

# Liberalism and Liberty from Gladstone to Ashdown:

## Continuous Thread or Winding Stair?

In a lecture delivered at Hawarden, and in a shortened version to the Liberal Democrat History Group meeting in July, *Conrad Russell* outlined the perennial themes in the approach of Liberals and Liberal Democrats.

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To be invited to commemorate Mr Gladstone must be a great honour to any historian, and another great honour to any Liberal. However, to receive both these honours at once must invite the reaction of Alec Guinness at the end of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*: 'How happy I could be with the one, were the other dear charmer away.' Whether historians are always capable of detachment is a point on which long familiarity with Common Rooms may create legitimate doubt, but at least historians should be free of obvious conflicts of interest.<sup>1</sup>

This is so clearly not the case with me that were I to pretend to the detachment necessary to academic history, the ghost of Geoffrey Elton would rise in anger over my shoulder. My grandfather sat on Mr Gladstone's back benches. My father, at the age of seventeen, drank port tête-à-tête with Mr Gladstone. In the course of an hour's drinking, Mr Gladstone favoured the nervous seventeen year-old with only one remark: 'this is very good port they've given me, but why have they given me it in a claret glass?' My father also, proverbially, knew Lloyd George, but that acquaintance led not to an OBE but to a prison sentence. I can still remember, at the age of ten, being taken to tea with Lady Lloyd George for the meeting at which that hatchet was finally buried. No sooner had I arrived, than I was painfully stung by a wasp. I could not understand why the

grown-ups showed so little interest, but I can understand well enough now. My father's last meeting with Mr Asquith was one of the few things he still remembered in old age with excruciating embarrassment. He had gone for a country walk one very hot day when he came on a pool, and stripped off for a swim. As he swam back to the bank, stark naked, there was Mr Asquith, with whom his relations just retained courtesy, standing by the bank looking down on him. I can look on Liberal leaders with feelings well short of idolatry. In the process, perhaps, I prove myself a true Liberal, but I do not make myself a good historian. The emotions the material generates do not encourage the detachment necessary to serious history.

I have decided to devote this lecture instead to political philosophy, in which the need for a show of detachment, though real, is less immediate. In analysing a belief, holding it might be a source of strength rather than of weakness, for the question, 'what do I believe?' is the only question on which I must always know more than anyone else. The party to which I belong claims a continual and lineal descent from Mr Gladstone. It honours his memory as it trades on the power of his name. Is this claim to ideological legitimacy justified? The object of this lecture is to assess how far there is one continuous thing called Liberalism stretching from William Gladstone to Paddy Ashdown, and if so, how the cocktail of continuity and change has been mixed. In the process it will be necessary to look at a tradi-

tion which, when Gladstone came to speak for it, had already lived nearly two hundred years.

The principle for which Shaftsbury and Locke were then contending was the principle embodied in the Bill to exclude James, Duke of York, from the succession by Parliamentary action, that government action derived its title from the consent of the governed. It was to that principle that Gladstone turned in his two-sentence contribution to *Why I am a Liberal*, in 1885. 'The principle of Liberalism is trust in the people, qualified by prudence. The principle of Conservatism is mistrust of the people, qualified by fear.'<sup>2</sup> It is a typically extreme statement of a principle stretching back to the first Whigs. It was re-stated by Paddy Ashdown: 'The idea is very simple and the one on which all Liberal Democrat thought is based. That power comes from the people, and that all institutions should, as far as practicable reflect this'.<sup>3</sup> Here is a central principle, restated by Whigs, Liberals and Liberal Democrats, and now more than three centuries old. It is not just a principle of the party's great minds. In 1886 when the Marquess of Hartington, stated for a firm Liberal principle, the 'extension of popular self-government all over the country', he was speaking on the platform of the party which created elected local government, and in favour of 'an extension of the functions and authority of Local Government'.<sup>4</sup> The Liberal Democrat group which organised a fringe meeting at the 1993 party conference on 'How to cope when all your activists become councillors' could say Amen to that.<sup>5</sup>

It is not, of course, that simple. Party resemblances are like family resemblances. Parties have their equivalent of the children who contrive to resemble both parents when the parents do not in the least resemble each other. Even appearances which are the same look different under the sartorial disguises of different centuries. Sherlock Holmes, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, once walked up to an eighteenth-century

portrait, and asked Watson if he recognised the face. Watson, of course, did not. Holmes then put his hand over the brow of the portrait, obscuring the wig, and 'at once the face of Stapleton sprang out of the canvas'. A defence of nonconforming aldermen under Queen Anne may not sound like an attack on black unemployment in 1997, yet the principle of non-discrimination is the same under the wig. The ideological continuity is clearer than the change in its dress will show.

