Manifestos

Richard Toye analyses Liberal manifestos to trace the party's beliefs about the British empire/commonwealth, colonialism and decolonisation

Liberal Party, Empire and Commonwealth, 1900–1979: A perspective through election manifestos

WHAT WAS THE Liberal Party's vision of empire? How much did Liberals care about the issue? These are significant questions because they have the potential to cast light on the centrality, or otherwise, of imperial concerns in British politics and society more generally. This article uses Liberal manifestos to trace the party's beliefs about the British empire/commonwealth, colonialism, and decolonisation, from 1900 through to 1979. As would be expected, the theme of empire was dominant at the start of the period – in connection with debates about South Africa and free trade – and declined thereafter. The 1920s saw a flurry of interest in colonial development. Post-1945, the party sought to claim credit for the transformation of empire into commonwealth, made early demands for a British turn to Europe, and showed pioneering concern about racial discrimination. By the 1970s, the discourse of empire/commonwealth had been reformulated into post-colonial debates over race relations and immigration. The commonwealth ceased to be discussed in any meaningful way as a significant geopolitical entity.

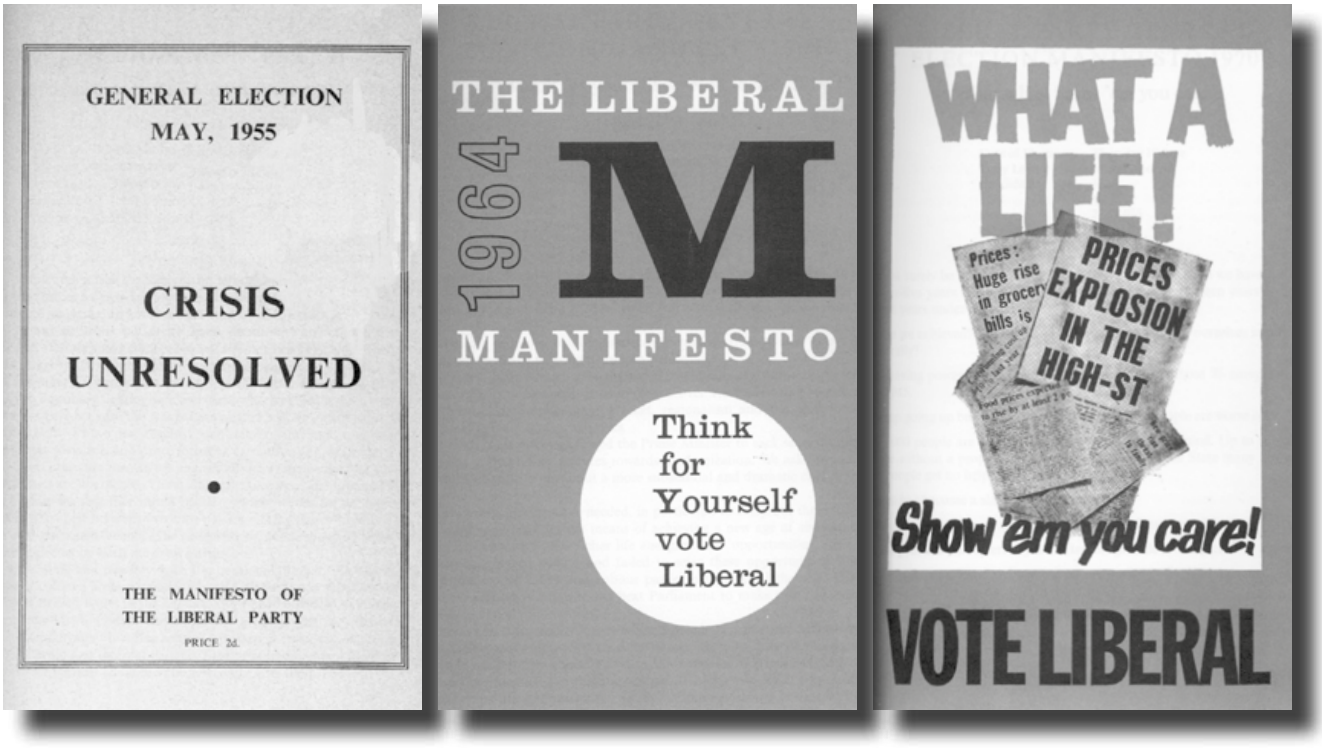
There has been longstanding historical controversy between scholars who argue for the importance of popular imperialism, and those who claim that the British people were rather uninterested in empire.[1] These debates always had a political edge, not least because of the idea that, never having properly processed its loss of status or engaged with the realities of its past, Britain is still gripped by a form of neurosis. Paul Gilroy has labelled this 'post-colonial melancholia'.[2] The issue has come to greater prominence due to public and academic arguments over the significance of Brexit, which is entangled with the longer story of the decline or reformulation of 'Britishness'.[3] As Robert Saunders has pointed out, claims that supporters of the Leave campaign were motivated by imperial nostalgia are often made in an overly simplistic way. Yet at the same time, he rightly suggests, 'post-imperial

