supreme Executive power’, a process that would be reinforced, it was claimed, by

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the creation of parliaments for Scotland and Wales.<sup>39</sup>

The third unifying theme that pervaded Liberal policy commitments between 1945 and 1955 was the party's adherence to the cause of international cooperation. The 1950 manifesto, for instance, stated that, in seeking to preserve peace in the world, the Liberal Party pledged itself 'to speed the process of creating an international order under the rule of law', and to that end commended the United Nations Security Council as offering 'the only machinery through which the development of the hydrogen bomb and other horrors of science can be brought under control'. 'The other half of the problem', it added, was 'strengthening the organisation of the free world, whose chief components are the United States, the British Commonwealth and Western Europe'. Echoing Churchill's doctrine of the three circles of influence, the manifesto maintained that Britain was 'in the unique position of being closely linked with all three' and should therefore 'develop our association with all of them'.<sup>40</sup>

A year later, the 1951 Liberal manifesto described the Council of Europe, which had been formed in 1949 as Western Europe's first post-war political organisation, as 'a Liberal conception', and as 'the realisation of a dream of European Liberals for two centuries'.<sup>41</sup> The rhetorical tone was consistent with the practical reality that British Liberals had been prominent in supporting the early movements that sought a more united or integrated Europe. Violet Bonham Carter and Lord (Walter) Layton, both close friends of Churchill, had been sympathetic to his vision of European unity unveiled in his Zurich speech of 1946 and inspiring his United Europe Movement in Britain. In addition, Frances Josephy had been present at the Congress of Europe in The Hague in May 1948 which gave rise to the European Movement of which Churchill, among a politically diverse group, was a patron, with Violet Bonham Carter and Lord Layton both members.

Furthermore, the 1955 Liberal election manifesto was able to declare an official commitment to the developing cause of European unity. It attacked 'the timidity and hesitation' which Labour and Conservative governments alike had displayed on the question of Britain's association with 'the movement to secure some measure of European unification'. In order, too, to promote 'positive and constructive policies for economic and social progress in Europe', the Liberal Party, it was added, would 'encourage by every means the establishment of a great free trade area in Europe'.<sup>42</sup>

That last policy commitment unwittingly raised some awkward questions about the potential conflict between the party's support for European unification, on the one hand, and its traditional and continuing advocacy of free trade, on the other. The earlier endorsement by the 1947 and 1948 Liberal Assemblies of the European cause had been accompanied, it should be noted, by their approval of resolutions calling for the abolition of tariffs on food and raw materials as the precursor of the eventual elimination of all tariffs. Moreover, by 1953 the most ardent free-trade faction within the party, led by Oliver Smedley and others, was reaching the peak of its post-war influence when the Liberal Assembly of that year declared its support for unilateral free trade.<sup>43</sup> Such a position was clearly incompatible with the common external tariff of the customs union, eventually established eleven years after the foundation of the European Economic Community in 1957. Indeed, that was a fundamental inconsistency which was later to drive Smedley and several other free traders out of the party.

Nevertheless, during its forlorn years of 1945 to 1955, the issue of free trade and the cause of European unification were widely viewed within the Liberal Party as interrelated concerns. Indeed, the latter commitment, as Baines has noted, 'should be seen as part of the Cobdenite tradition of internationalism', while the promotion of free trade was a 'major linchpin of that world view – and therefore most Liberals probably did not see any intrinsic conflict between it and a vague Europeanism'.<sup>44</sup>

Advocacy of the European cause was to become, along with political and constitutional reform, the most distinctive and broadly unifying Liberal policy stance of the second half of the twentieth century. But those concerns were not to emerge in the forefront of British political debate until the 1960s. In the meantime, the most distinctive Liberal policy commitments during the late 1940s and 1950s, namely, to free trade and co-ownership in industry, were ones that needed to be emphasised, especially in the light of the Liberals' lack of electoral success between 1945 and 1955, in order to underline the party's political identity, at a time when, in some eyes, that did not appear easy to discern.

During that period, free trade was, indeed, in itself, as Baines has pointed out, 'the hallmark of a Liberal', and belief in that cause 'acted almost as a substitute for a function in the political system, justifying the party's continuing existence'.<sup>45</sup> At the 1945 general election, the Liberal Party's radical, state-interventionist

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election programme, shaped by the policy ideas of Beveridge and Keynes, had also reaffirmed the importance of free trade. The Liberal manifesto thus declared that:

Freedom and expansion of trade are the necessary basis of world prosperity ... We should therefore press on vigorously with the conclusion of agreements with America and other countries for the progressive elimination of tariffs, quotas, exchange restrictions and other barriers to trade ...<sup>46</sup>

Every Liberal election manifesto during the 1950s restated that position, stressing the need for the gradual dismantlement of Britain's tariff structure and for action, too, against monopolies in order to help the consumer and small trader. The 1950 manifesto, for instance, claimed that 'the whole strength of this country, which sustained the part Britain played in two world wars and built up the standard of life we have to-day, was due to our free trade and our willingness to buy and sell in any part of the world'. Yet the protectionist policies of both the Conservative and Labour parties had 'handicapped the development of our international trading ever since a Liberal government was last in office'. The Liberal Party would therefore act to 'reduce tariffs by stages, until all are abolished'.<sup>47</sup>

Such commitments were consistent with the party's past attachment to the cause of free trade which, as Michael Steed has observed, had encapsulated 'the nearest to a single-issue identity which the Liberal Party has ever had'.<sup>48</sup> The issue's historical importance for the party had been evident at a number of pivotal political moments: in contributing decisively to its greatest electoral triumph of 1906; in helping to reunite the party in 1923; and in causing the departure of Liberal ministers from the National Government in 1932 following the Ottawa Agreements on Imperial Preference.

Before the 1950 general election, Sir Andrew MacFadyean provided a semi-official endorsement of the distinctive, historic commitment to the doctrine of free trade, stating in *The Liberal Case* that:

Liberals stand alone in demanding Free Trade, and the next Liberal Government should restore it as our national economic policy. Liberals object to protection not merely as wrong in the circumstances of today. They believe that it destroys enterprise, restricts the consumer's freedom of choice, is a reprehensible method of

invisible taxation, and is a fertile source of international friction.<sup>49</sup>

This Liberal cause was strongly advanced within the party during this period by a fairly cohesive faction led by Oliver Smedley, S. W. Alexander and Lord Grantchester. Smedley had on several occasions been a Liberal parliamentary candidate, and throughout the 1950s was the most zealous campaigner for free trade at Liberal Assemblies. S. W. Alexander was editor from 1948 of the *City Press* newspaper, through which he promoted the cause of free trade. He was also chairman of the London Liberal Party. Lord Grantchester (originally Sir Alfred Suenon-Taylor) was a wealthy city banker and Liberal Party treasurer from 1953 to 1962. He was also on the advisory board of the free market think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs, formed in 1955 and later to become a highly effective and influential vehicle for the promotion of economic-liberal ideas and policies.<sup>50</sup> Smedley, too, had played an active role in the early development of the IEA. Other prominent Liberal free traders at this time included Edward Martell, a party office holder between 1945 and 1951 and a key national organiser in the late 1940s, and Roy Douglas, a parliamentary candidate and later a party historian.<sup>51</sup>

All of those Liberal advocates of free trade promoted not only that cause but also other related economic-liberal ideas concerning free markets, competition, sound finance and a minimal State. They regarded the Liberal Party as the historical repository of such ideas. Their influence at a national level within the party was considerable during this period partly, too, because the financial resources of certain wealthy individuals facilitated the publication of promotional literature in support of free trade and even, in some cases, in the securing of parliamentary candidacies. At a sub-national level, too, those Liberal free traders sought to exert their influence within the party – particularly in London where Smedley, Alexander, Martell and Douglas were active, as well as in Yorkshire, 'long regarded as the home of individualist economic liberals', and in Lancashire.<sup>52</sup>

The 1953 Liberal Assembly at Ilfracombe marked, as has been noted, the zenith of the most zealous free-trade faction's influence within the party with the approval of resolutions calling not just for unilateral free trade, that is, 'irrespective of the attitude of any other state', but also for the abolition of state support for agriculture in the form of guaranteed prices and assured markets for agricultural products, both of which were depicted as violations of

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free trade. Endorsement of that latter policy position was viewed with dismay by some Liberal candidates in rural constituencies, including, notably, future party leader, Jeremy Thorpe. The most committed free traders lost some ground, however, at the 1954 and 1955 Assemblies, but later reasserted their influence in 1958 when the cause of unilateral free trade was successfully presented to the Assembly in visionary terms, worthy of Cobden and Bright, as 'a means to abolishing international tensions and promoting World Peace'.<sup>53</sup>

Partly in response to the activities and influence of that free-trade faction, a social-liberal pressure group, the Radical Reform Group, had been formed in 1952, alarmed not so much by the doctrine of free trade but rather by the hard-line free traders' apparent espousal of a 'laissez-faire' economic approach which opposed not just state intervention in the economy but even, it seemed, the entire concept of a welfare state. 'We strongly deplore both those tendencies', the group declared in an initial statement of aims. Its object, therefore, was the advancement within the Liberal Party of 'the policy of social reform without Socialism, which Liberals have promoted from 1908 onwards'.<sup>54</sup>

