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# Journal of Liberal History

For the study of Liberal, SDP & Liberal Democrat history

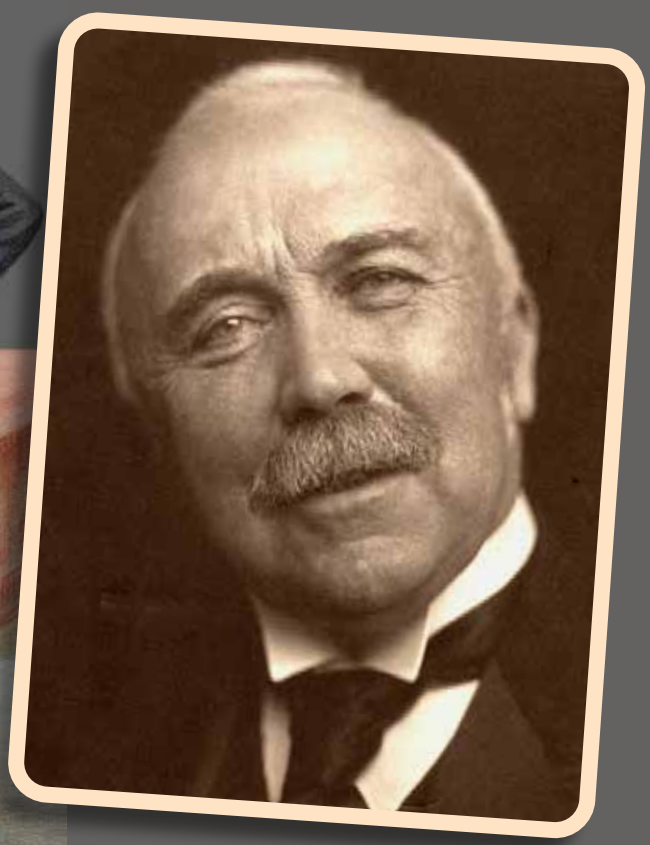
Alan Mumford
**The Political Skills of Four Liberal Prime Ministers**

Part 1: Rosebery and Campbell-Bannerman

Derek Earls
**Edward Donner and the rise of Manchester Liberalism**

Paul A. Nuttall
**The Final Act of 'Liverpool's Most Distinguished Son'**

Meeting report
**Liberalism: The ideas that built the Liberal Democrats**



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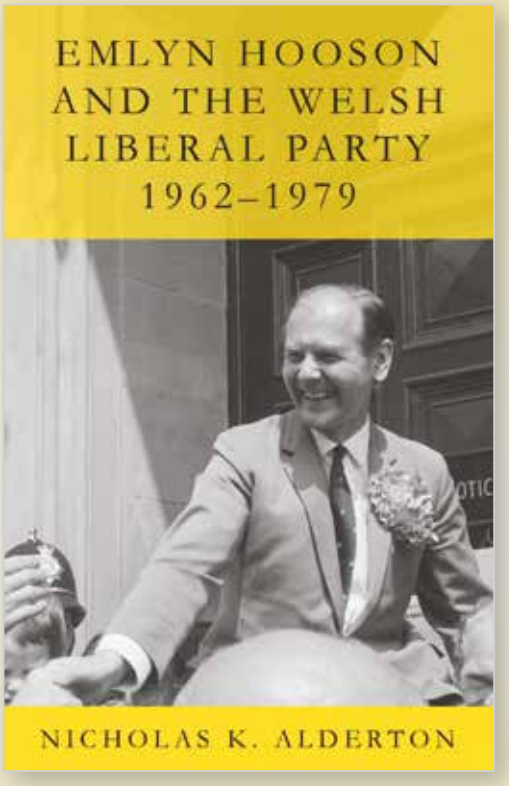


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**Liberal Democrat History Group**

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.

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# Liberal History News Winter 2025–26

## Dick Taverne (18 October 1928 – 25 October 2025)

Dick Taverne, who has died at the age of 97 was a politician of great skill, principle and commitment.

Born in Sumatra as a Dutch national, he was naturalised as British at age 21. Educated at Charterhouse School, and then Balliol College, Oxford, he qualified as a barrister in 1954. He fought Putney for the Labour Party in the 1959 election and was elected for Lincoln in a by-election in March 1962.

He held the seat for Labour for twelve years (1962–74), including stints as a Home Office minister (1966–68) and then Treasury Minister (1968–70). He helped to launch the Institute for Fiscal Studies, now an influential think-tank, and after Labour's defeat in the 1970 election became its first Director.

With his passionate pro-European views he became more and more estranged from the growing anti-Europeanism in the Labour Party, and when his local party in Lincoln voted in effect to deselect him, and his internal party appeals failed, he resigned from the party and formed the Lincoln Democratic Labour Association.

As a matter of principle he resigned his parliamentary seat and contested the subsequent by-election in March 1973 under the designation 'Democratic Labour'. He held the seat by 13,000, but saw his majority fall to 1,300 in the February 1974 election and lost by just under 1,000 in October 1974; the Labour victor was Margaret Jackson (later Beckett), who was to become Deputy Leader of the Labour Party under John Smith. In the same year Taverne became a member of the European Parliament, taking up one of the seats refused by the Labour Party.

He was a natural recruit to the Social Democratic Party on its formation in 1981, and served on their national committee from 1981 to 1987. He stood as an SDP candidate in the Peckham by-election in 1982, and in Dulwich in the 1983 general election. When the SDP merged with the Liberal Party he joined the new Liberal Democrats, serving on its

Federal Policy Committee 1989–90 and chairing its first economic policy working group.

In February 1996 he was created a Liberal Democrat life peer as Baron Taverne, of Pimlico in the City of Westminster. In May 2006 he was an unsuccessful candidate in local elections to Westminster Council.

He married Janice Hennessey in 1955, and had two daughters. His book *The March of Unreason* (Oxford University Press, 2005) won him the Association of British Science Writers' award as parliamentary communicator of the year. In 2014, he published his memoir, *Against the Tide: Politics and Beyond* (Biteback, 2014), reviewed for the *Journal of Liberal History* by Tom McNally in issue 94 (spring 2017).

Dick Taverne was a very personable colleague who was always happy to debate key issues and to be involved in voluntary sector organisations in support of important public issues. In his electoral and parliamentary roles as a committed European he was very much a precursor and an example to many colleagues who followed him and who were encouraged by his example. ■

Michael Meadowcroft

## Survey responses

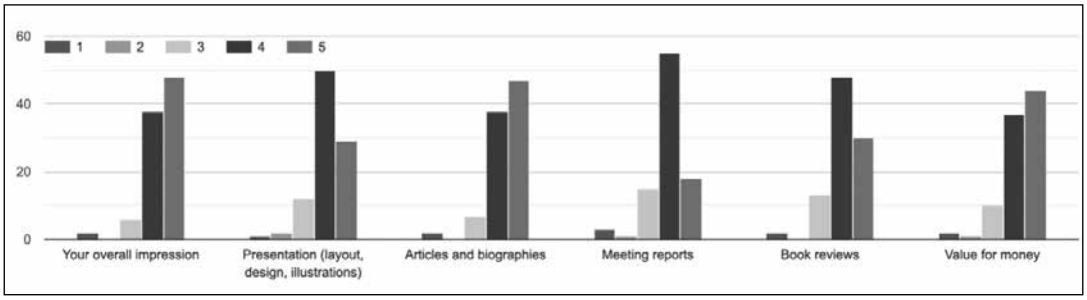
Thanks very much to the 101 individuals who completed our survey over the last two months of 2025. We last surveyed readers of the *Journal of Liberal History* in 2016, so this was well overdue!

We asked respondents to rate various aspects of the *Journal* on a scale from 1 (worst) to 5 (best) – see chart below. The averages across all respondents were (2016 ratings in brackets): overall impression 4.38 (4.19); presentation 4.11 (3.56); articles and biographies 4.36 (4.25); meeting reports 3.91 (3.70); book reviews 4.12 (4.03); and value for money 4.28 (4.25).

As in 2016, the vast majority of readers found the *Journal* neither too academic nor not academic enough (87 per cent; 10 per cent too academic, 2 per cent not academic enough) and felt we were striking the right balance between general introductory articles about Liberal history and detailed treatments of specific topics (76 per cent right balance; 13 per cent each for more general articles and more detailed articles). Thank you for all the main suggestions for topics for new articles; two broad themes were requests for more on recent Liberal history, and more about Liberal parties outside the UK (this was also a request in 2016). We will do our best to fulfil them, though as ever this depends on whether we can identify suitable authors, or whether authors come forward with contributions.

The background of respondents has changed a little since 2016, with a slightly higher proportion of Liberal Democrat members (90 per cent compared to 79 per cent). There is also an

Ratings of aspects of the *Journal of Liberal History* from 1 (worst) to 5 (best); Y axis is numbers of respondents



older age profile, though this is almost entirely due to a much larger number of people aged 75 or over amongst the respondents (23 per cent compared to 4 per cent); possibly older people in 2025 are more familiar with online surveys than in 2016. Respondents' educational background is similar, with 50 per cent (2016: 59 per cent) having completed a postgraduate degree.

Respondents were more likely to have gone to or watched History Group meetings than in 2016, with 56 per cent having attended one or more (2016: 39 per cent) – presumably because they are now accessible online, either during the meeting or afterwards. Thanks also for the suggestions for future topics and speakers. Respondents were also slightly more likely to have visited the History Group's website than in 2016: 79 per cent visited frequently or occasionally, compared to 70 per cent in 2016. Engagement with the History Group's social media outlets was limited, as in 2016, with quite a few respondents expressing principled objections to Facebook and Twitter; we are also now posting on Bluesky and are planning to do so on LinkedIn.

Finally, we asked whether respondents would be interested in purchasing second, revised, editions of two of our books. There was more interest in a new version of our general book on British Liberal history, *Peace, Reform and Liberation* (55 per cent would buy one) than in a new *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* – and in fact we have decided that it would be better to expand and update the biography content on our website rather than aim to publish a new book of biographies. We do, however, intend to go ahead with a new edition of *Peace, Reform and Liberation* – watch this space! ■

Duncan Brack

## Commemorating Sam Green

On 9 November 2025, Ed Davey unveiled a plaque to Sam Green, Liberal councillor on Durham City Council, 1972–79, and the first openly gay councillor elected in the UK. Below we reprint his article for the party website:

Sam Green didn't set out to make history. In 1972, he stood as the Liberal candidate for Crossgate ward in the City of Durham for the same reason our candidates stand for their local communities across the country: because they want to get things done. As Sam put it, he wanted to 'get things moving in the city'.

When he decided to put his membership of the Gay Liberation Front on his election manifesto – just five years after homosexuality had been legalised for over-21s – he told his local party. He said 'I'd better not stand in Crossgate', assuming that the revelation would hurt the party's chances. But he told how a retired schoolteacher – 'a little old woman', as he put it – said 'Well, I think Sam should stand because he lives in the ward and people know him'. So he did.

And Sam won through the traditional community politics that was the hallmark of Liberal candidates – and still sets Liberal Democrat candidates apart today. He went door to door, delivering thousands of leaflets. Canvassing tirelessly. He asked people what they thought about the local area and the local council. He listened to their concerns, and he acted on them.

But Sam did make history. In 1972, he became the first openly gay man to be elected as a councillor anywhere in the United Kingdom. Possibly even the first anywhere in the world.

And on Sunday, I was delighted to visit Sam's former home and join City of Durham Parish Councillors and local residents to unveil a blue plaque commemorating Sam Green as the trailblazer he was.

It is a testament to his courage. Because it took a huge amount of courage to come out to his whole community, to face the hostility and homophobia so prevalent

in those days, and to campaign openly as who he was.

And it's also testament to the people of Durham, who – more than 50 years ago – were open-minded and accepting enough to see Sam for who he was: a dedicated local campaigner who would be a hardworking and principled councillor.

Thinking about what Sam faced then – and the fact that before 1972 no one anywhere had won election as an openly gay candidate – made me reflect on how far we've come as a society.

There are now 75 out LGBT+ MPs in the House of Commons. Just this week, our party elected one of them – Josh Babarinde – as our President. And perhaps the most remarkable thing was that no one found it remarkable that he's gay.

But there is still far more work to do.

Because, more than half a century after Sam was elected, LGBT people still sadly face far too much hostility and discrimination, just for being who they are. Too many people still don't feel they can be open about their identity. Too many candidates feel the need to hide it – despite the trail blazed first by Sam and followed by so many others.

So I hope that remembering the courage and dedication of Councillor Sam Green will also serve to spur us on to continue to champion equality, respect and the rights of all people – to be who they are, to serve their communities with pride, and to get things moving. ■


Rt Hon Sir Ed Davey MP, Leader of the Liberal Democrats

## Liberal candidates directory

The latest edition of the Liberal candidates directory is now available on the Journal of Liberal History website, at https://liberalhistory.org.uk/resource-type/election-candidates-directory/. This is a comprehensive biographical index of the individuals who have contested a UK parliamentary election under the designation Liberal, Liberal Democrat and Social Democrat (plus candidates from the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland) from 1945 to 2024.

Much new information has been added, including candidates who stood in the 2024 general election and all by-elections since the 2019 election. Separate sections cover 11 English regions (Devon and Cornwall, East Midlands, East of England, Greater London, North East, North West, South Central, South East, South West, West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside) and Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Huge thanks, as always, to Lionel King who has devoted so much time over the years to compiling the directory. Lionel is a long-standing member of the History Group and was himself a parliamentary candidate (Kidderminster 1964, Sutton Coldfield 1970, Walsall South 1987).

Corrections and new information is always welcome. If you have any comments, please send them to Lionel on lionelking1964@btinternet.com and they will be included in future editions. ■

Chris Millington

**Liberal Prime Ministers**

A comparison of PMs' political skills; by Alan Mumford

# The Political Skills of Four Li
# Part 1: Rosebery and Campb

THESE FOUR PRIME ministers have been chosen for study not simply because they are the last Liberals to hold that post but because their varying skills illuminate and help to explain one of the great periods of radical reform in this country.

In the introductory chapters of *British Liberal Leaders*,[1] the authors identify five criteria for assessing leaders:

- Communication and campaign skills
- Ability to develop and articulate a vision
- Ability to manage their party
- Achieving the objectives of Liberalism
- Leaving the party in better or worse shape.

Furthermore, Professor Peter Hennessey, in his outstanding book *The Prime Ministers*, produced what he called 'ingredients for assessment for premiership performance'. This was based on his study of prime ministers since 1945 and totalled, again under five main headings, sixteen skill requirements.[2]

This article offers a more focused assessment which differs in two ways from the *British Liberal Leaders* review. First, it is about

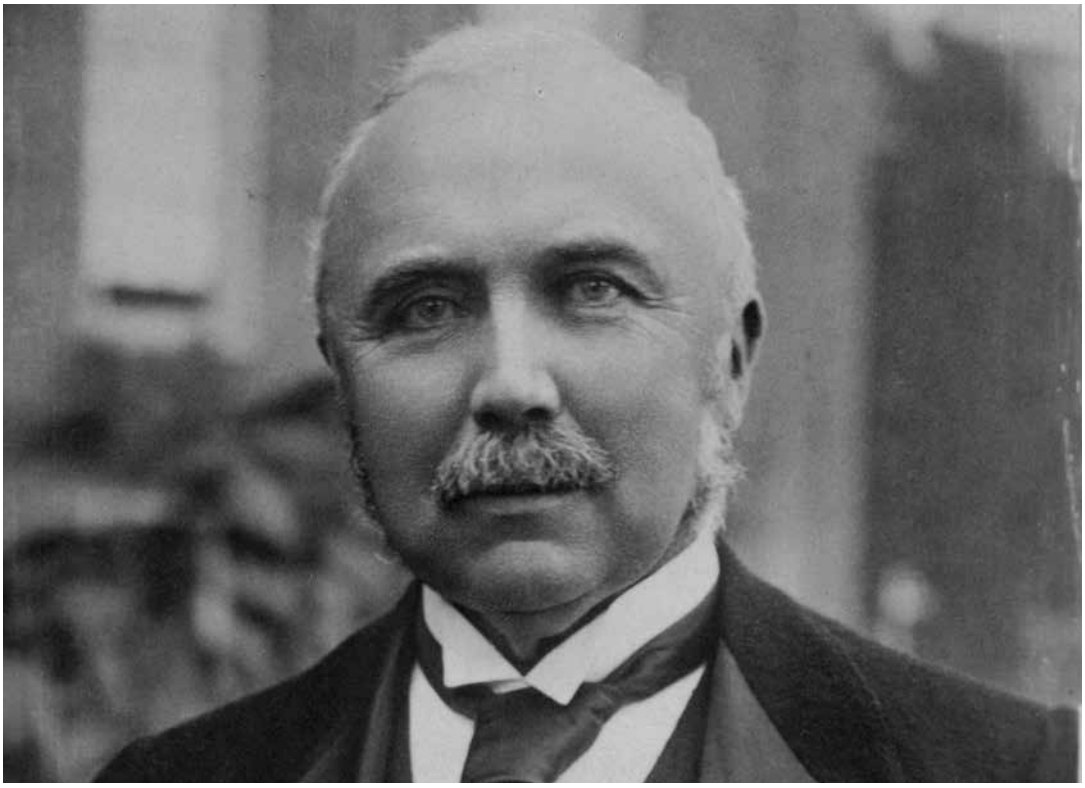
Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

# iberal Prime Ministers
# pbell-Bannerman

prime ministers and not about leaders. What skills did they deploy, or not deploy, in meeting the demands of their role as prime minister? Not all the relevant profiles in the *Leaders* book actually give clear answers to the criteria the editors set out, let alone to the sharper list of skill requirements as set out below.