Parties, like families, also have a number of different faces, which all recur over the generations. Perhaps few of those faces differed more than those of Gladstone and Palmerston, yet both types continued to recur in the Liberal Party after their death. That the party of Gladstone is now identified by the voters primarily for its readiness to put an extra penny on the income tax may seem like a paradox of positively Gilbertian ingenuity. Yet Paddy Ashdown might take comfort from the fact that the Prime Ministership of Palmerston was marked, in Parry's words, by 'government's success in persuading Liberal MPs of the need to levy taxes'. Palmerston's decision in 1859 to make Gladstone his Chancellor led to Gladstone's success in convincing Radical MPs that 'the fight for economy no longer had to be conducted *against* the State'.<sup>6</sup> Parties, like families, only survive if they can learn to make compromises, and such compromises do and must end in the mixing of the ideological gene pool.

Perhaps the Liberal addiction to government by consent has changed its apparent form most conspicuously in foreign affairs. Nancy Seear once, in the middle of a boring committee meeting, shot into my ear the question: 'why were we so much in favour of the nation state in the nineteenth century and so much against it now?' The answer is that in the nineteenth century nationalism was the periwig worn by government by consent. This is now regularly associated with the phrase, 'a nation rightly struggling to be

free', or as Gladstone said about the Muslims of the Sudan, 'a people rightly struggling to be free.'<sup>7</sup> The link is particularly clear in a letter written by the six-year-old Herbert Gladstone to his father in October 1860: 'Mama has been telling me about good Garibaldi. Did you really go down the dungeon? ... I hope Garibaldi will get Naples because he is good. And I want the king of Naples to go, because he is wicked, and shuts up people'.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the key contribution here was made by Russell, drawing on his philosophical roots in the seventeenth century. He made the seventeenth century roots much clearer in his despatch to the British Minister in Turin in October 1860, declaring support for 'a people building up the edifice of their liberties', and comparing the resistance to the Bourbons with the revolution of 1688.<sup>9</sup> This may have been the occasion of an exchange with the Queen which Lord John treasured enough to rehearse it to his grandson in old age. She: 'am I to understand you to say, Lord John, that under certain circumstances subjects may resist their lawful sovereign?' He: 'Speaking to a sovereign of the House of Hanover, Ma'am, I think I may say that I do'.<sup>10</sup>

As the passage of time has made it clear that nations, like dynasties, are transient, it has become increasingly clear, in cases such as that of the Kurds or of the break-up of the Soviet Union, that the doctrine of consent may operate as much against the so-called nation state as for it. Perhaps one of the most unfortunate academics of all time was the man who wrote a book on *The Yugoslav Federation: a Success Story*. After the normal delays of academic publishing, it appeared in 1991. Can Paddy Ashdown, the champion of Bosnia, properly appear as the heir of Gladstone, the champion of the nation state?

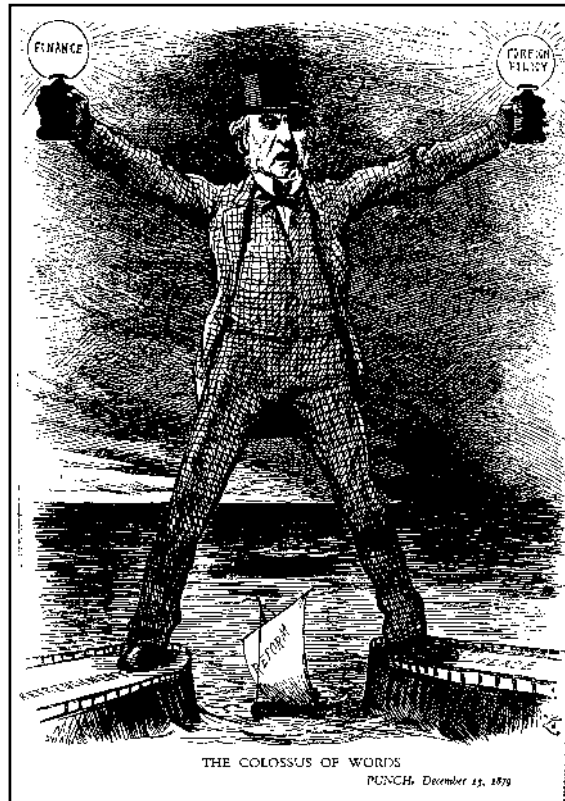
It was Gladstone himself who made clear that the answer was 'yes', and did so in a speech generally taken as one of the greatest indiscretions of a long career. Speaking

on the American Civil War at Newcastle in 1862, he said: 'we may have our own opinions about slavery; we may be for or against the South, but there is no doubt that Jefferson Davies and other leaders of the South have made an army; they are making, it appears, a navy; and they have made what appears more difficult than either, they have made a nation'. John Bright complained: 'he is for union and freedom in Italy and for dissension and bondage in America'.<sup>11</sup>

