

alone cannot solve the problem of global warming – and, Randall argued, in 1928 the Yellow Book made a very similar point when it set out a plan to tackle the chronic unemployment of the era. Coming from a Liberal tradition, the books do have common ground, concerned with freedom, balance and democracy. Seventy-five years ago, the Yellow Book was questioning the balance of society, the widening gap between rich and poor, unequal exposure to damage to the environment, and the failure of democracy. The Yellow Book shows a lost opportunity to tackle problems that have come back to haunt us and which have been tackled again in the Orange Book, but less radically. The Yellow Book envisioned a new state with a broader role to balance against personal freedoms, whereas the Orange Book posed questions about humanity's impact on the environment. Randall finished by reflecting on the liberal genius to protect freedom and promote opportunity, to renew, refresh and reinvigorate. He concluded by challenging the Liberal Party with the need to renew, like the authors in 1928, rather than reclaim, as the authors of the Orange Book had.

Paul Marshall argued that the Yellow Book and Orange Book were two contrasting offerings from within the Liberal tradition, separated by seventy-five years, and offering very different policy prescriptions. Marshall admitted that he had not read the Yellow Book until asked to speak in this debate. Although not a fan of the Yellow Book he did feel that both books shared some common ground. They had both been written at times when there was a need for a renewal of Liberalism. But the challenge for the Orange Book was to pick up economic liberalism, which has been neglected in the Liberal Democrats, rather than to adapt a philosophy to a new world.

## Seventy-five years on from the Yellow Book, Marshall argued that Liberalism has won the battle of political philosophies in the twentieth century.

He identified four freedoms that Liberals stand for, personal, political, economic and social, which can be seen in both books, and he highlighted the Liberal belief in social freedom, freedom of opportunity and equality regardless of wealth or birth, as the tenet that traditionally distinguishes Liberals from Conservatives. In our current age, he argued, neglecting economic freedom has led to economic illiteracy and the caricature of the Liberal Democrats as a high-tax party.

Seventy-five years on from the Yellow Book, Marshall argued that Liberalism has won the battle of political philosophies in the twentieth century. Socialism has been discredited, Fascism defeated, and Conservatism, according to Marshall, no longer influences David Cameron's party. For Marshall, the Yellow Book was a pragmatic book of its time. It

showed a willingness to change ideas in the face of changing times, but its focus on industry gave it a narrow scope and it was an intellectual retreat from economic liberalism. It sought to explain the industrial welfare state and make a new Liberalism. It was responding to a different challenge from that faced by the Orange Book, which had a wider scope.

According to Marshall, the Orange Book did not need to make a new New Liberalism. For in the information age, when everything can be googled, the Liberal philosophy of freedom works. He finished by suggesting that for the Liberals to go on and think the unthinkable in the future they needed to take the first step and reclaim their heritage.

*Lynsey Groom is a member of the History Group's executive committee.*

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## Liberalism and British national identity

Evening meeting, 5 February 2007 with Robert Colls and Professor John Solomos; Chair: Nick Clegg MP

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

**N**ATIONALITIES, AS Benedict Anderson has pointed out, are imagined communities.<sup>1</sup> They exist not as natural entities but as a construct for cultural, social and political purposes. Thus, the way we have imagined and constructed our own nationality is vitally important to us. The pattern of media, academic and political debate around Britishness reflects this importance. When people are asked what makes up Britishness, they often cite the notions of 'fair play', 'tolerance' or 'personal liberty' as part of the answer. Liberals regard these concepts as fundamental to liberal philoso-

phy but just how far has liberalism informed the construction of British national identity in the last hundred years, and how will new British identities emerging in the Britain of devolution, European Union enlargement, multiculturalism and the 'war on terror' be?