In reviewing the biographies of these four, it became clear that some elements of the *Liberal Leaders* list are less important for a prime minister. For example, assessment of whether a prime minister has left the party in better or worse shape does not tell us anything about how that was achieved, and how relevant that actually is to performance as a prime minister. Similarly, the leader's role in party management is of course important, but less so in terms of a prime minister, who has to manage his cabinet. Detailed examples of the demonstrated skills and behaviour of the prime ministers, taking readers beyond a simple tick box, provides an improved basis for judgements about them. This author has identified the following list of skills:

Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman (1836–1908) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



- Selecting the cabinet
- Managing the cabinet
- Decision making
- Developing effective relationships
- Communication skills
- Changing the framework for operating as prime minister
- Vision

One skill was missing in all four prime ministers reviewed (Rosebery, Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith and Lloyd George). Reflection on the performance of self and others (the former more difficult) can, if reflection includes not just criticism but action to improve, lead to improved effectiveness.

A diary is one way of achieving this. Only Rosebery followed Gladstone's example –but not his moral and physical self-flagellation. (No other British prime minister subsequently kept a diary until Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan.) He also wrote memos explaining, apparently to himself, his actions. Nor did those studied here use communication with others for this purpose. Asquith thought introversion was a dangerous and debilitating habit. His 560 letters to Venetia Stanley, to whom he proclaimed his love and commented on his personal and political life, contained very little self-criticism. He did however write, on 14 October 1914: 'I have always hated "having it out with people" and believe from that kind of passive cowardice have more than once failed in my duty'.[3]

Nor did Lloyd George in letters or discussion with Frances Stevenson, his personal secretary and mistress, reflect on his performance. While critical of others, he revealed no doubt about his own actions, except about the battle of Passchendaele.

Two questions of terminology need to be clarified. Conservative Liberal opponents until 1921 were most often described as Unionists. Lloyd George is treated as a Liberal prime minister, although his enemies within the Liberal Party would probably say that he was no longer a proper Liberal by 1918. However, education and housing policies pursued from 1920 were definitely Liberal in objective.

## Earl of Rosebery

Lord Rosebery, foreign secretary when Gladstone resigned in March 1894, was chosen by Queen Victoria as his successor. She liked Rosebery and disliked the better qualified chancellor of the exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, who was disliked even more strongly by his peers in the cabinet.

Rosebery protested his unsuitability for the post (as he had done previously when appointed as foreign secretary). He said he wanted to stay in the Foreign Office: 'I know nothing of the other aspects and should be in every way unsuited.'[4] However, he backed into the limelight believing it his duty to accept.

### *Selection of cabinet*

Rosebery complained to the queen that he inherited both policies and cabinet from Gladstone and implied there was nothing he could do about either. Harcourt remained as chancellor: Rosebery resisted his attempts to secure more authority. He chose Kimberley to succeed himself in the Foreign Office as he believed, correctly, that Kimberley would carry on his policies. He moved Fowler to the India Office to replace Kimberley. John Morley, ambitious for the Foreign Office, did not get it and stayed, unwillingly, to look after Ireland.

### *Managing the cabinet*

Within a few months, most of Rosebery's colleagues, had become disenchanted with him; Acland and Asquith as well as Morley had become particularly disenchanted. Rosebery, in turn, was upset that he received much less support than he expected from them.

The relationship between Rosebery and his chancellor of the exchequer Harcourt set a standard of dysfunction met subsequently

only by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Harcourt's agreement with Rosebery that he should have frequent contact with foreign issues worked to the extent that he sent 119 letters to Kimberley in fifteen months, but he also complained vigorously when he felt insufficiently consulted, for example on issues over Belgium and Uganda. Harcourt told Morley that 'it was not for him to dry nurse the helpless infant that we had begotten' (i.e. Morley and colleagues)[5] and claimed to be philosophically indifferent to the fate of the government.

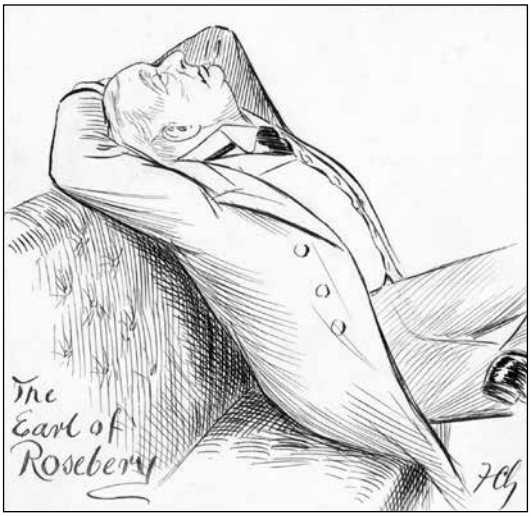
The periods in which Rosebery was ill with influenza, mental prostration and sleeplessness meant a lack of direction. Not much skill could be implemented on two hours sleep; cabinet meetings were no longer held. He made no attempt to bring the cabinet together on crucial issues. A treaty with Belgium was concealed from the cabinet; policy over Africa, particularly Uganda, was discussed only reluctantly. The first major shock of his premiership for his cabinet colleagues was his sudden pronouncement in the House of Lords on 13 March 1894 that Irish home rule was subject to more than a veto by the House of Lords. England 'as the predominant partner of the partnership of the Three Kingdoms will have to be convinced of its justice and equity'.[6] This statement, though realistic, was unacceptable to both his Irish supporters in the Commons and to many Liberals. Even more egregious was his announcement in a speech at Bradford that the House of Lords would be the main issue at a future general election. Moreover, the immediate action would be the submission to the House of Commons of a resolution about the powers of the House of Lords. The cabinet was indignant about his proposition without any prior discussion, and he had to drop it due to their lack of support.

After attacks on the government from Labouchere and Dilke in the House of Commons, which he saw as an attack on himself, he called a cabinet meeting on 19 February 1894 and suddenly read a statement saying that 'no one had spoken in my defence' in a debate in the House of Commons. He said he had never sought to be prime minister and 'I renounce it to say the least without regret.'[7] The cabinet were taken by surprise but unanimously declared their support and said the government could not go on without him. Colleagues added to this by writing letters of support to him and even Harcourt said, at a meeting with Rosebery, that he would do anything to help. On 21 February, Rosebery quietly told the cabinet he had reconsidered, following 'assurances'. He wrote later that he knew he could not resign but this was a way of restoring discipline, which on the whole succeeded. Whether this was really his motivation cannot be known, though colleagues certainly thought that he meant the threat.

Although Rosebery claimed that he had a cabinet split on a number of issues, this seems a characteristically self-pitying overstatement. Some colleagues gave him credit for keeping the cabinet together, but Morley saw there was really no threat to it breaking apart because Harcourt, despite his lack of belief in Rosebery, did not want to bring the cabinet down, although he said he would not be displeased if this were to happen – a different proposition.

The cabinet did not get involved in the details of Harcourt's budget although some had qualms about the taxation of property. Perhaps they were in the same position as Rosebery feebly claimed for himself when writing his memorandum to Harcourt about it: '… my opinions may not be of great value; I only give them for what they are worth'.[8]

Members were divided on whether to abolish the Lords or reform it, as Rosebery wanted. His general election manifesto without discussion in cabinet promised Welsh disestablishment, curtailment of the liquor trade and one man one vote, but not action on the House of Lords. 'Rosebery talked about his




Rosebery: drawings by Sir Francis Carruthers Gould, 1890s?, and Harry Furniss, 1880s–1900s (both © National Portrait Gallery, London)

colleagues a good deal. He felt that they stood too much aloof from him, and that the cabinet did not cooperate enough. Each member went his own way.'[9] He seemed not to feel that he had a responsibility to draw them together.

### *Decision-making*

He was not a good decision maker. On some major issues, he was forced in effect by the cabinet to retract what he wanted to do – over Egypt, over home rule, over the House of Lords.

The most crucial decision was required when Campbell Bannerman lost a vote in the House of Commons on the obscure issue of cordite supplies and was determined to resign. The vote could have been overturned but Rosebery decided his government should resign after fifteen months rather than dissolve or hold another vote. For once supported by Sir William, he persuaded his colleagues that a resignation en masse was the best course. This enabled Salisbury to take over on a temporary basis and to appear at the general election as the prime minister and win. (Rosebery's mistake was repeated by Balfour in 1905.)

His decision-making was affected by a number of personal defects of skill and behaviour: impatience, lack of proportion in dealing particularly with small issues, sensitivity to any criticism, dislike of any opposition to his views and yet a tendency towards hesitation as to what to do and an overall level of self-doubt. The latter was no doubt emphasised to him frequently by observing the ebullient and clear minded Harcourt in cabinet.

### *Developing effective relationships*

It was of course crucial to have effective relationships with his cabinet colleagues, who had found him pleasant although somewhat distant as foreign secretary. Rosebery did not meet Harcourt outside cabinet meetings at all, until Rosebery proposed to resign. Similarly, colleagues who tried to invite him to spend time with them over lunch were rebuffed. He complained that ministers never came to see him but, if they did not take that initiative, he should have done.

The general view was that he was shy, aloof, and unwilling to see colleagues one to

one. His own sensitivity to criticism made it difficult to discuss problems with him. Rosebery had no close relationship with anyone in his cabinet with whom to mull over problems.

Rosebery in a characteristic witticism had said that he would 'rather serve under Harcourt than over him'.[10] His comment on the experience was: 'Sir William is not only not behaving like a colleague he is not behaving like a gentleman'.[11] They very rarely had significant disagreements face to face, largely because they rarely met individually. The most substantial disagreement was over Harcourt's famous 1894 budget in which he increased death duties and introduced the idea of differential rates on property values. Rosebery disagreed with the new property tax at death on the grounds that it would break up British society, would finally end the prospect of landed peers ever voting for the Liberal Party, and would do nothing for the working class. Rosebery's mild memo expressing these views was received with contempt and insult by Harcourt, who implied that Rosebery knew nothing about taxes, that he was speaking from self-interest as a landowner and was adopting Tory attitudes. The verdict of history has been that the only significant achievement of Rosebery's government was Harcourt's budget – a sour result for Rosebery.

Harcourt's attitude conveyed directly and through his son Loulou was that he had been cheated out of the role by someone who was incompetent. According to Birrell, 'he did not swallow the bitter pill he chewed it'.[12]

Although Harcourt's behaviour was racked by envy, ego and a desire to wound, Rosebery lacked the willingness and ability to at least try and create a better relationship. Perhaps he feared that he was inferior to Harcourt in everything except good manners. It required a fuller understanding of Harcourt's position, denied the premiership by a less qualified man; it was not enough simply to see him as an ill-mannered ungentlemanly bully. Rosebery ought to have demanded more meetings with Harcourt in which he should have exercised flattery. He needed to speak and listen with more empathy. Discussion with Harcourt and others before Rosebery promoted the House of Lords as the lead item in the next general election campaign might have avoided the demise of Rosebery's proposals.

The only other colleague with whom Rosebery had significant problems was John Morley, who bitterly regretted having been 'forced' to stay responsible for Ireland. He initially wrote a petulant letter to Rosebery saying that he would have nothing to do with anything except Irish business in the Commons, and would make no contribution outside the House. Rosebery's response to this was to write that he was being let down by his close political friend.

When Asquith remarked, to Rosebery, obviously with reference to Harcourt, that though touchy and difficult to manage Morley was at least a perfect gentleman, Rosebery retorted that he was 'not sure that perfect lady would not best describe him'.[13] Morley's frequent correspondence with Rosebery continued despite the early frostiness; of the 600 letters Morley wrote to him, 85 were sent while Rosebery was prime minister.

Whereas one problem of Rosebery's relationship with Harcourt was that they never met and conversed, Rosebery met and wrote to the queen frequently, asking for sympathy and to calm her objections. It is difficult to find a Liberal policy of which she approved, and there were many that she explicitly opposed. Rosebery had one policy to which he was personally attached: reform (not abolition) of the House of Lords. She was scandalised by his proposal. She wrote of it that 'she was pained to think that without consulting her, not to speak of not obtaining her sanction',[14] Rosebery had advocated such a change in the British Constitution. When Rosebery politely denied that she had the power of sanction,

she elevated the disagreement to a claim that he could not submit a resolution of that kind without the dissolution of parliament. Again, Rosebery denied this.

She was next appalled by the proposal for Welsh disestablishment. She refused to deliver the sentence in the Queen's Speech on this. When he said he did not want to be in conflict with her views, her response was, 'she does not object to Liberal measures which are not revolutionary.'[15] (She thought the death duties aspect of Harcourt's budget revolutionary). Rosebery even went so far to tell her that he did not agree with Harcourt's budget.

There is no indication that the queen read Bagehot's injunction in 1867 – that the monarch had the right to be consulted to advise and to warn. She acted outside these rights.

### *Communication skills*

It is a relief to be able to record one skill of which Rosebery was fully seized. He was, his contemporaries thought, a great orator and, indeed, this was demonstrated by his ability to draw big crowds. Crewe described his oratory as: 'the earnestness, the humour, the inflexions of voice, most of all perhaps the answering thrill running through the audience like an electric current.'[16]

His wit got him into difficulty, especially with Queen Victoria. Her response was, 'he should take a more *serious* tone and be, if she may say so, less jocular which is hardly fitting a Prime Minister.'[17] His close confidant, Sir Edward Hamilton (a senior Treasury official), recorded a conversation with Rosebery in which he told Rosebery in relation to a particular speech, 'that he must try and drop the flippant style as Prime Minister, and also references to his holding the office of prime minister "unworthily", which have the appearance of mock humility. … He admitted the force of the criticism and took my remarks very well.'[18]

The House of Lords, where he had the support of a small minority of Liberal peers, was a less successful environment. It was, perhaps, his lack of experience of combative debate that caused him to make the debilitating error in responding to Salisbury on home rule referred to earlier.

The paradox about his oratorical skill, highly rated and important as it was at that time, is that he claimed to derive no pleasure from his success in it and frequently tried to avoid public meetings, though equally often finally agreeing to perform.

### *Changing the framework*

He did not change the way in which the cabinet or individual ministers or other party of government carried out their duties. There was still no formal record of cabinet discussions or decisions, though these were revealed in part in his weekly letter to the queen.

### *Vision*

There is nothing to show that Rosebery had any longer-term view than that embodied in his initial belief that he should help the Liberal government to survive. His Liberal Imperialist views, supported by a minority of cabinet, were not of a new future, but of modest expansion of Britain's interest in Africa. He developed no detailed policy or practical strategy on the House of Lords. He had no clear ideas on what should be done about Ireland except that nothing could be done without a majority of English MPs. What President George Bush, many years later, described as 'the vision thing', was not something to which Liberal or Unionist politicians subscribed – you had to be a Socialist to be interested in propounding a different future. When his proposal about the House of Lords sank into the sands of indifference, his declared future priorities were Welsh disestablishment, temperance reform and one man one vote – pragmatic single policies.

Tacitus wrote about the Emperor Galba: 'by everyone's consent capable of reigning, if

only he had not reigned.'[19] Rosebery is the only relatively modern prime minister to proclaim beforehand his unfitness for the role – and moreover to prove himself right.

## Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman

War secretary under Gladstone and Rosebery, C-B (his preferred nomenclature) led the Liberals in the Commons for eight years. Personally acceptable to Edward VII and to Liberal MPs, he was the inevitable choice to take over from Balfour when he resigned. He secured a massive majority in the subsequent general election. As leader of a fissiparous party, C-B faced the possible return of Rosebery, who, while saying he had no further interest in politics, kept reappearing with significant speeches. Home rule and the Boer War caused division with other Liberals, especially the group of Liberal Imperialists led by Asquith, Haldane and Grey; some wishing Rosebery to return. But these divisions did not in fact destroy C-B's government, as Balfour hoped.

### *Selecting the cabinet*

Asquith, Grey and Haldane had met in September 1905 and agreed the Relugas Compact. This was a unique effort to persuade C-B to act as prime minister in the Lords. They agreed roles for themselves and believed he would not be effective in the Commons; they would not join his government unless he agreed.

C-B had been warned about the plot and told Asquith, 'I hear that it has been suggested by that ingenious person Richard Burdon Haldane that I should go to the House of Lords, a place for which I have neither liking, training or ambition.'[20] With his wife Charlotte's encouragement, he refused to move. C-B had decided early to make Sir Robert Reid lord chancellor – the role wanted by Haldane. Unlike Haldane, he was experienced in government and was a radical and close personal friend to C-B.

C-B first secured Asquith as chancellor of the exchequer, giving him time to develop reasons to accept, and then used Asquith as an intermediary with Grey and Haldane, who accepted the Foreign Office and War Office respectively. Haldane claimed of the War Office, 'it is exactly what I myself longed for',[21] apparently forgetting Relugas and what he had told his wife. C-B allowed himself mild enjoyment over Haldane taking the job 'nobody would touch with a pole'. Previous differences between Liberal Imperialists and C-B had no influence on selection.

So, was Regulas all sound and fury signifying in the end nothing? Haldane's view was, 'Asquith, Grey and I stood together, they were forced to take us on our own terms.[22] C-B did not go to the Lords. Asquith, C-B's choice for chancellor without the Relugas threat, did not become leader of the House of Commons and effectively joint prime minister. Haldane did not become lord chancellor (but was a great war secretary). The only success was Grey, not C-B's original choice, receiving the Foreign Office.

Asquith, in what one can only kindly presume was a fit of self-delusion in old age, claimed, 'looking back on the whole affair, in which from first to last there was nothing in the nature of an intrigue.'[23] In his biography of Grey, Otte bizarrely claims that 'it cannot be said that their plans had failed'.[24]

In contrast C-B's accurate comment after Grey's final acceptance was, 'so they all came in – no conditions – there they are'.[25] He had enhanced his authority, which they had tried to diminish. He did very little direct persuasion – he let them persuade themselves. But the greatest potential influence on the selection of a cabinet failed.

