

William Ewart Gladstone, David Lloyd George, John Maynard Keynes, John Stuart Mill – who is the greatest Liberal of all time? The Liberal Democrat History Group’s poll for the greatest British Liberal in history is now entering its final stage. In July, *Journal* readers voted between fifteen potential candidates (plus an eclectic collection of write-ins). The result is given in summary below; the final four to emerge were Gladstone, Lloyd George, Keynes and Mill, with Asquith as a fairly close runner-up. In the next three pages you will find concise biographies of the four contenders in the final stage, put together by **Duncan Brack** and **York Membery**. *Journal* readers, together with all Liberal Democrats attending the party’s autumn conference, now have to make the final decision – which of the four is the greatest?

THE SEARCH FOR THE GREATEST

THE CASE for each of the top four will be presented at the History Group’s fringe meeting at the autumn Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton (see back page for details). Leading politicians and historians will make the case for each one of the four.

Enclosed with this *Journal* is a ballot paper, which if posted, must reach us no later than Tuesday 18 September (it can also be emailed – see the paper for details). If you are attending Liberal Democrat conference, you can hand in your paper to the History Group stand in the exhibition, by the end of Wednesday 19 September, or at the fringe meeting that evening.

The exercise has generated a surprising amount of interest from the media (surprising to us, anyway), with BBC Radio (*Today*, *Westminster Hour*), *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times* and the *New Statesman* all mentioning it. Look out for more coverage in the run-up to the final result!

The first-stage ballot

Just under a hundred *Journal* readers voted in the first-stage ballot, over a fifth of our circulation – not bad considering we didn’t provide reply-paid envelopes. The count extended to fourteen stages. The summary result is given in the table; STV aficionados can be sent a copy of the full count by emailing journal@liberalhistory.org.uk.

Journal readers were highly inventive in coming up with write-in candidates, including some highly obscure characters (mostly Whigs), and some we were going to rule out for being alive, or for not being even remotely Liberal; but perhaps less smart when it came to voting for them – the vast majority were listed as lower preferences than number 1, so of course were all eliminated, with zero first preferences, when we started knocking candidates off the bottom.

Below are summary biographies for the final four candidates.

SEARCH FOR THE BEST LIBERAL

W. E. Gladstone (1809–98)

William Ewart Gladstone was the political giant of Victorian politics. He defined the Liberal Party of the second half of the nineteenth century: the party of peace, retrenchment, reform and – above all – trust in the people.

A minister by the age of twenty-five, he left office for the last time at eighty-five. He served as Prime Minister on no less than four occasions, three of them after his ‘retirement’ in 1875. He was the leading orator of his age, not only in Parliament but outside, regularly addressing audiences of 20,000 or more.

Originally a Tory, he was converted to the cause of free trade under Sir Robert Peel. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1850s and 1860s, he abolished tariffs, simplified taxation, ended paper duties to facilitate the growth of the press and established the Post Office Savings Bank. With other Peelites, in 1859 he joined with Whigs and Radicals to create

the Liberal Party, and nine years later became its leader. Under his four premierships, the Irish Church was disestablished, the secret ballot introduced, the purchase of army commissions abolished, state primary education established and the franchise reformed and extended. He pursued a foreign policy guided by the ‘love of freedom’ and action through a ‘concert of nations’.

For Gladstone, politics was, above all else, about great moral issues rather than selfish interests. Hence his conversion to Irish Home Rule – which, despite two attempts, he never achieved, splitting his party in the process. His preoccupation with moral issues also explains his opposition to radical ‘constructionist’ legislation, which could too easily destroy incentives for self-help and voluntarism. Yet he was always a government activist willing to expand the role of the state, as a regulator (for example, in railway regulation, or Irish land reform), or as a provider where voluntary

means were inadequate, such as in education.

