

Introduction to Liberal history

In our short introductory article series, Michael Freeden tells the story of the Rainbow Circle, a discussion group of progressives founded in 1894.

The Rainbow Circle

IN HIS 1831 volume of essays, *The Spirit of the Age*, J. S. Mill wrote of a ‘change [that] has taken place in the human mind ... an age of transition’, embodying its ‘indefinite progressiveness’.¹ Sixty years later, Britain was permeated by another wave of ideological ferment, ostensibly more modest but of huge significance in the twentieth-century domestic renewal of social visions and practices. A remarkable concatenation of discussion and activism groups, many with overlapping membership, flourished in London and beyond. The best-known of those is, of course, the Fabian Society – that seedbed of intellectual middle-class socialism – that disseminated a vast range of closely researched and argued pamphlets packed with information and policy proposals. But there also existed an abundance of secular ethical societies, campaigning journalists, conscientious clerics, and urban missions centring on the educational needs of underprivileged youths. They all subscribed to what we would now call a left-of-centre persuasion, in which the boundaries between an advanced social liberalism and a moderate ‘socialist’ reformism were blurred. Once Labour revealed itself as a distinct political force, however, the progressive British political parties began to impose their institutional straitjackets on the political

landscape, transforming the term ‘socialism’ into a label that increasingly separated liberalism and socialism from one another.

Origins and mission

Among all those left-of-centre eddies was the Rainbow Circle, established in 1894 and convening monthly on a Wednesday evening for almost forty years.² Emerging from an informal discussion coterie in the National Liberal Club, it began by meeting regularly at the Rainbow Tavern in Fleet Street (hence the name), initially seeking a counterbalance to the dogmatic individualism and anti-statism of the old Manchester School. As one discussant pertinently observed in 1908, ‘The contrast between Liberalism and Socialism is beside the mark: the real contrast is between Socialism and Individualism’.³ The moniker ‘Rainbow’ proved to be a fortuitous designation, as observed by the Circle’s long-serving and cherished third secretary, the civil servant Ambrose Parsons: ‘The lowly origin of the name was not known to later members who were pleased by the imaginative notion that the Rainbow Circle was so called because, combined in one harmonious whole, it included every shade of progressive opinion (from the all red Socialism of Mr Herbert

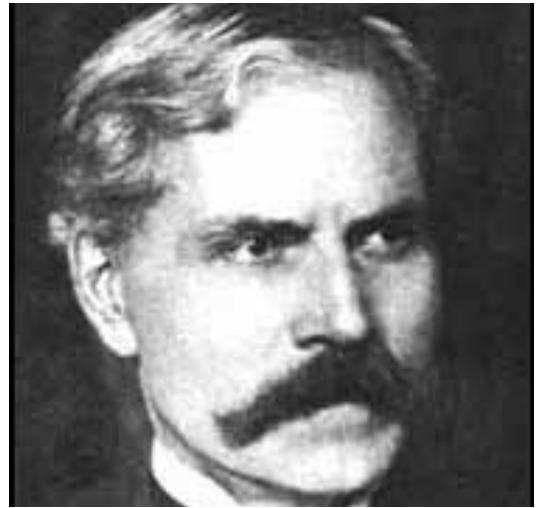
Burrows [the co-founder of the Social Democratic Federation] to the violet Liberal Imperialism of Mr Herbert Samuel).⁴

The Circle may not have been a crucible of dramatic ideational innovations, but it was unique in moulding and honing a progressive ideology drawing from its diverse membership of notable activists, some long-term, others transitory. Ramsay Macdonald was its first secretary, addressing the Circle on eleven occasions between 1895 and 1924 on matters such as the referendum, industrial affairs, state educational policy, or state compensation for industrial accidents. His talks on the Labour Party induced debates that, among others, queried the awkward fit between trade unionism and socialism. The leading Liberal Herbert Samuel gave an early talk in 1895 on the new liberalism that preceded his important book: *Liberalism: Its Principles and Proposals*.⁵ He argued for ‘a third social philosophy’ independent of the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabians. As against class sectionalism and an exaggerated emphasis on narrow political action, and in the face of some scepticism in the ensuing discussion, Samuel envisaged ‘a very positive view of the State as “a partnership in every virtue & all perfection”,’ adding that, while wedded to individual liberty, the new liberalism’s ‘root idea must be the unity of society – complex in its economic, cooperative, ethical and emotional bonds’.⁶