John Bright's comment was made from a position of commitment to an extension of the suffrage far more extreme than anything Gladstone had yet contemplated. My grandfather, standing as a Radical candidate for Leeds in 1865, reflected that if there were an 'essential opposition' between the interests of rich and poor, 'the injustice of giving no representation whatever to the latter because they are more numerous than we are would be far more hideous than even Mr Bright had ever represented it to be'.<sup>12</sup> To Gladstone, who had not yet learned to identify consent with the consent of a mass electorate the matter was far less clear. His 'pale of the constitution' speech, which would have made his position clearly inconsistent, was still two years in the future. His opinion was already politically incorrect, as he learnt from the storm which he provoked, yet it was not (quite) intellectually inconsistent. What Gladstone did show in this remark is the realisation that nations are not eternal absolutes, but human constructions capable of change. In the vital reference to making a nation, he showed that he understood that nation states were subject, like all other human creations, to mutability. In that realisation, he opened the way to most of the changes in his party's thinking about the nation state since then.

The rest of the changes in the party's thinking about the nation

state are the result of changes which have happened in the nature of world power and world conflict since Gladstone's day. When Paddy Ashdown, speaking at Chatham House on 6 March 1996, said that, 'the idea that the sovereign nation state can remain the basis on which the world is managed is one of the



nostalgic myths from which we are going to have to break free', he was speaking in a world in which seventy-nine out of eighty-two current conflicts were not between states, but between ethnic groups within or across national borders. He was speaking for a world in which water may become as scarce as oil, and 'the wars of the twenty-first century will increasingly be resource wars'. He might have added, as he has done on many other occasions, that he was speaking in a global market which cannot be controlled from within national boundaries, in which the amount of money which crossed our exchanges on Black Wednesday was more than our gross national product, and in which the gross corporate product of some multinational companies is more than the gross national product of some of the me-

dium-sized countries of the European Union. To say that his version of the nation state is not the same as Gladstone's is to say, simply, that he does not live in the same world.

Paddy Ashdown, in his Chatham House speech, turned to the instinctive readiness to identify law with liberty, and called for a 'framework of international law which is effective and enforceable'. He understands that sending a million refugees into another country, or diverting the Euphrates' headwaters, may be an act of aggression even if it takes place entirely within domestic boundaries, and that Article 2 of the UN Charter, which forbids interference in the internal affairs of another country, is therefore out of date. After talking to troops in Bosnia, he said they were pioneers in a new form of warfare, 'in which British soldiers will be asked to risk their lives not just in defence of individual British interests, but also to uphold international law'.<sup>13</sup> Yet even here, in his Don Pacifico speech, Gladstone was before him. Mocking Palmerston's claim that a British subject, like a

Roman citizen, was entitled to 'an exceptional system of law', a claim now repeated in the United States doctrine of extra-territoriality, he said that the Foreign Secretary's duty was 'studiously to observe, and to exalt in honour among mankind, that great code of principles which is termed the law of nations'.<sup>14</sup> This is one of the passages in which the great statesmen of Liberalism have left their creed room to grow.

Liberalism, from its seventeenth-century roots, was a creed of non-discrimination. Jo Grimond traced this back to Colonel Rainborough's famous speech at Putney in 1647: "the poorest he that is in England has his life to live as the greatest he.' That is one Liberal text ... It asserts it without envy'.<sup>15</sup> In Gladstone's day this creed of non-discrimination was largely directed to the abolition of

religious tests for entry to Oxford and Cambridge, and in most cases it was, for practical purposes, a creed calling for civil equality between the Dissenters and the Church of England. It is to the honour of the party that this call was not anti-Church of England, since perhaps as many of those who uttered it came from the Church of England as from Dissent. It was not a cry of hatred: it was a call for equality before the law. It was also, as the Liberals saw it, a call for the abolition of monopoly privilege. It was this discrimination against Dissenters in defence of an ecclesiastical monopoly which was at the heart of the Llanfrothen burial case, which began the career of Lloyd George. The Rector of Llanfrothen, without legal authority, locked the doors of the churchyard to prevent the burial of a Dissenting quarryman, and Lloyd George, the rising local solicitor, roundly defeated him in the ensuing court case. Community politics would have held no novelty to Lloyd George. Lloyd George's Liberalism was not in daily evidence after he entered into the wartime coalition, yet when Kitchener forbade the regiments to have Nonconformist chaplains, and the men to speak Welsh in their billets, it is no surprise that when Lloyd George came to hear of it, Kitchener retreated in bad order.<sup>16</sup>