patterns of thought' should be regarded 'not as a psychological affliction to which only half the population is subject, but as a common cultural inheritance through which all sides think and argue.'[4] The question remains, however, whether all groups in society have been equally prone to imperial/post-imperial thought, and whether there have been genuine moments of escape from, or rebellion against, its constraints. Have there, indeed, been moments when its importance genuinely faded?

An examination of the Liberal Party's electoral promises over the first seven decades of the twentieth century can help illuminate these questions. This is in spite of the fact that Britain's last exclusively Liberal government came to an end, with the formation of the Asquith coalition, in 1915. Although the party's decline was real and drastic, the Liberals continued to have moments of real political salience and apparent revival. As Peter Sloman has recently written, 'The re-emergence of the Liberal Party as a significant electoral force was one of the most important political developments in 1970s Britain' – this being achieved on the back of a critique of class politics and the unresponsiveness of the two-party system to citizens' problems.[5] Yet even for those many stretches during which Liberal electoral prospects seemed hopeless, the views put forward by an embattled minor party can be used to cast light on the broader political landscape. Though the Liberals lacked the opportunity to enact their policies, their manifestos cast light on what was thought to be politically sayable and potentially popular.

To understand what manifestos can tell us about imperial issues requires an appreciation of the genre and how it changed over time.[6] These documents had their origins in the election addresses – or personal constituency manifestos – of party leaders. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was an established convention that a leader's address, notionally addressed to his constituents, was a guide to his party's national policy, even though individual candidates retained a good deal of freedom of manoeuvre. Up to and including 1918, Liberal general election manifestos

Liberal Party election manifestos: 1955, 1964, 1970



often, but not always, took this form. Thereafter, the party consistently issued its own manifestos in a style that would be recognisable today – except in 1929, when David Lloyd George's address to the electors of Caernarvon Boroughs was taken as the authoritative party statement. Over time, these documents tended to become longer and more detailed (as did those of the other parties), though the upward trend was not entirely consistent. Thus, the 1900 Liberal manifesto consisted of 1,790 words and the 1979 one of 7,061 words. This expansion had implications for the audience and purpose of manifestos.

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Manifestos have a reputation as documents that are 'unread, and often unreadable'. By the time that Lord Hailsham made that comment, in 1976, it was likely fair.[7] Earlier in the century, however, they achieved wide circulation. It is plausible to imagine that the relatively short and punchy addresses-cum-manifestos of the Edwardian era, which were often reproduced in newspapers, achieved a substantial readership. During that period, party leaders were largely content to lay out general principles, leaving detailed policymaking for when they were in office. But as time progressed, and partly in response to the challenge of Labour, parties were increasingly expected to provide lists of specific pledges, as well as to explain how they would be paid for. As manifestos lengthened to give evidence of policy planning, they were less likely to be perused by ordinary voters. But they were still important because of their agenda-setting function and because of the way that they were discussed in the media. 'A party's manifesto, however little it is read, is always a crucial political document', explained one leading journalist in 1974. 'It defines the party's very being and purpose, fixing the analysis of problems, listing the pledges, enumerating the priorities which are repeated in a thousand candidates' speeches across the country.'[8] Arguably, as the post-1929 Liberals stood little chance of forming a government, they had a little more leeway than Labour and the Conservatives, because their plans were less likely to receive searching scrutiny.