Robert Colls began his exploration of the subject in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the year 1880, with the opening of the city's first free library. The chairman of the library committee, Joseph Cowen, Liberal MP for Newcastle, performed the opening ceremony. Cowen was well known for being a supporter of Irish, Polish and

Italian nationalism. It is possible he may have run guns for his friend Garibaldi. He was also a strong supporter of the trade union movement, in particular the Northumberland Miners' Federation and the Durham Miners' Association. Cowen had also recently become a convert to New Northumbrianism, an early version of English devolutionary politics. Cowen opened the library and was invited to borrow the first book. He chose J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*. In that moment and in that deed, High Liberalism clasped hands with populist liberalism just as it was embodied in Joseph Cowen, newspaper proprietor and brick maker, 'the Blaydon brick', as he was called. Here was a man who left £635,000 in his will but who deliberately dressed like a coal miner in his Sunday best and who retained or cultivated the Geordie accent for those who cheered him on.

Five years before, Joe Wilson, probably the first great music hall star, had died. Wilson was an early stand-up comedian, a singer and songwriter with a strong, populist Geordie or north-east identity. He was also a reformer, teetotaler and a Liberal who believed in improving the lives of working-class people. In the 1890s the Liberal caucus in Newcastle put Cowen's memory alongside Wilson's to create a vision of the people, an early version of being a Geordie. This identity bound the people to liberalism just as liberalism bound itself to the people. This deal between culture and politics lasted until at least 1926.

What happened in Newcastle also happened in other regions. From 1880 to 1920 liberalism managed to go beyond Nonconformity, free trade and J. S. Mill. It was able to reach into the interests and the identities of the English, Scottish and Welsh people. So much so that when socialism first came to

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these communities, it was seen as a kind of aberration of intellectuals. Thus one hundred years ago – apart from a few relics of national identity which were always associated with the Tory cause, such as the military, the monarchy and field sports – liberalism and Englishness (and Britishness, although this contains other nuances) were so close as to be synonymous.

Liberalism had spent a century laying claim to the national personality and national history. This history was seen by liberals as a thousand-year struggle to claw back units of liberty from an unjust and arbitrary state. It later came to be called Whig history. This interpretation was essentially a liberal view of the English past; an English struggle that gave mission, purpose and meaning to the English people. It mixed English personality with English liberty, realised through history. This liberalism was not something worked out by philosophy, rather it was worked out in history, in common law, on the ground through cases, rather than through intellectual apparatuses. The rule of law, free speech, freedom of religion, free markets, free trade, freedom of the press and free libraries – these were the landmarks of English history.

Aspects of English history like Saxon moots, witanes, the English language and English laws were mixed in with these ideas – King Alfred became an honorary liberal. From the thirteenth century were added Magna Carta and regular Parliaments, with Simon de Montfort signed up as another honorary liberal. In the sixteenth century came the Reformation and the birth of Protestant liberty; the seventeenth century delivered 'revolution' in 1642, regicide in 1649 and 'glorious' revolution in 1688; Oliver Cromwell and William of Orange also become honorary liberals, because they too had clawed back liberty from

a state that was taking it away. The union with Scotland in 1707, retrospective union with Wales and union with Ireland in 1801 were all claimed as absorbing the margins of Britishness for liberalism and incorporating toleration and relief for Catholics and Nonconformists. To the Whig historians, the Industrial Revolution was to be portrayed as the economic result of the benefits of liberty with 1776 (Adam Smith) and 1846 (Repeal of the Corn Laws) as key dates. The gaining of political rights and the extension of the franchise from the Great Reform Act of 1832 through the later reforms of the nineteenth century – the march went on. Even the Empire could be accommodated into this Liberal-Whig view of history. After some early opposition from Cobden and Bright, by the 1880s even Liberalism could be imperialistic. Joe Chamberlain especially, but others like Dicey and Freeman – even Mill – accepted the virtues of Imperialism when the British imperial power was seen as a greater, more moral force than its rivals.