There were no other significant problems over the membership of the cabinet. Morley, who would still have liked to be foreign secretary, accepted the India Office. Rosebery received no discussion let alone an offer. Dilke, an amorous republican, disliked by C-B, was

the only significant omission. Two important appointments were John Burns as the first working-class member of a cabinet, and Lloyd George the fiery Welsh radical as president of the Board of Trade.

### *Managing the cabinet*

Unlike Rosebery, who had a major and unreconciled rival, C-B had no rival constantly undermining him. To the contrary, he had three previous dissidents – Liberal Imperialists – working well with him. Disagreement on constitutional issues in South Africa revolved around the cabinet's lawyers, not Liberal Imperialism. Views on the likely competence of C-B as prime minister changed through experience. Haldane, who C-B had believed to be the origin of his problems in opposition, congratulated him on his success in September 1907, from the political grave in which C-B thought he had placed him.

Haldane wrote later, 'in truth in those days C-B neither much liked or understood me. Later on, I was to find him an admirable Prime Minister to work under.'[26] After C-B resigned, Grey commented, 'I have long recognised that the difficulties that I made when the government was being formed was short sighted and ill informed.'[27]

Haldane was critical of the way in which the cabinet worked. He wrote that the cabinet was:

> a congested body of about 20 in which the powerful orator secured too much attention. The Prime Minister knew too little of the details of what had to be got through to be able to apportion the time required for discussion. Consequently, instead of ruling the cabinet and regulating the length of discussion he left things too much to themselves. We had no Secretary, no agenda and no minutes.[28]

Although an accurate description, this was published after he experienced quite different arrangements under Ramsay MacDonald in 1924, following the Lloyd George cabinet reforms. He also thought that too much was left to individual initiatives. But Birrell, responsible for education, sought C-B's counsel frequently. This was a reflection of a style of C-B's which was, to some eyes, over-delegating, but to others was one of C-B's good features.

Writing in 1909 Sir Almeric Fitzroy (secretary to the Privy Council) wrote, 'it is the opinion of those best qualified to judge that Asquith's control of the cabinet is less than Sir H Campbell Bannerman used to exercise.'[29] Wilson thought that C-B was more successful than Asquith in controlling his colleagues and preventing their differences getting out of hand. But he gives no references for this opinion.

### *Decision-making*

We have only the recollections of Margot, Asquith's wife, as to Asquith's version of party discussions – recollections perhaps more dramatic and colourful than the reality. C-B's tactic of constantly using Asquith to pass his views on to Grey and Haldane, and of giving Asquith the task of actually finally offering them their jobs, was a particularly clever feature of his decision-making.

C-B's powers were considerably enhanced when the Liberals won a huge victory in the 1906 general election. But, in the Lords, there were 479 Unionist and Liberal Unionist peers against 88 Liberals, some, like Rosebery, of uncertain adherence. The majority had no hesitation in vetoing or emasculating a succession of Liberal bills.

C-B insisted that all the main elements of the constitution for South Africa previously devised by the Unionist government would be abandoned in favour of real self-government. He pushed his version through cabinet, rejecting the views of Asquith and a cabinet committee. There are different versions of how the constitution was agreed in cabinet.

Lord Riddell, speaking to Lloyd George in April 1913, asked rhetorically, 'Who was responsible? Campbell-Bannerman or Asquith?'. Lloyd George, 'Oh C-B he deserves all the credit. It was all done in a ten-minute speech at the cabinet – the most dramatic, the most important ten-minute speech ever delivered in our time. He brushed aside all the checks and safeguards devised by Asquith, Winston and Loreburn.'[30] Churchill agreed it was C-B whose views prevailed. Asquith's self-serving different version in 1912 was 'the notion that C-B was opposed in cabinet, or won it over in relation to the Transvaal settlement is a ridiculous fiction. ... Between ourselves he had little or nothing to do with the matter and never bothered his head about it.'[31]

In 1923 Asquith claimed that C-B had 'slept placidly' through the meetings at which South Africa's problems were discussed. C-B's version to Charlotte, 'Well ma'am they've agreed and I've got it through.'[32] Historians differ on C-B's role. It is possible to reconcile Asquith's demeaning comments about C-B: C-B had little involvement in the actual details of the later committee that subsequently worked out the constitution.

C-B had been suddenly decisive in forcing his own views on some bills. On the Trades Disputes Bill, for example, he stood up in the Commons and accepted an amended version of part of it, contrary to what his own minister had proposed.

He was in favour of women's suffrage and would have voted in favour on the Women's Enfranchisement Bill in March 1907. However, he could not commit the government, which was split on this issue – especially with Asquith an obdurate opponent. In May 1906 he had met a deputation of 300 women and told them that 'they had made out before the country a conclusive and irrefutable case' and 'should keep on pestering'.[33]

C-B had a long record of criticising the House of Lords as a Unionist weapon; and

Campbell-Bannerman: drawings by Sir Francis Carruthers Gould, and Sir Leslie Ward, 1890s–1900s (both © National Portrait Gallery, London)

accused Balfour of 'open treachery' in using it as such. The 'second chamber is being utilised

as a mere annexe of the Unionist Party.'[34] Balfour had responded to his defeat in the general election by saying that the Unionists should still control whether in power or opposition, the destinies of this great empire. C-B did not accept a cabinet committee proposal for joint sessions to resolve differences. His own proposal was for a suspensory veto – i.e. bills could be delayed for a period of time but eventually would go through on the Commons majority. There was no prospect of the Lords agreeing with this.

Increasingly war like statements from the Kaiser and others led to C-B authorising preliminary discussion between British and French generals about a possible joint action should Germany take offensive action, but he told the French prime minister that there was no agreement on what would happen in a war between France and Germany.

There were no proposals on Irish home rule – not even to take action step by step as he had indicated before the general election. He did enough through discussion to persuade the Irish Nationalists to continue to support him – for fear of something worse.

Those who had thought him indolent and therefore incapable of being a decisive prime minster must have been surprised by the interventions and decisions recorded above. The fact that he displayed willingness to compromise, having listened to others, was part of the skill through which he avoided not just confrontation but serious opposition by colleagues.

### *Developing effective relationships*

C-B was bluff, kindly and affable. Relationships were also easier because he was more effective than his critics expected. Asquith had never been as critical of C-B as Grey and Haldane were, and C-B managed a potentially difficult situation very well. Asquith chaired cabinet when C-B was unable to do so. In March 1908, C-B told Asquith that he was a 'wonderful colleague, so loyal so disinterested, so able. … You are the greatest gentleman I have ever met.'[35]

Morley, the prickliest of his cabinet, developed a positive view. 'As head of a cabinet he was cool acute strangely candid attentive to affairs considerate.' He wrote further that C-B 'whilst capable of extremely shrewd criticism even on friendly colleagues and their infirmities, was spontaneously kind hearted and helpful.'[36] His view about the cabinet was 'we have been the most absolutely harmonious and amicable that ever was known.'[37] (Morley had been in cabinets under Gladstone and Rosebery.)

Grey said of C-B that 'he made no distinction in personal relations, between those who had helped him and those who had made difficulties for him'.[38]

Perhaps in response to Edward VII's concerns and perhaps because he felt that they had gone too far in their criticism of the Lords, C-B wrote mildly reproving letters to Lloyd George and Churchill (but he wrote to the king emphasising Lloyd George's skill in handling the rail strike in 1907). Churchill in December 1912 wrote that 'Campbell Bannerman's was a kindly manner which caused the applicant going away feeling that his request would if possible be granted and then if it was refused the Premier would regret refusal more than anyone else.'[39]

Outside cabinet, C-B's main relationship with a strong political effect had been with his wife Charlotte. C-B's declaration that he needed to get his wife Charlotte's approval as the 'final arbiter' on whether to go to the House of Lords may have been a convenient delay in responding to Asquith, or a reflection of a remaining uncertainty – or his real belief. Though this was the most memorable intervention by any twentieth-century prime minister's wife, she does not seem to have been a significant influence afterwards except unintentionally, in that her continued ill health

distracted him and in her final illnesses and death actually prevented him from fully acting as prime minister.

In terms of his officials, he talked most frequently to Sinclair, his parliamentary private secretary. This seems to be mostly a case of Sinclair listening and occasionally recording C-B's views rather than himself influencing C-B.

C-B had to deal with a less awesome figure than Queen Victoria in Edward VII, who involved himself quite properly in whether C-B should go to the House of Lords, which he favoured but did not pursue. While the king did not like the policies of the Liberal Party, he was never, unlike George V, in the position of actually having to have to sign a bill reducing the power of the House of Lords. His problems with C-B were often about communication, and he complained that C-B never consulted him. C-B's reports on cabinet meetings were certainly perfunctory, lacking detail to explain what happened. They differed on South Africa, the Trade Disputes Bill, education and suffragettes – perhaps the 'warn' part of his role.

C-B was characteristically emollient in dealing with the King's criticisms of speeches by Lloyd George, writing that they were after all responding to vehement Unionist comments – and that possibly Lloyd George had made his speech in Welsh and had been mistranslated. The king particularly objected to a Lloyd George speech asking whether the country was to be governed by the king and Lords or king and people. 'He objected to bringing the sovereign's name in these violent tirades.'[40]

He objected to some of C-B's nominations for peerages – but in the end accepted them. C-B recommended Florence Nightingale as the first female to receive the Order of Merit: the king delayed this.

The king had broken convention by attending Charlotte's funeral at Marienbad. He also broke normal bounds by visiting 10 Downing Street to see C-B in his dying days – he was told C-B was too ill to see him. And when he accepted C-B's resignation, he wrote that, 'It has always been a great pleasure and satisfaction to me to do business with you at all times.'[41]

### *Communication skills*

One of the reasons the Relugas trio wanted to place C-B in the House of Lords was that he was a poor performer against A. J. Balfour, whose skills enabling him to show how many saints could dance on the point of a needle had often secured no successful response from C-B.

C-B impressed more as prime minister than in opposition, especially his performance in the House of Commons. Backed by a large majority of Liberal MPs (in contrast to his experience before 1906), he had a much more sympathetic audience. He responded brilliantly to Balfour's first intervention: C-B's unplanned but successful response was, 'The Right Honourable Gentleman is like the Bourbons. He has learnt nothing. He comes back to this new House of Commons with the same airy graces – the same subtle dialectics – and the same light and frivolous way of dealing with great questions.' C-B described the questions that Balfour posed as 'utterly futile, non-sensical and misleading. I say enough of his foolery.'[42] This attack was fuelled by C-B's dislike of Balfour. Turning Balfour's debating strength into a weakness was a masterly display of skill which ended Balfour's dominance.

He had few of the same platform arts to excite passion as Rosebery, Harcourt and, later, Lloyd George did. He used an accurate image in a speech on 12 February 1907 in which he compared the House of Lords to a watchdog which was sometimes somnolent and sometimes ferociously active. (Lloyd George later described the Lords as a poodle.) The Irish journalist and MP T. P. O'Connor wrote, 'despite his failings I know of no man in the House of Commons who can make a speech more lucid, more choice and lucid in diction'.[43]

### *Changing the framework*

The most dramatic change to the framework of government would be revision of the powers and membership of the House of Lords. C-B's idea, of suspensory veto, was not acted on until Asquith's Parliament Act of 1911.

He required cabinet ministers to provide details of, and most to resign from, their directorships in companies, a potential source of corruption.

C-B and his cabinet agreed with the idea that MPs should be paid £300 a year, but they were told by the chancellor, Asquith, that there was no money available.

### *Vision*

Haldane thought that C-B was 'not identified in the public mind with any fresh ideas for indeed he had none',[44] and described him as a dear old Tory; but other ministers did not take this view – which was contradicted by the policies he pushed.

C-B's view on the crucial issue of Irish home rule was that it should be put into effect through a sequence of steps towards a final achievement. This was not visionary; it was an accommodation of political reality in relation to the House of Lords.

When he gained his huge majority in 1906, he did engage in something close to a visionary approach in one area, when he insisted that the arrangements with the various parts of South Africa should be based on the view that, if you were magnanimous, you were more likely to achieve a successful policy, and in addition there should be representative government even though that excluded the coloured population.

C-B was a politician interested in pragmatic approaches to the future, not a visionary about a new society. ■

Alan Mumford is the author of several articles in the *Journal of Liberal History*, including 'Five Liberal Women and politics' (issue 107, summer 2020), 'Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal' (issue 99, summer 2018) and several book reviews. Part 2 of this article, on the political skills of Asquith and Lloyd George, will be published in our spring issue.

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Continued on page 55

**Gladstone**

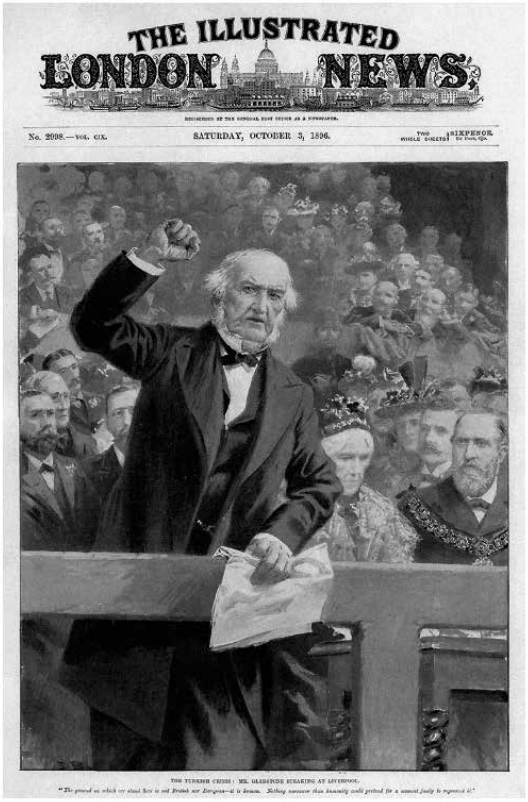
Paul A. Nuttall recalls William Ewart Gladstone's speech on the Armenian massacres in the city of his birth.

# The Final Act of 'Liverpool's Most Distinguished Son': William Ewart Gladstone, Hengler's Circus, September 1896

William Ewart Gladstone is one of Liverpool's most famous sons and was born on 29 December 1809 at 62 Rodney Street. His family had accrued their fortune through the transatlantic slave trade, and their residence was the palatial Seaforth House, not far from the banks of the River Mersey, in Seaforth. A young Gladstone was educated at Seaforth Preparatory School and then sent to Eton. He later attended Christ Church College, Oxford, achieving a double first in Classics and Mathematics. According to his contemporaries, Gladstone never lost his northern accent and always maintained familial links to Liverpool.[1]

Alongside his arch-nemesis Benjamin Disraeli, Gladstone was undoubtedly the most important political figure of the Victorian period.[2] He sat in the House of Commons from 1833 until his retirement as an MP in 1895. His political journey was from that of a staunch early-Victorian 'High Tory' to a mid-Victorian Liberal, and in the final stage of his career, he was a late-Victorian Radical.[3] Indeed, John Morley, Gladstone's faithful disciple and biographer, asked him in later life why he remained in politics so long; he responded that 'I was brought up to fear and detest liberty. I grew to love it. That is the secret of my whole career'.[4]

Gladstone holds the honour of being elected British prime minister more times than anybody else. On four separate occasions, stretching over a quarter of century, he occupied the country's principal political position. He first became prime minister in 1868 until 1874, leading what A. J. P. Taylor has claimed to be the first and only truly Liberal government.[5] Gladstone returned in 1880 before dividing his party over his decision to support home rule for Ireland; he fell from power in 1885, only to return briefly in 1886. His final term as prime minister came between 1892 and 1894, when he once again attempted, and failed, to achieve home rule for Ireland. Gladstone was replaced as Liberal leader and prime minister by his protégé, Lord Rosebery (Archibald Philip Primrose) in 1894. He did not contest the 1895 general


THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS.

No. 2998.—VOL. CIX. SATURDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1896. WITH A SUPPLEMENT

THE TURKISH CRISIS: MR. GLADSTONE SPEAKING AT LIVERPOOL.

Addressing the audience at Hengler's Circus, 24 September 1896 (Source: Ron Jones)

election and played no part in the campaign, which saw the Liberals lose and Rosebery replaced as prime minister by the Conservative peer, Lord Salisbury.

Gladstone's retirement, however, was only temporary and he was drawn back into public life for a final time by events occurring over three thousand miles away in Armenia; and this forms the subject of this article, as Gladstone's last great political act occurred in his home city of Liverpool. On 24 September 1896 Gladstone mounted the stage in front of a packed audience at Hengler's Circus, West Derby Road, Liverpool. He was 86 years of age, partially blind, profoundly deaf and struggling to walk. Although his capacity for physical exertion had deteriorated, his mind was as supple as ever, and his speech, which lasted one hour and twenty minutes, made global headlines and had profound domestic political consequences.

The subject of Gladstone's speech was the slaughter of thousands of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. Armenia is a small landlocked country located between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. During the late Victorian period, the western part of the country fell within the borders of the Ottoman Empire and the east into Russia. The Armenians were considered second-class citizens by their Ottoman rulers, primarily on the grounds of their Christian faith, and they were thus treated accordingly. The massacre of Armenian civilians had begun in 1894 and it is estimated that between 50,000 and 300,000 people were killed in a three-year period. The pivotal role played by Sultan Abdul Hamid II ensured they became known as the 'Hamidian massacres'.