One somewhat crude way of measuring imperial language in manifestos is simply to count the occurrence of specific terms. For this purpose, the following words were designated the 'empire word-group': empire, imperial(ism/ists), colony, colonies, colonial(ism), dominion(s). The word 'commonwealth' was counted separately. The limitations of this approach should be noted. First, allowance must be made for the changing length of manifestos across time. Second, there is some scope for the data to mislead, as with a few uses of 'commonwealth' that do not refer to the (post-) imperial institution, but this is marginal. Third, the use of the words in question does not necessarily mean that parties favoured empire – sometimes, for example, parties referred to 'colonialism' in order to attack it. Fourth, the data does not capture references to specific territories (e.g. India) or imperial issues (e.g. tariff reform).

The numbers do, however, offer a starting point for considering the relative tendencies of the various parties to discuss these questions and gives some insight into their favoured terminologies. Uses by each party of the entire empire/commonwealth word group is shown in Figure 1. The detailed data is available upon request. Taking all the 1900–1979 manifestos together, the Liberals were the party which made the fewest uses of the empire/

commonwealth word group, and the Conservatives the most (with more uses than both other parties put together). 1900 and 1906 were the only elections at which the Liberals outdid both the Conservatives and Labour in this respect, although their lead over the Tories was trivial. The Liberals did quite often outmatch Labour, notably in 1945, 1950, and 1951, but Labour's prolific use of 'commonwealth' in the 1960s contributed to its significant overall lead over them.

'Commonwealth', it should be noted, enjoyed a mid-century boom across all three parties but faded during the 1970s. Over the whole period, the Liberals were significantly less likely than their rivals to use the term, though they achieved the highest 'commonwealth' count on one occasion (the election of 1951). It will be clear, then, that there were considerable ups and downs in occurrences of the empire/commonwealth word group. To explain this, we need to look at the various elections in more detail.

For the Liberals, the poll of 1900 was not much more than an exercise in damage limitation. The South African (or Second Boer) War had started the previous year with a series of British reverses but, now that the military situation had improved, Lord Salisbury's Unionist government sought to profit by calling a 'khaki' election. Conservatives and their Liberal Unionist allies painted the Liberals as unpatriotic, unmanly, and even treacherous.[9] The Liberals' task was made harder by the sharp divisions within their party, between 'Liberal Imperialists' who supported the war and 'pro-Boers' who opposed it. As party leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman faced the unenviable task of trying to keep the factions together under the onslaught of jingoistic attacks. It should be noted that pro-Boers, such as Lloyd George, were not in general hostile to the empire as such – they simply believed that this particular imperial conflict was misconceived.[10] The Liberals had a long record of attacking Tory 'imperialism', which they associated with an autocratic style of government, and presented themselves as the custodians of an empire based on morality and freedom rather than on mere selfish national interest.[11]

The National Liberal Federation published an election manifesto, the rhetoric of which was in line with the heritage of Gladstone. It accused the government of imperial and foreign policy mismanagement and of failing to understand Britain's true national mission. The overall message could be summed up as 'The empire is not safe in the government's hands.' The manifesto foregrounded imperial issues strongly – it made no attempt to sidestep the South African question. 'The Nation will not soon forget the dark days of less than a year ago following the miscalculation of a Government that had risked a war without first counting the cost.' As a result of ministers' incompetence, Britain had been humiliated, the manifesto claimed. 'Disasters in the field fell like thunderclaps upon our country and overwhelmed it with shame, apprehension, and distress.' If the position had now recovered, this was due not to the actions of the government but rather to 'the genius of Lord Roberts' (the British commander in South Africa) and the courage of his soldiers. Coming from the Liberal side, this praise of the military probably sounded rather unconvincing, but it was necessary in order to deny any credit to those who were directing the war on the civilian side.[12]