So, by 1907, flush with the great electoral and ideological victory of the previous year, Englishness stood synonymous with Liberalism and the future looked set fair for progress, more liberty, ever more liberty, ever more absorption into a British-Liberal world. Regicides had been absorbed, Cromwell's statue stood in the yard of the Palace of Westminster. The revolutionaries of 1688 had always been absorbed, celebrated as heroes of the founding of political liberalism. Nonconformists, Catholics and the labour movement had been absorbed by liberalism and even enjoyed their special support. This was particularly true of the labour movement with some astonishing legislation in the 1870s and around the turn of the century, notably the Trades Disputes Act of 1906, the extension of the franchise and the

beginnings of the welfare state after 1908. Even the aristocracy, though naturally Tory, had accepted free trade in corn and extensions to the franchise. The House of Lords had yet to be dealt with but no one doubted reform would come. To women, the franchise would also come because to refuse it, as Millicent Fawcett kept telling her male Liberal colleagues, was a denial of liberal history.

The Empire was more problematic, depending on what exactly one meant by the Empire. The white Dominions were automatically capable of absorption. India would take longer, but the Indian National Congress looked hopeful with its liberal belief in a secular state. However the African and West Indian colonies were not in the picture and the experience of the Boer War had shown how divisive to Liberalism imperial questions could be and demonstrated the limits of liberal absorption in the Empire.

Then there was Ireland. Pacified by land acts and franchise reform and not yet willing in 1907 to vote republican, Ireland was still a problem waiting to happen, the issue of Home Rule dividing MPs north and south. Liberalism had of course tried to absorb the Irish question through the efforts of Gladstone in particular and as early as the 1850s there were attempts by Liberals to bring the bourgeois revolution to Ireland. In 1907 the problems still lay in the future.

What went wrong? What happened next was that Liberalism (with a capital L) became separated from liberalism (with a small 'l') and Liberalism stopped winning elections. Liberalism, the small 'l' philosophy, failed to absorb both Ireland and the Indian and African imperial domains. From the perspective of 2007, it may be that this failure remains a problem for contemporary liberals when confronting people from the ethnic minorities

whose group identities do not square with the basic tenets of liberalism. The third thing that happened was that the Whig view of history as a journey or a mission to build up popular power and liberty started to falter from the 1930s and had broken down by the 1960s. This process occurred over a period which saw the second of two world wars, after which the planet was brought to the brink of nuclear destruction and which saw the rise of forms of reasoning such as structuralism and deconstructionism, which sought to destroy unities rather than build them. History ceased to be a journey or a mission and became in Oakeshott's words 'a predicament'. At the same time the world stopped being an English or British place. Western leadership was ceded to the USA, with its own interpretation of liberalism; Socialism collapsed and Conservatism too deferred to American leadership. In 1990, Francis Fukuyama pronounced the end of history as historical struggle had now been superseded by the triumph of American liberal capitalism.

British liberal reaction to these changes was to keep going, to continue to stand for Liberal ideas and policies and to continue to develop these through thinkers such as Keynes and Beveridge and through ideas and strategies such as community politics – democratic, local, an example of Burke's 'little platoons'. At the same time however, Liberals gave up a liberalism which had been strongly associated with the British nation state and its history in favour of a liberalism more based on human rights and universalism. In a nutshell, Liberals gave up the historians for the lawyers. As a reaction to electoral failure, Liberals also gave up on the British electorate and switched allegiance to Brussels, remote and seemingly undemocratic. The massive changes that have taken place

since the 1950s, decolonisation, deindustrialisation, mass immigration, privatisation, the failure of civility and the threat posed to liberty have all left Liberalism behind. In conclusion, Professor Colls had to question the ability of contemporary liberalism to reconnect with the interests and identities of modern communities.