The principal aims of the Radical Reform Group, whose two leading protagonists were Desmond Banks and Peter Grafton, were to provide a focus for those who feared that the Liberal Party was drifting towards a doctrinaire anti-statism; to prevent the defection of senior party figures, as well as Liberal activists and voters, to Labour; and to attract supporters from other parties. The ideological focus of the Radical Reform Group – on 'social reform without socialism' – was elaborated in the preamble to its 1953 constitution. The Radical Reform Group had been formed, it was stated, 'at a time when no existing political party has successfully produced, in all fields, policies which are based clearly on the twin pillars of liberty and social justice and which combine their requirements...'. In using the term 'radical' in its title, the group had in mind 'that body of opinion which, ... while believing in the value of initiative and private enterprise, is utterly opposed to laissez-faire economics,' and which, 'while recognising and accepting the need for some measure of State intervention in our economic affairs, is equally opposed to the nationalisation of all the means of production, distribution and exchange...'. Those forms of state intervention which the group did favour should be introduced 'at certain defined points where the economic interests of the

community demand it, where the maintenance of full employment and social security depend on it and where the just distribution of wealth, power and responsibility cannot be achieved without it'.<sup>55</sup>

In its first statement of policy, *Radical Aims*, published in 1954, the group drew attention to 'the increasing influence' within the Liberal Party of 'a school of "laissez-faire" apostles' who 'sought to turn Liberals back to the philosophy of Herbert Spencer', and who not only denounced 'state intervention of all kinds' but also rejected, in particular, 'the welfare society of the mid-twentieth century'.<sup>56</sup>

The Radical Reform Group therefore underlined 'the danger that an understandable and healthy reaction against excessive State intervention might carry away with it those forms of State intervention' which were considered 'essential to the preservation of true freedom'. It feared, too, that 'in the absence at that time of any very clear guidance from the Liberal leadership on these issues, it seemed likely that, with the prevailing trend, the bulk of the party might be manoeuvred by the active "laissez-faire" exponents into increasing acceptance of their tenets...'.<sup>57</sup>

In this ideological dispute, the position of the Radical Reform Group could draw on earlier, semi-official support in Sir Andrew MacFadyean's pre-1950 election statement of *The Liberal Case*. For, while endorsing the cause of free trade, MacFadyean had nonetheless made the historical observation that 'laissez-faire', in 'its popular sense', that is, 'complete freedom from State interference in business life, the conditions of labour, and the acquisition and use of wealth', had 'never been either practised or preached by Liberals for a hundred years'. On the contrary, he maintained, Liberals had been 'the main driving force behind the movement for social reform, for humanising life in an industrial country, for delimiting licence and liberty'. If, then, 'laissez-faire' was dead, it was Liberals who had 'struck the first blow'.<sup>58</sup>

The formation of the Radical Reform Group two years after the expression of such views served to sharpen the tone of the subsequent ideological debate within the Liberal Party in the early-to-mid-1950s about its future role, character and purpose. The fundamental question that it really posed was whether the Liberals were to be a classical liberal party, concerned with free trade and a minimal State, or, as the group favoured, a social-liberal one in the traditions of Asquith's post-1908 government, the New Liberalism of the Edwardian era and

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the state-interventionist ideas of Keynes, the ‘Yellow Book’ and Beveridge.

It would be too simplistic to depict this intra-party debate in terms of a left-right schism, with the supporters of the Radical Reform Group and the free traders classified as left-wing and right-wing respectively. As Robert Ingham has pointed out, such a description ‘would have been bitterly contested by the 1950s free traders who regarded themselves as radicals and the other side as essentially conservative’. Their attitude was clearly reflected in a 1953 council resolution of the London Liberal Party, which deplored the fact ‘that the party leadership is inclined to create the impression that the Liberal Party is a centre party fluctuating between Toryism and Socialism’, and therefore called upon Clement Davies:

... to propagate more militantly our radical policy, making it clear to the electorate that neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party are progressive ... and that liberalism is the distinctive radical alternative to both these stagnant creeds.<sup>59</sup>

Oliver Smedley, too, stressed the need for the party to mark out this ideological space, seeing, as Richard Cockett has noted, a ‘historic opportunity for the Liberals to assert their old authority by taking up a new political position distinct from the two main parties locked into their Butskellite consensus’.<sup>60</sup>

In spite of the tensions inflamed by this dispute, a spirit of compromise was evident in the party by 1954. At the party Assembly of that year, a resolution on unity of purpose, moved by Derick Mirfin of the Union of University Liberal Societies, recognised ‘that there are, and always have been, two distinct and interdependent traditions in Liberal thought’, but maintained ‘that the task of the Liberal Party today is to blend these two traditions in a unified policy of social justice economic strength’. In similar vein, Paul Rose, a member of the Liberal Party Council, even suggested that the nature of the ideological debate was being misrepresented. Desmond Banks and other leading members of the Radical Reform Group were tending, he argued, to equate the fervently pro-free trade views of Smedley, Alexander, and their supporters – in reality a small group within the party – with the attitudes of mainstream Liberals who believed in the merits of a market economy. Banks and his colleagues should, however, be aware, Rose stressed, that the extreme free traders had always differed from the more widely held belief among

Liberals that a free market economy and a welfare society were really complementary necessities.<sup>61</sup>

In broad agreement with that view, Roy Douglas, himself an ardent free trader at that time, later commented on the 1950s debate that: ‘Many Liberals, probably the large majority, would have seen no incompatibility between these two approaches’. Moreover, he added, ‘the dichotomy, insofar as it existed at all, did not exhibit any perceptible correlation with age’, since ‘some of the most enthusiastic advocates of the traditional free trade-land taxing view were in their twenties or early thirties’.<sup>62</sup>

There were certainly solid grounds for reaching a compromise on this issue, since there was very wide support throughout the party for free trade, even if it was seldom promoted in the zealous terms expressed by Smedley and his sympathisers. Clement Davies had clearly reaffirmed his belief in free trade as a key party policy at the 1953 Liberal Assembly, even though his successor, Jo Grimond, tended to be more circumspect, arguing that the party would be revitalised ‘not ... by some eccentric nostrum but by a general revival of Liberal feeling’.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the 1955 Liberal general election manifesto reflected Davies’ view, and the mainstream party view, in support of free trade, asserting that:

We must ... systematically reduce and finally abolish tariffs which ‘protect’ our home markets, which encourage price rings and monopolies, and which must, for that is their whole object, increase our prices and, as a result, weaken our power to compete.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, economic-liberal ideas in general were widely expounded within the party between 1951 and 1955. During the parliament of that period, all six members of the parliamentary party – Davies, Grimond, Arthur Holt, Donald Wade, Roderic Bowen, and Rhys Hopkin Morris – were firm supporters of a market economy. Arthur Holt, for example, in 1954 drew attention to the ‘fine dilemma’ facing the party that had arisen from the fact that ‘in matters of trade, industry, finance and economics where there are the greatest differences between socialists and Liberals’, the Conservative Party had ‘appeared to the people as the most effective champion of a freer economy...’, and had ‘associated themselves in the public mind with “setting the people free”’ through ‘their avowed policy of removing physical controls and much state interference’. Holt therefore made clear his own support for a ‘highly

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competitive free market economy operating without restrictive devices against imports', and argued that Liberal policies 'on freeing trade, strengthening the powers against monopolies ... together with the taxation of land values...' were 'all designed to enable a free market economy to do its job effectively'.<sup>65</sup>

In general, there was wide support in the party at this time for a form of economic organisation in which, in the words of Elliot Dodds, a leading Liberal thinker and journalist, and party president in 1948, 'private enterprise – real private enterprise – will function throughout the major part of the economy'.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, because Liberals ought 'to afford the widest possible scope for genuine private enterprise', they were for that very reason 'as much opposed to private monopoly as they are to Collectivism'.<sup>67</sup>

This linkage between Liberal support for free trade and for 'real private enterprise' was clearly explained by Sir Andrew McFadyean in *The Liberal Case*, when he maintained that:

The misfortune of capitalism is that, largely as a result of two world wars, it has been prevented from operating as private enterprise; its fault, and a cardinal one, has been that it sought protection from internal competition by monopoly and from external competition by tariffs.<sup>68</sup>

What appeared, then, to be a distinctive Liberal approach – in support of private enterprise and a market economy and in opposition to both state collectivism and private monopoly capitalism – was emerging from the party's historic and enduring commitment to free trade. That cause, however, had become, as we have seen, contentious when promoted by its most fervent advocates not only for reasons that the Radical Reform Group had underlined but also because, as Dutton has observed, free trade in its purest form caused 'embarrassment over protection and farm subsidies for a party which was largely confined to agricultural constituencies'.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the broader ideological position, of which free trade was a central part, and which Elliot Dodds had clearly defined, did help to form a distinctive space in which, the Liberal Party could place itself in an otherwise perilous political environment.

Dodds developed this position at greater length in his various writings on the second most distinctive Liberal policy issue of the 1950s – co-ownership. He was, indeed, the principal and most articulate Liberal advocate of that cause in the immediate post-war period. In

1938 he had chaired the party's *Ownership for All* committee, whose report, drafted by the economist Arthur Seldon,<sup>70</sup> had advocated, in addition to the restoration of free trade, the encouragement of co-ownership and profit-sharing schemes in industry. Those progressive, distributist ideas had already, it should of course be noted, been promoted ten years earlier in the report of the Liberal Industrial Inquiry, *Britain's Industrial Future*, or the 'Yellow Book', as it became popularly known. Among its various Liberal themes was an emphasis on the diffusion of ownership, designed to reduce the tensions within the British class structure.<sup>71</sup> The Liberal Party, the Yellow Book declared, thus stood 'not for public ownership, but for popular ownership', its goal being 'not to destroy the owner-class, but to enlarge it'.<sup>72</sup>

Elliot Dodds' own distributist ideas, which had been influenced by the political thought of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, involved the advocacy of a widely diffused ownership – of both industry and property – for which he himself coined the phrase 'ownership for all'. He had thus, on one level, developed some of the Yellow Book's central themes. But with his firmly individualist emphasis on the more independent property owner and shareholder, Dodds' ideas were also, as Donald Wade and Desmond Banks later pointed out, 'in another way ... a reaction against the Yellow Book',<sup>73</sup> and its detailed proposals for increased state involvement in industry and in the economy at large.