The manifesto also denounced a panoply of alleged failures elsewhere around the world. In some cases, it accused the government of being unnecessarily provocative (triggering conflict on the Indian frontier, for example). In other ones, it alleged feebleness: 'In Siam, Tunis, and Madagascar British interests were gratuitously sacrificed by a series of what were called "graceful concessions".' It further denounced Unionist neglect of social

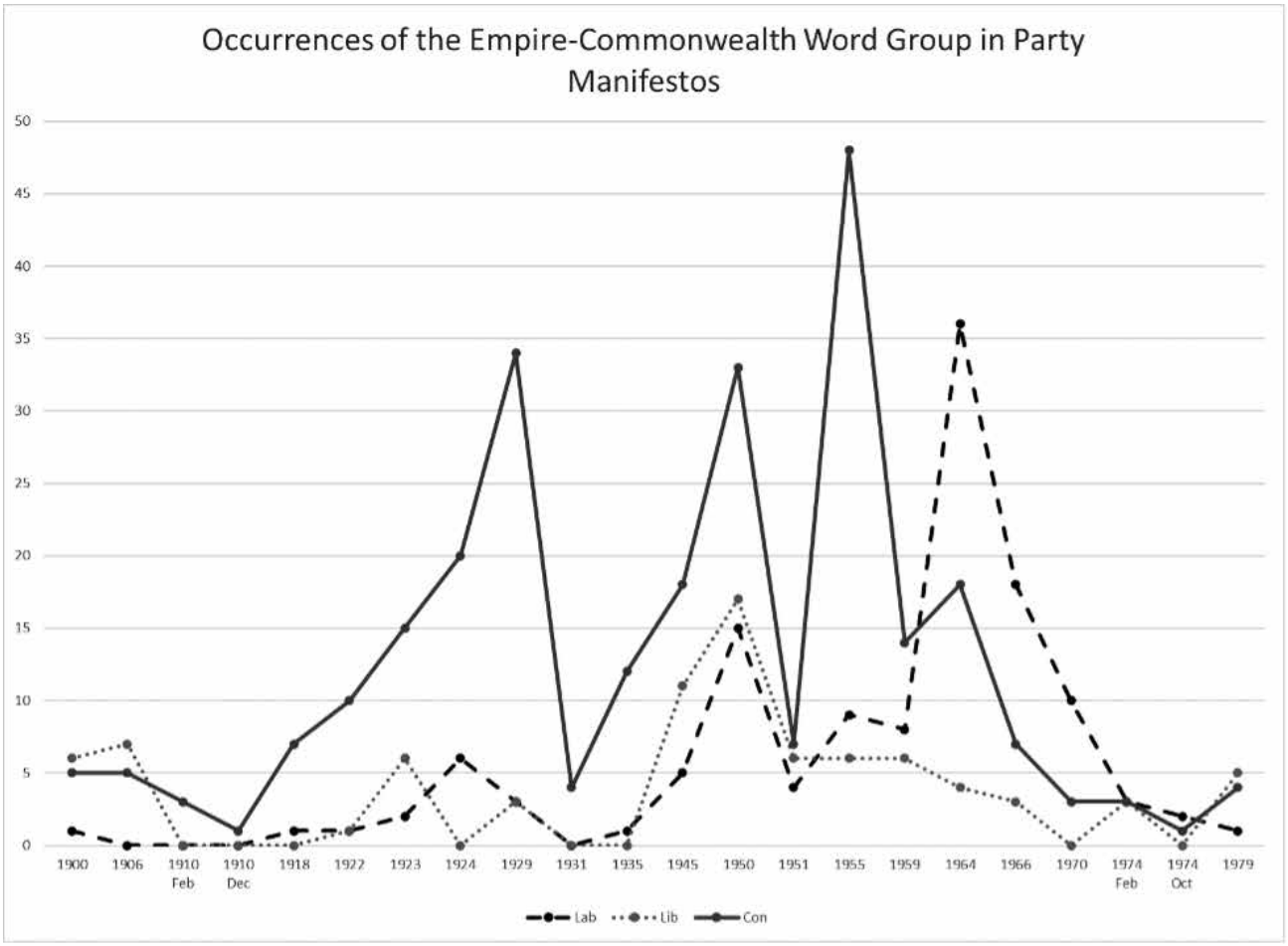

Figure 1. Note that the 1918 Conservative figure refers to the Lloyd George coalition manifesto, and that figures for the post-1931 'National' Liberal group are not shown.

issues, but though the manifesto was spirited in its criticisms, it could scarcely disguise the fundamental split in the Liberals' own ranks. It offered a slight desperate plea to the competing factions to sink their differences: 'Shall we not all unite in condemnation of a Ministry which, for the five years of its existence, has kept the Empire in a ferment, has squandered its resources, and in legislation and administration has shown neither the will nor the power to pursue or to initiate a policy of progress and reform?'[13]

By the time of the next election, in 1906, the party had achieved much greater harmony. A major cause of this was Joseph Chamberlain's decision to launch a campaign for imperial protectionism, or 'tariff reform'. This split the Unionists, raised the spectre of 'food taxes', and allowed Liberals to coalesce around their traditional cause of free trade, which was strongly embedded in British culture.[14] At the time of the election, Campbell-Bannerman was already prime minister, Arthur Balfour's government having resigned at the end of the previous year. In his election address, which on this occasion served as the party's manifesto too, 'C-B' continued the critique offered in 1900. He accused the Unionists of mishandling the aftermath of the Boer War and criticised the use of Chinese indentured labour in South Africa – attacks on 'Chinese slavery' were a popular Liberal election cry. He also dedicated considerable space to free trade. A key Chamberlainite argument was that tariff reform would allow empire countries to favour each other's trade through a mutually beneficial system of concessions (or 'imperial preference').

