

- power in South Manchester.
- 39 Henry Gladstone to Campbell-Bannerman, 26 Oct. 1899, CBP 41215 f.118, quoted in Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 230.
- 40 Clarke, *Lancashire and the new liberalism*, p. 230 ff.
- 41 Moore, *Liberalism and the Politics of Suburbia*, p. 225.
- 42 *Manchester Evening News*, 9 May 1907.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1907.
- 44 The Labour party chose not to contest the election.
- 45 *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Apr. 1908.
- 46 *100 years of Manchester High School for Girls*.
- 47 *History Ireland*, 3/ 20 (May/June 2012), found online at: <https://www.historyireland.com/in-defence-of-barmaidsthe-gore-booth-sisters-take-on-winston-churchill/>
- 48 Sonja Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth: An image of such politics* (Manchester University Press, 2012).
- 49 Quoted in *History Ireland*, 3/20 (May/June 2012), as above.
- 50 Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, pp. 124–5.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 52 Quoted verbatim in Randolph S Churchill *Winston S Churchill Companion Volume II Part 2 1907–1911* (Houghton, Mifflin Company, Boston 1969) and in contemporary newspapers, for example in *The Londonderry Sentinel*. 30 Apr. 1908.
- 53 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Oct. 1908.
- 54 An account of this can be found in *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Mar. 1909.
- 55 For an analysis of the 1910 elections and the changing relationship between Liberals and Labour, see Declan McHugh, *Labour, the Liberals, and the Progressive Alliance in Manchester, 1900–1914* (School of History, University of Leeds, 2002), p. 101 ff.
- 56 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 28 Jan. 1910, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.
- 57 Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 231.
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- 59 Listed in Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (HarperCollins, 1964), p. 535.
- 60 See the account of 11 July 1911 in Jenkins, *Asquith*.
- 61 See the account in the *Manchester Evening News*, 17 Mar. 1916.
- 62 See *Medical Press and Circular*, 1916, p. 177.
- 63 See the *London Gazette* (3rd supplement), 7 June 1918, p. 6687.
- 64 *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 1916, p. 22.
- 65 *ULULA: The Manchester Grammar School Magazine*, vol. ixlviii (Oct. 1920).
- 66 Moore, *Transformation*, p. 16.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 68 Duncan Tanner, *Political change and the Labour Party 1900–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 419 ff.
- 69 *Manchester Evening News*, 1 Nov. 1935.
- 70 See Declan McHugh's analysis of the significance of Liberal social reforms in *Labour, the Liberals, and the Progressive Alliance in Manchester 1900–1914*, p. 93.
- 71 Moore, *Transformation*, p. 266.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

Report

Liberalism: the ideas that built the Liberal Democrats

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, Bournemouth, 20 September 2025, with Professor Jonathan Parry and Professor David Howarth. Chair: Baroness Featherstone
Report by Peter Truesdale

Professor Parry put his cards on the table at the outset. He was (and indeed is) a political historian. Therefore,

his thinking about Liberalism springs not from looking at theory. Rather it comes from examining the political processes and

actions of Liberal leaders over the last two centuries. From these studies he drew out two big Liberal principles. The first

concerned the political process: doing politics in such a way that it worked properly for people, dealing with their concerns and thereby generating trust in politics. The second follows from the first: vested interests must be tackled – they must not impede or distort the political process.

At any given point there will be a multitude of vested interests. The key is to identify, combat and rectify those that are most damaging. And then to target those that could be campaigned against and rectified most effectively. Professor Parry agreed with all those who said that freedom was a key Liberal value. Yet a more fundamental Liberal value, he judged, was fairness within the political system. What of economics? His definition of Liberalism was a political one not an economic one.

Professor Parry then addressed the question: 'When did the Liberal Party begin?' The usual answer given to this question is 1859. The coalescing of Whigs, Radicals and Peelites: a new coalition with the talents of Palmerston, Lord John Russell and Gladstone providing leadership. He reviewed the evidence that supports this case, but he preferred the Reform Act of 1832. The passing of the Act engendered a two-party system. Consequently, the nascent Liberal Party had to consider the needs of its significant supporters. Those in the towns (whose economic interests were not the same as the country

and the landed aristocracy), religious Nonconformists and Irish Catholics. Throughout the nineteenth century, Liberals promoted their supporters' interests, whether through widening of the franchise, redistribution of seats, opposition to tariffs and other such measures. This was not without argument or division.