After the Second World War, Dodds was involved in developing and updating the *Ownership for All* policies, once again chairing a party committee set up for that purpose. The most significant change in party policy to emerge from this process in 1948 was the proposal for a scheme of what came to be known as co-ownership in industry, to be applied in all firms with more than fifty employees or over £50,000 capital. This would involve the sharing of remaining profits between shareholders and employees, after a return had been paid to the shareholders; the encouragement of employee shareholding; and elected representation for employees on the board of directors. Furthermore, the principle, which was to prove controversial, that co-ownership should be induced by legislation was accepted in 1948, whereas the earlier 1938 report had proposed only its voluntary encouragement.<sup>74</sup>

Dodds had recently elaborated a theoretical justification for the Liberal policy of co-ownership in his book, *The Defence of Man*, published in 1947. 'The ultimate aim', of Liberal industrial

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policy, he stated, was ‘to make the workers co-owners, with a stake in the enterprises in which they are engaged as well as an effective voice in determining the conditions under which they work’. ‘The principle of diffusion’, he further explained, which Liberals sought to apply with regard to property ownership, permeated their entire philosophy, in both its economic and political aspects. Economically, widespread ownership made possible ‘decentralisation of initiative and risk-taking which is of the essence of a healthy economy’. Politically, too, the dispersal of power, and hence of responsibility, was a necessary condition of democracy. Furthermore, the operation of the principle of diffusion in these two fields was really interlocked since ‘political democracy will not work satisfactorily without economic democracy, and *vice versa*’.<sup>75</sup>

In broader ideological terms, too, the idea of co-ownership was promoted by Dodds as, like the enduring commitment to free trade, an essential aspect of a distinctive Liberal conception both of economic organisation and of the wider industrial society. It was thus an idea ‘as hostile to Monopoly-Capitalism as it is to Socialism’ since co-ownership aimed to ‘distribute, instead of concentrating, political as well as economic power, and encourage by all means possible the smaller, spontaneous centres of responsibility.’ At the workplace, moreover, ‘it would make the workers citizens of industry, and not mere hirelings either of private employers or the State’.<sup>76</sup>

Two years later, in a 1949 party report on its co-ownership proposals, Dodds even used terminology that unknowingly anticipated ideological developments on the European centre-left a half-century later. The Liberal commitment to co-ownership in industry would be, he maintained, the basis of a ‘Third Way’, an alternative to both ‘Monopoly-Capitalism’ and ‘Monopoly Socialism’. He even claimed, in almost apocalyptic terms, that Western civilisation, if confined to the choice between those opposed forms of economic organisation, would be ‘doomed’ since, ‘like other civilisations before it’, it would be ‘wrecked by class-war, even if the catastrophe of international war is avoided’.<sup>77</sup>

In 1951 Dodds developed these points further, explaining that the Liberal Third Way would involve ‘the spreading of property, power, responsibility and control’. In practical terms that would entail such policy measures as devolution of government to Scotland and Wales and reversal of the trend towards the concentration of political authority in

**In broader ideological terms, too, the idea of co-ownership was promoted by Dodds as, like the enduring commitment to free trade, an essential aspect of a distinctive Liberal conception both of economic organisation and of the wider industrial society. It was thus an idea ‘as hostile to Monopoly-Capitalism as it is to Socialism’ since co-ownership aimed to ‘distribute, instead of concentrating, political as well as economic power, and encourage by all means possible the smaller, spontaneous centres of responsibility.’**

Whitehall; greater powers for local authorities; the extension of home ownership; decentralisation of the administration of the nationalised industries; and finally, of course, ‘the adoption of “Co-ownership” throughout industry, thus assuring the workers a share in control as well as profits and giving them the saving sense of proprietorship’.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, pursuit of this dispersed Liberal Third Way would not only, in Dodds’ view, enable Britain ‘to steer a clear course between Monopoly Capitalism and Monopoly Socialism’, presented by him as shorthand descriptions of excessive concentrations of economic power. For he had earlier depicted Liberalism even more broadly as offering an ideological Third Way, between conservatism and state socialism, in both its Marxist and Western democratic socialist forms. At the 1948 Liberal Summer School, as the embryonic Cold War beckoned, he thus maintained that Conservatism ‘by attempting to “conserve” things as they are, with their manifold injustices and inequalities ... manures the soil in which Communism grows’, while socialism ‘cannot combat Communism either’, since it was ‘based on the same economic principles’ and preached ‘the same doctrine of class-warfare’. Only Liberalism, Dodds claimed, could really ‘stem the Communist tide’, essentially for two reasons: ‘first, because it understands the principle which is Communism’s antithesis; second, because it understands what makes men Communists’. Socialists, by contrast, had taken a wrong turning, ‘not because they felt the sting of social injustice and sought to use the power of the State to remedy it, but because ... they rushed to the conclusion that the key to Utopia lay in making the State “monopolistic owner, employer and feeder”!’<sup>79</sup>

Co-ownership in industry, the practical foundation of the Liberal Third Way that Dodds espoused, had been strongly promoted as a policy goal when the 1948 Liberal Assembly endorsed its legislative, rather than voluntary, implementation. Liberal opponents, however, of legislation in that field later proposed instead that co-ownership should be encouraged by tax reliefs, although they failed to overturn the established policy. Nonetheless, successive Liberal general election manifestos, in 1950, 1951, and 1955, carefully avoided any commitments to legally induced co-ownership.<sup>80</sup>

Within the confines of internal party debate, by the end of 1955 a policy compromise on the issue of co-ownership, between those who advocated its compulsory introduction by legislation and those who favoured its

encouragement by tax incentives, had been reached in the Liberal Party. An emphasis on the removal of tax barriers to co-ownership was to be accepted as the immediate policy goal rather than its introduction by compulsion. A party committee, appointed in 1954 to draw up a detailed plan for the implementation of co-ownership, had produced this change of emphasis, claiming that there was a broad measure of agreement within the party about the content and implications of party policy. Co-ownership, it was stated, involved giving employees a share of residual profits; a share in ownership of the business through some system of employee shareholding; a share in management through joint consultation; and a share in policy making through representation at board level.<sup>81</sup>

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During those darkest of years for the Liberal Party, co-ownership in industry remained, then, a distinctive and broadly unifying policy issue. Like free trade, it continued to underline the party's political and ideological identity and purpose at a time when organised, party Liberalism appeared a declining force, increasingly eroded by the dominance of the two-party system in an era of class-based voting, as well as by the centripetal, Butskellite tendencies in British government. Just as the party's other most distinctive, albeit at times contentious, issue of the 1950s – free trade – was presented as the Liberal alternative both to state ownership as espoused by Labour and to private monopoly control and protectionism as endorsed by the Conservatives, so did co-ownership, as its most eloquent advocate, Elliot Dodds, insisted, offer a third, Liberal way distinct both from state socialism and from monopoly capitalism.

In spite, therefore, of the lack of an overarching coherent ideology guiding the Liberal Party through its wilderness years of 1945 to 1955 – and particularly between 1945 and 1951 – some kind of distinctive and firmly

rooted doctrinal position, developed by Dodds and others, had been taking shape.<sup>82</sup> Allied to the party's depiction of itself as a third force free of class or sectional interests, that position underlay not just Liberal policy commitments to free trade and co-ownership, but also, as has been noted, its stances on civil liberties, political and constitutional reform, and international – particularly European – cooperation. Those last two causes were to be promoted further during the 1960s, while the first, the defence of individual civil liberties, was to endure well into the decades that followed. But, in the meantime, the party's struggle for survival in the late 1940s and early 1950s had secured not only its continuing political independence, but also the maintenance of a broad ideological foundation, reinforced by those cornerstones, that could be strengthened as British Liberalism gradually revived in the years stretching ahead.

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- 1 See Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies: Liberal Leader* (Politico's, 2003), p. 209. In support of Wyburn Powell's judgement, see J. Graham Jones, 'Churchill, Clement Davies and the Ministry of Education', *Journal of Liberal History*, 27 (Summer 2000), pp. 6–14; David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 164.
- 2 On the contributions of Frank Byers and Philip Fothergill to the Liberal cause during that period, see Roy Douglas, 'Frank Byers (Lord Byers)' in Duncan Brack (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (Politico's, 1998), pp. 63–5; and Roy Douglas, 'Philip Fothergill', *ibid.*, pp. 117–19. On the broader political factors underlying the Liberal Party's survival between 1945 and 1951, see Dutton, *History*, pp. 169–170; John Stevenson, *Third*

*Party Politics since 1945: Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats* (Blackwell, 1993), pp. 40–2; Tudor Jones, *The Revival of British Liberalism: From Grimond to Clegg* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 4–6. For a detailed examination of the course of survival, and gradual revival, of the Liberal Party at constituency level, see Mark Egan, *Coming into Focus: The Transformation of the Liberal Party, 1945–1964* (VDM, 2009). (This particular article, in *Journal of Liberal History*, focuses, however, on the policy and ideological factors that underpinned the survival of British Liberalism between 1945 and 1955.)