A commingling of personalities and professions

Two of the Circle’s intellectual heavyweights were J. A. Hobson and J. M. Robertson. Hobson, the new liberal theorist, economist,

Members of the Rainbow Circle:
Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937)
Herbert Samuel (1870–1963)
Sir Richard Stapley (1842–1920)



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writer and journalist – a regular contributor to the *Manchester Guardian* and the pathbreaking liberal weekly the *Nation* – read twenty-two papers to the Rainbow Circle. Together with his colleague L. T. Hobhouse, who was

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elected to the Circle in 1903 but never took up his place, he shares the distinction of being Britain’s most original liberal thinker in the half-century following T. H. Green’s death.⁷ Hobson’s diverse talks included a forerunner to his seminal book on imperialism, an analysis of the relationship between unemployment and underconsumption (the latter an economic theory that was later praised by Keynes), accounts of, separately, American capitalism and South African industrial monopolies, feminism, the newspaper, and Hobson’s influential insistence on the organic psycho-physical nature of society. Robertson, the impressively learned and accomplished Liberal politician, literary critic, rationalist, and freethinker, also delivered twenty-two papers on topics ranging from figures such as Machiavelli, Paine, Disraeli, or Joseph Conrad, through discussions of politics and economics in France and India, to problems concerning Malthusianism and eugenics, taxation, tariff reform, and the minimum wage.

Among other significant members were A. G. Gardiner, editor of the *Daily News*; G. P. Gooch, the historian, Liberal MP and long-term editor of the *Contemporary Review*; C. P. Trevelyan, the Liberal MP; Percy Alden, the Liberal, then Labour, MP whose career was devoted to public sector social service;

Graham Wallas, the Fabian Essayist and LSE-based political scientist; and F. J. Matheson, secretary of the British Institute for Social Service.⁸ The philanthropist Sir Richard Stapley chaired the Circle at his house at 33 Blooms-

bury Square until shortly before his death in 1920. Alongside them were entrepreneurs, government employees, lawyers, and organisers in the voluntary sector. No women were members, although women were invited to attend meetings and on

a couple of occasions gave talks themselves. Over the years, ten of the Circle’s members were elected as Liberal MPs, while an equal number were unsuccessful parliamentary candidates. Eight members obtained seats in the landslide 1906 general election alone. The ethicist and lecturer H. J. Golding recalled that ‘membership of the Rainbow Circle ... gave me chastening intercourse with some of the strongest minds in the liberal movement in thought and politics ... leading progressives were of the company.’⁹

The London Ethical Societies, in particular South Place Ethical Society in Conway Hall, Red Lion Street, were parallel hubs for leading Circle members. Conway Hall became a major forum of secular humanism and the site of the well-regarded Conway Annual Lecture. Burrows, Hobson, and Robertson were regular Sunday lecturers under its secular auspices, later joined by the social philosopher Cecil Delisle Burns.¹⁰ Of that venue Hobson wrote: ‘My close connection with this liberal platform, lasting continuously for thirty-six years, was of great help to me in clarifying my thought and enlarging my range of interests in matters of social conduct ... I found myself driven to put ethical significance into a variety of current topics and events, many of

which belonged to the fields of politics and economics.’¹¹

The minute-books: an intellectual and ideological treasure trove

The particular value of the Rainbow Circle for liberal historians and for explorers of the rise of a community-inclined welfare ethos lies in the survival of its minute-books – the first volume graced with Ramsay MacDonald’s beautifully rounded handwriting. They testify to the richness, variety and intellectual curiosity of the subjects that exercised the Circle’s humanists, professionals and practitioners and afford an edifying glimpse into the fashioning of so many of the arguments, proposals, and concerns that eventually, if unevenly, matured into policy documents such as the Liberal Yellow Book, the Beveridge Report and more broadly into the post-1948 welfare state.