Professor Parry noted but did not explore the challenges that the rise of the trade unions posed for the Liberal Party at the end of the nineteenth century.

Having rejected an economic definition of Liberalism, Professor Parry examined *laissez-faire* and the claims some made that it was integral to Liberalism. He thought a Liberal leader could not consistently be an economic liberal. Combatting the vested interests would necessarily entail some economic intervention by the state. He noted the existence, by the 1850s, of a recognition within the party that the state might need to do more – and, by the 1880s, of increased moves towards economic intervention.

He posited that economics posed a problem for Liberals because they lacked the simplistic views traditionally espoused by Labour and the Tories. He thought the Orange Book row had been overblown. He said no Liberal leader had ever been sympathetic to central state control of the economy but that they found monopoly capitalism equally unappealing.

Professor Parry ended with a thought that was, at the same time, both uncomfortable yet undeniable. Liberalism had tapped into the concerns of those dissatisfied with the functioning of the political system. It had ameliorated their concerns. The current success of Reform UK tapped into the disillusionment of voters with the functioning of the political process just as Liberal reformers had in the nineteenth century. The challenge for the LibDems was to see how the party could understand and meet voters' concerns now.

Professor Howarth's contribution began with: 'I think what I had better say first is that I agree with Jonathan.' It raised a laugh. It was also a true statement. The rest of his speech enriched the meeting with practical thoughts and examples.

The first point of agreement was that Liberalism is nothing to do with economics – that Liberalism is agnostic between different economic theories and approaches. A second point was that Liberalism is not a set of doctrines. Rather Liberalism is a set of ideas built around the party. He pointed out that some of those identified as Liberal thinkers were also active politicians. He adduced the examples of John Stuart Mill and William Beveridge. He augmented this duo with the examples of John Maynard Keynes, Conrad Russell and T. H. Green. They were not removed from the political

process but were, at certain parts of their lives, part of it.

Ideas, he asserted, were filtered through a Liberal disposition. He then volunteered what he thought were the key factors within that Liberal disposition. The first was openness to new ways of thinking. Openness was a fundamental Liberal instinct. The second was hatred of the abuse of power. He characterised this as being an instinct rather than an abstract thought: a gut reaction. The third was being a 'live and let live' person. This was not something that caused withdrawal from relationships but a quality that was actively brought to relationships. The fourth was seeing people as individuals not just members of groups or collectivities. Professor Howarth said that he hated being classified and he hated classifying

other people. That more than anything else defined us Liberals against the Labour Party. The fifth was an anti-hierarchical feeling, a great dislike of those who put themselves above others. Boris Johnson, he asserted, was disliked by Liberals not so much for his policies as for the fact that he put himself above others. The sixth factor he linked to a comment Keynes made about Asquith. Keynes said that Asquith was 'cool', by which he meant controlled and rational. Liberalism, too, was cool. It was ever trying to be rational and avoiding being carried away by passion. Finally, an instinct for moderation and compromise. Professor Howarth confessed that this was not a quality he had. Nonetheless it certainly characterised our party. All this was a calm and convincing analysis shaped by

experience. It was a perfect complement to Professor Parry's historical analysis.

Was this theory? Was it practice? Which came first and begat the other? Here again was a point of agreement with Professor Parry. Practice shaped theory rather than the other way round. So, theory is derived from a process of thinking about what we are already doing.

The logical inference from this is that we all have a part to play. Liberalism is a dynamic process. Gladstone, Lloyd George, Nancy Seear, Paddy Ashdown made their contributions in their day. Maybe it is time for us to do so too! ■

Peter Truesdale was a councillor and Leader of Lambeth Council. He is a member of the History Group's executive.

Reviews

Liberal ideas

Liberalism: the ideas that built the Liberal Democrats (Liberal Democrat History Group, 3rd ed, 2025)

Review by William Wallace

It's not easy to summarise Liberalism in fifty pages. The third edition of a handbook for those interested in the intellectual roots of the current party offers a number of essays on different Liberal themes,

some focusing on eighteenth and nineteenth-century origins, others on more recent preoccupations. The introduction summarises political Liberalism's philosophy. 'The essential basis of the Liberal view [of human

nature] is optimistic: Liberals believe in the essential goodness of humankind [and] ... the ability of rational human beings to define their own interests and pursue them with moderation rather than extremism.'