The invention of the telegraph allowed news of the Ottoman atrocities to be reported around the world, and there was popular outcry in Britain. Gladstone placed himself at the forefront of the public outrage and gave his first speech denouncing Ottoman barbarism in Chester in August 1895. Moreover, in a letter to the Daily Chronicle, Gladstone accused the European powers of a conspiracy of silence on the subject.[6] Public meetings imploring the British government to intervene began to be organised across the country in the summer of 1896. The people of Liverpool also demanded that affirmative action was taken by the government, and they were determined to make their voices heard.

To this end, the city's lord mayor, the sixteenth Earl of Derby (1841–1908), received a deputation of local notables, including the Tory East Toxteth MP, Augustus Warr (1847–1908), the local Liberal leader, Richard Durning Holt (1868–1941), former Liberal MP and editor of the Liverpool Daily Post, Sir Edward Russell (1834–1920), and Cllr Archibald Salvidge (1863–1928), the chairman of the Liverpool

Workingmen's Conservative Association. All were appalled by the actions of the Ottomans in Armenia, and they demanded that a public meeting be held so the city's feelings could be exhibited to not only to the country, but the world. The petition stated:

> We the undersigned citizens of Liverpool, feeling deep indignation at the horrible treatment to which the Armenian Christians are being subjected to by their Turkish rulers respectfully request your Lordship to summon a town's meeting to urge upon Her Majesty's Ministers the necessity of requiring the Sultan to stop further atrocities.[7]

The lord mayor promptly agreed to the request and Hengler's Circus, which in later years became the Hippodrome Theatre, was booked for the afternoon of Thursday 24 September 1896.

The next question was who would be the star attraction to ensure that the meeting garnered maximum publicity? Edward Evans, the chairman of the Liverpool Reform Club, suggested that Gladstone would be the ideal guest to address the meeting. Unsurprisingly, this suggestion was met with some resistance, particularly in local Tory quarters. For example, Edward Lawrence (1828–1909), a Conservative alderman and prominent cotton merchant, stated that Gladstone's presence 'would not be universally welcome'.[8] Regardless of Lawrence's objection, the former prime minister was the ideal candidate to address the meeting. His presence would not only ensure that what was said at the meeting would be widely reported, but he had been openly critical of the British government's relative ambivalence about the slaughter of the Armenians. Indeed, it is fair to say that Gladstone's views chimed with both the people and the civic leaders of his home city. Therefore, when the Liverpool Conservative Party's governing body met, the local leader, Sir Arthur Forwood, concluded that it would be viewed as unnecessarily partisan to object to Gladstone's presence. Thus, the local party supported the plan to offer the former prime minister an invitation to speak on behalf of the people of Liverpool.[9]

The organisers found that Gladstone was more than willing to address a Liverpool audience; it would ensure that his cause garnered publicity and gained even more traction in press. The cross-party meeting would also be the first time Gladstone had spoken in the city since he had been made a freeman of Liverpool in 1892. Moreover, he enjoyed speaking at Hengler's Circus, once stating that the venue provides 'a noble presentation of the audience'.[10] As soon as Gladstone's attendance was announced, there was an immense amount of public interest. The meeting was not ticketed and although the speeches were scheduled to begin at 2 p.m., the doors of Hengler's Circus opened at 9.30 a.m. and the auditorium was full by 10.30 a.m. According to the *Liverpool Daily Post*, 'nine-tenths were drawn perhaps by the hope of hearing England's most venerable servant'.[11]

Gladstone's entourage, which included his wife, Catherine, and his son, Herbert, was welcomed to Liverpool by cheering crowds at James Street Station. Liberal leader Richard Holt escorted the family from the station to Hengler's Circus where Gladstone was introduced onto the platform by Lord Derby, who, as lord mayor, chaired the meeting. Other speakers included Forwood, Lawrence, Russell and Warr. The *Liverpool Daily Post* noted how Gladstone had aged: 'he walks a little heavier on his stick' and 'the lines of age have deepened'. It also observed how his voice had weakened and how he spoke 'with the sweetest whisper of persuasion'.[12]

Gladstone began his speech by clarifying that what he was about to say was not a denunciation of the Islamic faith. He told the audience that many Muslims had 'resisted these misdeeds with the utmost of their


Hengler's Circus (*The Builder*, 2 December 1876)

power' and deserved 'our sympathy and admiration'.[13] This sentiment was echoed by Lawrence, who reminded the audience that millions of Muslims in India were loyal to the queen empress, and many also served in the Indian Army. Gladstone claimed that the blame for the Armenian atrocities rested solely with the government in Constantinople and in particular with Sultan Hamid II, who he claimed was 'adding massacre to massacre'.[14]

To cries of 'shame', Gladstone told his audience that 'men are beaten, human excrement rubbed in their faces … women and girls are insulted and dishonoured and dragged from their beds naked at night'. He called for the British government to intervene, but he believed that they would only act if forced by popular outcry. 'It has become necessary to strengthen the hands of the executive government by an expression of national will', he stated. Gladstone also did not confine his criticism to the British government. He argued that 'Concert Europe' had 'failed in what is known as the Eastern Question', and its inaction was a 'miserable disgrace'. Gladstone concluded with a call for the 'civilised states of Europe' to combine and put an end to the atrocities. The *Liverpool Daily Post* proudly announced that 'through its most distinguished son and freeman, Liverpool has spoken'.[15]

The British press was divided over the contents of Gladstone's Liverpool speech. Whereas *The Times* called on 'all sober

politicians to part company with him',[16] the *Morning Post* claimed that Gladstone's words would have 'a salutary effect, both home and abroad'.[17] The international coverage was equally divided, especially in France. The *Éclair* newspaper claimed that Gladstone's speech amounted to a war with 'Britain and France against the rest of Europe';[18] yet *Rappel* claimed that Gladstone speech showed that 'Great Britain alone defends the cause of humanity'.[19]

The prime minister, Lord Salisbury, sympathised with Gladstone's arguments, but he was not prepared to jeopardise peace in Europe; especially after being warned by the Russian monarch, Tsar Nicholas II, that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire would result in instability and possibly a 'European war'.[20] He therefore simply ignored the Liverpool intervention. The Liberal Party, however, could not ignore the return of its former leader, and the press contrasted Gladstone's call for action with the inaction of its current leader, Lord Rosebery, who had previously warned against acting on 'impulse'.[21] The *Daily Chronicle* called Rosebery 'weak', and *The Spectator* accused him of being 'ridiculously inadequate'.[22] Rosebery was furious with Gladstone's Liverpool speech and, to the amazement of both his party and the country, he resigned. He also wrote Gladstone a private note stating that:

> I will not disguise that you have, by again coming forward and advocating a policy I cannot support, innocently and unconsciously dealt the coup de grace.[23]

Although Roy Jenkins has concluded that the Hengler's Circus speech had 'more effect on the internecine warfare within the Liberal Party' than it did on British foreign policy,[24] there can be no doubt it was Gladstone's last political act. The atrocities in Armenia ceased the following year and Gladstone died on 19 May 1898. The speech therefore represented one of Liverpool's greatest ever citizens, conducting his final political act in his home city, and what is more, it was at the behest of the local people. It was a fitting end to a long and glittering career in public life. ■

This article originally appeared in *Liverpool History*, the journal of the Liverpool History Society, and is reprinted with the kind permission of the Society.

1 Gladstone's older brother, Robertson, was the Tory mayor of Liverpool in 1842–43, and resided at Court Hey Hall, Roby, which is now the National Wildlife Centre.

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6 Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Prime Minister*, p. 582.

7 *Liverpool Daily Courier*, 21 Sep. 1896.

8 Ibid.

9 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 22 Sep. 1896.

10 Neil Collins, *Politics and Elections in Nineteenth Century Liverpool* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 200.

11 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 25 Sep. 1896.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 *The Times*, 25 Sep. 1896.

17 *Morning Post*, 25 Sep. 1896.

18 *Eclair*, 25 Sep. 1896.

19 *Rappel*, 25 Sep. 1896.

20 John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power 1874–1914* (London, 1999), p. 242.

21 *The Times*, 14 Sep. 1896.

22 Leo McKinstry, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (London, 2005), p. 390.

23 Rosebery to Gladstone, 7 October 1896, in Robert Rhodes James, *Rosebery* (London, 1963) pp. 392–393.

24 Jenkins, *Gladstone*, p. 628.

**Liberalism in Manchester**

Derek Earls recounts the story of a major figure in Manchester Liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

# Edward Donner and the rise of Manchester Liberalism

THE NAME OF Edward Donner is no longer familiar even to historians of the Liberal Party; but it should be, for he was hugely influential in making the great northern city of Manchester a Victorian and Edwardian bastion of Liberalism. Party activist during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, past president of the Manchester Liberal Federation, the South Manchester Liberal Association and Manchester Reform Club, he was a valued friend of both Campbell-Bannerman and Winston Churchill. He was also the chairman of Churchill's election committee in the 1908 by-election. Described in the *Manchester Evening News*, after his death, as 'the leader of liberalism in Manchester',[1] he has somehow been erased from history. Perhaps one reason lies in his own character, for the *Manchester Evening News* also commented that 'To those who know him intimately Mr Donner is a most unassuming gentleman whose force of character is hidden between a veil of modesty.'[2]

Born in 1840, the son of Scarborough solicitor and entrepreneur Edward Sedgefield Donner,[3] he studied at Oxford University where he met and became friendly with James Bryce,[4] later cabinet member and ambassador to the United States, and also with A. V. Dicey of *The Law of the Constitution* fame. A Classics scholar, with a first in Mods and later coming seventh in the country in the Indian Civil Service exams, Donner was destined for a lucrative administrative career in India. All of that changed after the death of his father and, instead, he arrived in Manchester to work for the family shipping firm of Chamberlin, Donner & Co. of Aytoun Street[5] as a cotton merchant. This apparent descent into trade, no doubt partly to maintain his father's widow (Donner's mother had died when he was aged 2) and many younger siblings, was the making of him.

On arrival in Manchester, he not only fell in love and married Anna, the daughter of a local banker, but he quickly found kindred spirits determined to develop the potential of this rapidly growing northern metropolis. His first great project was to be involved in the foundation of Manchester High School for Girls,[6] for he felt strongly that girls should be educated to the same standards as boys and have equal opportunities to develop their academic talents. His influence in education rapidly extended to Manchester Grammar School,[7] where he became a governor and vice-chairman, and to the foundation and support of other local schools.[8] He was also highly influential in the foundation of Manchester University from its origins in Owens College and was a familiar face to many in that developing institution. By the 1860s, Owens College was an exciting ferment of ideas with research a priority, pushing the boundaries of

many subjects in a way in which a provincial university had the freedom to do. In a history of the college published in 1900,[9] Edward Donner is listed as a life governor and a member of the council. Donner got to know well various visiting and existing professors, teaching staff and students. He was also delighted that his best man, James Bryce, was professor of jurisprudence from 1870 to 1875. It was actually Donner who proposed the formal resolution for an independent foundation of Manchester as a university in 1902.[10] Despite his crucial role, including the donation of sports facilities and his residence in his will,[11] you will find it hard to find any acknowledgement of him from the present-day university, which has largely forgotten his contribution. Donner's influence in the university and its forebears should certainly not be underestimated when we assess his contribution to the Liberal Party. Through social interaction and debate, discussion and his own example, he influenced many university contacts in liberal thought and ideas. It is likely that his own perception of liberalism was also honed and refined by others in this exciting academic institution.

Indeed, from the time of his arrival in Manchester, he was soon also surrounded in his development of liberal ideas by the 'great and the good' of the emerging Manchester metropolis: by academics and bankers, by the bishop and the dean, by the archdeacon, who was also the priest of his parish church where he became churchwarden, and particularly by the dynamic wife of the archdeacon who involved him with the High School for Girls project. Of course not all may have shared his politics. But many had an openness to new ideas and direction necessary in a rapidly developing industrial city. It is interesting that, although many Liberal stalwarts were active Nonconformists,[12] Donner was a committed Anglican who also became involved in Manchester diocesan affairs.[13] Indeed, so deeply did he take his church commitments

Edward Donner (*Manchester Evening News*, 9 November 1907)

that he was prepared to defy the party line and vigorously oppose at meetings the disestablishment of the Church of Wales.[14] He soon became known by and was friendly with the great editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott.

Above all Donner was very happy to work with those of influence in order to further his passionate concern for social justice and the development of community. This including modern and scientific ideas, and this was a spur for him to become involved with a wide variety of organisations, from a hospital for the deaf to industrial schools for offenders and those likely to offend.[15] He observed with horror the drunkenness on Manchester's streets as he walked to and from his office each day – a distance of several miles; this led him to the temperance lobby. His role as a merchant led to involvement with British and foreign sailors' benevolence. He championed children's homes for orphans[16] and nursing help for the poor.[17] He became a trustee of the Manchester Royal Infirmary, was involved in the Manchester Royal Eye Hospital, and in 1894 the Manchester Medical Socie ty appointed him as a vice-president. He had a philanthropic interest

in the then cutting edge of science, especially with regard to cancer treatment and the then revolutionary use of the Rontgen ray apparatus (i.e. X-ray machine). As far back as 1887, he was treasurer of the local fund of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, which visited Manchester in that year.

As well as charitable work and support for those in need, which included much financial generosity, he was also a patron of the Arts. In a desire to see Manchester as a great centre of culture, he worked hard with others, in particular to establish and support the Whitworth Art Gallery. He was one of the original governors[18] and prominent at its opening. He also obtained, in 1898, a first folio of Shakespeare for the Christie Library. Sadly, this was stolen in 1972 and never recovered.[19] He was also a patron of the Halle Orchestra and chairman of Manchester Museum Committee. He was determined to provide open space for the community and the *Manchester Guardian* commented, 'It was mainly owing to his generosity that the Ashfield estate was acquired for public purposes and added to Platt Fields, the great South Manchester park.'[20] The provision of a fine pavilion on the newly opened sports ground for Owens College was largely due to him,[21] and, in 1922, he gave £500 towards the new sports field for Manchester High School for Girls.

In 1907 he was awarded a baronetcy and the *Manchester Evening News* waxed eloquent that:

> Members of all parties and of all sections of the community will be gratified by the baronetcy conferred on Mr Edward Donner. To the general public he is known as a man whose lead is always in the field of benefaction and always commands a following. Mr Donner also includes in his activities a large share in the management of the Hulme's charity (as Chairman of the Governors) the Manchester Royal Infirmary (as a member of the Board of Management), the Manchester University (as a representative governor), the Hulme Hall, the Girls' High School, and the Manchester Grammar School. To these and to other local institutions and to local charities generally he has given with a generous hand.[22]

His philanthropy earned him the freedom of the City of Manchester in 1916.[23]

His liberal politics were intertwined with this philanthropy. The philanthropy was not a means of garnishing votes or favours but arose from deeply held convictions. His liberal politics may well have been a means of expressing and enabling some of this, but the philanthropy endured even when he was no longer politically active. He was certainly not a career politician and, for example, had no desire to stand as a member of parliament. When he was politically active not only was he socially active but he did all of this as well as running a successful business – one can only assume that, with his time spent in so many different areas, he had very competent colleagues and employees. In addition, he became prominent in the banking world including being chairman of the District Bank.[24] Again this was intertwined with his liberal economics and his commitment to free trade. The banking sector was vital to Manchester's economic success, and Donner's stable influence in this should not be underestimated. Research has shown that:

> Manchester's financial sector underwent a particularly radical transformation. In 1872 the 12 banks making up the new Manchester clearing had a collective turnover of £69 million. By 1896 this figure had nearly trebled to £191 million making Manchester home to the largest provincial clearing house in the country.[25]

Not only was Donner economically literate and skilled in finance and trade, but he was also

philosophically absolutely committed to the Liberal doctrine of free trade and no import duties – a doctrine which he was convinced was the only true foundation of prosperity. Certainly, as a merchant running a shipping company, free trade was very much in his business interests. He rejected the view proclaimed by tariff reformers that, when there is an import duty, the burden of the duties is borne by the exporter. It was not only his opinion but the collective experience of the great shipping houses of Manchester that duties are paid by the importing people and that it is folly to talk of 'taxing the foreigner':

> Sir Edward Donner, of the firm of Chamberlin, Donner and Co., merchant manufacturers of velvets, velveteens, &c., was not less emphatic in his statement that it is the consumer who pays. His firm, he said, do a considerable business with American States. In all cases tariffs are met with, and the burden of them is as a matter of course cast on the shoulders of the purchasing firms, who pass it on to their customers, and they, doubtless, to the actual user.[26]

One reason that Manchester was such a Liberal stronghold was that Donner was but one of many merchants and traders in cotton and other goods seeking a sensible business environment founded on free trade rather than protection. Not only did this result in fewer bureaucratic restrictions but also led to lower costs for businesses and more competitive prices for consumers, as well as increasing imports and exports. But certainly, in Donner's case, progressive social attitudes and local action were helped by the economic benefits of free trade. His Liberalism did not arise out of privilege but out of a genuine desire to serve this new industrial city. His Liberalism not only encouraged prosperity but also sought public improvements for the benefit of all, as well as trying to avoid evil social consequences. As a wealthy Anglican businessman and property owner, he sits awkwardly with the conclusion of Moore who, referring to South Manchester in the late nineteenth century, wrote:

> Suburban Liberalism was successful, not because it spoke the language of a privileged group, but, somewhat paradoxically, because it attacked a privileged group – the largely Anglican property-owning class who resisted the public improvements prized by many of the lower middle class.[27]

Of course, many other Liberals both then and since have involved themselves in philanthropy and social action, but it is hard to find any who gave so extensively or unselfconsciously of their time for the relief of others and the wider good of their local community or had such a lifelong commitment to the area.