It was perhaps this attack on privilege, monopoly and discrimination which was the daily cement of Liberalism. It was normally conducted, as Grimond said, 'without envy', because that was the way which led to success. It was perhaps the key principle of 1832 that this attack on discrimination and privilege was led by those who were themselves privileged, but, as a good Liberal might put it, preferred not to exercise their talents from behind the protection of a political tariff barrier. How much this remains part of the intellectual furniture of Liberalism is illustrated by Jo Grimond's 1959 criticism of trade unions: 'Liberals are in favour of trade unions: they think it is a good thing that they are industrially strong. But the po-

litical results of their privileged position are bad. Just as we would not now tolerate landlords or churches who claimed special privileges under the law ...'<sup>17</sup> Who but a Liberal would have thought to criticise trade unions by comparing them to landlords or to the Church of England?

The key to any call for non-discrimination is the capacity to universalise. Here some of the greatest Liberals have failed, and will always fail, as Rainborough's reference to 'the poorest *he* that is in England' illustrates. We are all human. Yet it is to the credit of British Nonconformists that they have shown far more capacity to universalise the grievance of discrimination than most other groups which have suffered it. It is very hard to think of a continental equivalent of British Nonconformists and it is perhaps this part of the Nonconformist legacy which has done most to keep Liberalism alive through the era of class politics. Among all the contributions to *Why I am a Liberal*, in 1885, few sound as fresh a century later, as that of Millicent Garrett Fawcett:

'I am a Liberal, because liberalism seems to me to mean faith in the people, and confidence that they will manage their own affairs far better than those affairs are likely to be managed for them by others.

No section of the people has ever been excluded from political power without suffering legislative injustice. To mention only a few instances: the working class suffered for centuries from laws which attempted to fix the rate of wages, to prevent labourers migrating from place to place in search of better-paid employment, to suppress trade societies, and to facilitate the embezzlement of their funds. Women have suffered, and are still suffering from a number of unjust laws ...

Every case of injustice is a double curse, harming those it is supposed to favour, as much as those to whom it is obviously oppressive; and liberalism, notwithstanding the timidity of some fainthearted and weak-kneed Liberals, is the main

force in the political world which cuts at the root of injustice; not so much by tinkering and patching up particular instances of wrong, as by giving the people the power to protect themselves. Equal justice to all, man or woman, workman or aristocrat, is the only sort of liberalism that deserves the name.'<sup>18</sup>

These words, written in the nineteenth century, draw on the principles laid down by Locke in the seventeenth century, and lay down an agenda for the twenty-first century. It is in this theme of non-discrimination, perhaps even more than in the often more headlined Liberal desire to control power, that the intellectual continuity of a creed is most apparent.

It is precisely this creed of non-discrimination which has kept Liberals from class politics all through the period when they have been most in fashion. As soon as we treat anyone as a member of a class, we discriminate: we treat them as a member of a category, rather than reacting to them as individuals, according to what they do. The century since the death of Gladstone has been the century of class politics, but one after the other, Liberals have rejected any such notion. Perhaps the most emphatic of all, because most aware of the pressure he was resisting, was Asquith in 1921: 'the Liberal Party is not today, it never has been, and so long as I have any connection with it, it never will be, the party of any class, rich or poor, great or small, numerous or sparse in its composition. We are a party of no class'.<sup>19</sup>

There have perhaps been occasional moments when Liberals have repeated the mistake of King Harold at Hastings and come down off this high ground. Gladstone's 'classes against the masses' speech at Liverpool in the election of 1886 may be an example.<sup>20</sup> Lloyd George's Limehouse speech is another example:

'There has been a great slump in dukes ... They have been making speeches lately. One especially ex-

pensive duke made a speech, and all the Tory press said, “well, now, really, is that the sort of thing we are spending £250,000 a year on? Because a fully-equipped duke costs as much to keep as two Dreadnoughts – and they are just as great a terror – and they last longer. Let them realise what they are doing. They are forcing a revolution – and they will get it.’