Campbell-Bannerman rejected the claim that this would bolster imperial unity:

> I hold that any attempt to rivet together the component parts of the Empire with bonds so forged, or to involve it with us in a Fiscal war against the world, is not, and cannot come to, good. An empire 'united' on a basis of food taxes would be an empire with a disruptive force at its centre, and that is a prospect with the realisation of which, both in the interests of the Colonies and the mother-country, I can have nothing to do.[15]

As this suggests, though the Liberals may have been less emotionally attached to the empire than Conservatives were, they still wanted to present themselves as its custodians. Far from wanting to dissolve it, they argued that *artificial* attempts to strengthen imperial ties at the expense of the people at home and in the empire, would be counterproductive.

H. H. Asquith replaced Campbell-Bannerman as prime minister in 1908. He was much less inclined than his predecessor to use election addresses/manifestos to discourse on imperial matters (though his support, in 1918, for reform in India should be noted).[16] This was so even though international trade remained an important issue and though anti-colonial resistance surged in Egypt, Ireland and India after the First World War. It was not that Asquith and his colleagues did not care about empire questions or that they remained silent about them in general. But they did not use manifestos to foreground them as central questions in the electoral fight.

In 1923, the Conservatives sought a mandate for protection, inadvertently triggering reconciliation between the Asquith and Lloyd George Liberal groupings that had split from one another during the war. But though free trade was still common ground for both, the reunited party's manifesto arguments for it made no reference to the threat that tariff reform might pose to the empire. The party was now being progressively outstripped by Labour, which formed its first (minority) government in 1924. By talking little about the empire in its manifestos, the Liberals were behaving more like their socialist rivals than like the Conservatives, whose 1920s manifestos saw a significant increase in the use of imperial language.

