

**Tony Little** provides a foretaste of the Liberal Democrat History Group's next publication, *Great Liberal Speeches*, by introducing a speech by John Bright on 20 May 1858

# Plus Ça Change

## The politics of faction in the 1850s

In May 1858, Cardwell tabled a motion of censure to force Lord Derby's minority Conservative administration out of office. The pretext chosen was a proclamation issued by Lord Canning, Governor General of India, in the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny and condemned by Lord Ellenborough, President of the Board of Control, in a despatch from London. The condemnation was leaked to the Liberals and the press. Was this a manoeuvre by Disraeli as an excuse to publish the condemnation officially? The government had not been fully informed of Canning's intentions and their condemnation was unjust. However, the reason for their ignorance could be laid at the feet of Palmerston's retiring ministers. When this became clear and when it was known that a defeat for the government would result in a new general election after only a year, Liberal dissensions surfaced. Facing an overwhelming mutiny from the back-benches, Disraeli humiliated the Liberal leaders by forcing them publicly to request Cardwell to withdraw his motion. Derby's government survived for another year.

John Bright was a Radical MP, best known for his association with Richard Cobden in the campaign against the Corn Laws. He spoke out against the Crimean War and helped defeat Palmerston's government in 1857 over British gunboat diplomacy in China. He lost his Manchester seat in the ensuing general election but quickly returned to the house in a by-election in Birmingham. Thereafter he became a leading campaigner for a second Reform Act. Bright remained a Birmingham MP until his death in 1888, but broke with the Liberal Party in 1886 when he opposed Home Rule.

In May 1858, Bright did not wish Palmerston to return with a government as narrowly based as it had been in 1855–57. In Bright's eyes, Palmerston's aristocratic Whigs were almost as serious an obstacle to radical progress as the Tories. He devoted the bulk of his speech to India, but also exposed to public gaze the techniques being used by the leaders of the

Liberal factions to generate sufficient support to eject Derby and Disraeli. He shows that Palmerston had little to learn from New Labour in the manipulation of the press.

Palmerston was a good man-manager, both in his attention to back-benchers in the corridors of Westminster and in the glittering parties at Cambridge House hosted with his wife. Lord John Russell was Palmerston's leading opponent within the Whigs and the two had long-standing quarrels. Bright was wrong to assert that they were reconciled, or shared a 'loving cup', and Russell was only dissuaded from publicly denouncing Bright when friends pointed out the further damage it would do.

### The colour of faction

'I think it is but fair, just, and generous that Members on this side of the House, at least, should take no course which wears the colour of faction, for the purpose of throwing the present Government out of office. Whenever I join in a vote to put Gentlemen Opposite out of office, it shall be for something that the country will clearly understand – something that shall offer a chance of good to some portion of the British empire – something that shall offer a chance of advancing distinctly the great principles for which we – if we are a party at all on this side of the House – profess to care.

But there is another reason. Not only is it feared that hon. Gentlemen opposite will get firm in their seats, but it is also feared that some hon. Gentlemen near me will get less firm in their alliance with the right hon. Gentlemen on this side. I have heard of mutinous meetings and discussions, and of language of the most unpardonable character uttered, as Gentlemen now say, in the heat of debate. But there was something more going on, which was traced to a meeting of independent Members recently held in Committee-room No. 11; and if a stop were not put to it, the powerful ranks on these benches might be

broken up, which, if united, it was believed, would storm the Treasury benches and replace the late Government in office.

## A desperate effort should be made

I believe it was intended that a desperate effort should be made to change the state of things here before Whitsuntide. That was a resolution which had been come to long before any one knew anything about Lord Ellenborough's despatch. And the present seems to be a convenient opportunity, inasmuch as it has this in its favour, that it appears to be defending an absent servant of the Crown; that it appears to be teaching a lesson to the Government who have acted injudiciously in publishing a despatch; altogether it has that about it which makes it an excellent pretext on which hon. Gentlemen may ride into office.

Now, I do not speak to Whigs in office or to those Gentlemen who have been in office and expect to be in office again; but I should like to say what I believe to be true to those Gentlemen who call themselves independent Members, who come here with no personal object to serve, not seeking place, patronage, or favour, but with an honest desire, as far as they are able, to serve their country as Members of the House of Commons. If this Resolution be carried, it is supposed that the old Government, or something very like it, will come back again. Now, there was great discontent with that old Government before it went out; yet no pledge whatever has been given that its conduct will be better or different; no new measures have been promised, no new policy has been avowed, no new men, that I have seen, have been held forth to the public very distinctly as likely to take high office in the State.

## The glittering bauble

There have been some things which I should think Members of this House must have felt pain at witnessing. There are newspapers in the interest of this ex-Treasury bench which have, in the most

unblushing manner, published articles emanating from the pen of somebody who knew exactly what was wanted to be done. In the case of a gentleman, for example, who was engaged in Committee-room No. 11 – a gentleman whom I need not mention because the House knows all the circumstances of this case, but a gentleman who took a most prominent part in the proceedings in that Committee-room – and no one is probably more indignant at what has been done than himself – those newspapers have positively fixed upon and designated him for a certain office, if the present Government go out and another comes in; another gentleman who seconded a Resolution on that occasion is also held up for an office; but they do not state exactly what his precise position is to be; and the glittering bauble of some place in the incoming Government is hung up before many hon. Gentlemen who sit around me. It is not said, 'It is for you,' and 'It is for you,' but it is hung up dangling before them all, and every man is expected to covet that glittering bauble.

