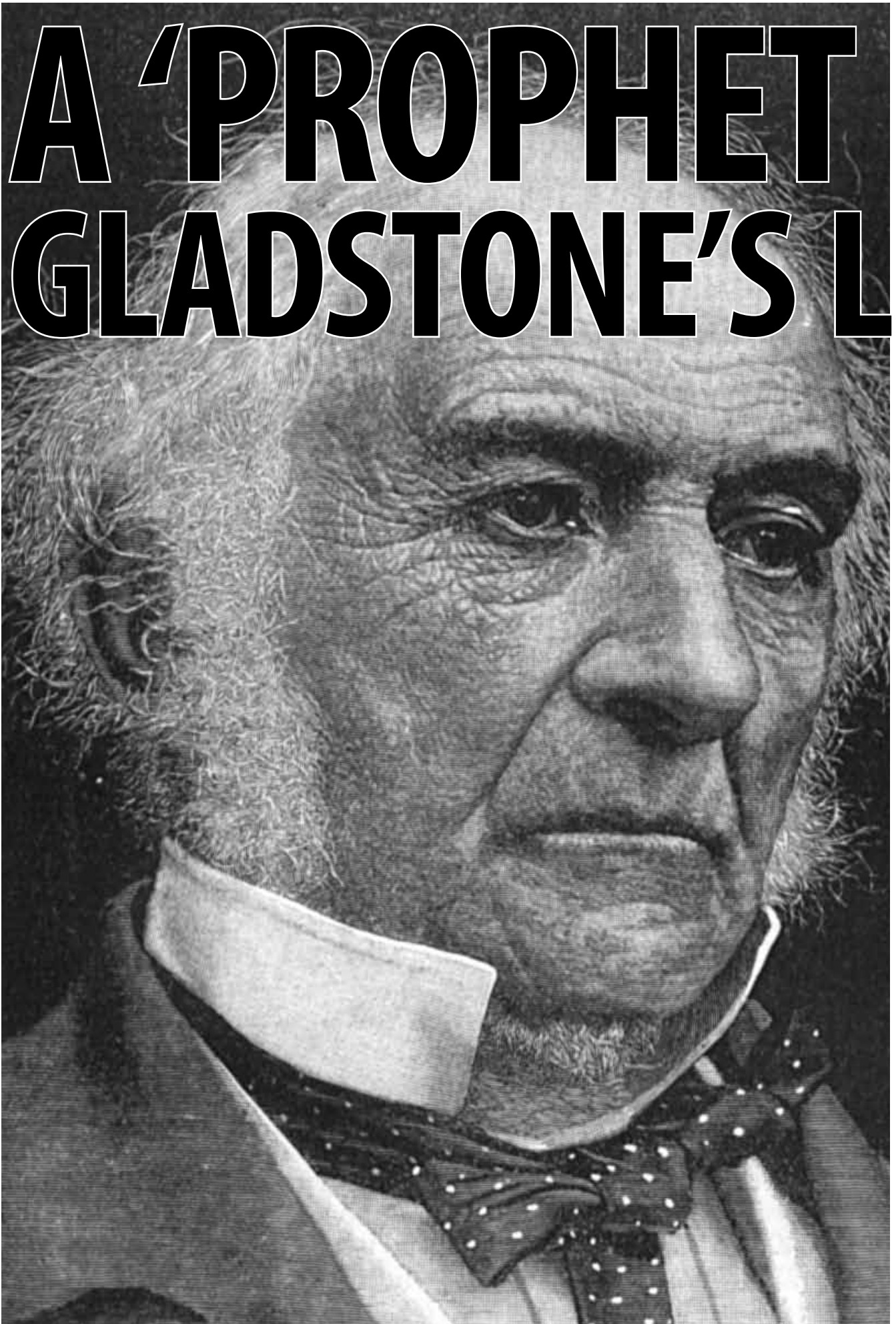


A 'PROPHET FOR GLADSTONE'S LEG



FOR THE LEFT? LEGACY 1809–2009

In the year of the 200th anniversary of his birth, what relevance has Gladstone to today's politics? **Eugenio F. Biagini** examines his legacy.