Sadly, only four of the five minute-books remain, up to 1924. They had been removed to the house of Percy Alden, where the meetings continued after the east side of Bloomsbury Square was demolished in the late 1920s to make way for Victoria House. However, the fifth volume, concluding in 1931, disappeared after a German bombing attack destroyed Alden’s house. The others ended up in the Hampstead home of the Rainbow Circle’s last secretary, Stephen S. Wilson. When I traced the minute-books down there in the 1980s, Wilson graciously permitted me to photocopy them around the corner at a newsagent’s. I gingerly carried these precious and weighty tomes in a shopping bag, in an uneasy mixture of excitement and trepidation. Deciphering, transcribing and editing them for the Camden Series of the Royal Historical Society became a labour of love that occupied me for a year of evenings. After Wilson’s death, the minutes were safely deposited at the London School of Economics.

The meetings were organised thematically, each annual session having an overarching heading. Among the early ones were ‘The New Radicalism’, ‘Democracy’, ‘The Duties of the State to the Individual in the Industrial Sphere’, ‘A Practical Programme for a Progressive Party’, ‘The Newer Demands of the Political Left Wing’, ‘Imperialism’, and ‘Ethics and Social Reform’. That solid contemporary political angle was later relaxed in favour of two series on political thinkers and occasional literary figures, though the gatherings continued to track events and to reflect challenges of the time such as pre-1914 social unrest, land reform, and of course foreign policy and affairs, the First World War, and post-war reconstruction.

Unlike the discussions they inspired, the papers themselves were not fully reproduced – though their gist was usually recorded – except in one instance when the Rainbow Circle published its 1910–11 papers as a book, *Second Chambers in Practice*, against the backdrop of the crisis and reform of the House of Lords.¹² But the Circle also ventured separately on the launching of a journal, *The Progressive Review* (1896–97), that aimed to be a mouthpiece of the progressive movement. Samuel later reminisced in his *Memoirs* that ‘Finding that we were more or less at one in many things the Rainbow Circle decided, in 1896, to publish a review to propagate those doctrines that we held in common’.¹³ Passionately, and true to the Circle’s credo, the *Review*’s first issue proclaimed that ‘Liberal thought and the enthusiasm of social reform are sprouting from a thousand seeds sown by education in a thousand spots’.¹⁴ The epithet ‘progressive’ summoned up the new liberalism, deliberately avoiding too close an association with the Liberal Party, its pre-1906 incarnation believed to be mired in an increasingly irrelevant mindset. Indeed, Hobson – a key driving force of the *Review* – had already drawn attention in an

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1899 Circle lecture to the ‘widely held intellectual affinities which ... place the leaders of the Radical, the Socialist & the Labour groups much nearer to each other than their followers imagine’. Among those, Hobson listed the extirpation of heredity in government, old age pensions, and – in a warning to some of his colleagues – the need to resist the ‘yielding of certain progressives to imperialism’.¹⁵ But the Review was short-lived, foundering on those very ideological divisions over imperialism, on too modest a circulation, and on personal grievances between William Clarke, the editor, and Ramsay MacDonald, acting as its secretary.

Of equal, if not greater, interest were the detailed accounts of the discussions – pro, contra, and off-piste – that followed a paper’s delivery and indicated the wealth of opinions and backgrounds of the Circle’s members. On their own, those fascinating and invaluable summaries enable readers and researchers to get a handle on the myriad swirling and informed tributaries at the disposal of British leftwing liberalism. Even when watered down in the interwar years, their survival power propelled them to infiltrate and endure in major post-1945 conversations, often appropriated – consciously or not – by Labour Party policies.

Legacy beyond evanescence

The demise of the Rainbow Circle in 1931 marked a double decline. The one was a result of biological attrition: the ageing or death of most of its founding and active members and its inability to recruit a new generation of social reform aficionados and ideational luminaries. The other was the crumbling of a coherent annual programme that could furnish continuity and fire up lasting engagement. Years of sustained advocacy aimed at recasting the quality of Britain’s public agenda gave way to a disjointed assemblage of unrelated topics more befitting a genteel and casual

monthly club. Thus, the financial situation, education, the constitution of Andorra, and thrillers were lumped together in the Circle’s final full year.