- 3 William Wallace, 'Survival and Revival', in Vernon Bogdanor (ed.), *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 43.
- 4 Rodney Barker, *Politics, Peoples and Government: Themes in British Political Thought since the Nineteenth Century* (Macmillan, 1994), p. 54. For an examination of the social-liberal beliefs and policy proposals of Keynes and Beveridge, see Tudor Jones, '“Reluctant” or Liberal Collectivists? The Social Liberalism of Keynes and Beveridge', *Journal of Liberal History*, 78 (Spring 2013), pp. 32–41.
- 5 Dutton, *History*, p. 139.
- 6 Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (Quartet Books, 1975), p. 166.
- 7 See Vic George and Paul Wilding, *Ideology and Social Welfare* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), ch. 3.
- 8 See Ian Bradley, *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal Britain* (Chatto & Windus, 1985), pp. 96–100.
- 9 José Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 460.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 461–2.
- 11 Bradley, *Strange Rebirth*, p. 102.
- 12 In an address by Beveridge to the National Liberal Club in 1954; see 'Problems of Social Security', Clement Davies Papers, C/1/6; cited in Malcolm Baines, 'The Survival of the Liberal Party, 1932–1959' (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1989), p. 97.
- 13 Bogdanor, 'Introduction', in Bogdanor (ed.), *Liberal Party Politics*, p. 8.
- 14 Clement Davies, letter to Gilbert Murray, Clement Davies Papers, J/3/26; cited in Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies*, p. 189.

- 15 Dutton, *History*, p. 143. On the divisions within the parliamentary Liberal Party, between 1945 and 1951, see, too, David Dutton, 'On the Brink of Oblivion: The Post-War Crisis of British Liberalism', *Canadian Journal of History*, xxvii, 3 (December 1992), pp. 426–50.
- 16 See Peter Joyce, *Realignment of the Left? A History of the Relationship between the Liberal Democrat and Labour Parties* (Macmillan, 1999), pp. 101–17.
- 17 See *ibid.*, p. 112.
- 18 Clement Davies, draft speech notes, 10 May 1949, Clement Davies Papers, K/1/48; cited in Jones, 'Churchill', p. 8.
- 19 Dutton, *History*, p. 144.
- 20 Stevenson, *Third Party Politics*, p. 33.
- 21 Dutton, *History*, p. 145.
- 22 Donald Johnson, *Bars and Barricades* (Christopher Johnson, 1952), p. 285.
- 23 Winston Churchill, letter to Clement Davies, January 1950; cited in Mark Pottle (ed.), *Daring to Hope: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), p. 75.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Winston Churchill, speech at his adoption meeting as Conservative candidate for Woodford on 28 January 1950; cited in Jones, 'Churchill', p. 9.
- 26 *The Times*, 19 May 1952; cited in Alan Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1966), p. 66.
- 27 Dutton, *History*, pp. 144–5.
- 28 Baines, 'Survival', p. 157.
- 29 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1951, *The Nation's Task*, in Iain Dale (ed.), *Liberal Party General Election Manifestos, 1900–1997* (Routledge/Politico's, 2000), pp. 81–2.
- 30 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1945, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 65.
- 31 Baines, 'Survival', p. 122.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 34 See Jorgen Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party: A Study of Retrenchment and Revival* (Constable, 1965), pp. 204–6.
- 35 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1945, in Dale, *Manifestos*, pp. 67–8.
- 36 Dingle Foot, *Freedom Today* (Liberal Publication Department, 1948.), p. 16 (based on an address to the Liberal Summer School, 1948). Dingle Foot, who had lost his Dundee seat at the 1945 general election, remained a prominent Liberal in the late 1940s.
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- 38 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1945, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 67.
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- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 41 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1951, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 83.
- 42 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1955, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 90.
- 43 See Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, pp. 134–6.
- 44 Malcolm Baines, 'Liberals and Europe', *Journal of Liberal History*, 42 (Spring 2004), p. 46.
- 45 Malcolm Baines, 'Survival', p. 158.
- 46 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1945, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 66.
- 47 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1950, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 73.
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- 49 Andrew McFadyean, *The Liberal Case*, (Allan Wingate, 1950), p. 33.
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- 52 See Robert Ingham, 'Battle of Ideas or Absence of Leadership? Ideological Struggle in the Liberal Party in the 1940s and 1950s', *Journal of Liberal History*, 47 (Summer 2005), pp. 36–44.
- 53 See Rasmussen, *Liberal Party*, pp. 136–7.
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- 56 Radical Reform Group, *Radical Aims*, p. 1.
- 57 *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.
- 58 McFadyean, *Liberal Case*, p. 36.
- 59 See Ingham, 'Battle', pp. 37, 39.
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- 61 See the *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Apr. 1954; letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, 23 Apr. 1954; both cited in Watkins, *Liberal Dilemma*, pp. 72, 73.
- 62 Roy Douglas, 'The Liberal Predicament 1945–64', *Journal of Liberal History*, 50 (Spring 2006), p. 16.
- 63 Jo Grimond, speech to Scottish Liberals, *News Chronicle*, 17 May 1954; cited in Geoffrey Sell, 'Liberal Revival: Jo Grimond and the Politics of British Liberalism, 1956–67' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1996), p. 49.
- 64 Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1955, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 91.
- 65 Arthur Holt, 'The Liberal Attitude to Contemporary Problems', *Political Quarterly*, xxiv, no. 3 (Jul.–Sep. 1953), pp. 251, 252.
- 66 Elliot Dodds, *The Defence of Man* (Herbert Joseph, 1947), p. 135. On Dodds' contribution to Liberal thought, see Donald Wade and Desmond Banks, *The Political Insight of Elliot Dodds* (Elliot Dodds Trust, 1977); Robert Ingham, 'Elliot Dodds', in Brack and Randall, *Liberal Thought*, pp. 93–6.
- 67 Frank Byers and Elliot Dodds, *The Liberal Purpose* (Liberal Publication Department, 1946), p. 6.
- 68 McFadyean, *Liberal Case*, p. 8.
- 69 Dutton, *History*, p. 146.
- 70 Arthur Seldon was then research assistant to Sir Arthur Plant, professor of commerce at the London School of

# Reviews

- Economics, and was later, from 1957 onwards, editorial director of the Institute of Economic Affairs. See Meadowcroft and Reynolds, 'Liberals', pp. 45–51.
- 71 See Michael Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 114.
- 72 *Britain's Industrial Future: The Report of the Liberal Industrial Inquiry 1928* [1928] (Ernest Benn, 1977), pp. 261, 243. For a detailed analysis of *Britain's Industrial Future*, see Freedon, *Liberalism Divided*, pp. 105–18.
- 73 Wade and Banks, *Political Insight*, p. 23.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 36. For a detailed analysis of continuities and change in post-1945 Liberal thinking on co-ownership, see Stuart White, 'Liberalism's Progressive Past: Post-War Liberalism and the Property Question', in J. Margo (ed.), *Beyond Liberty: Is the Future of Liberalism Progressive?* (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2007), pp. 53–68.
- 75 Elliot Dodds, *The Defence of Man* (Herbert Joseph, 1947), pp. 139, 142.
- 76 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5.
- 77 Elliot Dodds, introduction to *People in Industry: A Report of the Liberal Co-Ownership Proposals* (Liberal Publication Department, May 1949), p. 8.
- 78 Elliot Dodds, 'The Third Way', 1951; cited in Wade and Banks, *Political Insight*, pp. 38–9.
- 79 Elliot Dodds, *This Freedom* (Joseph Woodhead & Sons, 1949), pp. 4, 5, 12 (based on an inaugural address to the Liberal Summer School 1948). The concluding, quoted phrase, acknowledged by Dodds, is from Leopold Schwarzschild, *The World in Trance* (Hamish Hamilton, 1943).
- 80 See Liberal Party General Manifesto 1950, in Dale, *Manifestos*, p. 72; Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1951, *ibid.*, p. 83; Liberal Party General Election Manifesto 1955, *ibid.*, p. 92.
- 81 See *Liberal News*, 16 Dec. 1955.
- 82 This intellectual process was assisted by the formation at Oxford in 1953 of the Unservile State Group, chaired by Elliot Dodds. See Peter Berberis, 'The Unservile State Group', in Brack and Randall, *Liberal Thought*, pp. 406–7.

## Tories and the Coalition

Ken Clarke, *Kind of Blue: A political memoir* (Macmillan, 2016); David Cameron, *For the Record* (William Collins, 2019); Oliver Letwin, *Hearts and Minds: The battle for the Conservative Party from Thatcher to the present* (Biteback Publishing, 2017)

### Review by Duncan Brack

THE JOURNAL OF LIBERAL HISTORY has reviewed several books giving the Liberal Democrat side of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–15 (David Laws's *Coalition and Coalition Diaries* (*Journal* 100, autumn 2018); Norman Baker's *Against the Grain* and Lynne Featherstone's *Equal Ever After* (both *Journal* 93, winter 2016–17)), but what did Conservative ministers make of it? Three autobiographies give us some clues.