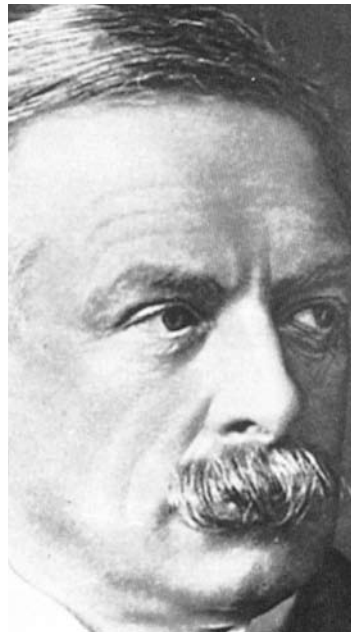
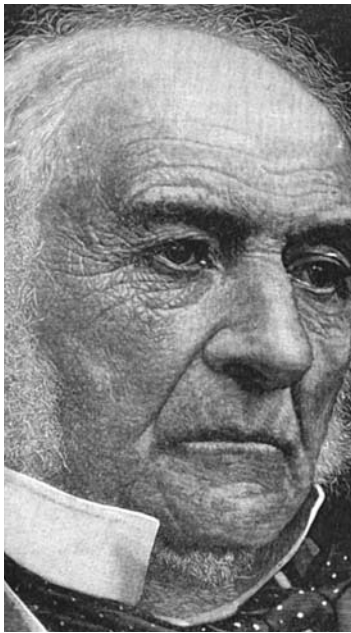
In the time left over from office, Gladstone collected china, wrote on Homer and participated in the religious controversies of his time. He was a man of immense physical and mental energy, chopping down trees and reading books (20,000 of them, according to Roy Jenkins) for relaxation. He moulded and embodied Victorian Liberalism. He was not only a great Liberal; he was a great human being.

John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946)

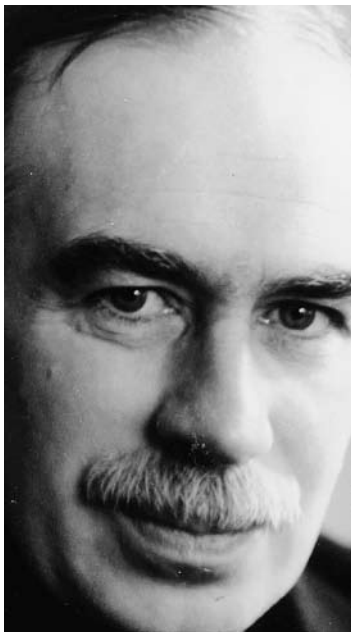
As well as Liberal politicians, Liberal thinkers have helped to shape government in twentieth-century Britain. Greatest among them was Keynes, the most influential and important economic thinker of the century, whose ideas came to underpin Western governments’ post-war economic strategy.

Primarily a Cambridge academic, John Maynard

THE SEARCH FOR THE GREATEST LIBERAL



Far left:
Gladstone,
Keynes
Left: Lloyd
George, Mill



Keynes worked for the government in both wars. During the First World War he advised Lloyd George on war finance and the Versailles peace settlement, resigning over its punitive terms. In the Second, he was the leading economic adviser to the Treasury (1940–46), and headed the British delegation to the Bretton Woods talks in 1944, which laid the foundations for the post-war international financial and trading system.

His economic works include his *Tract on Monetary Reform* (1923) and *On Money* (1930), still regarded as his major works by many monetary economists.

His most famous work, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), effectively invented macroeconomics. He showed that the price system could not be relied upon to achieve an equilibrium that made full use of human resources, and argued that governments should manage the economy to eliminate unemployment, especially by running budget deficits. The book reads like a summary of all economics written subsequently, though, like the Bible and the works of Karl Marx, its very richness has led to thousands of articles and books disputing its meaning.

Keynes was also an active Liberal. He was a pioneer of the Liberal Summer School movement, a member of the Liberal Industrial Inquiry, which produced *Britain's Industrial Future*, the famous 'Yellow Book' (1928), and part-author of the 1929 Liberal manifesto and of the accompanying *Can Lloyd George Do It?*, which explained the Liberal Party's plans to cure unemployment.

Like all great Liberals, Keynes was essentially an optimist. Through his brilliant insights he showed how economics could be used to help create and maintain the conditions in which human beings could live civilised, creative and passionate lives.

David Lloyd George (1863–1945)

David Lloyd George is one of the greatest and at the same time one of the most controversial politicians in the history of the Liberal Party. He played a central role in the great reformist administrations of 1905–16. As party leader (1926–31), he introduced Keynesian economics to the Liberal programme and to British politics. But his period as Prime Minister, from 1916–22, split the party into rival factions, presaging its catastrophic decline.