That was one of our greatest ever political speeches, but it was not Liberalism, and Lloyd George was soon forced to backtrack for the good Liberal reason that what he had said contradicted the nature of his own support. Later that year, he said: ‘you will find these rich men in the House of Commons sitting up night after night, risking health, some of them most advanced in years, and what for? To pass a measure which taxes them to the extent of hundreds, maybe thousands of pounds a year. All honour to them.’<sup>21</sup> He was back on Liberal ground. The essence of Liberalism was not that it was an attack on a class: it was an attack on monopoly. The *Leicester Daily Mercury*, listing the key issues in February 1909, named them as ‘monopolies in land, in liquor, in ecclesiasticism, in electoral machinery, and in the House of Lords, which is the very holy of holies of monopoly’.<sup>22</sup> That may be a cartoon, but as so often, it is the cartoon which shows up the key features, and it is a good springboard from which to look at Liberal economic policy.

Nothing has been more insistent in the political cartooning of the Liberal Party than the attempt to portray it as a free market party, devoted to the principles of classical economics. In fact, there is a consensus among academics who have seriously studied the party that it was no such thing. That is backed by the unanimous agreement of Liberal politicians, and by unexpected supporters such as Sidney Webb and Lord Goschen, who left the party precisely because it was *not* such a party.<sup>23</sup> Can anyone consider Liberal policy on drink, to take one of the

*Leicester Daily Mercury’s* examples, and make out that it was based on the principles of free market economics? It was the Liberal Party, not the Tory Party, which was carried away in the 1874 ‘torrent of gin and beer’. Jonathan Parry suggests that even the drive for the repeal of the Corn Laws owed as much to the traditional Whig desire to avoid revolution by concession, and to avoid fighting an electorate on a class basis, as to the principles of political economy.<sup>24</sup>

The great mistake of attempts to base accounts of the Liberal Party on classical economic theories of the free market is the great mistake of the twentieth century about the nineteenth: the belief that its great arguments were about economics, not about religion or the constitution. Victorian politicians were not interested enough in economics to base a party division on them. There were no more votes in invoking the name of Smith and Ricardo than there are now in invoking the names of Keynes or Friedman. A cry like ‘no church schools on the rates’ was far more exiting to voters than any appeal to the laws of supply and demand. Even in fighting Chamberlain’s tariff reform, Lloyd George found far more mileage in the good populist cry of ‘stomach taxes’ than in the charge that Chamberlain was ‘distorting the market’. It was ecclesiastical, not economic, principles on which the Whig party had been founded, and which the Liberals inherited.

Karl Marx memorably said that Liberal ideas ‘gave effect to the sway of free competition within the realm of knowledge’.<sup>25</sup> It is arguable that Marx got it back to front, and what he should have said was: ‘Liberalism gave effect to the doctrine of religious pluralism within the realm of the economy’. Putting it that way round would have had chronological realism, and also logical realism, since it was the religious issues on which the party and its electoral base were built.

This approach would also make sense of what, to a twentieth-century eye, often looks like a mish-

mash of Liberal economic policy. There is no more consistency in Liberal economic policy in the nineteenth century than there is in Conservative economic policy in the twentieth, but there is perhaps a tendency to be discerned. Most of the invocations of economic theories of market freedom, and especially the key examples of repeal of the Corn Laws and free trade, tend to come where they support the traditional Liberal attacks on the power of monopoly and of privilege. It is the line of argument of those who did not see why the Anglicans should have all the best tunes. To this line of approach, Gladstone, with his High Tory past, his High Anglican religion and his Oxford University seat, is perhaps to some degree an exception. His insistence that governments should not interfere with functions ‘which they are totally unable to discharge’<sup>26</sup> was nearer free market economic theory than many Liberals, and may have owed something to his first career as a Peelite. Yet even Gladstone and Hartington, when they found the near-monopoly economic power implicit in railways, were prepared to contemplate nationalisation.<sup>27</sup>

While we often find Liberals invoking free market principles against monopoly or privilege, we find a good many, from the Ten Hours Bill of 1847 onwards, in which they were prepared to jettison free market principles in order to control monopoly or privilege. The issues of hours of work is one of the clearest examples to show that nineteenth century Liberals were not Thatcherites. The first compulsory public health legislation, which made privies and drains compulsory for new houses, was Viscount Morpeth’s Public Health Act of 1848. One can multiply such Acts, but that type of activity is best kept for a book.<sup>28</sup> One example may serve to show how debate on such an issue might be conducted: that is the Hares and Rabbits Bill of 1880, which finally reached the statute book as the Ground Game Act. To the utter fury of farmers, landlords had taken to

putting restrictive covenants into leases, to forbid farmers to shoot hares and rabbits on their land because it was a destruction of game.