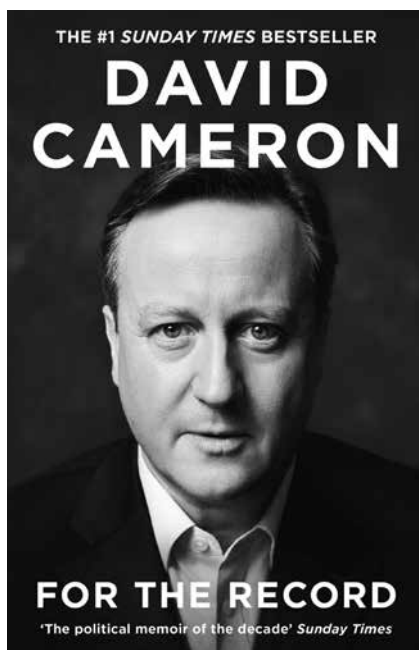
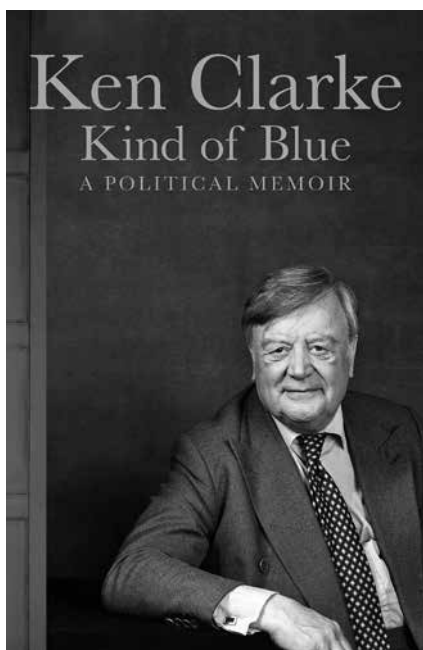
Ken Clarke's is the least revealing, though the most enjoyable to read. Covering the whole of his long political career, Clarke devotes just two chapters out of twenty-six to the 2010–15 government, in which he was first Secretary of State for Justice (2010–12) and then minister without portfolio (2012–14). He breezes through his time in office, doing what he thinks is right and ignoring everyone else, especially his fellow Conservatives (when appointed to Justice, he claims never to have seen Conservative policy on the issue; he refuses to allow No. 10 policy advisers to enter the department to meet anyone other than himself). He is scrupulously polite about David Cameron, and grateful to him for giving him a last (somewhat unexpected) chance at ministerial office, but does not hide his growing contempt for Cameron's spinelessness in the face of the Eurosceptics in his own party and in UKIP, which led eventually to the Brexit referendum – 'a startling and catastrophic decision' (p. 462), 'an irresponsible gamble' (p. 487).

He strongly supported the formation of the coalition, on the grounds that a minority government would be

incapable of achieving anything significant, and clearly got on well with Liberal Democrat ministers, particularly Nick Clegg, who chaired the Home Affairs cabinet committee, of which he was deputy chair. On many issues of civil liberties and criminal justice, and on Europe, he was clearly closer to the Lib Dems than he was to most other Conservatives. Overall, 'In my suddenly converted opinion, we were much more successful throughout our five-year term in coalition than a single-party Conservative government could have been' (p. 445). But apart from that, he has nothing to reveal about how the coalition worked in practice.

David Cameron's memoirs are much longer than Clarke's, and much less fun to read. Although he is ready enough to apologise when he thinks he's made a mistake, he is wearily self-congratulatory. He displays absolutely no self-doubt: everything he tries to do is right, because he knows or feels it to be so.

For all his early attempts to detoxify the Conservative Party, it's pretty clear that his conversion to hugging huskies and hoodies is superficial. Despite his claim that 'we are all in this together' in dealing with the deficit (p. 184), he never recognises the pain that the coalition's austerity policies caused to poor families and communities (a characteristic I noticed in the Conservative junior ministers at the Department of Energy and Climate Change when I served as a special adviser to Chris Huhne in 2010–12; generally decent people, the impact of policy on poor people simply didn't register with them) or the damage they caused to



local government. He defends the cut in the top rate of income tax in the 2012 Budget without explaining its impact on his pretence that ‘we are all in this together’ (p. 349).

He pays virtually no attention to environmental policy after he becomes prime minister (he mentions setting up the Green Investment Bank in 2012 but is completely silent on the 2015 decision to privatise it). Although he regrets fighting a poor campaign in the Brexit referendum, he is not sorry he called it. He claims that Tory backbenchers’ enthusiasm for it was explained by pressure from millions of their constituents – but in a discussion with one rebellious Tory MP it quickly becomes clear that it’s Conservative Party members’ views the MP cares about, facing a possible reselection battle against a Eurosceptic colleague if the boundary review goes ahead (p. 332).

Nevertheless, he has some interesting observations on the formation of the coalition. He recognises from the outset that it represents a far bigger risk for the Liberal Democrats than for the Tories – both because of what generally happens to junior partners in coalition governments and because of the specific risk to the Liberal Democrat voter base amongst public-sector workers, particularly in education, from the party’s support for spending cuts (p. 8). Along with George Osborne, he also recognises, far more than Clegg, the likely damage to the

Lib Dems from their decision to support the tuition fees increase; indeed, Osborne even advised Clegg not to go for it, but Clegg is adamant: “Our old policy was wrong; this is a good policy.” It was one of the bravest steps I’ve ever seen a politician take ... George was right. It *was* political suicide’ (p. 225).

He also recognises the damage that the alternative vote referendum caused to the Liberal Democrats, and to the coalition. He reveals that Michael Gove and Oliver Letwin both volunteered to campaign for AV, out of concern over the impact – but he reassures them it’s not necessary, and later authorises the Tory attacks on Clegg which argued that AV would lead to governments more likely to break their promises, just as the Lib Dems had over tuition fees. But ‘politics is a brutal business’ (p. 293), so that’s all right.

At the beginning of the coalition Cameron expresses himself keen that Clegg should take on a major department, perhaps the Home Office or the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (which hardly counts as a major department), but is relaxed when Clegg prefers to become deputy prime minister (p. 139). (In retrospect, it might have been better if Clegg had taken a department as well as become DPM. It would have helped to raise the profile of Liberal Democrat participation in government, though I recognise that it would have been

a considerable strain, and may have inhibited Lib Dem oversight over general government decision-making.) I’d love to know who the Lib Dem junior minister was who reassured Cameron, on his appointment, that: ‘You don’t have to worry about me. I’m basically a Tory anyway’ (p. 139). I’m guessing it was Jeremy Browne, junior minister at the Foreign Office 2010–12 and Home Office 2012–13; ‘never knowingly under-lunched’, as one Lib Dem minister once described him to me.

After the beginning, however, Cameron has remarkably little to say about the workings of the coalition. In fact, he has little to say about Liberal Democrat ministers at all, apart from Clegg. Generally, he simply ignores them – Lynne Featherstone, for example, the driving force behind the same-sex marriage act, is mentioned only in passing as looking after the consultation exercise (p. 440) – or patronises them (Danny Alexander in particular), seeming to think of them rather like children who are generally well behaved but occasionally, and inexplicably, naughty. With a small number of exceptions, the tensions between the two parties over a whole series of issues that are so evident in David Laws’s accounts go completely unrecorded.

The two main exceptions are occasions for surprise that the Lib Dems should dare to disagree with him. The first is the row over the Leveson reforms of the regulation of the

press, in 2013 – ‘the only time we [Clegg and he] nearly came to blows’ (p. 264). More serious is the dispute in 2012 over House of Lords reform and the review of constituency boundaries (which would have benefited the Tories, as Labour seats were – and still are – on average smaller in population). At first Cameron is highly complimentary about Clegg’s handling of Lords reform – ‘I thought the process brought out the very best in him: collegiate, measured and meticulous’ (p. 362) – but this turns to fury when Clegg threatens to veto the boundary review if the Tories vote down Lords reform: ‘at that point Nick began to show the worst of himself’ (p. 362); ‘I felt cheated by him. Here was this reasonable, decent person I had worked with for over two years being disingenuous and – frankly – dishonourable.’ (p. 363). Cameron is right to point out that the boundary review was explicitly linked, in the Coalition Programme, to the AV referendum (which was delivered), but this hardly negates the Lib Dems’ desire to want to see some positive outcome from the constitutional reform agenda. Apparently, for Cameron, the idea that politics is a brutal business isn’t supposed to apply to him. But eventually he gets his revenge, claiming that the decision to target Liberal Democrat seats in the 2015 election was mainly due to their vetoing the boundary review.

Cameron recognises, however, that he should have made more of an effort to persuade his own MPs to back Lords reform, and to make the likely link with the boundary review explicit (though he declares that ‘he wasn’t angry with the ninety-one’ Tory rebels who torpedoed it (p. 367); maybe he should have been). He doesn’t explicitly acknowledge that a large part of the problem – with this and other issues – lay in the way in which the Coalition Programme had been agreed by the Conservative leadership over the heads of its backbenchers, in sharp contrast to the Lib Dem approach – though Cameron does recognise that if another coalition is to be agreed after the 2015 election, Tory MPs would have to have a vote on it (p. 368).

In a distinctly muddled passage, he apparently blames the Liberal Democrats for the botched NHS reforms. Despite the Coalition Programme’s pledge to ‘stop the top-down reorganisations of the NHS’, he claims that structural reform is necessary (p. 228) but that it wouldn’t have needed legislation – and, therefore, somehow, wouldn’t have been ‘top-down’ – if it hadn’t been for the Lib Dems demanding the abolition of the Primary Care Trusts (p. 229). Although he is right to identify this as a Lib Dem proposal, the rest is just nonsense.

Tensions did not particularly arise, however, over economic policy. Although Cameron records initial difficulty in ‘getting the Lib Dems to the stage where they saw the need for fiscal consolidation along the lines we wanted’ (p. 186), in general there is little disagreement. Indeed, in 2012 he is pleasantly surprised at Lib Dem ministers’ enthusiasm for raising the income tax threshold. ‘We couldn’t believe our luck – after all the years listening to Lib Dems wanting spending increases, they were now actually asking for a tax cut.’ (p. 348) Clegg and Alexander were desperate to see the income tax cut implemented, as a manifesto promise they needed to see kept. The tragedy of their approach is that, despite the fact that it was indeed a Lib Dem policy (opposed by Cameron during the 2010 campaign, a fact he curiously omits to mention), almost no one in the electorate saw it as such, tax cuts being generally perceived as Tory-inspired. At the same time, the public spending cuts that were necessary to pay for it further eroded Liberal Democrat support.