What little the Liberal manifestos did say was interesting, nonetheless. There was some novel reference to imperial development. This must be understood in two different contexts. First, the need to find a solution to the problem of mass unemployment. Second, the shifting discourse of colonial development more broadly. As Aram Ziai notes, 'in a long and discontinuous process during the first half of the 20th century, the idea gained prominence that developing a colony had to be linked with material improvements for the indigenous population'.[17] This type of development helped provide a rhetorical justification for empire at a time when it was increasingly threatened by nationalist movements.

The concept first appeared in the 1923 manifesto, which argued for government support of 'enterprises that would permanently improve and develop the home country and the Empire'. In addition to domestic initiatives such as such as afforestation and land drainage of land, there was mention of 'the development of Imperial resources especially in our Crown Colonies, railway building in the Dominions and India, the facilitation of oversea settlement under the British flag, [and] cheapening the means of transport in order to develop inter-imperial trade'.[18] Briefer references occurred in 1924 and 1929.[19]

A more detailed idea of what was intended can be gleaned from the 1928 policy document *Britain's Industrial Future* (or 'Yellow Book'). This substantial volume, produced after Lloyd George had seized the party leadership, was the culmination of a shift away from

classical Liberalism and towards economic interventionism.[20] The Yellow Book included a chapter on 'Imperial Development'. This expressed caution about the expansion of empire trade, making clear that this could not be expected to solve all of Britain's economic problems.

> These considerations do not, however, alter the fact that the Empire presents opportunities for development of vast potentiality, which it is both our duty and our interest to utilise to the utmost of our power. No policy of national revival would be other than incomplete if it did not give a high place to this task; a task which is peculiarly incumbent upon Liberals, seeing that the Liberal Party may justly claim to have been responsible for the most important stages in the development of the Empire's modern form, as a commonwealth of co-operating peoples.

The chapter sought to refute the idea that Liberalism was indifferent to the empire's well-being and promoted the idea that Britain's colonial rule was a form of trusteeship exercised on behalf of 'simple and primitive peoples'.[21] Although the radicalism of the Yellow Book's economic vision provoked discontent amongst traditional Gladstonian Liberals, of whom there were still many, these bland imperial sentiments were likely acceptable across all wings of the rapidly fracturing party.[22]

During the course of 1931, with even free trade now being a point of contention, the party split in three. Two groupings – the Simonites and the Samuelites – joined the Conservative-dominated National Government, and Lloyd George's small group remained outside. When an election took place in the autumn, Lloyd George's address referred to 'the imperial Parliament' but made no direct substantive comment on empire affairs.[23] Sir John Simon's letter to his constituents, which served as his Liberal National group's manifesto, also steered clear of discussing them explicitly, though it argued in favour of tariffs.[24] Only the manifesto of Sir Herbert Samuel's group made overtly imperial arguments. It claimed that 'freedom of trade is the only permanent basis for our economic prosperity and for the welfare of the Empire and of the world.' It also argued for 'The development of responsible government in India' via the Round Table Conference which had been initiated by the Labour government in 1930.[25] The Samuelites left the National Government in 1932, because of their opposition to the Ottawa agreements, which marked a decisive breach with Britain's free trade past. Their 1935 manifesto included none of the terms from the empire/commonwealth word group, and instead highlighted the need to strengthen the League of Nations, in the context of Mussolini's recent invasion of Abyssinia.[26]

By the time of the 1945 election, the National group of Liberals had effectively been co-opted by the Conservatives. The remainder of the Liberals, now under Sir Archibald Sinclair, held misplaced hopes for electoral success, despite fielding only 306 candidates. Sinclair fought a rather traditional campaign and was overshadowed by Sir William Beveridge, who had been elected as a Liberal MP in the wake of his famous wartime report on social services. The party's manifesto has been described as 'probably the most left-wing on which it campaigned in the whole of the twentieth century.'[27] In this context, it is striking how prominent imperial issues were in the document (though this did not translate into local campaigning, assuming that individual election addresses were representative of this). The manifesto was cast as a twenty-point programme, with 'The British Commonwealth' appearing second on the list, above 'Service Men and Women', 'Social Security', 'Full Employment', and 'Housing' (points 3 through 6). It argued:

> The Liberal principle which inspired the creation of the Commonwealth – that of free and independent nations working together in a common loyalty for a common way of life – must be fostered as an element of stability in the world and a practical example of the way in which security can be combined with national freedom.[28]

Liberals and others had been using the term 'commonwealth' for decades, as a synonym for empire which lacked the connotations of domination.[29] And the manifesto did not drop 'empire' entirely. Nevertheless, there was now a greater emphasis on 'commonwealth' and the spirit of free association it was said to represent. At the same time, there was a return to discussion of colonial development and trusteeship, now paired with the encouragement of 'political self-government in association with the Commonwealth'. This was the first suggestion in a Liberal manifesto of political reform in any territory other than India. There was also now a proposal 'for complete self-government for India' – a much stronger suggestion than the various vague hints of change in previous manifestos.[30]

The disastrous electoral performance in 1945 confirmed the Liberals as a fringe party rather than as a serious contender for government.[31] At the 1950 election, under the leadership of Clement Davies, the party tried to take credit for having inspired the ongoing transformation of empire into commonwealth and welcomed the newfound independence of India, Pakistan and Ceylon. However, the manifesto also sounded a note of caution: 'Self-government must only be granted to Colonies when in the interests of the majority of the people concerned. […] Even then, colonial economic independence is unlikely.'[32] In 1951, with the Cold War well in train, the manifesto insisted that 'One of the greatest forces for peace is the British Commonwealth.' There was, moreover, now some acknowledgement of the fact of racial injustice. 'Liberals are proud of the Commonwealth. They wholly condemn the colour bar which exists in parts of it.'[33] Race discrimination had long existed within the empire, of course, and some Liberals had shown concern about it, but the issue had gained greater prominence with the establishment of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1948.

This period saw the emergence of European cooperation and integration as a theme in Liberal manifestos. That of 1950 pressed for faster development of the recently founded Council of Europe but also insisted that there was no need for Britain to choose between Europe and the commonwealth.[34] Similar sentiments were to be found in the other manifestos of the fifties: united Europe, the commonwealth, and the UN were to be mutually reinforcing. Jo Grimond took over as leader in 1957, and the party began a partial recovery. Five years later, at the time of Britain's first, failed application to join the European Economic Community (EEC), the Liberal Assembly hardened its pro-European line. The commonwealth was not to have a veto over UK membership of the EEC.[35] In the 1964 manifesto, it was insisted that Britain had a special role to play in commonwealth development. But the commonwealth now appeared in a new context too. By this point popular fears about immigration had led the Tory government to introduce restrictions. The Liberals now said that they would 'take the initiative in setting up a system

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of commonwealth consultation towards an agreed policy for immigration, exclusion and expulsion and the rights of political asylum.'[36] This seems like an attempt to address the issue without appearing racist or coercive.

In the 1966 manifesto, there was a specific section headed 'Non-Racialist Approach to Immigration', separate from that on the commonwealth. (The latter section deprecated 'compromises with racialism'). It spoke highly of immigrants' contributions to the country, but also suggested that there would be immigration control, albeit 'regulated by the availability of jobs or the possession of skills and not fixed at an arbitrary figure bearing no relation to vacancies.'[37] Jeremy Thorpe became party leader in 1967. He was vocal in denouncing the white minority regime in Rhodesia, in a way that was consistent with the Liberal humanitarian tradition.[38] He attacked apartheid and criticised the Labour government's ambiguous line on the Vietnam War. Moreover, his progressive approach to immigration, together with David Steel's pioneering role in legalising abortion, meant that 'in the social and cultural sphere, the party was associated with the "permissive" agenda'.[39]