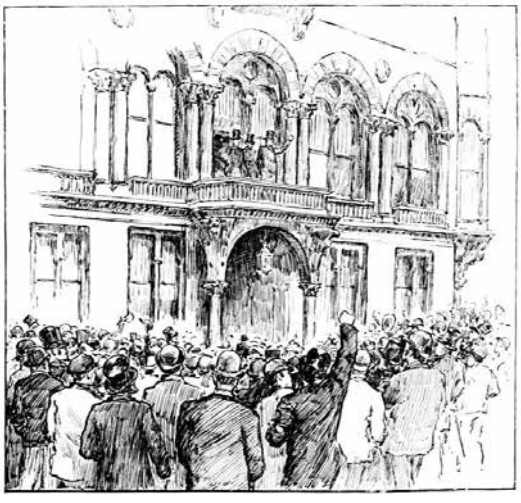
So, from the start of his move to Manchester, Donner rapidly became a stalwart of Liberal institutions and political activism. His modest charm and gentle persuasion and wise counsel counted for much. Unlike more radical local liberals like Sir Henry Roscoe,[28] who became for a time MP for South Manchester, his was a less strident voice but nonetheless effective, especially to a wider audience than Liberal stalwarts. His style was well summed up by C. P. Scott when Scott took over from him in 1909 as president of the Liberal Federation. The local press quoted him as saying:

> In Sir Edward the Liberal Federation had an ideal president. Liberals were sometimes spoken of as though they were wild men and revolutionaries. They would not describe Sir Edward as a revolutionary (Hear, hear). He was an extremely convinced and convincing Liberal, who combined in a remarkable degree caution with courage and enterprise with foresight. He looked before and after, and they all felt they were pretty safe in following him. Mr Scott did not know whether

> Sir Edward Donner had taken out a patent for his particular kind of Liberalism but if he had it was to be hoped he would work it actively in this country and that his country would have the benefit of its product – (Cheers and laughter.)'[29]

Donner was indeed a familiar and influential figure in all local Liberal institutions. He had succeeded Sir Charles Swann (who was MP for North Manchester) as president of the Manchester Liberal Federation in 1907.[30] Although, as we see above, he resigned this in favour of his friend C. P. Scott in 1909, he did remain as a vice-president. He was a member of Manchester Reform Club probably from its establishment in 1867. In 1871, it moved into fine new premises on King Street designed by architect Edward Saloman. Here much Liberal business, no doubt both municipal and national, was done in convivial surroundings. In 1899, at the thirty-second annual meeting, chaired by President Mr Edwin Guthrie, he was listed as on the Reform Club political committee.[31] He later progressed to becoming president. He was generous in funding the Liberal cause, donating £50 to the MLU (Manchester Liberal Union) in the 1890s and another £50 for the new Liberal Club in 1893.[32]

Manchster Reform Club at election time, c.1890 (*Club-Land*, 85)



But for sheer length of service, which itself is an indication of the priority Donner placed upon it, his presidency of the South Manchester Liberal Association, from 1905 to 1916, must rank as highly significant. This was the association most concerned with Donner's immediate surroundings and the area and people he knew best. I have found no evidence that Donner represented Liberalism in a formal capacity beyond Manchester, although his contribution within Manchester was outstanding and well known to national leaders.

Perhaps here is a good place to mention the reputation of Edward and his wife, Anna Donner, for hospitality. Able to afford a full household staff, they delighted in entertaining and introducing people from different spheres to one another. Such an exchange of ideas cannot be quantified but was of immense value. In summer, the lovely garden in their house at Oak Mount in Fallowfield was used for garden parties for many different charities and organisations, from the South Manchester Liberal Association itself to a local Catholic Convent School[33] and the British Medical Society's seventieth meeting, in 1902. Each Sunday, they would entertain staff from the university. Both Campbell-Bannerman and Churchill shared his board on their visits to Manchester. He was equally happy with such exalted people as with somewhat random visitors, such as a visit by a delegate, Sadie Harper, from an American university, who wrote, 'I sat on Sir Edward's right, and he was just delightful to talk to. Oh you would have loved both him and Lady Donner, they were such charming people.'[34]

Unlike many of his contemporaries, including his best man, James Bryce, he did not seek to stand for parliament but rather put all his efforts into the local community, trying, with Anna, to make it a better and a safer place. Nevertheless, he had a real and vital

contact with those who were MPs. In a letter to James Bryce, dated 3 April 1880, he writes:

> I couldn't write last night for we were out & only got news of your election in the evening. I have just sent a telegram with our heartiest congratulations – I am awfully glad old fellow. The Liberal victory has surprised everyone here by its substance. Personally I am just as well pleased that things have gone as they have, for I can't stand Dizzy – he would be in any party sooner or later. I hope the Liberals will make a strong government … no reason why they should not.
>
> Anna sends very kind wishes also to you & your northern sisters, & adds her included warmest congratulations.
>
> Every affection,
> Edward Donner[35]

James Bryce rose quickly in political importance as an MP, and, in a letter to him dated 22 August 1892, Donner writes:

> My dear Bryce, We are both delighted that you are in the Cabinet. Accept our best congratulations. I shall hope to see you at Linglands again as you have a lot of Duchy property there. We came home on Friday evening. Anna is very well, & I am too, but I find this morning I am not much good at writing. We spent our time at Sars & the Eiffel art both very delightful. With kindest remembrances to your wife & yourself, Every affection, Edward Donner.[36]

That they continued to correspond on substantive matters of politics can be seen in a letter from Donner to Bryce, dated 9 December 1894,[37] in which Donner proclaimed:

> It is not the ordinary voter, known to political workers, who counts, but the large class of those not known to politicians, but who turn situations. The College[38] touches them at busy points, as many hundreds of students pass through it every year or two.

Here we find a conscious recognition, if one were needed, of the importance of his contacts with Owen's College, the forerunner of the university. He was conscious that his Liberalism belonged amongst, and influenced, the free exchange of ideas from those eager for academic knowledge and professional skills.

Donner was recommended to Campbell-Bannerman in preparation for the former's visit to Manchester in 1899, with the assurance 'that Edward Donner is the best man to act as your host. He is an Oxford man & a very nice fellow, also quite one of the leading M'ter Liberals.'[39] Clarke, in his chapter on 'Men of light and leading',[40] sees Donner as typical of highly influential local Liberals – respectable and with a social conscience – without whom MPs lacked solid constituency support. Campbell-Bannerman immediately warmed to Donner and there began a personal friendship between the two of them.

Donner's influence in national politics increased when, in 1907, he became president of the Manchester Liberal Federation. Certainly, all of this fits in with James Moore's thesis, examining South Manchester, that 'popular community-based campaigning that addressed local needs could provide powerful cross-class appeals and help address Liberal decline in urban politics'[41] Donner's genial, thoughtful, philanthropic and unthreatening character was both attractive and effective. However, partly because he was modest and unassuming, his contribution has so often been subsequently ignored or understated.

Personal friendship with Campbell Bannerman led to Donner entertaining him on a prime ministerial visit to Manchester in May 1907. A newspaper account recorded:

> A surprisingly large number of people assembled at the Central Station to welcome the Prime Minister. The platform at which the train was to arrive was kept clear,

> but outside the barriers, right down the approach to the station and along Mount Street hundreds of people were waiting some time before the train was due. Waiting on the platform were the local leaders of the Liberal Party, including Mr Donner who will occupy the chair at the banquet at the Midland Hotel tonight … Mr Donner's private carriage was drawn up near the platform. Sir Henry was greeted on alighting from the train by Mr Donner and hearty cheers were raised by the party on the platform … He entered Mr Donner's carriage at once with Mr Donner and Mr Nash and drove off to Mr Donner's house at Fallowfield. As they left the station the cheering was renewed by the people when they caught sight of Sir Henry through the windows of the closed carriage, a conveyance by the way which caused considerable disappointment to the small army of photographers who were waiting with their cameras to take snapshots of Manchester's distinguished visitor.[42]

Interestingly, it was in November of the same year that Edward Donner was made Baronet by Sir Henry in the King's Birthday Honours list. The *Manchester Evening News* of 9 November not only listed Donner's philanthropy and citizenship but also elaborated his modest character and the effect of his friendship and influence in Liberalism at the highest level:

> Though of liberal views Mr Donner is not in any sense an aggressive politician and the fact that the Premier on his last visit to Manchester, was the guest of Mr Donner at Oak Drive, Fallowfield, had rather a social and personal than political significance. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who on previous visits had been the guest of Mr Donner, spoke highly on that occasion of his host's valuable help 'Not only in the cause of Liberalism but in support of every good work, educational and philanthropic.' Sir Edward Donner is married and has no family.[43]

Despite his connections, his industry, his philanthropy and his personality, Donner did not meet with universal success. The biggest failure of his political endeavours was as chairman of Winston Churchill's election committee, when Churchill was defeated in the then Manchester North West by-election on 24 April 1908. It was a three-way contest with a Conservative and a Socialist candidate also standing.[44] Churchill had been the Liberal MP for the constituency since 1906, but he had to stand again in a by-election because he had been appointed as President of the Board of Trade. At that time, newly appointed cabinet ministers were required to re-contest their seats. Fighting what was traditionally a Conservative seat, Churchill – and Donner who he enthusiastically appointed as his election committee chairman – faced opposition to their stance on the importance of free trade and also from the suffrage movement. This latter was a little surprising, because Churchill was on record as being sympathetic to their cause. However, at this stage, it should be noted, the Liberal government had not committed to women's suffrage. From an account in the *Manchester Guardian*:

> At the close of a crowded meeting in the Cathedral Schools yesterday Mr. Winston Churchill was asked what he would do to help women to get the Parliamentary suffrage.
>
> He said: 'I will try my best as and when occasion offers, because I do think sincerely that the women have always had a logical case, and they have now got behind them a great popular demand among women.
>
> 'It is no longer a movement of a few extravagant and excitable people, but a movement which is gradually spreading to all classes of women, and, that being so, it

assumes the same character as franchise movements have previously assumed.

'I find another argument in favour of the enfranchisement of women in the opposition we are encountering on this temperance question.

'I believe the influence of women in the temperance question would be highly beneficial. When I see the great forces of prejudice and monopoly with which we are confronted, I am ready to say that the women must come into the fighting line and do their share in fighting for the cause of progress.' (Cheers.)

Mrs C. H. Pankhurst writes from the office of the National Women's Social and Political Union:

'Except that we regard it as a sign that our campaign against the Government is having its effect, we attach no value to Mr. Churchill's assertion that he will use his influence with the Government in the interests of women's suffrage.

'Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman is in favour of 'votes for women', yet he, as Prime Minister, could not induce his colleagues to take action, and where his influence failed Mr. Winston Churchill's is not likely to succeed.

'We wish to make it clear to Mr. Winston Churchill that we shall not be satisfied by anything less than a definite undertaking from Mr Asquith and the Government as a whole that the Women's Enfranchisement Bill now before the House of Commons is to be carried into law without delay. Unless this official Government pledge is made to us we shall continue our opposition to the candidature of Mr. Churchill and other Government candidates.'[45]

Interestingly, in this regard Sir Edward was himself at this time not convinced by the campaign for women's suffrage, a fact probably known by the Pankhurst family. A school history records that, 'The daughters of Mrs Pankhurst, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, who all at one time or another played a prominent part in the cause of women's suffrage, were all members of Manchester High School for Girls in the last decade of the nineteenth century and all were prominent in the cause of women's suffrage.'[46] It seems from the account that Christabel and Adela were happy there but Sylvia hated it. A decade later, Donner found himself at odds over women's suffrage with the headmistress of the school he had been very influential in founding, but there was no record of them discussing this in public.

The situation was also complicated by the support of both Churchill and Donner for proposed legislation concerning public houses. Edward Donner, in particular, was a staunch opponent of the evils of the liquor trade. This has been described thus:

> In response to the numerous proposals presented to the House of Commons, the Liberal government agreed to overhaul the entire licensing arrangements across the United Kingdom. A proposed licensing bill (1908) would control opening hours, restrict the number of licences and contained a section effectively banning the employment of women. The bill, drafted in February 1908, contained 40 pages outlining amendments to the Licensing Acts, 1828 to 1906. The main thrust of the proposed bill was to reduce dramatically the number of public houses and transfer licences from breweries in an attempt to virtually nationalise public houses. Almost hidden in part three of this document, under clause 20 ('Power to attach conditions to the renewal of a licence'), was a section granting local magistrates the power to attach any condition that they saw fit, including 'the employment of women or children on the licensed premises'. Under this clause a local magistrate could refuse

> to issue or renew a licence unless a publican agreed not to hire women for bar work.'[47]

This led to a furious reaction from the Gore-Booth sisters, that is Eva Gore-Booth and her older sister Constance Gore-Booth, later known as the Countess Markievicz. Both were committed Irish suffragists of influence. Constance was later the first woman elected to the parliament of the United Kingdom, from 1918 to 1922. However, as a member of Sinn Fein, she did not take her seat. Eva had renounced her Irish aristocratic background to live with Esther Roper in a terraced house in the heart of working-class Manchester. The story of her life is told in detail by Sonja Tiernan in *Eva Gore-Booth. An image of such politics*.[48] At the time of the 1908 by-election Eva invited her sister to join her in defending the barmaids, founding the Barmaids Political Defence League. They resented the moral standpoint of churchmen approved of by Donner, like the Bishop of Southwark, who proclaimed that 'the nation ought not to allow the natural attractions of a young girl to be used for trading purposes'.[49] Sonja Tiernan records:

> Gore-Booth organised a rather striking coach, drawn by four white horses, to be driven around Manchester on the day that Churchill held his meeting at the Coal Exchange. Markievicz was at the whip and she drove to Stevenson Square. On their arrival Gore-Booth and Roper took to the roof of the coach and made a rousing address about Clause 20 of the Licensing Bill. The women explained how the clause would restrict, or possibly eradicate, the employment of barmaids. Roper appealed for a vote against Churchill in the by-election on the grounds that the 'Home Secretary had been induced to insert the clause in the bill by a number of rich persons who had attacked the moral characters of barmaids as a class.' Gore-Booth exclaimed that 'it was not a minor matter to take away the livelihood of 100,000 respectable hard-working women.'[50]

In addition, much of the Catholic vote was lost because of Roman Catholic opposition to the Liberal education policy which they claimed was undermining the autonomy of Roman Catholic schools. Despite all of this, Churchill rode around the constituency in an open top car with his mother and Sir Edward Donner on the day of the election, convinced he would win, yet he lost by 529 votes from a large turnout of 10,681.[51]

Following his defeat, in a most gracious letter to Sir Edward Donner, his electoral committee chairman, Churchill wrote giving a valuable insight into his political thinking:

> My Dear Sir Edward Donner,
>
> I must ask you to convey my sincere thanks to all those who worked with you to secure the success of the Liberal and Free Trade cause at the late election in North West Manchester. The energy and public spirit they displayed in that hard conflict are beyond all aspersion; and their efforts were supported by a thoroughly efficient organisation. An even more powerful concentration of forces and interests have prevailed and certainly I am not going to underrate the evil consequence of the result. But there is at the heart of every political reverse the dynamic impulse of a future triumph. You must turn the emotions of defeat to the process of recovery, so that the very hour of disaster may become the seed time of victory, and, in my opinion, the figures of the poll ought to carry the highest encouragement to all Free Traders who are in earnest. It is quite clear the political levels and balance in North-West Manchester have been permanently altered during the last four years. Here in a constituency, which since its creation has been regarded as the blue ribbon of Lancashire Toryism at a moment of peculiar

national and still more local difficulty, the utmost exertions of the most powerful vested interests in the country have only succeeded in securing an anti Free Trade majority of 153 upon a poll of unexampled size, and even this exiguous majority was only achieved through the sudden and organised transference of between 400 and 500 Catholic votes, always hitherto an integral part of the Liberal strength in Manchester, to the Protectionist side upon grounds quite unconnected with the main issues. Now, by the general election several important adverse factors may have been removed. The insignificant support secured by the Socialist candidate after so much trouble makes it at least doubtful whether that curious diversion will be repeated. The Licensing Bill will, I trust, have taken its place upon the statute book, and the liquor trade may not be in a position to exercise the undue political power which they at present possess. The Catholic voters now estranged will, there is reason to hope, have been conciliated and their apprehension allayed by some fair and practical concordat in educational matters. Lastly, at the general election the issue will be sharply defined, and a vote for the Protectionist candidate will not only be a moral injury to the cause of Free Trade in the abstract, but a direct mandate for the immediate erection of a discriminatory tariff upon a vast number of commodities. See now what a noble opportunity rises above the horizon. There is no reason, in my opinion, why, with a suitable candidate the seat should not be recovered in such manner and at such time as will more than repair the misfortune that has occurred. In such a work I shall be ready to aid in any way in my power, and, although my Parliamentary connection with the division has now terminated, I shall consider myself under special obligations to help, so far as my strength permits, to defend Free Trade in the great city to whose prosperity and fame Free Trade is vital.

Yours very sincerely,
Winston S Churchill.[52]

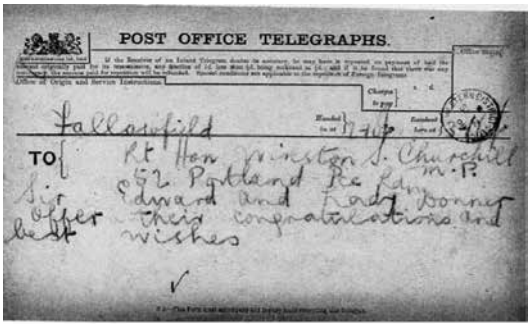
Churchill's prediction above was proved correct and the Liberals did regain the seat in the January 1910 election.

The friendship between Mr & Mrs Churchill and Sir Edward and Lady Donner continued. A telegram was sent by the Donners on the occasion of Churchill's wedding in September 1908.