## Beautifully engraved cards

But this is not all. These are not the only arts which are employed. Members of this House sitting below the gangway, who have been here for years – Gentlemen of the most independent character – receive flattering and beautifully engraved cards to great parties at splendid mansions; and not later than Friday last, of all times, those invitations were scattered, if not with a more liberal, no doubt with a much more discriminating hand than they ever were before. [An hon. Member: 'Absurd!'] Of course it is very absurd; there is no doubt about that, and that is precisely why I am explaining it to the House. Why, Sir, if those cards of invitation contained a note with them, giving the exact history of what was really meant, it would say to hon. Gentlemen, 'Sir, we have measured your head, and we have gauged your soul, and we know or believe' – for I believe they do not know – 'we believe that your principles which you came into Parliament to support –



John Bright MP

your character in the House – your self-respect will go for nothing if you have a miserable temptation like this held up before you.' Sir, if we could see them taking a course which is said to be taken by the celebrated horse-tamer, who appeals, as I am told, to the nobler and more intelligent instincts of the animal which he tames, then I should not complain. But they appeal to instincts which every honourable mind repudiates, and to aspirations which no hon. Gentleman on this side of the House can for a moment admit.

## A loving cup

Well then, if they succeed, what sort of a Government shall we have? I am as anxious for a Liberal Government as any man in this House, but I cannot believe that, in the present position of things on this side of the House, a Liberal and solid Government can be formed. We are told, and the whole country has been in a state of expectation and wonder upon it, that two eminent statesmen have actually dined together; and I am very glad to hear that men engaged in the strife of politics can dine together without personal hostility. I say nothing of the viands that were eaten. I say nothing of the beverage that was in the 'loving cup' that went round. One of our oldest and greatest poets has told us that –

'Nepenthe is a drink of soverayne grace'

He says that it was devised by the gods to subdue contention, and subject the passions; but that it was given only to

the aged and the wise, who were prepared by it to take their places with ancient heroes in a higher sphere. But that could not have been the contents of the 'loving cup' in this instance, for these aged statesmen are still determined to cling to this world, and to mix, as heretofore, with all the vigour and the fire of youth in the turmoil and contention of public life.

## The worst of all coalitions

But does the fact of this dinner point to reconciliation, and to a firm and liberal administration? I believe that any such Government would be the worst of all coalitions. I believe that it would be built upon insincerity, and I suspect it would be of no advantage to the country. Therefore I am not anxious to see such a Government attempted. I ask the House, then, are they prepared to overthrow the existing Government on the question which the right hon. Gentleman has brought before us – a question which he has put in such ambiguous terms? Are they willing in overthrowing that Government to avow the policy of this Proclamation for India? Are they willing to throw the country into all the turmoil of a general election – a general election at a moment when the people are but just slowly recovering from the effects of the most tremendous commercial panic that this country ever passed through? Are they willing to delay all legislation for India till next year, and all legislation on the subject of Parliamentary reform till the year after that? Are they willing, above all, to take the responsibility which will attach to them if they avow the policy contained in this Proclamation?

*Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group, and a writer on nineteenth-century Liberalism.*

Great Liberal Speeches, which will contain over forty complete or edited speeches from Liberal politicians from Charles James Fox to Charles Kennedy – including John Bright – together with introductions, will be published by Politico's Publishing in September 2001 – see back page for further information.

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## In this month...

### What was happening in the Liberal world in the second three months of years gone by?

#### 18 June 1941

Scottish Liberal Federation Executive Committee – A one-day conference would be held in September to urge the government to introduce home rule, electoral reform and land tax. A letter from the Scottish National Party urging a referendum on the question of home rule after the war was agreed with.

*(Liberals were often criticised for ignoring key issues in favour of minority concerns such as electoral reform.)*

#### 27 April 1954

Extract of letter from H Graham White to Seebohm Rowntree – 'I am told that the Assembly at Buxton was a success as things go. But there was a lot of sentimental nonsense talked about co-ownership, and this mistaken idea we can irradiate (sic) quite soon I think. A new committee has been set up to deal with it and make an enquiry. It is astonishing how normal people can be swept away by emotion and lose any responsibility on a particular subject. I am myself most anxious to see a review of the present situation in industry to bring the Liberal thought which inspired the Yellow Book up to date. I find few people realise the enormous changes which have taken place in the structure of industry in the last 15 years. What I feel is needed is something like the Acton Trust, if possible on a more popular basis.'

*(The policy of industrial co-ownership was popular with rank-and-file Liberals who sometimes suspected that their enthusiasm was not shared by the Party's leadership. H. Graham White was President of the Party when this letter was written.)*

#### 14 May 1954

LPO Executive Committee – 1955 Assembly: Jo Grimond, backed by John Baker, called for an end to old-fashioned Assemblies and advocated a party rally in its place, without amendments and resolutions.

*(The Liberal Assembly was a rather shambolic affair. This radical suggestion was not taken up but major reforms were made in the late '50s.)*

#### 2 April 1963

Inverness Liberal Association Executive Committee – Jeremy Thorpe told the meeting that financial support from the LPO would depend on certain targets being met. If the association had an income of £2000 in 1963/64, had 3000 members by April 1964, held an autumn publicity campaign and appointed a full-time agent and two part-time sub-agents the LPO would donate £250 with a further £250 promised after three months. Further contributions would depend on progress thereafter.

*(This is an example of the first coordinated targeting of resources into a winnable seat by the Liberal Party.)*

#### 21 May 1964

London Liberal Party Executive Committee – A motion was carried urging the LPO to concentrate on promoting propaganda not policy before the general election, especially building up the advantages of holding the balance of power.

*(The 2001 election was the first for many years in which the Liberal Democrats' campaign was not dogged by questions about what the party would do in the event of a hung parliament.)*

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## liberator ...

- The radical Liberal magazine, now in its thirtieth year.
- Recent contributors include Alan Beith, Chris Davies, Nick Clegg, Conrad Russell and Michael Meadowcroft.
- As reviewed in the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, Spring 2001.
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