Tensions over this came into the open in the wake of Enoch Powell's 1968 'rivers of blood' speech. In an unscripted party-political broadcast, the leader of Birmingham City Council's Liberal group, Wallace Lawler, appeared to contradict the official Liberal line on immigration. Lawler may not have been as extreme as Powell – he had campaigned for Sikh bus drivers to be allowed to wear turbans – but he wanted to exclude most groups of migrants from moving to his city.[40] His tough line may help explain his narrow victory in the 1969 Ladywood parliamentary byelection (he lost the seat the following year). Local and national liberalism could deliver very different messages.

The 1970 manifesto backed the UN, NATO, and British membership of the EEC. It urged American withdrawal from Vietnam as soon as possible and regretted the recent US invasion of Cambodia. The commonwealth was not mentioned. Traditional free trade beliefs now merged with anti-racism and concern for the economic development of poor nations but without any use of imperial or post-imperial terminology of the kind that had previously been associated with these issues. Hence, 'Greater freedom in international trade will assist the underdeveloped countries who need markets for their products. […] Britain and other countries should contribute 1 per cent of Gross National Product of official aid to developing countries as soon as possible. We are totally opposed to all forms of racial and religious discrimination.[41]

In the three further Liberal manifestos of the '70s, there was little evidence that the commonwealth was thought to hold geopolitical significance, though there was some sense of historically derived duty towards it and of a distinctive relationship. Commonwealth countries were thus not considered entirely 'foreign'. The February 1974 manifesto stated the party's belief that Britain had a 'primary obligation to citizens of the United Kingdom and colonies', as well as to commonwealth citizens whose right to register as UK citizens after five years' residence had been removed by the 1971 Immigration Act. The manifesto called for that right to be reinstated and for a royal commission to 'examine and clarify' the rights of UK and commonwealth citizens.[42] The October 1974 manifesto was silent on commonwealth issues but in 1979, under the leadership of David Steel, the party suggested that Britain had a special contribution to make to Third World development 'because of our links with the Commonwealth.'[43] Subsequent Alliance/Liberal Democrat manifestos made only a few notional references to the

commonwealth. The theme was now dead as an area of substantive policy discussion.

In conclusion, manifestos were, of course, only one part of the picture. Were one to make a review of other types of election literature, as well as speeches, press conferences, and interviews, it is likely that a more complex story would emerge. Such an exercise would undoubtedly reveal considerable diversity between different localities and candidates (as the discussion above of Birmingham suggests). Nevertheless, as authoritative, even definitive, statements of the party's national policy, manifestos offer an excellent method for tracking change across time. This article has traced not merely the decline of the empire/commonwealth as an electoral theme but also some notable alterations in the ways in which the issues were formulated.

It is clear that, at the start of the period, traditional Tory claims about the Liberal Party were inaccurate. Liberals were neither indifferent nor hostile to the empire – had they not cared about it, they would hardly have divided so sharply over the South African war. However, they were certainly not as committed to it as Conservatives and Unionists were. For Liberals, it was desirable to maintain the empire, but not at the expense of the welfare of British workers.[44] This may help explain why a party which was so wretchedly split on so many issues adjusted to the decline and fall of the empire with little obvious sign of pain. Both the Conservative and Labour parties were much more troubled by the switch from commonwealth to Europe, which the Liberals embraced early and with alacrity. Whatever the Liberal Party's faults, excessive imperial nostalgia does not appear to have been one of them. ■

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Reviews

From rebellion to emancipation

Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* (Vintage, 2021)

Review by Andy Cabot

Michael Taylor's *The Interest* – and its even more pointed subtitle: *How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* – achieves something quite unique in just about 300 pages: the book provides a comprehensive synthesis of the critical period in the debate on British slavery between the Demerara rebellion in 1823 and the passing of emancipation in parliament in 1833. Taylor's work is notable for its examination of the era and its key figures, making it