The Churchills returned to Manchester to receive a wedding present for Mrs Churchill subscribed by the Liberals of North West Manchester. There was also a gift of a souvenir of Mr Churchill's service to North West Manchester. These are described as:

> The gifts were diamond ornaments – a bracelet and a star. The star is intended for the hair, but Mrs Churchill pinned it at once to her dress and she was still wearing it when she took her place on the platform at Belle Vue last night … At night Mr and Mrs Churchill went to Belle Vue for the presentation of the souvenir of Mr Churchill's political representation of North-west Manchester. The subscribers to this fund numbered many hundreds and, as Sir Edward Donner, in making the presentation very happily

Telegram from Donner to Churchill: 'Sir Edward and Lady Donner offer their congratulations and best wishes'.


POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.

Fallowfield

TO Rt Hon Winston S. Churchill M.P. 52 Portland Pl. W.

Sir Edward and Lady Donner offer their congratulations and best wishes

> phrased it, they included many whose worldly possessions are small but who are nevertheless true judges of character, with warm hearts and generous appreciation … Sir Edward Donner said 'We delight in your eloquence, in your knowledge, in your wit and humour, we have confidence in you as a statesman and as an able administrator, and we are grateful for your eminent services to Lancashire'. Sir Edward Donner singled out other of Mr Churchill's qualities and was warmly cheered when he assured Mr Churchill that although the direct political tie had been severed Manchester will always claim a large share in him 'as a representative of the British nation.' Sir Edward Donner was again cheered when he uncovered the souvenir, a beautifully designed fruit and flower stand in silver. It bears an inscription memorising the great Liberal victory of 1906 … Mr Churchill's speech of thanks was listened to with great pleasure … he spoke with transparent gratitude 'The support of this great city has been the turning point of my political life.' His defeat at the by-election six months ago was 'a bitter sorrow, a cruel, heavy blow'. But Mr Churchill insisted on the broader outlook … The waves of fortune may ebb and flow, but in the long run the new levels will hold, and therein Manchester Liberals will find abiding satisfaction."[53]

The Manchester Liberal Federation annual meeting of 1909[54] was chaired by Sir Edward Donner, who gave a comprehensive speech that included both a lament for the death of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman and the result of the by-election in which Churchill was defeated. On a positive note, he commended the report of the general committee, which enthused about the social reforms, such as the old age pension, that the Liberal government had achieved. It is a moot point whether handing over the presidency to 'one of his oldest personal friends and a pillar of liberalism in the North of England', C. P. Scott, was influenced by the recent by-election defeat. However, Donner still remained involved and supportive and continued as a vice-president. 1910 was exceptionally busy with two elections, in January and December.

As the January election was drawing to a close he commented that it had been a bitter contest and a large part of a letter to Bryce, dated 28 January 1910, contains some interesting insights. Not only is it clear that political arguments also became religious issues, but the letter also highlights the debate about free trade against tariff reform as well as the role of the House of Lords.[55]

> We are nearly through with the elections. The Tories, big landlords and publicans have used every kind of means against me, and spread a belief that the ballot is not secret. Indeed it appears to be pretty lowly conducted in some such districts. Prayer for a Tory candidate in some schools has been found useful. At Fallowfield Church we handed over the matter to the All. King and simply prayed that country might be guided aright. They were.
>
> I hope that Asquith will go first simply for two things. 1 to put the Budget through 2 to establish the sole right of the Commons to touch finance. I should think the Irish would agree. Of course Balfour may offer to put them through the House of Lords in exchange for Tariff Reform, but I doubt if he cares much for Tariff Reform, and the bargain would be risky for both.
>
> The big question of curtailing the powers of the Lords, or reforming them, will be difficult. Asquith has pronounced for the former; others for the latter. It could be tackled after 1 and 2. I try to inform upon everybody that we must be prepared and willing for another fight at any moment.
>
> Bos Smith's life is well done, but the book is rather big.

> My wife includes with me in kindest remembrance to Mrs Bryce and yourself, and believe me,
>
> Yrs, every affection
> Edward Donner[56]

Clarke records that Donner continued in great demand in the run up to the December election.

> The calls on his support were numerous. On one evening in November Donner spoke for Schwann in Manchester North, Haworth in South, and was appointed to Kemp's election committee in North West.'[57]

Another interesting political letter to Bryce can be found in the run up to the January 1910 general election.[58] Donner lambasts the Tory press as the 'idle rich of whom we have far too many in London especially'. He states that 'the next General Election will be interesting. I hope you will be back for it. The Labour Party will trouble us.' He is clearly anxious about a threat from both Tory and Labour. It did indeed result in a hung parliament. That 'big question', referred to above by Donner in his January letter to Bryce, of curtailing the power of the Lords can be seen in Asquith's action of including him in a list of possible peers.[59] Whether he was aware of this possibility is unknown but perhaps this is doubtful and would probably not have been welcomed by him, although these peerages were never bestowed. This was a contingency plan in case a mass creation was needed to get the Parliament Act through the Lords in 1911. It does, however, show the regard in which he was held by the Liberal leadership.

Although he and Lady Donner opened their garden for a garden party to support South Manchester Liberal Association in 1911,[60] perhaps unsurprisingly Donner felt increasingly that the time was right to withdraw from major political activity. He eventually resigned from the chairmanship of the South Manchester Liberal Association in 1916 on the grounds of advancing years.[61]

During the years between 1914 and 1918, both Sir Edward and Lady Donner were doing all they could for the war effort despite their increasing age. Sir Edward was busy with the war work of the Manchester Royal Infirmary.

> The war work of the Manchester Royal Infirmary was the subject of comment at the annual meeting of the trustees, held on February 9th. Sir Edward Donner said the past year had made extraordinary demands upon the honorary staff. They had taken over 200 military patients in addition to all their ordinary care of the civil patients. The staff had risen to the occasion.[62]

Lady Donner was involved in founding the Fairview Auxiliary Hospital in Fallowfield and was a member of the Fallowfield Red Cross. She was made a Dame of the British Empire for her war work.[63] In June 1914, Sir Edward and Lady Donner's house and garden were lent for the day to the British Red Cross as a training exercise for a mock hospital and operating theatre.

Politics no longer seemed important at this time of great national peril, although it should be noted that the passage of the war and the role of women within it altered Sir Edward's view on women's suffrage. Despite his earlier lack of enthusiasm for this cause, it was reported in 1916 in the *Christian Science Monitor*:

> Of the many interesting changes which have come over public opinion in the United Kingdom, during the last two years, few are more striking than that in regard to woman suffrage. It is not that great numbers of public men and public bodies have formally registered altered views. The change is soon much more in a kind of general admission, met with everywhere, that the whole question is on a different basis; that woman

> suffrage is in fact already an admitted necessity, because the view of the nation has really swept far beyond it. The admission of Sir Edward Donner, at Manchester, recently, that he had been converted to woman suffrage, because of what he had seen during the past two years, is only an expression of a feeling that is growing more common every day.[64]

In 1920, Sir Edward was 80. Known now as 'the grand old man of Manchester' – a term of affection his modesty would have shrunk from – perhaps the best tribute came from the magazine of Manchester Grammar School, for it encapsulates his life of trade and social and political action at a time when inevitably his powers were waning:

> 'My boy is going into business. What in the world is the use, I should like to know, of his learning your Latin and Greek? As for going up to Oxford, it simply means that he won't begin at the Petty Cash until he is 22.'
>
> Of such talk Sir Edward is the standing refutation. He learned Latin and Greek, he took Classical Honours at Oxford, and he stands to-day as one of the leading business men of Manchester and the noblest of her great citizens. The 'chapter of accidents' (though I doubt whether that is the right name for it) brought him to Manchester straight from Corpus, Oxford, and the friendship of such men as Prof. Dicey and Lord Bryce. He set himself to study the cotton trade with the same thoroughness as he had studied the humane letters withal. 'There is no work uninteresting,' he says, 'if you put your back and your mind into it.' The warehouse was a very different proposition from what he had forecast for himself, but he put his back and his mind into it, and before long there was no operation in connection with the warehouse which he did not understand both in theory and practice. So much for his vocation in the narrower sense of the word; but there is for every businessman a higher vocation – the vocation of citizenship. It is the fulfilment of this vocation that Sir Edward Donner has won the regard and affection of the whole community. In particular he has devoted himself to higher education. The University has had no better friend and supporter. Professors and servants, the Council and the Students' Union, alike look to him for counsel and help. It is always at their service for any good object.
>
> Sir Edward is our Deputy-Chairman; he is Chairman of our sister Institution, the Girls' High School; he is an ex-chairman and still governor of Hulme Grammar School; he is president of the Whitworth Institute, and chairman of Hulme Hall. This represents only a small part of his civic work. Wherever there is a cause which makes for the uplift of the common life, Sir Edward gives it his active support. 'The wisest head in Manchester,' said a friend to me. 'And the biggest heart,' was my answer. The Grammar School joins with all Sir Edward's friends in the tribute which is paid to him on achieving his 80th birthday. 'That man is richest,' says John Ruskin, 'who has by means of his attainments and possessions the widest and most helpful influence over the lives of his fellows.'[65]

Donner died at his home, Oak Mount, Fallowfield on 29 December 1934 after a fall on the evening of Christmas Day. When we assess Donner's contribution to the Liberal cause over many decades, we see not only how much Manchester Liberalism depended on him and his unique style, but also his importance nationally through his friendship with Liberal leaders and influential politicians, like Campbell-Bannerman, Churchill and Bryce, in keeping local issues in the national consciousness. He was not, of course, immune to the ebb and flow of political popularity. Indeed,

Moore could have been describing Donner when he stated, 'Manchester Liberalism had great influence on the national political stage, but never exercised complete dominance over its own city'.[66] Having said this, Moore also points out that 'Both Manchester and Leicester were something of Liberal islands in otherwise largely Conservative counties.'[67] Certainly, in Manchester's embrace of Liberalism, Donner's congenial leadership style was successful and not only attracted many but avoided the damaging internal schisms which can be so destructive.

Although this leadership contribution came to be recognised in his own lifetime and he was admired and followed then, this 'grand old man of Manchester' has now been largely forgotten. Tanner, in examining the dynamics of political change which saw the ascendency of the Labour Party, argues:

> The evidence presented here suggests that the process of change was more fragmented. The Liberals were not an entirely 'visible' force, but Labour's capacity to replace them was not so evident that major electoral changes were inevitable. There were areas of Labour growth before 1914, and areas of Liberal success. The political system was an elaborate jigsaw.[68]

In this process of national and local fragmentation Donner was, I think, ever patiently trying to assemble the jigsaw and make sense of it in ways which accorded with his Christian, humanitarian and liberal instincts and the needs of the local community. So, not only was Donner a catalyst for the growth of Liberalism in Manchester and the north-west, but he also illustrated quite unconsciously a strategy of sound and honest business and social action with a concern for education for all and a particular concern for the plight of the poor, the disadvantaged, the sick and the unfortunate. It was no exaggeration for the *Manchester Evening News* to describe him as 'one of the most genuinely public spirited men in the country'[69] Such local examples could be seen as an inspiration for national Liberal policies such as old age pensions and the National Insurance scheme.[70] In this, while a shrewd observer of national politics, he was rooted in the local and wished the best for the lives of those around him. He would, I think, have agreed with Moore's conclusions:

> Despite the growing importance of national political personalities, local issues and local politicians continued to be important, especially in urban politics where personal contact between the elector and candidate was more likely.[71]
>
> The vitality and commitment of a generation of Liberals in the constituencies was able to overcome the period of destructive infighting at Westminster. Only a world war, with its accompanying social and political turmoil could destroy that optimism and vitality.[72]

This model of local presence and action has been successfully adopted by Liberal activists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. Only by being fully part of and committed to the local community and its well-being has the present incarnation of Liberal Democrats had so much influence in local councils and now so much influence with its seventy-two MPs at Westminster following the 2024 general election.

In his own day and circumstances Sir Edward Donner set a fine example. Today we should rediscover his heritage and continue to be grateful, not just for him, but also for those who in our day do so much of the hard graft of caring for communities. ■

Derek Earis is a retired Church of England priest and an Honorary Canon Emeritus of Norwich Cathedral. He now lives in York. He is an MA of Oxford University and a BCL of Durham University and has had a lifetime as a parish priest.

1 *Manchester Evening News*, 1 Nov. 1935. This comment appeared as part of the account of the death of his wife Lady Donner, who died eleven months after him. See also the detailed tribute in the *Manchester Guardian* of 31 Dec. 1934 at the time of his death.

2 *Manchester Evening News*, 9 Nov. 1907.

3 Donner's father's contribution to the lucrative tourist industry in early to mid-19th century Scarborough was considerable. More information can be found in Arthur Rowntree (ed.), *The History of Scarborough* (J. M. Dent, 1931), p. 266; also on the website of the Scarborough Civic Society, see scarboroughcivicsociety.org.uk/Royal-Hotel.php.

4 James Bryce was Donner's best man at his wedding to Anna Cunningham on 18 Apr. 1866 at the parish church of St James, Birch. He was appointed trustee of Donner's wife's assets. He became a member of the Liberal cabinet of 1892 and became Ambassador to the United States 1907–13. There is an extensive correspondence between the two preserved in the Bodleian Library.

5 *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Dec. 1941, refers to the firm as being founded in 1854.

6 His role in this was extensive and time consuming as treasurer of the project and was groundbreaking at the time. See Sara Burstall, *The Story of the Manchester High School for Girls 1871–1911* (Manchester University Press, 1911); also, *100 years of Manchester High School for Girls 1874–1974*, obtainable from the school and printed by A. J. Wright & Sons Ltd., Manchester.

7 See footnote 29 for a fulsome tribute.

8 This includes the Willian Hulme Grammar School which opened a Donner centre in 2008 in his memory.

9 P. J. Hartog (ed.), *The Owens College, Manchester: (Founded 1851) A brief history of the college and description of its various departments* (J. E. Cornish, 1900).

10 See *Manchester City News*, Sat. 11 Jan. 1902.

11 Donner House, its use and then demolition in 1966 is described in Brian Pullan and Michele Abendstern, *A History of the University of Manchester 1951–73* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

12 See, for example, J. R. Moore, *Liberalism and the Politics of Suburbia: Electoral dynamics in late nineteenth-century Manchester* (Urban History, 2003), p. 234.

13 See *Manchester Evening News*, 23 Dec. 1905, concerning the sale of three old Manchester churches.

14 See for example the *Church Times*, June 1912, p. 823.

15 See account of Donner's presence at Barnes' House School, Heaton Mersey to award prizes as recorded in *The Advertiser*, Fri. 25 June 1918. Such schools were later called Approved Schools, then Community Homes with education, and now Secure Schools.

16 See account in *Manchester Guardian*, 8 May 1911.

17 See *Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1918.

18 Charter of incorporation signed by Queen Victoria on 2 Oct. 1889.

19 See my letter in *Daily Telegraph*, Fri. 10 Nov. 2023.

20 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 Dec. 1934.

21 An account of the opening ceremony performed by Lady Donner is in the *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Oct. 1900.

22 *Manchester Evening News*, 9 Nov. 1907.

23 For the citation see: Sir Edward Donner | GB127.M797/2/1 | Manchester Archives+ | Flickr https://www.flickr.com/photos/manchesterarchiveplus/7988667850/album-72157631541553684.

24 See Sir Christopher Needham's tribute in *The Observer*, 27 Jan. 1935.

25 A. Kidd, Manchester (2nd edn., Keele, 1996), p. 107–8, quoted in J. Moore, *The Transformation of Urban Liberalism: Party Politics and Urban Governance in Late Nineteenth-century England* (Routledge, 2017), p. 267.

26 *The Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 28 Jan. 1910, quoting from research done by the *Manchester Guardian*.

27 See Moore, *Liberalism and the Politics of Suburbia*, p. 248.

28 Ibid., p. 235.

29 *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Mar. 1909.

30 See *Yorkshire Post & Leeds Intelligence*, 1 Jan. 1935.

31 See *Manchester Courier*, 1 Mar. 1899.

32 P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 213.

33 Pat Harris, *Against the Odds: The Story of The Hollies FCJ Convent School, 1852–1985* (Kindle edn.: Pat Harris, 2002), ch. 2.

34 Mary Biggar Peck (ed.), *A Full House and Fine Singing: Diaries and Letters of Sadie Harper Allen* (Goose Lane Editions, 1992), p. 237.

35 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 3 Apr. 1880, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.

36 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 22 Aug. 1892, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.

37 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 9 Dec. 1894, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.

38 That would be Manchester's Owens College, the forerunner of the University. He comments that the college is, socially and politically, a considerable direct

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.

58 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 7 June 1909, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.

59 Listed in Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (HarperCollins, 1964), p. 535.

60 See the account of 11 July 1911in 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! ■

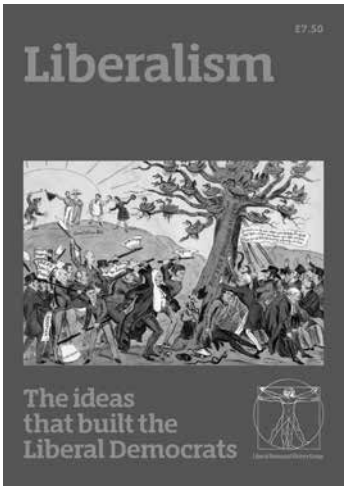
Peter Truesdale was a councillor and Leader of Lambeth Council. He is a member of the History Group's executive.

# 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.'




Chapters on Whigism, Radicalism, Peelites and Free Trade set out the historical commitments to reform rather than bloody revolution (severely tested during the wars with revolutionary France), the belief in progress and enlightenment through reform, commitment to toleration and freedom of expression, and to free trade as against mercantilism and war. Modern Liberalism begins with the 'New Liberalism' of T. H. Green, Hobhouse and Hobson – setting up an underlying tension between 'classical' Liberals clinging to a minimal state and the sanctity of private property and individual liberty, and social liberals who accepted that social improvement required state action, and that freedom for all required social institutions and economic intervention to redress the imbalance between privilege and poverty. The origins of social liberalism in the improving measures and 'municipal socialism' of Liberals in local government, from the mid-nineteenth century on, is carefully noted.