The most interesting of the three books, from the point of view of the history of the coalition, is Oliver Letwin’s *Hearts and Minds*: part memoir, part a discussion of evolving Conservative ideology from the 1980s to the 2010s. Letwin, who was Minister of State for Government Policy (a title invented specially for him) from 2010 to 2016, was a key part of the coalition’s machinery behind the scenes, playing the opposite number to Danny Alexander or David Laws in keeping the coalition partners from diverging too strongly and

in resolving disputes, kicking major issues upstairs to the Quad or to bilateral meetings of Cameron and Clegg where necessary. Highly intelligent and possessing an impressive grasp of detail across most domestic policy areas, he helped smooth the workings of the coalition (and was one of the few Conservative ministers who really understood climate issues; as a special adviser in DECC, we often found him supportive).

He endorses some of Cameron’s observations, particularly over the risk the Liberal Democrats took in entering coalition. While he had been part of the Conservative team, together with William Hague and George Osborne, that had analysed the Liberal Democrat 2010 manifesto and had prepared for post-election negotiations, they had never assumed that they could agree a coalition; Letwin had in fact prepared a draft confidence and supply agreement. ‘It was clear to me that the large degree of convergence between the Liberal Democrat programme and our own arose not from political expediency but from the fact that the Orange Book Liberals had a world view very similar to that of the Cameron Conservatives’ (pp. 167–68).

But although, after the election led to a hung parliament, Letwin encouraged Cameron to make his ‘big, open and comprehensive’ offer to the Liberal Democrats – an offer which did not mention coalition but didn’t rule it out either – he was ‘completely astonished’ when the Lib Dem team announced that that was what they wanted (p. 174). Everything that he had read about the history of coalitions had convinced him that they were disastrous for the smaller partners. He assumed that the Lib Dems understood this too, so reached the conclusion that they were: ‘focused on producing the best possible government under the circumstances rather than on their own party interests ... we were talking to a group of politicians whose main aim was actually to produce and be part of a workable government’ (p. 174). This made the negotiations much more straightforward, particularly when the Lib Dem team accepted that they could avoid a number of contentious issues, such as

tuition fees or nuclear power, by agreeing that Lib Dem MPs would abstain (in retrospect, a disastrous choice), when Letwin had originally assumed that these would have to be traded off against Tory priorities.

He also identifies the fact that Clegg and the Lib Dem negotiators were ‘all people with serious conceptions of government’ (p. 175) as another contributory factor, but remains convinced that they made a ‘fundamental political error’ over the AV referendum. Aware that something like this might be a post-election demand, Letwin had taken the trouble to study the results of polls and focus groups on options for reform of the voting system. They had convinced him that while proportional representation could potentially garner majority support, AV had no chance. ‘It pretty quickly transpired that the Liberal Democrat negotiating team either hadn’t seen this evidence or didn’t believe it. So, to my further astonishment, instead of insisting on the immediate introduction of AV for the next election, they were happy to sign up to a promise from us that we would have a referendum on whether to introduce AV’ (p. 177). He even made it clear during the negotiations that the Conservatives would campaign for a No vote, but the Lib Dem negotiators were quite relaxed about this. Letwin does not speculate on whether the Conservatives would actually have accepted legislation for AV as part of the deal, but if they had, this must count as one of the most disastrous decisions of the Liberal Democrat team and leadership. Given the narrowness of the Tory victory in 2015, AV almost certainly would have resulted in another hung parliament.

Letwin goes into some detail on the structure of the coalition, which he sorted out with Jim Wallace in the first days of the government. This included the Coalition Committee, and the practice of ensuring that all cabinet committees had a chair from one party and a deputy chair from the other, with either party having the right to refer any decision to the Coalition Committee. In practice this right of referral was never used, and the Coalition Committee was

almost entirely superseded by Cameron–Clegg bilaterals, the Quad, Quad meetings with Letwin and Laws also in attendance, and Letwin–Alexander/Laws bilaterals. ‘This was exactly what we hoped would happen. The point of the arrangement was to guarantee that neither side could bludgeon the other into particular decisions. We hoped this would provide a basis upon which informal discussion between the two sides of the coalition could be used to resolve tricky issues without either party feeling disadvantaged’ (p. 179).

As Letwin observes, the system worked because it was based on trust, a ‘doctrine of no surprises’, and continuous discussion – and also because of the fact that, on most issues, there was relatively little difference between the ministers at the centre of the coalition, even if that was not so true of their wider parties. ‘Would the mechanism ... have worked with a different cast of characters – less intelligent, less rational, less decent, less aligned with Cameron’s Conservatives? My guess is that they would not ... I doubt that the system would have prevented things going wrong if the key players had fundamentally been at loggerheads’ (p. 182) – though if they had been that fundamentally opposed, it hardly seems likely that they would have agreed a coalition in the first place. The more interesting question, on which he doesn’t speculate, is whether the system would have worked so well if the Liberal Democrats had been more determined to use government explicitly to deliver benefits for their own supporters – as the Conservatives did for theirs. Would that have helped bolster public support for the party, or would it simply have caused the machinery of government to grind to a halt?

Letwin is right, though, to identify not just how easy it was to put the mechanisms together, but also how well they functioned over the following five years; by any assessment, the 2010–15 government operated as a government far better than the administrations that followed it. He also identifies the Coalition Programme itself as a key element – in effect, ‘a contract between the two sides of the coalition ... any decision not to implement any

part of the Programme, or any move to add to the Programme, could come about only by further “contractual” agreement between the parties’ (p. 183). The Programme set out exactly what the government would do (at least for the first few years) and thus came to possess a far higher status than a mere party manifesto. (I can confirm that that’s how we saw it in DECC.)

Because of this, it also had the unexpected, but welcome, consequence of making civil servants ‘stick firmly to the script’; as well as making sure the coalition worked, Letwin spent most of his time in government making sure that departments did what they were supposed to do, including developing various means of tracking performance data in real time. Working together with his Lib Dem counterparts and with Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary, he also ensured that the messages that ministers wanted to convey to the civil service machine were the same from each party’s ministers and the same as the messages the central apparatus of the civil service itself sent out. He believes that this was another key element in the smooth functioning of the coalition.

There were of course some major disagreements, and Letwin was involved in trying to resolve most of them. He concurs with George Osborne that the Liberal Democrat position on tuition fees was a huge mistake on their part. ‘I had nothing but respect for Nick’s open-mindedness in coming to a conclusion so different from the one he had presented to the electorate just a short time earlier. But I simply couldn’t see how he would explain the abandonment of the pledge ... in policy terms it was the right decision, but this had blinded him to the fact that, politically, *he* wasn’t in a position to make it’ (pp. 195–96).

Another issue was the EU, where, as Letwin recognises, the two parties began from wholly different starting points: ‘there really wasn’t much that basically divided Danny Alexander’s politics from mine, except on this issue’ (p. 196). In practice, however, the particular matter at stake – the number of Justice and Home Affairs opt-ins the government would choose – was

resolved fairly amicably. NHS reform was of course a major headache, but, in contrast to Cameron, Letwin does not blame this on the Lib Dems, but on the failure of the reform package to address the issue of integrating health and social care for elderly people; he thinks it did a decent job for the rest of the NHS.

He identifies just two episodes where the basic harmony of the coalition broke down, and they're exactly the same as in Cameron's assessment: the Leveson reforms and the row over House of Lords reform and the constituency boundary review. On the former, Letwin blames pressure from Hacked Off and the Labour Party more than anything else, and in the end a compromise is reached. On the latter, unlike Cameron, Letwin clearly understands the Lib Dem position; though, like Cameron, he is exasperated with the degree of opposition to Lords reform among Tory backbenchers. 'The coalition dynamics had come into conflict with the dynamics (or rather, the statics) of the Conservative parliamentary party and the result was ... nothing' (p. 220). (As David Laws observed in his *Coalition Diaries*, 'In coalition, "no" is a far more powerful word than "yes".') A single-party government could probably have resolved 'such big ideological bust-ups' because of its 'underlying bonds of loyalty' (p. 221); but the coalition, based on a transactional arrangement, could not do so.

These are the exceptions rather than the rule. For the rest of the time, coalition 'felt like a functional rather than a dysfunctional operation. What is more, it felt like a sane and stable administration' (p. 221). (In sharp contrast, one might observe, to the Johnson government which, two years after *Hearts and Minds* was published, expelled Letwin from the Conservative parliamentary party.) Letwin clearly enjoyed working in coalition and admits that he found himself as often allied with as opposed to Lib Dem ministers; he appreciated the opportunity to sideline Tory hardliners: 'I certainly had more in common with some of my closest Liberal Democrat coalition colleagues than I did with some of my most ideologically distant fellow Conservatives'

(p. 213). No wonder he helped make the coalition work.

All these books reinforce what I think is the generally accepted conclusion that, in terms of delivering what it set out to do, the coalition worked well, and better than the governments that preceded and followed it. But I believe that they also suggest that what the coalition delivered could have been better for the Liberal Democrats as a party: that Lib Dem ministers, and particularly Nick Clegg, were too responsible in delivering effective government, and missed too many chances to dig their heels in and demand something – anything – that would have more obviously rewarded their own supporters and shored up

their collapsing support in the electorate. To be fair, they were beginning to behave more in this way by the latter years of the coalition, but by then it was too late.