John Solomos opened by remarking on the perceived difference between history as a study of the past and sociology as a study of the present. But issues around 'race', immigration and national identity have assumed great political importance in Britain since 1945 and the study of the history of those ideas since then has had a significant impact on the way these questions are understood today. The principal area of debate after 1945 was how Britain should respond to questions around immigration and ethnic diversity, especially colonial, non-white, immigration. This was important in the context of the debate about identity because the immigrants concerned were, at the time, not just imperial but British subjects with certain rights and entitlements in respect of citizenship and status in British society. This has altered since the 1980s and 1990s, with new debates about immigration centring on asylum and refugee status, but in the earlier period the debate was taking place in the slightly contradictory context of immigrants who were actually coming to the 'mother country'. This brought complex identity issues for the immigrants who had attachment to their home colonies and saw themselves at the same time as British, and for the host community who struggled with this contradiction and tried to resolve the questions it raised about their own identity. These issues gave rise to two debates, the first about how to regulate, control and eventually to stop immigration, the second

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about how British society responds to the realities of racial and ethnic diversity in terms of policy, structures and identities. Ever since the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, Britain has been considering whether it could declare itself to have a 'white Britain' policy while at the same time reconciling that desire with Britain's role as the mother country of a racially and ethnically diverse Commonwealth with a set of obligations towards the people who have come here and who are entitled to equal social and political rights with members of the host community.

Therefore, one way of looking at what happened to British national identity after 1945 is from the perspective of people who were strangers in the sense of being newly arrived in the country yet who, because of their upbringing in British colonies with all the political, social and cultural connections with the mother country, were not strangers in the traditional sense at all. Yet when they did arrive they were regarded as strangers and British society was forced to confront issues around integration, assimilation, cultural and ethnic diversity, how the newcomers could be accepted into public life in this country and what the reaction of central and local government and other public institutions should be. Institutions were forced to confront evidence of racial inequality, discrimination and bigotry and try to come up with policies which rectified or challenged these factors while leaving space for the new communities to be culturally different, to develop their own institutions and their own place in public life. Dealing with this dilemma has been at the heart of race relations policies since the 1960s. It has produced a situation where public policy has been to promote multiculturalism and diversity, to tackle inequality and yet at the same

time encourage integration into a common British identity. Professor Solomos seemed to be concluding that this approach was essentially liberal in the promotion of diversity and in the introduction of laws and policies designed to tackle inequality and discrimination but met the limits of liberalism in the debates about integration or assimilation and over firm immigration controls.

Professor Solomos reminded the meeting that all debates around these issues are complex and it is important not to focus on one interpretation. In today's Britain, in our institutions, our education system, our welfare system, in features of our society such as urban life in London and across the nation and in policies for young people, it is clear that multiculturalism and diversity are indeed strongly embedded in modern British life. This is not simply a question of demographics: in terms of social and cultural interaction, multiculturalism represents an important dimension of everyday life, youth culture being a clear example. What we call British culture today, again using youth culture as an example, is fundamentally very different from what it used to be and has clearly been shaped by multicultural influences. At the same time it is important to remember that it has not just been immigration that has changed and influenced perceptions of what it means to be British. The country has undergone huge social changes, such as post-industrialisation, dietary and medical improvement, and sexual liberation, and these influences too impact on how we see ourselves in society.

In terms of national identity it is clear that Britain has become much more culturally diverse and very ethnically and racially diverse since 1945. This has led to criticisms from people such as Trevor Phillips, who feel multiculturalism has gone

too far, that we have entered an era of super-diversity, that society has been too liberal in allowing the growth of cultural diversity and that the process needs to be reined back to enable all British people to find more things in common which bind us together. While these arguments are often presented in a fashion that appears to be scaremongering, there is a legitimate concern underlying the debate that we need to find a common culture. The other side of the argument is that one of the strengths of Britain today is that we are a culturally and ethnically diverse people, which allows many different communities and identities to express themselves and support each other within society and not to believe that there is one true, common culture. What it has meant to be British has always been subject to debate and historically the notion of what Britishness is, what it has meant to be English or have a particular regional identity has constantly changed over the years.

The discussion over British national identity today is a continuation of that debate but the danger is that the debate encourages a view that it may be possible to move back to some idea of a mono-cultural Britain, that it is right to seek a common culture which is fixed and unchanging. It may be more useful – and more liberal – in taking the discussion forward to move away from notions of culture and diversity and focus more on obligations and rights, both the obligations and protection of rights which the state owes immigrants and minorities and the obligations immigrants and minorities owe to the state, to society and its diverse component parts. This approach takes account of the continuing pressures in the modern world on movements of peoples, those violent upheavals constantly producing refugee migrations.