Essays on feminism and environmentalism explore themes where Liberal ideas have developed slowly, often through contested debates. Twin essays on economic liberalism and Keynesianism trace Liberals' commitment to active economic management between and after the world wars, against warnings that this would lead to an over-powerful and potentially authoritarian state. A contribution on social democracy notes the acceptance of liberal socialists within the Labour Party of the constructive power of a centralised state within a mixed economy, and the doubts about over-centralisation that fed into the merger of internationally minded social democrats with the Liberal Party. An excellent essay on localism and devolution links the role Liberals played in the establishment of nineteenth-century municipal corporations, parish and district councils, the underlying commitment to devolution within the UK, and the development of community politics as part of 'enabling each person to fulfil his or her own potential' as an active citizen.

The focus of this booklet is firmly on British Liberalism. It's a pity that there was not space to include some more cross-references to continental liberalism and social democracy, particularly across northern Europe. The development of the 'social market economy' in West Germany, for example, was partly in response to British guidance and advice. Roosevelt's practical Keynesianism, and the central role he and his advisers played in establishing the post-1945 liberal international order – and in promoting West European integration – is also an important strand of the liberal and social democratic tradition, although almost forgotten today.

Faced with succinct summaries of so many aspects of Liberalism, the reader is left wanting to know more, and to explore the tensions between different principles. How have liberals addressed the contradictions between their commitment to liberty and their concern about inequality – a tension on which Lloyd George is quoted in 1908? What has happened to the Liberal promotion of co-ownership, cooperatives and non-profits, which the handbook notes J. S. Mill, Elliott Dodds and Jo Grimond all supported? Is the core liberal faith in progress, education and the positive guidance of intellectual elites sustainable in a world in which conservation must limit growth and mass democracy feeds distrust of elites?

Readers should come away from this booklet thinking critically about how to adjust liberal principles to the challenges we face today. How should we interpret Hobhouse's century-old dictum that 'liberty without equality

is a name of noble sound and squalid result' in a world of billionaires, multi-national corporations and a lengthening tail of elderly people? Is there a clear limit to the acceptable percentage of GDP taken in taxation when the demands on government have widened to its current extent? Is it possible to maintain an effective liberal international order when the majority of major powers are not democratic, when American leadership has collapsed, and China is pursuing an effective mercantilist strategy?

The essay on the evolution of liberal concern for the natural environment poses one underlying dilemma: 'the balance between liberal adherence to individual freedom, of non-interference in people's choices and lifestyles, and the desire to limit the environmental consequences of those choices seem likely to become increasing difficult to strike.' Liberalism has always been about striking difficult compromises between principles that are hard to reconcile. Extremists and populists may claim to offer simple answers to economic and social issues. Liberals, committed to reform rather than revolution, have grappled with conflicting priorities for more than two centuries, and face even more agonising choices today. ■

William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) studied at Cambridge, Cornell and Oxford, taught at Manchester, Oxford and the LSE, and has researched and published on British foreign policy, national identity and European international politics. He is currently Liberal Democrat Cabinet Office spokesman in the Lords.

# Coalition and leadership

## Vince Cable and Rachel Smith, *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade* (The Real Press, 2022)
## Review by Duncan Brack

In *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade*, Sir Vince Cable – Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010–15 and leader of the Liberal Democrats 2017–19 – together with his wife, Rachel Smith, offers a dual-narrative memoir of the 2010s: a time of coalition government, austerity politics, the Brexit referendum and its aftermath. Cable provides the public story – ministerial decisions, party manoeuvres, the rhythms of Westminster – while Smith's diary entries supply the private weather of the same decade: impatience, pride, exhaustion, domestic negotiation and the odd moment of delight. The result is not merely 'behind the scenes', but a study in how politics colonises a life, and how a partnership adapts (or strains) when one half is immersed in the vortex.

The book is organised broadly chronologically, split into phases: the coalition era (2010–15), the post-2015 collapse of the Liberal Democrats, the Brexit referendum and its aftermath, and Cable's return to Parliament and two-year party leadership. Cable's passages follow the decisions of government and party: the formation of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, the business and industrial strategy agenda (he recounts his interest in long-term decision-making and partnerships between business and state), the priority given to austerity, the Lib Dem tuition-fee reversal, and the increasingly fractious politics leading to the 2015 meltdown. Smith's sections trace the partner's view – from her earlier activism (anti-apartheid, rural affordable housing) through the challenges of political life: farm-life, Blue-Tongue disease, constituency – life, media intrusion, and the emotional toll of the party's decline. This dual perspective make the book quite unusual – not just a record of high-level political decisions,

recorded in retrospect, but the story of on-the-spot choices, partnerships, trade-offs and consequences.

For Liberal historians, the book's value is clear. As Business Secretary during the Coalition, Cable had a front-row seat in significant policy developments: the industrial strategy, the Green Investment Bank, shared parental leave, the ring-fencing of banks, university funding reforms. Cable is unapologetic about the virtues of coalition, including not just these specific outcomes, but the efforts to ensure fiscal stabilisation and to put long-term thinking into a short-term system, while acknowledging the electoral and organisational costs that followed. He is also good on the internal mechanics of government: how priorities are set, how 'wins' are defined, how ministers learn, or fail to learn, the language of the machine.


The book offers first-hand insight into how the party handled power alongside its Conservative partner – its ambitions, compromises and mistakes, and the tensions that followed. Cable confirms that he was not involved in the supposed plot to supplant Nick Clegg as leader, after the disastrous local and Euro election results of May 2014; in fact he argues that in reality there was no plot, just an over-reaction by Clegg's press office to constituency polls (showing how unpopular Clegg was) funded by Cable's friend Matthew Oakeshott.

The book is perhaps less strong on the coverage of Brexit, the brief Lib Dem revival and Cable's own party leadership, including the negotiations with other parties over possible Brexit deals, and the relationship with the break-away Change UK MPs – all covered in seven chapters, compared to thirteen for the Coalition. There are, however, revelations, including the fact that in May 2018 Cable suffered a minor stroke – kept mostly private at the time – that contributed to his decision, in March the following year, to step down as leader after the 2019 local and Euro elections. The evident energy which he dedicated to his leadership, however (between the ages of 74 and 76), is constantly impressive.

One of the book's most interesting elements is in the recurring theme of political identity under pressure. The decade in question was not simply 'divided' in the sociological sense; it was divided in the moral sense that Liberal politics often feels most acutely: between principle and compromise, between proximity to power and the risk of contamination, between party unity and intellectual honesty. Cable is at his best when describing these as genuine dilemmas rather than as problems with obvious answers. The reader may still disagree with specific judgements – on strategy after 2015, on the limits of anti-Brexit positioning, on what a party of Liberal reform should have prioritised when squeezed between populism and polarisation – but disagreement is precisely what a useful political memoir should provoke.

Smith's contribution is, in a way, the book's rebuke to Westminster self-importance. Her entries repeatedly return to the unpaid labour that makes public life possible: managing family logistics, absorbing stress, maintaining relationships, and quietly enforcing perspective when politics inflates itself into a total worldview. She is also a sharp observer of political culture, especially the peculiar mixture of performative confidence and private insecurity that clings to parliamentary life. The domestic scenes are not gossip; they are evidence. They show how 'the party' and 'the job' can become a third presence in a marriage, and how the language

of politics bleeds into the language of home.

This dual lens also helps the book avoid one of the common problems of political memoirs: the temptation to settle scores. There are, inevitably, portraits of colleagues – some generous, some less so – but the narrative mostly resists old grievances. Instead, it helps illuminate a more interesting question: how decent people, operating in good faith, can still end up trapped in spirals of distrust, factionalism, and strategic misfire. That is an especially pertinent question, given the Liberal Democrats' recurrent challenge of combining moral seriousness with organisational ruthlessness.

Ultimately, *Partnership and Politics in a Divided Decade* works best as a document of Liberal politics under stress: a party asked to govern, punished for governing, then challenged to remain relevant in a landscape reshaped by Brexit and increasing polarisation. It is also a book about political companionship – about the personal institutions that underpin public ones. For Liberal historians, it offers valuable texture: not just a retrospective narrative of the 2010s, but a record of how those years sounded and felt, day by day, inside one household that sat very close to the centre of events. ■

Duncan Brack is Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History*. For the first two years of the Coalition government he was a special adviser to Chris Huhne, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change.

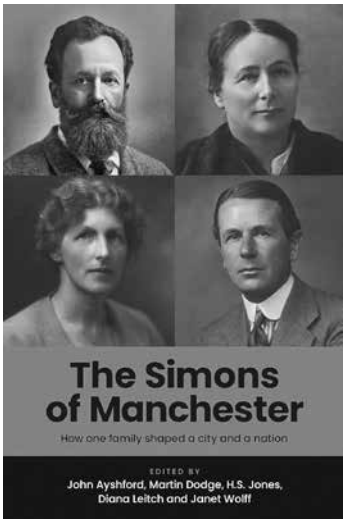
## The Simons

John Ayshford, Martin Dodge, H S Jones, Diana Leitch and Janet Wolff (eds.), *The Simons of Manchester: How one family shaped a city and a nation* (Manchester University Press, 2024)
Review by Jaime Reynolds

Ernest Simon crops up in Liberal history as a somewhat obscure figure: a progressive who contributed to party ideas and the Liberal Summer Schools in the 1920s, and an MP for a few years before 1931. As the authors acknowledge, he remains relatively unknown and they note the tendency to confuse him with his more prominent contemporary, Sir John Simon. Apart from his short spell in parliament, Ernest was a successful businessman and philanthropist, wrote influential books and campaigned on housing and planning, and was chairman of the BBC for five years. The long public career of his wife Shena in local government and education is even less well known, as is the record of public work of his parents, Henry and Emily. Largely, this is because they were not national figures; their activity was focused on Manchester where, as this book makes clear, they made a 'formidable impact on the city, its social institutions and its politics'.

Writing on British political history has, until recently, tended to fixate on Westminster, overlooking the importance of politics at the local level, especially in the period before 1945, when it was still a formidable force. The Simons are notable amongst the victims of this neglect, so this copiously illustrated joint-volume by a group of Manchester-based academics, sponsored by the Simon Fund, is a valuable addition to the growing literature of political biography adopting a local perspective. It breaks new ground by approaching the Simons not just as individuals but as a family, projecting 'a powerful family tradition of public service, deliberately transmitted'.

The first three chapters describe how the Simons emerged as prominent figures in the Manchester German diaspora, like many of them, liberal exiles from the 1848 revolution in Germany.




Henry Simon was an engineer who tapped continental know-how to develop and implement innovative and more efficient industrial processes: 'the Simon system' in flour milling and coke-processing factories in Britain and abroad. This led to considerable wealth, philanthropic work and civic activity in the city. His second wife, Emily, also of German émigré extraction, was likewise heavily involved in philanthropy, poverty-relief and education, and was especially prominent in the foundation and management of Withington Girls' School. Despite her commitment to female education, she was an active opponent of women's suffrage, leading to conflict with several of the other women in the family.

Ernest overcame chronic shyness as a young man to qualify as an engineer and take over control of the firm by 1910, by which time he had 'gained a sense of self-exceptionalism arising from a perception of intellectual superiority which cast off much of his sensitiveness' as John Ayshford and Brendon Jones put it. His political and social ideas were heavily influenced by H. G. Wells, the Webbs, R. H. Tawney and Fabianism, and he developed a driving belief in promoting the happiness of his local community and educating its citizens for democracy. He was a technocrat, one might say a social engineer, fascinated by the implementation of ambitious schemes to overcome disadvantage and urban problems. He was convinced of the need for comprehensive planning, the mobilisation of expertise and the encouragement of the 'practical' social sciences to supply the experts. Yet, for a long time, sceptical of Labour's nationalisation plans, he stuck with the Liberal Party and it was not until 1947 that he finally joined Labour, became a peer and soon after was appointed chairman of the BBC.

He married Shena Potter in 1912. Initially he wrote that 'it was a purely mental attraction' and of being attracted by the opportunity to 'pursue their many shared political causes'. It developed into a long and successful marriage and political partnership. The biographical chapter on her by Ayshford and Jones and the one by Charlotte Wildman on her feminism and civic work are especially valuable in shining light on this forgotten figure, and indeed the authors are persuasive in arguing that Shena was 'perhaps the most vivid and remarkable of the four [Simons]'. From a wealthy shipping family, she studied at Newnham and LSE and was a friend of Beatrice Webb and of the same intellectual mould. She was a Manchester councillor from 1924 to 1933 and was particularly associated with the development of the huge and innovative Wythenshaw housing estate, built on land donated by the Simons. She was also a leading progressive education campaigner, pressing for better access of working-class entry to Grammar Schools and later supporting comprehensive education. She remained a coopted member of Manchester Education Committee for decades after she lost her council seat, thanks partly to her adherence to the Labour Party in 1934, and she also served on government committees. As Wildman reveals, she was also an expert on local government finance.

Further chapters examine the Simon engineering business, their contribution to housing reform and town planning, and their close engagement with Manchester University.

As the authors emphasise, the focus is on Manchester and the book 'gives short shrift' to the Simons's other enthusiasms. Thus, detailed attention is given, for instance, to Henry's involvement with the personnel matters of the Hallé Orchestra or to Ernest's part in the establishment of the department of

American studies at the university. Non-Manchester topics are largely left unexplored or dealt with briefly. This includes Ernest's national political career, his chairmanship of the BBC and his commitment to such causes as population control, leaving a lot of questions for further research. One wonders, for example, how his belief in curbing population related to the eugenicist ideas that were not unusual in Fabian and progressive liberal circles before the Second World War. Similarly, Shena's suffragism and feminism are dealt with in a broad-brush way. Charlotte Wildman writes that Shena was deeply sympathetic with the suffragette movement but, financially dependent on her parents, 'she could not join in suffragette militancy, as they were opposed to it.' It might be added that, from 1912 (during the peak of militant suffragette activity), she had to contend with a mother-in-law who was an active anti-suffragist. This leaves many questions unanswered. Like many women of her class and political orientation, Shena's engagement with the suffrage question and militancy – and indeed Emily's with the opposing camp – may well have been complex and nuanced and would benefit from further dissection. More detail about Shena's activity in the women's movement, both in Manchester and nationally, would also be welcome. It is emphasised that she was a close friend of Virginia Woolf and other leading feminists, but it is unclear from the book whether and how far she participated in the lively interwar feminist organisations and debates. One puzzle that is not mentioned at all is what motivated Ernest to stand in the parliamentary by-election held in 1946 on the death of Eleanor Rathbone, the celebrated feminist MP, thereby splitting the progressive vote and frustrating the election of Mary Stocks, Rathbone's political heir, who incidentally was also a close friend of the Simons and indeed, later, Ernest's first biographer.

It is no surprise or criticism that both the fresh subject-matter and original perspective of *The Simons of Manchester* throw up many further questions and lines of research to be explored. The book also provides a model that could be usefully followed to examine the traditions and contribution of other notable local Liberal dynasties: the Colmans of Norwich, the Markhams of Chesterfield, the Hartleys of Southport and the Browns of Chester, to name but a few. ■

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# Reclaiming Liberalism

## Alexandre Lefebvre, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (Princeton University Press, 2025)
## Review by David Howarth

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) is a landmark in liberal political philosophy. It attempted something many believed no longer possible: to give liberalism a basis that was both normative and rational. Its methods, asking what political principles and institutions reasonable people would choose if they had no idea of their own individual commitments, advantages or disadvantages ('the original position behind a veil of ignorance') and then asking how those judgments could be made maximally consistent with one another ('reflective equilibrium') provided Rawls with a way to argue that a just state would be a liberal state. Using only arguments that appeal to universal human capacities and not to particular ethical or spiritual traditions ('public reason'), Rawls claims that we would establish a basic political structure that

maximises equal political liberties, makes sure that those liberties were exercisable in practice and not just in theory (that individuals would receive their 'fair value'), and ensures that the only persistent inequalities would be those that enhanced the lives of those who were least well off ('the difference principle').

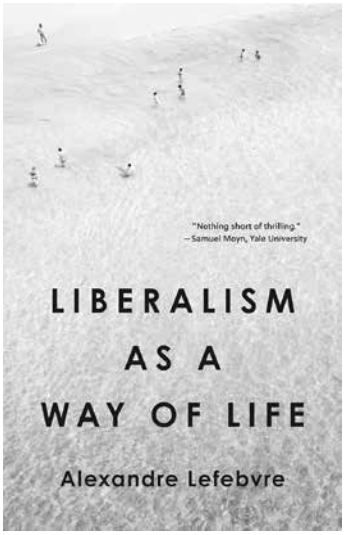
One point that Rawls insisted on, especially in his later work *Political Liberalism* (1993), was that his theory was about politics not about individual behaviour. He was not arguing for liberalism as a 'comprehensive doctrine', which is to say a view about how people should behave in their everyday lives, but only as a political doctrine, about how people with different ethical or religious views could live together successfully in a just state. In *Liberalism as a Way of Life*, however, Alexandre Lefebvre has decided to ignore Rawls's limitation and to ask how Rawlsian liberalism would work as a comprehensive doctrine in its own right, as a theory about how to live. At first sight, this is a terrible idea. Structuring a polity is a completely different activity from structuring one's own life. It is like using thoughts about the best way to organise a tennis tournament as a guide to how to play tennis. The results are, perhaps predictably, not entirely convincing, although the book does generate some interesting insights along the way.