And perhaps the biggest lesson to draw from these accounts is that when your own coalition partners, with nothing to gain, warn you about the consequences of your own decisions – on tuition fees and even, implicitly, on the AV referendum – you really need to pay attention.

*Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History. For the first two years of the coalition government he served as a special adviser at the Department of Energy and Climate Change.*

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## Whitley and the Whitley Councils

John A. Hargreaves, Keith Laybourn and Richard Toye (eds.), *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations: J. H. Whitley (1866–1935) – Halifax Radical and Speaker of the House of Commons* (Routledge, 2018)

Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**

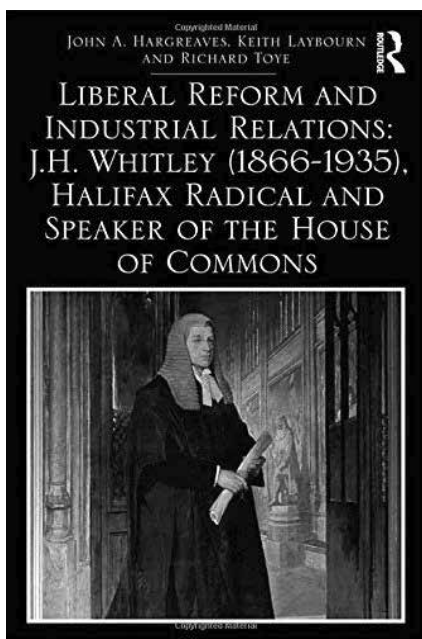
**S**TUDIES IN LIBERAL history have burgeoned over the past twenty-five years but a number of lacunae have remained. One such was a study of J. H. Whitley, eponymous link with the Whitley Councils and the last Liberal Speaker of the House of Commons. Whitley's family are now rectifying the omission. Dr Chris Cook, the doyen of searchers and publishers of political sources, noted that Whitley's papers 'relating mainly to his ... period as Speaker' were in the hands of his son and that '[I]t is believed that no other private papers exist.'<sup>1</sup> Happily this proved to be wrong, and in October 2011 Whitley's grandson, John Whitley, deposited the whole archive with the University of Huddersfield as the nearest academic institution to Whitley's home and political base in Halifax.<sup>2</sup> Following on from the establishment of the Whitley archive, an annual J. H. Whitley lecture was established in 2012. The 2014 lecturer was John Bercow, the then Speaker and a

very different personality to Whitley.<sup>3</sup> Now a book of essays on Whitley has been published as a forerunner to a full biography.

Inevitably in a book of twelve separate essays there is a certain amount of repetition; but essentially it gives a sympathetic picture of a little known Liberal figure and is a useful contribution to the history of a traumatic period in Liberal history.

It is evident that John Henry Whitley, known always as Harry Whitley, would have fitted very easily into the present-day party. His was a practical local Liberalism built on local voluntary action and a seven-year apprenticeship on the Halifax County Borough Council, continuing his final term of office whilst MP for the town. He established a seaside camp at Filey for poor boys from Halifax and often took charge of the camps himself. The camps continued long after his death and were taken over by later members of the Whitley family. Also, together





with other family members, Harry Whitley established the Halifax Guild of Help, an early coordinating body for the voluntary sector, out of which eventually developed the Councils of Voluntary Service of today. He was reluctant to become an MP, refusing the nomination on a number of occasions until finally accepting it for the 1900 'Khaki' general election. Such was his local popularity that, in the two member constituency, with the pro-Boer war Conservative topping the poll, Whitley took the second seat displacing the sitting Liberal MP. The whole Whitley family was involved in Liberal politics and in municipal and voluntary service, and one gathers that it was a sense of duty that impelled him into taking on the Liberal nomination and what appears to have been to him the distasteful task of spending months in London rather than in Halifax.<sup>4</sup> Also investing Whitley's Liberalism was his strong Non-conformist religion, being a lifelong Congregationalist, a denomination one of whose key tenets was the independence of each local church. I recall that the late Donald Wade, a former deputy leader of the Liberal Party, was a leading Congregationalist.

The Whitley family were mill owners but, unusually for Halifax where wool was the dominant textile, they were cotton mills. Harry Whitley gave his responsibilities to the family business as the reason for being unable to

accept the Liberal association's nomination at the 1895 election.

The one apparently discordant note in the Whitley family's otherwise consistent life was the despatch of Harry Whitley, and, one by one, his younger brothers to the relatively new public school, Clifton College, in Bristol. Harry's father chose the school because, 'differences of opinion were tolerated and a boy had to make his way by character and industry.' John Hargreaves points out that another practical reason was perhaps that Harry's mother had died when he was three and the lack of a maternal presence in a busy household could perhaps in part be substituted by going away to a public school that proclaimed a Christian heritage.<sup>5</sup> As a student and sportsman, as in many other spheres, Harry Whitley was capable though not outstanding, but in the school's debating society he was a confident and articulate advocate of radical causes, few of which, however, secured a majority in the final vote! He retained a lifelong affection for the school and supported a number of fundraising initiatives whilst Speaker.

As a back bench MP, Whitley pursued positive Liberal policies to alleviate poverty and poor housing conditions. To deal with the latter he proposed the taxation of land values which, he argued, would inhibit land hoarding and encourage building. He supported home rule for Ireland and backed women's suffrage. His first step on the path of promotion was his appointment as a whip in 1907 – a relatively relaxed task one would assume, given a Liberal majority of almost 130. In 1920 he made a big change, moving from the Whips Office – the heart of the political battle – to become deputy chairman of Ways and Means, distant from political partisanship. Unfortunately, in dealing with this period, Clyde Binfield gives no indication of how or why he made this shift or how a year later he became deputy Speaker and chairman of Ways and Means.<sup>6</sup> In this latter post he had to deputise for Mr Speaker Lowther who was often absent.

Whilst in the latter post an unexpected crisis arrived for the Liberal

Party. In January 1915, in the middle of the First World War, the chief whip, Percy Illingworth, another Yorkshire MP and from all reports a superb occupant of the post, died suddenly from typhoid fever as a result, it was said, of eating a bad oyster. Asquith turned to Whitley to take over but he refused; some reports say that he felt that his health was not up to the demands of the job, but John Hargreaves states that Whitley told Oliver, his youngest son, that he did not feel himself sufficiently partisan to take on the role of disciplinarian.<sup>7</sup> It is also possible that he saw his future as succeeding to the Speakership rather than in party politics. His refusal led indirectly to the Liberals' poor parliamentary performance during the first Labour government in 1924 as Asquith was unable to find a long-term occupant as chief whip until his close colleague Vivian Phillips accepted. However, Phillips' antipathy to Lloyd George made it difficult for the party to present a united front. The poor performances of the Liberal and Labour whips led to the collapse of the Labour government and the Liberal Party never regained its parliamentary strength.<sup>8</sup>

Whitley became Speaker in April 1921 and held the position until June 1928. Although not a particularly long tenure he had a number of unique and difficult political events to deal with, including the Anglo-Irish Treaty which removed the Republic of Ireland MPs from the House of Commons, the first Labour government in such a minority government that it was not even the leading party in parliament, the presence of women MPs, and the General Strike of 1926. As Speaker, Whitley himself was unusual: first, he was from the North; second, he was a textile manufacturer rather than the usual lawyer or member of the landed gentry; and, as it turned out, he was the last Liberal Speaker. The general assessment of him was that if not outstanding he was certainly effective.<sup>9</sup> In particular he had decided to treat disruptive Labour MPs, particularly the 'Red Clydeside' Members with a 'long rein' and this was far from pleasing to the more respectful Members who accused him of being too easy

going. The objective fact was that his strategy worked in that for the most part the House functioned and was rarely disrupted. He was, in effect, following similar Liberal methods to the ones he had employed in the Halifax mill in dealing with labour relations and acknowledging the role of trade unions.<sup>10</sup> In the midst of the difficulties of dealing with a boisterous House, there were the particular difficulties of the initially split Liberal Party. One would have expected Whitley's politics to have placed him alongside the Asquithians rather than supporting the Lloyd George faction, but at the 1918 general election he accepted the Coalition Liberal label even though he had not received the Coalition 'coupon'.

Perhaps Whitley will be remembered chiefly for his role in the formation of the joint industrial councils that bear his name. The Whitley Councils emerged from the First World War and the Asquith government's concern about industrial disputes affecting the war effort detrimentally. Whitley was the Deputy Speaker and Asquith appointed him to chair the relevant committee. His experience in managing a large cotton mill and maintaining harmony there was valuable experience for the new committee. The committee produced five reports during 1917 and 1918, the first of which is usually thought of as the Whitley Report.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, few industrial councils survived much beyond the war, but the civil service saw the value to their work and took up the idea. Also, the unions were not enthusiastic about the Whitley concept of works committees and the response to these was somewhat disappointing.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that industrial councils and works councils survived at all has given the Whitley name a continuing resonance.

One of the conditions on which Whitley agreed to accept the Speakership in 1921 was that he would not have to take the traditional peerage on retirement. He had always been opposed to the existence of the House of Lords and he was determined to be consistent. In 1928, when the time came to retire, he personally asked the

king to be excused appointment to the Lords. A somewhat different attitude to that of John Bercow!

His expressed intention on retirement was to return to Halifax and to pick up his voluntary work there but, despite his wish for a quieter life, he took on two further onerous tasks. In 1929 he accepted appointment as chairman of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, travelling a great deal and eventually producing a report sympathetic to the need for regulation to improve working conditions and pay for Indian men and women. In 1930 his last national appointment was as chairman of the Board of Governors of the BBC. John Reith was the powerful and opinionated director general of this burgeoning corporation and was fearful of Whitley's appointment. Whitley was determined from the beginning to establish a good working relationship with Reith and he achieved that to Reith's satisfaction, arguably by being too supportive of Reith's hegemonic and somewhat narrow views on the duty of the BBC to safeguard moral values. Whitley died in office at the BBC in 1935.