The interwar era saw the waning of the public dominance of British liberal thinking – notwithstanding the success of the Liberal Summer Schools, the advent of a more technical interest in Keynesian economic strategy, and Beveridge’s plan.¹⁶ The Labour Party had drained political and contemplative liberalism of some of its most creative thinkers and essayists, whose voices now blended into brands of socialism that possessed their own pedigree and identity. As for personalities, stimulating scholars, journalists and ideological innovators who could match Robertson’s erudition or Hobson’s effervescent originality, these were in short supply or wedded to different forums. The programmatic output of the Liberal publicist Ramsay Muir was a dull substitute for the new liberals at their passionate prime. As much of the left-liberal vision had been subsumed into sections of Labour social planning, liberals tended to fall back on notions of individualism and property. Rather than upholding some forms of collectivism, the remaining liberals demonstrated a more tepid and inconsistent commitment to state regulation. In its diminished form, the Rainbow Circle could no longer contribute, either in inclination or in the current aptitudes of its members, to its initial ethos of intertwined social life and benign public-spiritedness. It had outlived its purpose.

Given today’s reduction in dedicated face-to-face group meetings, one is more likely to encounter them in hard-nosed specialised think tanks, in amateur book clubs, or in academic workshops. The decorous and conscientious endeavours of the Rainbow Circle now appear to be largely rooted in past social customs and practices. Here was a small private group recruited from

disparate walks of life, comprising various professional sub-cultures, exuding political fervour, displaying mainly well-mannered disagreements alongside bridge-building, and a quasi-formal conviviality in very comfortable surroundings. Yet that elite association of individuals, crucially sporting democratic and altruistic instincts, was gifted with the capacity to generate an extraordinary social and cultural impact on a scale far beyond its numbers, aligned with the broader progressive vanguard from which it drew nourishment and into which it injected urgency and imagination.

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- 1 J. S. Mill, *Essays on Politics and Culture*, ed. G. Himmelfarb (Anchor Books, 1963), esp. pp. 1–8.
- 2 *Minutes of the Rainbow Circle 1894–1924*, edited and annotated with an Introduction by Michael Freeden (Royal Historical Society, Camden Fourth Series, vol. 38, 1989).
- 3 *Minutes*, p. 170.
- 4 A. Parsons (ed.), *Second Chambers in Practice* (P. S King & Son, 1911), p. v.
- 5 H. Samuel, *Liberalism: An Attempt to State the Principles and Proposals of Contemporary Liberalism in England* (Grant Richards, 1902).
- 6 *Minutes*, p. 28.
- 7 See M. Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Clarendon Press, 1978).
- 8 For the full list, see the *Minutes*, appendix II.
- 9 H. J. Golding, *The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Ethical Movement* (D. Appleton, 1926), p. 180.
- 10 S. K. Ratcliffe, *The Story of South Place* (Watts & Co., 1955), pp. 60–76.
- 11 J. A. Hobson, *Confessions of an Economic Heretic* (George Allen & Unwin, 1938), pp. 57–8.
- 12 Parsons (ed.), *Second Chambers*, p. v.
- 13 (Viscount) H. Samuel, *Memoirs* (The Cresset Press, 1945), p. 24.
- 14 'Introductory', *Progressive Review*, vol. 1 (1896), pp. 1–2.
- 15 *Minutes*, p. 68.
- 16 See M. Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought 1914–1939* (Clarendon Press, 1986).

Letters to the Editor

Asquith

I enjoyed Radio 4's recent dramatisation of Robert Harris's latest novel, *Precipice*.

The actor reading out the book gave Asquith a conventional 'received pronunciation' accent. However, I'd always been under the impression that he had a very slight Yorkshire accent, but perhaps I'm wrong? (Similarly, I'd been given to understand that

Gladstone had a slight Liverpool accent – but again, perhaps I'm wrong.) Can anyone advise?

Incidentally, Asquith's Wikipedia page has an audioclip of him supposedly delivering his Budget speech in 1909. Does anyone know if this recording is genuine?

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