Lloyd George grew up in North Wales in humble circumstances, and qualified as a solicitor before winning election as MP for Caernarfon Boroughs in 1890. He rapidly earned a reputation as a radical, and was prominent in the opposition to the Boer War. He entered the cabinet first as President of the Board of Trade and then as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He established himself as a dynamic, radical force in the government, introducing the major Liberal social reforms, including old age pensions, National Insurance and the 'People's Budget' of 1909.

He served as Minister of Munitions and then Secretary of State for War in the first

wartime coalition. In December 1916, after mounting concern over Asquith's ineffectual leadership, he found himself facing irresistible pressure to take office as Prime Minister. He proved an exceptionally able war leader, but the split of 1916 gravely wounded the Liberal Party and eventually led to its eclipse by Labour.

Succeeding Asquith as leader in July 1926, Lloyd George used his famous Fund (accumulated from the sale of honours) to finance a series of policy committees. These produced, most famously, the 'Yellow Book', *Britain's Industrial Future*, which proposed a radical programme of state intervention in the economy to reduce unemployment. Under his inspirational leadership, the party enjoyed a new-found energy and vitality – but was by then too firmly established in third place to be able to break through the barriers of the electoral system.

One of the most dynamic and brilliant politicians ever to lead the Liberal Party and become premier, Lloyd George remains a figure of controversy; but his achievements, first in implementing the New Liberal programme of social reform, and then in ensuring that the Liberal Party remained committed to social liberalism, are real and lasting.

John Stuart Mill (1806–73)

Philosopher, economist, journalist, political writer, social reformer, and, briefly, Liberal MP, John Stuart Mill is one of the most famous figures in the pantheon of Liberal theorists, and the greatest of the Victorian Liberal thinkers.

Eldest son of the Scottish utilitarian philosopher James Mill, John Stuart's works have had far more lasting interest. In *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) he voiced his unease concerning the excessive power and influence of the state; people understood

Great Liberals: first-stage result		
<i>Candidate</i>	<i>First preference votes</i>	<i>Eliminated / elected at stage</i>
H. H. Asquith	4	Runner-up
William Beveridge	3	6
Violet Bonham-Carter	2	4
Henry Campbell-Bannerman	5	11
Richard Cobden	3	9
Millicent Garrett Fawcett	2	5
Charles James Fox	2	4
W. E. Gladstone	37	1
Jo Grimond	4	12
Roy Jenkins	4	10
John Maynard Keynes	6	14
David Lloyd George	6	13
John Locke	3	7
John Stuart Mill	9	8
Lord John Russell	1	3
<i>Write-ins</i>		
John Bright	1	3
Winston Churchill	1	3
Stephen College	1	3
T. H. Green	1	3
L. T. Hobhouse	1	3
Viscount Palmerston	1	3
Herbert Samuel	0	2
Adam Smith	1	3
<i>Quota</i>	<i>= 19.61</i>	

their own business better than government did. However, he acknowledged a clear role for the state, for example in regulating natural monopolies.

He is best known for his masterpiece, *On Liberty* (1859), which emphatically vindicated individual moral autonomy, and celebrated the importance of originality and dissent. Although generations of Liberals have used his arguments to oppose state authoritarianism, in fact Mill devoted most of the work to arguing against middle-class conformism, which stultified opposition and a critical cast of mind.

In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) Mill expounded his doctrine of democracy, emphasising the importance of local government. Putting his beliefs into practice, he served as Liberal MP for Westminster from 1865

to 1868, where he argued for proportional representation and the extension of suffrage to women householders – a stance he developed in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which remains the only feminist classic written by a man. He maintained that social reform, rather than repression, was the cure for civil unrest in Ireland, and argued for the impeachment of the brutal Governor Eyre of Jamaica. Mill's defence of civil rights and racial equality helped to lose him his seat in 1868.

Mill's intellectual achievements were unmatched in Victorian England. His defence of individual liberty can still set the terms of debate today, for example over freedom of speech. This helps to explain why *On Liberty* is the symbol of office of the President of the Liberal Democrats – and, what is more, the symbol of liberalism itself.