This book is a useful addition to the literature on a troubled period in Liberal history and provides a valuable insight into the varied life and times of one of the lesser Liberal figures whose political life spanned the whole period from 1900 to 1928. I look forward to

the forthcoming biography of Harry Whitley.

*Michael Meadowcroft has been a Liberal activist since 1958; Liberal MP, Leeds West, 1983–87; elected Liberal Party President, 1987; political consultant in 35 new and emerging democracies, 1988–2016.*

1. Chris Cook, *Sources in British Political History 1900–1951, Volume 4: A Guide to the Private Papers of Members of Parliament: L–Z* (Macmillan, 1977)
2. Details of the archive can be found at <http://heritagequay.org/archives/WFA/?view=item>
3. I gave the 2017 lecture on 'The myths and lessons of the 1924 Labour government'; a version of the lecture appeared in the *Journal of Liberal History*, 100 (Autumn 2018).
4. Professor Keith Laybourn chapter, *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations*, p. 68.
5. *Ibid.*, Dr J. A. Hargreaves chapter, p. 9.
6. *Ibid.*, Professor Clyde Binfield chapter, p. 53.
7. *Ibid.*, Hargreaves chapter, p. 26.
8. M. Meadowcroft, 'The 1924 Labour government and the failure of the whips', *Journal of Liberal History*, 100 (Autumn 2018).
9. Professor Richard Toye chapter, *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations*, p. 109.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
11. *Ibid.*, Professor Greg Patmore chapter, p. 87. (Officially the Whitley Committee on Relations between Employers and the Employed.)
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–1.

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## The language of elections

Luke Blaxill *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880–1914* (Royal Historical Society, Boydell Press, 2020)

Review by **Iain Sharpe**

**P**OLITICAL HISTORIANS STUDYING elections in the pre-1945 era before opinion polling have always faced a difficult challenge in gauging what voters were thinking and why they voted as they did. David Butler and his fellow authors of the ‘Nuffield’ studies of post-war elections could draw on detailed opinion polling to shed light on the outcome. But interpreting election results in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century elections can sometimes feel like little more than guesswork.

Those who have attempted studies of pre-1945 elections have found various ways of overcoming this problem. A. K. Russell and Neil Blewett, in their respective monographs on the 1906 and 1910 elections, scoured candidates’ election addresses to produce detailed tables of which issues were mentioned most. The diaries and correspondence of leading politicians can also provide valuable insights. There is also press coverage. But until the last couple of decades this was a laborious process: researchers had to spend long hours combing through column inches of yellowed newsprint or microfilm to find reports of election speeches and political meetings and so discover what candidates, journalists and voters were saying and writing. It could feel a bit random and unscientific, and above all time-consuming.

The experience has been transformed by the arrival of digitised newspaper archives, such as the *Times* Digital Archive and the British Library Newspapers collections. Now we can search for and identify the articles we are looking for using names of candidates, political parties, constituencies. It saves time and enables us to be more confident that we have not missed anything crucial. But, for whatever reason (perhaps a sense that British political history is a tired and passé field of study),

digitised newspapers have not been exploited to their potential in the study of politics and elections.

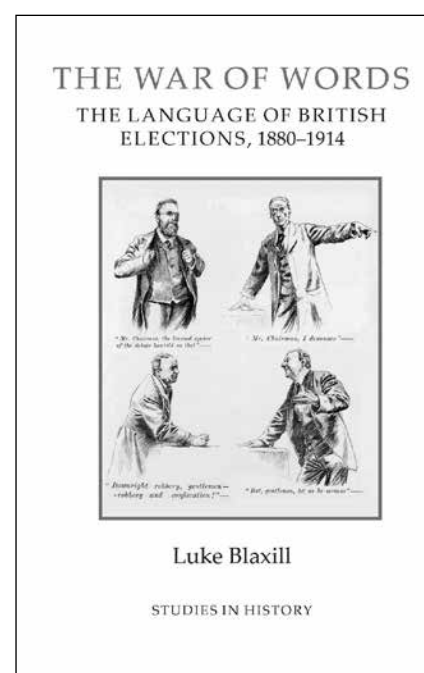
So, Luke Blaxill, in this excellent monograph, is blazing a trail for the innovative use of newspaper archives to shed new light on pre-First World War electoral politics. He uses the technique of corpus linguistic analysis, which although common in social sciences has not really been adopted by historians. He has compiled three collections (or ‘corpora’) of election speeches between 1880 and 1914, one from East Anglia, another from other constituencies across the country, and a third of speeches by leading statesmen with a more national than constituency focus.

He has used these corpora to search for and identify how often particular issues, or words associated with them, were mentioned in hustings speeches. While such an approach cannot tell us what voters were thinking, it does tell us what candidates thought were the issues most likely to win votes. Such an approach enables a more methodical and quantitative analysis of these speeches than is possible by historians reading and interpreting the text. It provides researchers with a significant new angle in studying historic election campaigns.

Blaxill applies his approach to weigh in on debates and controversies surrounding elections in the late-Victorian and Edwardian era, by turns challenging or reinforcing current wisdom. So he points to Joseph Chamberlain’s radical ‘Unauthorised Programme’ having had a greater impact on the 1885 election than recent historians have suggested; the continuing importance of home rule as an issue in 1892 as well as 1886; the South African war being the decisive reason for the Unionists’ triumph in 1900 (a view that is once again becoming received wisdom after being challenged by

historians); and the Unionists being in a stronger position before the First World War than recent literature has allowed for, with a positive and unified position on tariff reform. There are other issues whose importance he revises downwards, such as the distinctive identity of the Liberal Unionists after 1886, the impact of imperialism in the 1895 general election, and the importance of New Liberalism in Liberal electoral success in the Edwardian period.

He also looks at the importance of national personalities on election campaigns. In doing so he establishes Gladstone’s continuing central importance to politics during the 1886–92 period, which some historians have seen as little more than a coda to his long career. In fact, Gladstone’s name was mentioned almost as often in the latter election as in 1886 and references to him far exceeded those of any other politician; for example, in Blaxill’s ‘national’ corpus there were 271 mentions of Gladstone but only 44 of the Conservative leader, Salisbury. But most surprising is Blaxill’s finding that, in the two elections after his adoption of home rule, Gladstone was referred to far more often by opponents than by supporters (between twice and four times as often depending on which corpus is used). In fact, he shows that this is true generally of



# Asquith vs Lloyd George

On 7 December 1916, H.H. Asquith was replaced as Prime Minister by David Lloyd George. The change followed mounting disquiet over the conduct of the First World War, and Lloyd George's demands that a small committee, not including Asquith, should direct the war effort. Lloyd George forced the issue by resigning from the coalition government. Unionist ministers sided with Lloyd George and indicated their willingness to serve in a government led by him.

The Liberal Party remained divided until the end of the war and beyond. The party fought the next two general elections as two separate groups and the reunion that finally came, in 1923, was, in Asquith's words, 'a fiction if not a farce'.

Was the split between Asquith and Lloyd George caused by their contrasting personalities, or by substantive disagreements over management of the war? Or did their rivalry reflect deeper divisions between different Liberal traditions?

Join **David Laws** and **Damian Collins MP** to discuss the causes and consequences of the Asquith–Lloyd George rivalry. Both speakers contributed chapters to Iain Dale's new book, *The Prime Ministers: 55 Leaders, 55 Authors, 300 Years of History* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), David Laws on Asquith and Damian Collins on Lloyd George. Chair: **Wendy Chamberlain MP**.

**7.00pm, Monday 1 February** (following the Liberal Democrat History Group AGM at 6.30pm)  
Online meeting, on Zoom: register via the History Group website at [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk)

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national party leaders, but most distinctively so in Gladstone's case.

It would be easy for a book such as this to consist of dry statistical analysis, and while there are certainly plenty of graphs and tables contained partly in lengthy appendices, it is written in a lively and engaging fashion that means it is far from a dull read. Inevitably corpus linguistic analysis can only provide part of the picture in studying elections and there will always be a place for the qualitative analysis of election leaflets, speeches and newspaper reports, along with party records, politicians' diaries and correspondence.

It still leaves us plenty to argue about. For example, while this reviewer is in happy agreement with Blaxill about imperialism, Liberal Unionism and New Liberalism, I think he overstates the case that the

Unionists were bound for victory in the election due to have taken place in 1915 had war not intervened. The Unionists may have had a unified and coherent message on tariff reform, but the evidence of post-First World War general elections suggests this was still not a winning electoral cause. In addition, there was at least a year of the parliament still to run and the potential for the course of events to affect the likely electoral outcome. Had the Liberal government achieved 'peace with honour' in the August 1914 crisis, delivered Irish home rule with compromise between Unionists and nationalists, and succeeded in abolishing the system of plural voting that had cost up to fifty seats in 1910, it would have been in a strong electoral position. Had it allowed Germany to occupy Belgium and France and

presided over civil war in Ireland, it would have faced certain defeat – and probably even more catastrophically than Blaxill suggests.

Whatever specific disagreements one may have with particular conclusions, Blaxill deserves much praise for pioneering a new approach to the study of electoral history – one that, from the evidence presented here, has provided considerable new evidence and insights. One hopes that corpus linguistics analysis will be taken up by others in this and other fields of historical study. By any standards this is an important and impressive book.

*Dr Iain Sharpe is an administrator at London University and a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.*