The Bill which Harcourt, for the second Gladstone ministry, put before the commons voided all such covenants in leases. The adherents of strict political economy objected to the Bill on the ground that it interfered with freedom of contract. Harcourt asked: 'did the House imagine that this was the first Bill which had interfered with freedom of contract? ... All principles, however sound they might be, were subject to certain clear and well-defined exceptions'. The 'exception' Harcourt invoked was 'where bad customs had grown up, and one party had been unable to resist the force of those bad customs'. This is in effect the EU doctrine of the 'level playing field', and Harcourt very fairly quoted the Truck Acts and the Merchant Shipping Act as examples of it. State intervention was justified by the inequality of power between the contracting parties, which authorised the state to use its power to level the field.

What is even more interesting is the way Harcourt attempted to set up the image of the debate. All political speaking is a form of cartooning, and Harcourt set out to cartoon free market thinking as Conservative landlords' defence of their own privileges; he rehearsed his case and said: 'yet the noble Lord the member for Haddingtonshire declared this bill a monstrosity in legislation. Freedom of contract, according to the noble Lord, was a sacred principle only when applied to rent. Interference with it was a matter of course: but Conservative members, when dealing with land, thought otherwise'. This is an exercise in political spin-doctoring which no truly free market party could have attempted. It is the voice of a party well used to controlling economic power to protect the weak.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, the work of the New Liberals of the late Victorian and Edwardian period, who constructed the philosophic base for the Liberal advance after 1906 and for the foundations of the welfare state, are perhaps less new than they are sometimes taken to be. Hobhouse, one of the most famous of the New Liberals, said that legislation against monopoly was 'directed to the re-dressing of inequality in bargaining', and was 'not ... an infringement of the two distinctive ideals of the older Liberalism, liberty and equality. It appears rather as a necessary means to their fulfilment'.<sup>30</sup> This says no more than Harcourt had said in 1880.

New Liberals justified many of their advances in Liberal thinking through an individualistic notion of community in which they saw a common interest in the success of the whole, and argued for rights, not because they were natural, but because they were conferred by soci-

system, for opportunity to labour.<sup>31</sup> Hobson argued that 'there is a moral duty incumbent on the State to make 'the right to live' a corollary of 'the legal compulsion to be born.' He held that this implied a 'State guarantee of a minimum standard of life'. Perhaps what is most striking about the New Liberal philosophy is that the defence of such daring new measures as National Insurance and the Old Age Pension rested on philosophical foundations which were so familiar and so traditional. Robertson, defending the Old Age Pension in 1912, said it was 'part of the generally avowed duty of doing as we would be done by'.<sup>32</sup> This was not just a use of that always new book, the Bible, but also a looking back to the principles of the law of nature as enunciated by Locke.

No doubt many of these New Liberal ideas would have horrified Gladstone. Indeed one has the impression that for many of the party

Young Turks in Gladstone's last years, that was one of their great attractions. Yet they were securely rooted in ideas which had been current in the party all through Gladstone's period of power, and indeed in ideas which were very much older than that. The New Liberals may have turned away from Cobden and Bright but they made a determined effort to appropriate Mill, using the scope for ramification in Mill's enlarged concept of utilitarianism to do so.<sup>33</sup> Mill, by his insistence that 'trade is a social act', and that the case for leaving it unrestricted did not arise from his principles of liberty, deliberately left the way open for them to do so.<sup>34</sup> Lloyd George was not a New Liberal. He took these ideas up, as busy ministers do, because they were

missiles lying to hand when he needed something to throw. It was Lloyd George, by hurling new Liberalism at the House of Lords, who wove it into a framework attack on monopoly and privilege, turned it into something which all Liberals



'A creed of non-discrimination': Gladstone attempting to help Bradlaugh despite his aversion to atheism.

ety for the mutual benefit of the recipient and the conceiver. Herbert Samuel, in 1902, said that the unemployed, 'the helpless victims of an industrial system faulty in its workings, have a claim on the society which maintains and profits by that

would recognise, and has made it so securely part of party philosophy that it has remained there ever since.