Lefebvre's reasons for embarking on his project are themselves an amalgam of the interesting and the not entirely convincing. He thinks that our society is suffused by liberalism ('the water in which we swim') but at the same time that liberalism has been compromised by other ideas (capitalism, populism, nationalism, meritocracy and others), as a consequence of which liberalism, at least in its Rawlsian sense, has not been established. We live, he says, not in liberalism but in 'liberaldom', a condition in which liberal values are ideologically dominant but not put into practice. Lefebvre offers his programme of more rigorous individual commitment to liberalism in everyday life as a way for liberals to cope with living in liberaldom.

The idea of 'liberaldom' encapsulates something about a society in which the rhetoric of liberal values seems to have outlasted the practice of liberalism, but is liberalism really 'the water in which we live'? The problem is, who are the 'we' Lefebvre is talking about? From the examples he uses, drawn mainly from American popular culture of ten to twenty years ago (including an extended discussion of *Parks and Recreation*), one guesses that 'we' are college educated North Americans born after 1975, people who are shocked by racist and sexist language and by any form of cruelty. It might well be true that such people swim in liberal waters while living in a society tainted by illiberalism and that their situation is causing them discomfort. But the experience of liberals in most places is very different. They ('we') are more often an embattled minority struggling to withstand wave after wave of nationalist or religious bigotry. They ('we') live in a world in which cruelty is the norm, not only under anti-liberal regimes (Russia, Iran, China), but also everywhere infected by 'social' media and by the speeches of President Trump.

Another not entirely convincing aspect of Lefebvre's starting point is the implication that the best way for liberals to react in the situation he describes is therapeutic rather than political. Lefebvre places 'self-care' (in Foucault's admittedly quite bracing sense of reconstructing oneself in the light of telling oneself hard truths) at the heart not only of his programme of behaviour change but also at the heart of liberalism itself. This is a misstep. It turns liberalism into a form of quietism, disengaged from politics and at risk of looking complacent or even smug. Since the end of the First World War, liberalism, and individual liberal lives, have been in danger. Turning inward sounds like giving up. Max Weber and Simone Veil would be appalled.

Turning to the content of Lefebvre's recommendations, he proposes three 'spiritual exercises' for liberals, one flowing from Rawls's original position behind a veil of ignorance, one drawing




on Rawls's idea of reflective equilibrium and the third using Rawls's notion of public reason. The first exercise requires us to ask ourselves what we would think about a problem if we mentally stripped ourselves of our advantages and disadvantages, including our social position, and then decided what to do based on an imagined conversation with other similarly neutralised people. In effect, it asks us to strip away what many people nowadays confusingly call our 'identity' – the categories into which other people put us and our attitudes towards those categories. Lefebvre points out that this exercise forces us to adopt a position of impartiality not only as between other people but also as applied to ourselves. It helps us to combat our tendency to give ourselves special favours. If we do this repeatedly, Lefebvre claims, we approach an ideal of impartiality while at the same time retaining our autonomy, in the sense of being able to choose what to think. We also encourage ourselves to be less snobbish, more humble and less self-centred. Whether this would work in practice is an interesting psychological question, but it has at least an air of plausibility. The habits of thought and feeling it aims to develop – especially putting oneself into the shoes of others and not treating oneself as special – are the kinds of habits that liberals have or at least should have. But one aspect of the original position is not very helpful. The imagined conversation behind the veil of ignorance is with other people who have themselves been neutralised in terms of their endowments and identities. That works in *A Theory of Justice* itself because Rawls is thinking about what might count as an impartially arrived at set of basic institutions. But it works less well as a means for encouraging empathy. It is too sterile – a conversation about what people might be like rather than about what they are like. To attain empathy, the people in the imagined conversation would need to have real lives, including capacities, beliefs and attachments. Or better still, we might try a spiritual exercise consisting of interacting with real people.

The second exercise involves reflective equilibrium, the process of bringing one's convictions into harmony by identifying inconsistencies and eliminating them by adjusting or dropping convictions that are less important. As Lefebvre recognises, the method of reflective equilibrium is not inherently liberal. Fascists can use it to become more coherent fascists. Lefebvre makes two claims about the method when used by liberals. The first claim is that the process of worrying about which aspects of one's commitments to change or abandon makes one more tolerant of other people's struggles with their values and so furthers the liberal virtues of humility and tolerance. His second claim is less convincing: that the process of reflective equilibrium helps us to achieve harmony between our private selves and our public selves by eliminating any difference between them. The argument only works if one believes that the society in which we live, in which our public selves operate, is itself safely liberal. Lefebvre believes that it is, and it might be so for people living in Princeton, NJ or in Cambridge, Mass. Many places, however, including public places online, are not safe for liberals. Being liberal in an illiberal world means suffering from having one's public and private lives pitted against one another.

Lefebvre's third exercise is the most contentious. Public reason is the requirement, which Rawls himself applies only to debates about basic structures such as constitutions, that participants give reasons for their positions that do not depend on belief

systems that not everyone shares but only reasons that could be persuasive for all people. Those who dislike the principle characterise it, not wholly inaccurately, as banning references to holy scripture in political debate. Lefebvre wants us to stick to public reason in far more aspects of life than disputation about constitutional arrangements. The benefits that he claims we can gain from the exercise of only giving reasons that anyone could accept are extensive, even extravagant: delight in others and tolerance, because practising public reason requires one to listen to others before speaking; keeping cool and civil in interactions with others, because public reason requires thought before speaking; and cheerfulness, because it engenders a feeling of common purpose and community. In addition, Lefebvre claims that public reason can somehow replace religion in our lives because it 'redeems everyday life'. Lefebvre is indeed here referring to important liberal virtues – openness is the ultimate liberal trait and Keynes (in 'Liberalism and Labour' (1926)) mentions 'a certain coolness' as a liberal characteristic. And Lefebvre makes an important point when he says that trying to see the world from a point of view that everyone can share regardless of differences of culture and religion is a unifying, community-building habit.

But there is a high cost for Lefebvre's liberals if they combine his public reason exercise with his reflective equilibrium exercise, a cost that he acknowledges at the very end of the chapter on the third exercise. To be 'liberal all the way down' so that one's public and private lives match and so that one confines oneself to public reason leads to a position where liberals cannot have any separate private reasons. That means, as Lefebvre eventually admits, that his view is that one cannot be both a comprehensive liberal and religious. This is not a conclusion that many active liberals conducting their own exercises in reflective equilibrium would want to endorse.

The problem with Lefebvre's conclusion that comprehensive liberalism is incompatible with religion is not just that it ignores liberal history and not just that it seems to endorse the kind of purism that Lefebvre himself wants to avoid when he talks of 'delight in difference'. It is also that it seems to apply to any kind of transcendent experience through art, music, literature, mathematics or science. It is impossible to describe the value of transcendence to someone who has not experienced it, and so public reason is stuck with deadly dull and not always persuasive arguments about the economic value of the creative industries and the development of new technologies out of basic science, arguments that following Lefebvre's logic, liberals are supposed to accept as their private reasons too. Lefebvre has a long footnote in which he expresses his frustration with the communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor not so much for Taylor's criticism of what might be thought of as a liberal way of life but because Taylor assumes that 'anyone who seeks a full and complete life in liberalism is bound to be disappointed'. But Taylor might have a point at least about Lefebvre's version of liberalism, which closes liberals off from important aspects of life.

Perhaps the mistake was to look for a comprehensive liberalism in the first place. Comprehensiveness involves a form of perfectionism, but liberalism is about the imperfect not the perfect. It is not utopian but consists of an unending struggle. A better starting point for liberalism on a personal level than Rawls's structural political liberalism might be the Japanese concept of *wabi sabi*: that nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect. Liberalism is an active, open, hopeful, generous response to an imperfect world. Lefebvre certainly captures part of liberalism's spirit, but he has locked it away in a place from which it will want to escape. ■

Professor David Howarth is a former Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge (2005–10). From 2010 to 2018 he was a UK Electoral Commissioner. He is currently a Fellow of Clare College, University of Cambridge.

# The politics of architecture

Timothy Brittain-Catlin, *The Edwardians and their Houses: The New Life of Old England* (Lund Humphries, 2020)
Review by Iain Sharpe

A review of a book about architecture might seem out of place in a political history journal. Yet the two have often been – and still are – closely linked: buildings can be displays of power or reflections of ideology through aesthetic taste, or both.

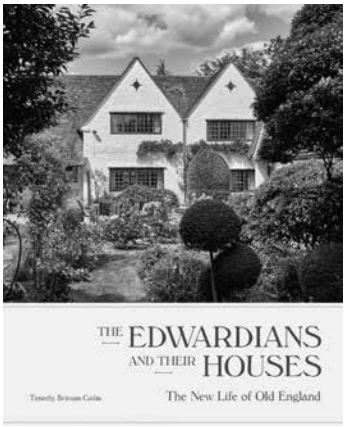
In the context of British political history, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw Tories favour first the baroque then the gothic (ostentatious, romantic), while Whigs preferred the classical (logical, rational, echoes of ancient Athens). The boundaries were never sharply drawn – no one much objected to the Houses of Parliament being rebuilt in gothic style after the fire of 183. But the notorious battle over the design of the foreign office building in the 1850s, in which the gothic revival architect George Gilbert Scott was forced, under pressure from Whig Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, to replace his original plan with an Italianate alternative, showed how politically controversial such matters could become.

In this book, Timothy Brittain-Catlin, an architectural historian and also nephew of Shirley Williams, examines a less controversial but still fascinating aspect of the interplay between political thought and architectural style. His subject is how Liberal politicians in the Edwardian era built homes for themselves and for others, and how this related to their wider concerns about housing and land reform, both issues of increasing importance during this period.

It is very much a personal account, its starting point being the author's fascination with Kingsgate Castle near Broadstairs in Kent, where his family had a holiday flat during his childhood. At the start of the twentieth century, Kingsgate Castle was remodelled and extended from an eighteenth-century folly by the Liberal, then Liberal Unionist, politician Sir John Lubbock, who had recently been ennobled as the first Baron Avebury. Modern architectural wisdom would see Kingsgate Castle as a sham, its tower and castellations creating a faux medievalism. Yet Brittain-Catlin sees Lubbock – an enthusiast for science and archaeology, and best known today for the introduction of bank holidays, saving the Avebury stone circle and sponsoring the first legislation to preserve ancient monuments – as an unlikely practitioner of fakery. From that initial thought, he embarks on an exploration of how Edwardian architecture interwove the old and the new, looking in particular at the tastes of upwardly mobile Liberal politicians.

As anyone knows who has, like this reviewer, served on a local authority planning committee, the core principle in restoring, extending or altering historic buildings is to preserve the old and keep the new clear and distinct – pastiche and reproduction are out. This follows principles set out in the late Victorian era by William Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, who objected to excessive restoration rather than the preservation of old buildings. Brittain-Catlin shows that, at the start of the twentieth century, this was by no means the consensus. He highlights numerous examples of Victorian and Edwardian building projects where new elements are seamlessly woven into the fabric of historic ones, of the inclusion of fittings moved in from other old buildings, and also of the designing of new buildings to look as if they have been developed over time in different styles.

He sees a connection between the Liberal preoccupation with




land reform, including the creation of smallholdings and allotments, and the belief that buildings should appear to emerge organically from their environment, unlike the big houses of the eighteenth century that dominated the landscape they sat in. The particular example he cites is at Daws Hill near High Wycombe, home of Charles Wynn-Carington, the third Baron and First Earl Carrington. He was one of the few major landowners to stay loyal to Gladstone after the Liberal split of 1886, and later a member of Asquith's cabinet. He also for a time represented a working-class ward on the London County Council at a phase when it was prioritising improving housing for the poor.

A keen land reformer at a political level, Carrington also practised what he preached, using his own land in High Wycombe to provide 1,400 urban allotments and in Lincolnshire to let 650 acres as smallholdings. The family owned several large residences, and, in a bid to consolidate his estate, Carrington sold off his stately home, Wycombe Abbey, and adapted and redeveloped an old farmhouse and agricultural buildings at Daws Hill, part of his estate, into a new shooting lodge. It was all done in a Jacobean style, rambling and asymmetrical, a world away from the stately homes of the past. Yet, paradoxically, for a building that appeared from the outside as being rambling, pastoral, and on a domestic scale, its interior included a new grand white drawing room in high classical style, a further example of not being constrained by stylistic harmony or distinction between the old and the new.

The book is by no means all about rural retreats. We learn, too, about the controversy over a private scheme for slum clearance in Westminster's Smith Square area in the late 1890s that would have led to the development of large residential buildings between Millbank and the River Thames. The protests it provoked, including from the Dean of Westminster Abbey, led to a revised scheme promoted by the Progressive- run (that is, primarily Liberal) London County Council for street improvements that did not block views of the river. The resulting development led to the insertion of new buildings into the existing Georgian fabric of the area.

Those who remember the Liberal Democrats' tenure of 4 Cowley Street will be interested to see that building given some prominence here. Built in 1903–04 as offices for the North Eastern Railway (NER), it was designed by prominent architect Herbert Field to look like a house. Further down the street, Field designed new homes for Liberal MPs Walter Runciman and Charles Trevelyan, both NER directors and thus conveniently situated for their parliamentary and business interests. Indeed, this proved a popular area for politicians to commission or buy homes – Runciman and Trevelyan hardly lacked for Liberal neighbours.

The garden cities movement is also mentioned, in the form of Gidea Park in Essex, now known by the less romantic name of Romford Garden Suburb. This was developed from 1909 on land belonging to Liberal MP Herbert Raphael, in collaboration with two fellow Liberal MPs. The scheme benefitted from the Liberal government's curiously named Housing, Town Planning, etc. Act of the same year, which aimed both to improve residential standards and encourage construction of more homes by ending the previous system that had meant virtually all significant planning projects needed an Act of Parliament to go ahead. In Gidea Park, architects were invited to partner with developers to design show homes on a relatively modest scale. Most of these were of a Jacobean vernacular design, and one of

the curiosities of the scheme was how the guide for visitors made considerable reference to the long-demolished nearby Tudor great house of Gidea Hall, while all but ignoring its eighteenth-century neo-classical replacement.

That point is one of many snippets of information that constitute a particular delight of this book. We learn, for example, that Margot Asquith, wife of Liberal Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, commissioned the first barn conversion, in the modern sense of a repairing an agricultural building without much decoration or embellishment, for an outbuilding of the family's smart new home at The Wharf in Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire. We learn, too, that Margot, in her voluminous autobiographies and diaries, fails to mention the architect of both house and barn conversion, Walter Cave, with whom she must have collaborated closely. Architects remained tradesmen not artists.

To conclude, Professor Brittain-Catlin's enthusiasm for his subject is apparent and infectious. It is no criticism of his book to say it is discursive and thematic rather than an attempt to put forward a closely argued thesis or to write a comprehensive guide to the architecture of the period. It certainly inspired this reviewer to want to visit many of the buildings described here. Yet there disappointment lies. For the most part, the properties featured in the book, while generously proportioned and beyond the aspirations of most people, are homes not palaces, and remain in private ownership where they have not been converted to business premises or hotels. They will not be found in National Trust or English Heritage listings. This makes the reader grateful for the inclusion here of outstanding modern colour photography by Robin Forster, bringing the text vividly to life, enabling us to see what we are reading about. I am sure that any *Journal of Liberal History* readers whose interests stretch beyond political history to architectural, environmental and cultural topics will find this book a delight. ■

Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London Universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era in 2011. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford from 1991 to 2021.

'The Political Skills of Four Liberal Prime Ministers'
(continued from page 20)

27 Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 216.
28 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 500.
29 Ibid., p. 482.
30 Ibid., p. 483.
31 Ibid., p. 484
32 Ibid., p. 510.
33 Ibid., p. 563.
34 M. Asquith, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, vol. ii (Penguin, 1936), p. 73.
35 J Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 432.
36 Ibid., p. 145.
37 Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, p. 65.
38 Lord Riddell, *More Papers from my Diary* (Country Life, 1934), p. 109.
39 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 556.
40 J. A. Spender, *The Life and Times of the Right Honourable Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman*, vol. ii (Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), p. 389.
41 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 479.
42 Spender, *Life and Times*, p. 513.
43 Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 156.
44 Ibid., p. 156.

A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

# Liberals and free trade

'Free trade', the removal of barriers to international trade in goods and services, played a critical role in British politics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and attitudes to free trade helped to define parties' positions on the political spectrum. For much of its life, the fortunes of the Liberal Party were closely tied to the strength of popular feeling for free trade.

Now, thanks to Brexit and President Trump, trade and tariffs are back on the political agenda. Discuss the historical and current relevance of trade policy with **Professor Frank Trentmann** (Birkbeck College, author of *Free Trade Nation*) and **Lord Chris Fox** (Liberal Democrat spokesperson on Business and Trade in the House of Lords). Chair: **Baroness Julie Smith**.

**6.30pm, Tuesday 27 January**, following the AGM of the History Group at 6.00pm.
David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club, London SW1A 2HE.

*Those unable to attend in person will be able to view the meeting via Zoom. Please register for online access via the History Group website (https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/). For those attending in person, there is no need to register.*

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

# Liberals and local government

The Liberal commitment to localism and local power has strong historical roots. Discuss the Liberal innovations in local government in Birmingham in the 1870s, led by Joseph Chamberlain, and in Manchester in the 1920s, led by E. D. Simon, with **Dr Ian Cawood** (Associate Professor of History, University of Stirling) and **Dr Brendon Jones** (University of Manchester).

**6.15pm, Saturday 14 March**
Venue to be confirmed (check our website nearer the time), York

*This is a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrats' spring conference in York (13–15 March). You do not need to registered for the conference to be able to participate. We are not offering Zoom access, but a recording of the meeting will be available via our website soon afterwards.*