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These cause increasing numbers of strangers to seek protection abroad as well as occasioning the growth of societies containing many diverse communities. These trends are not slowing down or reversing and the idea that we can look back to a more mono-cultural model for society seems incompatible with them. The liberal question is not so much how do we retreat from diversity, but how do we accommodate diversity in such a fluid global environment? Not what uniform national identity should we be creating, but how we encourage different identities (for example, ethnic, cultural, regional, religious) within a common citizenship while still meeting the challenge of continuing to offer protection to minorities and honour our international and national obligations.

Nick Clegg, commenting on aspects of the presentations, drew attention to the central contribution of big and small 'l' liberalism to social and welfare provisions in contemporary Britain (often claimed or appropriated by other political parties), and pointed out how this aspect of British life informs how we think of ourselves as a society. He also rejected the idea that liberalism's defence of civil and human rights was somehow exotic and removed from mainstream perceptions of what constitutes Britishness. On the contrary, he felt that recent attacks on civil liberties could have been more skilfully presented by liberals as attacks on essential British freedoms and that opposition to these attacks could have been more successfully portrayed by liberals as patriotic defences of hard-won liberties. He suggested this had not been done because liberals felt squeamish about identifying themselves too closely with patriotism and wrapping themselves in the Union Jack as a reaction against the constant

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playing of the patriotism card by the right.

Liberalism as a modern movement was trying to grapple with the diverse and multi-layered nature of power in the contemporary world, which is spread locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. It is to liberalism's credit that it is trying to work out a coherent response to the realities of this complexity through local strategies such as community politics while at the same time embracing, for example, the supranational dimension of the European Union, however imperfect or remote its dealings may sometimes appear from everyday life, in an effort to make that power understandable and accountable to citizens. In the same way, Liberalism is well placed to absorb the growing interest in environmentalism and sustainable development and to champion remedies for environmental degradation from the local to the supranational level.

Nick Clegg felt that liberalism, while a tolerant philosophy, was not a value-free philosophy. Liberals can and perhaps should more often make judgements about cultures and structures, such as extreme forms of

theocracy, which we believe are inimical to liberal democracy. We have failed to do so for fear of seeming intolerant and illiberal but liberals have to defend more often and with greater passion the essential elements of our own philosophy, free speech, due process and universal application of the law. Clearly liberalism has had a central influence on past perceptions of British national identity.

Professor Colls described the period between 1880 and 1920 as a time when Liberalism and Englishness were synonymous. It may never be possible to reproduce that exact match but while liberalism retains so many essential components of what it is that we feel makes us what we are today, it will continue to inform and influence the debate on national identity. Perhaps the lesson is that liberals should make more of an effort to promote the common themes between liberalism and Britishness in an attempt towards recapturing the political success of 1880–1920.

*Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983)

## Help needed!

The Liberal Democrat History Group was formed in 1988. Since then, we have organised meetings, starting at one per year and now usually holding four. We have published the *Journal of Liberal History* quarterly since November 1993. We have published four books, the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (1998), *Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* (1999), *Great Liberal Speeches* (2001) and *Dictionary of Liberal Thought* (2007). And we have established the website [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk) as the web's premier source for Liberal history.

We have every intention of continuing and developing all these activities – and more! But we need help – with a few exceptions, all the History Group's activities are implemented by a very small group of individuals, most of whom also have busy professional and political lives.

If you are interested in helping with any of the activities above – meetings, the *Journal*, publications or the website – or with helping to run the Group more broadly, we'd like to hear from you. It is not necessary to attend meetings; many of our activities can be carried out from your own computer. Please email Tony Little, Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o [journal@liberalhistory.org.uk](mailto:journal@liberalhistory.org.uk).