It is since 1945, since the party has faced the challenge of socialism, that Liberalism has recovered a distrust of the state which Gladstone would have recognised. Here the key thought came from Jo Grimond, who revived a Liberal distrust of the spreading power of the state which Lloyd George, who treated the government machine like a fast car, had quite forgotten. It is a key Grimond line that 'I suspect that the slither towards dependence on the state is inherent in all democracies unless deliberate steps are taken to counter it'.<sup>35</sup>

It is this mixture of traditions which Paddy Ashdown has inherited. They are not incompatible, but, like a team of high-spirited horses they are not easy to drive together. In terms of his quotations, Paddy Ashdown's favourite Liberal appears to be Lloyd George. He is well aware of the power of the state to create freedom by intervening to level the playing field. Paddy Ashdown's particular nightmare is no longer the Nonconformist shut out of the burial ground: it is the lack of opportunity. It is 'young men and women sleeping in a shop doorway just the thickness of a plate-glass window away from job ads they'll never have the skills to apply for'.<sup>36</sup> If Paddy Ashdown has a key word it is 'trapped'. It may be literal, as in the case of Hartcliffe in Bristol, where 'even the act of mourning requires four buses'.<sup>37</sup> It may be metaphorical, as in the case of people trapped by poverty traps in the benefit system. There is in his desire to use the state to create opportunities, and in his dedicated defence of public services, all the Lloyd Georgian's readiness to rely on the power of the state. It is the voice of Lloyd George which denounced 'levels of poverty now immorally distant from the levels of affluence around them in many parts of the capital', and the voice of a New Liberal which said that 'we live more safely, and ultimately more prosperously, in a society that is united'.<sup>38</sup>

Yet at the same time there is a distrust of leaving it to the state in which we can hear the voices of Gladstone and Grimond. Ashdown warns us that things happen 'where people have the power and the responsibility and the support to do things for themselves.' In adapting Beveridge's image of the five giants, he says: 'now note the difference in language. It is not the state that slays the giants – it is the individual. The state is not the guardian angel – it is the provider of guardian angels'. This tradition of self-reliance and self-help is one Gladstone would have recognised.<sup>39</sup> In combining it with the more statist tradition coming from Lloyd George, Paddy Ashdown is like the proverbial child who resembles both parents, even though they do not resemble each other. Technically as well as ideologically, this blend is extremely difficult to mix in the right proportions, and there is a lot of work still to do on it, but it is clear enough that within Paddy Ashdown's Lloyd George, there is a Gladstone struggling to get out. The more work I have done on this lecture, the more glad I have been that the phrase in my title, 'Continuous Thread or Winding Stair' does not pose two mutually exclusive alternatives. There is a continuous thread from Gladstone to Ashdown, but it goes up a stair which is very winding indeed – and there is a lot further to climb.

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## Notes

1 I would like to thank Paddy Ashdown both for supplying the selection of speeches on which I have drawn for this lecture and for some very helpful comments.

- 2 Reprinted in Duncan Brack, *Why I am a Liberal Democrat* (Liberal Democrat Publications, 1996), p. 143.
- 3 Paddy Ashdown, 'A Welfare State for the next Century', Friendship Group annual lecture, Birmingham, 16 June 1997.
- 4 Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Victorian Government in Victorian Britain* (1993), p. 241.
- 5 Fringe meeting at party conference at Torquay, September 1993.
- 6 Parry, *op. cit.* pp. 184–86.
- 7 Parry, p. 291.
- 8 Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (1995), p. 199.
- 9 Parry, p. 189.
- 10 Oral history. Communicated by Lord John Russell to my father, and by him to me on many occasions during my childhood. Lord John's notorious tactlessness makes it unlikely that this was in fact a *mot d'escalier*, but even if it were it would be none the worse guide to Lord John's mind.
- 11 Jenkins, *op. cit.* pp. 237–39.
- 12 Bertrand and Patricia Russell (eds), *The Amberly Papers* (1937) I 364. For an example of Gladstone at his kindest, see his letter of condolence to my grandfather for his defeat in the general election of 1868: 'let me take the opportunity of saying how much I regret your exclusion from Parliament, though I trust it is but temporary. When I read your able speech at Plymouth (I think) I feared the sting of the clerical bee, or wasp, would find you out, as it did me.' *Ibid.* II 157.
- 13 Paddy Ashdown, speech at Chatham House, 6 March 1996, and *Beyond Westminster* (1994), p. 54.
- 14 Jenkins, p. 119.
- 15 Jo Grimond, *The Liberal Future* (1959), p. 16.
- 16 Martin Pugh, *Lloyd George* (1988), pp. 9–10, 78.
- 17 Grimond, *op. cit.* p. 38.
- 18 *Why I am a Liberal Democrat*, p. 148.
- 19 G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration 1886–1929* (1992), p. 173.
- 20 Parry, p. 302.
- 21 Pugh, *op. cit.* pp. 49–50.
- 22 Parry, p. 302.
- 23 Searle, p. 109.
- 24 Parry pp. 145, 245; Michael Freedon, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (1978), pp. 33–35; Searle, p. 26.
- 25 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (ed. Engels, 1888), p. 21.
- 26 Parry, p. 168.
- 27 Jenkins, pp. 68, 249, 321.
- 28 Parry, pp. 229–223.
- 29 Parry, pp. 243–45; *Hansard*, vol. 252, cols. 1714–15, 10 June 1880. The issue of rabbits was a strong electoral one. In the South Devon election of 1868, the Tory

*concluded on page 11*

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# A Visit to Hawarden

Tony Little describes the Gladstone family home.

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Gladstone lived a somewhat peripatetic lifestyle; the index to the diaries lists some seventeen different London homes, not including the Dollis Hill home he borrowed in later life. When not in London he was often at one of the great houses of the Whig aristocracy or of other friends. But if anywhere could be called home it was Hawarden Castle.

Hawarden is a village in Flintshire in North Wales, and the Castle was the property of Gladstone's wife Catherine's family. When the family got into financial difficulties over an unwise investment in an iron and brickworks at Stourbridge, it was the resources of the Gladstone family which came to the rescue. From thereon, Gladstone and his family

shared the house with Sir Stephen Glynne, and Gladstone's family inherited the estate. The house remains in the family and is not open to the public. It was a great privilege for those who attended the Chester centenary conference (see pp. 43–44) to be able to visit Gladstone's home.

The house is approached through a grand mock-castle gate entrance in the village and requires a 15–20 minute walk which passes the ruins of the medieval castle. The main part of the house is a classic eighteenth century home, not built on an unduly grand scale, which has been clad in stone with mock battlements added in a Regency Gothic style. Under Gladstone's occupation it was extended to include the

Temple of Peace, and the Octagon room, which was used for the storage of state and important family papers. We were allowed to see the downstairs rooms. These were simply furnished but rich in portraits of the family – in which it was interesting to note how the features of the young Catherine just before marriage were clearly recognisable in the later portraits. The furniture in the dining room was still the original.

The largest room was the drawing room, which had also served as the library in times past. On what must be the north wall are still the fake book cases with titles bearing witness to the family's sense of humour – *Ascent of Cader-Idris* by Anthony Strollope Esq, *An Israelite Without Guile* by Ben Disraeli. It is through the hidden door in one of these bookcases that access is gained to the Temple of Peace – Gladstone's study – which is largely unchanged since his day.

In it are to be found the desk in the window where he worked and the desk in the centre where he studied. In this room he wrote his famous pamphlet on the Bulgarian atrocities. Around the walls are some of the bookcases which he designed himself to jut out into the room, providing the maximum space for books on the two sides and at the ends facing inwards. One of these was used to record the heights of the family at various ages, and Sir William Gladstone, who acted as our guide, indicated that the GOM had been recorded as 5ft 11½". Lying scattered around are the great seal of office of 1859, one of the many axes presented to him in acknowledgment of his tree-felling, and a wheelbarrow which came from the opening of a railway. On top of the bookcases are a series of busts, including, unexpectedly, a bust of Disraeli to stare down at his rival at work. On the wall is the Millais portrait of Gladstone and one of his grandchildren. Perhaps the most poignant document we saw in this year was the original of his will, written in his own hand over eight pages of a ½d notebook.



HAWARDEN CASTLE, FROM THE SOUTH-WEST.  
Photo: G. H. Wilson and Co., Aberystwyth.

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## Liberalism and Liberty

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candidate's speeches were regularly punctured with staccato cries of 'rabbits!, rabbits!', and occasionally with worse: *Amberly Papers*, II, 208, 209–10, 212, 219–20, 223, 235 and other refs.

30 Freeden, p. 35.

31 Freeden, p. 219, 209.

32 Freeden, pp. 218, 222.

33 Freeden, p. 14. Hobhouse's exact words were: 'the interests of every man are no doubt in the end bound up with the welfare of the whole community, but the

relation is infinitely subtle and indirect ... the direct and calculable benefit of the majority may by no means coincide with the ultimate good of society as a whole'. It is a line of thought whose debt to Mill's *Utilitarianism* is surely clear.

34 J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, (ed. Stefan Collini, 1989), p. 95.

35 Grimond, p. 43.

36 Paddy Ashdown, speech at party conference, Cardiff, 9 March 1997.

37 Paddy Ashdown, *Beyond Westminster*, p. 6.

38 Paddy Ashdown, speech in London, 8 April 1997.

39 Paddy Ashdown, Friendship Group annual lecture, 16 June 1997.