ON 18 April 1992 *The Economist* devoted its leading article to 'A prophet for the Left': this was neither Marx nor Gandhi, but Gladstone. He dominated the magazine's cover illustration, where he was represented surrounded by the microphones of journalists eager to pick his brain on current political affairs. For the occasion the Grand Old Man (GOM) was made to wear a colourful green coat, embroidered with red, yellow and purple roses. As the roses and their colours suggested, *The Economist* recommended this 'post-modern' rendition of the great Victorian reformer as a model for 'the left'. It was quite a remarkable claim to make after over a decade of Thatcherism, during which 'Victorian values' had become almost a Tory battle cry. However, what was even more interesting is that the leaders of both the Liberal Democrats and the

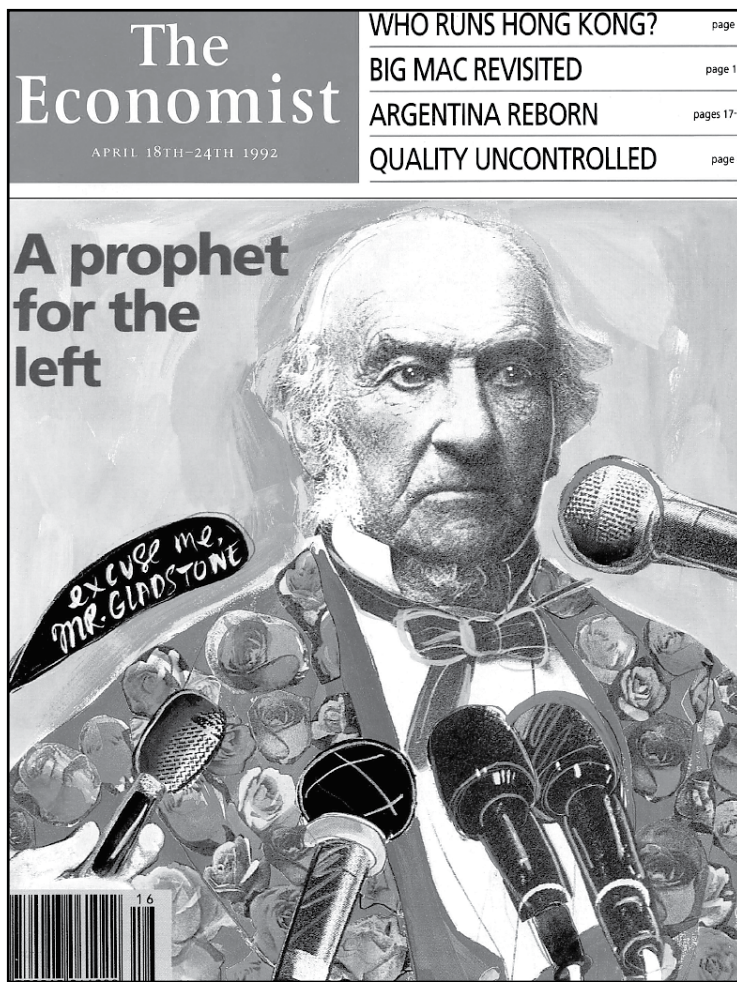
William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98)

Labour Party started soon to behave as if they were actually taking *The Economist's* advice to heart. Certainly at the time they were perceived to be doing so, not only by the press but also by political analysts and historians.

So, what made Gladstone's legacy politically relevant on the eve of the new millennium? And which legacy are we talking about? Gladstone enjoyed an extraordinarily long career, starting out as a Tory idealist in 1832 and ending up as the hero of the Liberal left in 1896 (when he delivered his last, famous public speech on the duty of the international community to stop the Armenian massacres). From 1846 he moved away from the Conservative Party after it rejected Sir Robert Peel – to whom Gladstone was very close – and between 1853 and 1859 he drew closer to the Liberals over the Italian Risorgimento, which polarised both public opinion and the parties in Parliament. As Chancellor of the Exchequer

(1853–55, 1859–65) he established the free trade fiscal system which soon became a new consensus, defining the relationship between citizens and the state for the next seventy years.¹ Later, between 1868 and 1885, Gladstone became the great 'moderniser' of British politics and society, presiding over two of the most significant reform governments in the history of these isles. Separation between church and state in Ireland, a democratically managed system of primary education, the reform of trade union legislation, the first major steps towards 'meritocracy' in the armed forces, reform of university education, and the most radical restructuring of the electoral system hitherto attempted (in 1883–85) – these were some of the historic achievements of the Gladstone governments.

However, the ultimate reason for the GOM's enduring appeal is not his record as a reformer, but his ability to reinvent and redefine liberalism as



Cover of *The Economist*, 18 April 1992

of property rights, Gladstone promptly answered that Price spoke as if the government's task was to legislate 'for the inhabitants of the Moon', rather than for British subjects in flesh and blood. The point he was trying to make was that the needs of real people in their historical context were to be given priority over ideology and economic dogmas. The latter should be modified to suit human needs, not vice versa.

The realpolitik of Christian humanitarianism

If this emphasis on needs creating rights was a new departure, the reasoning behind it had gradually emerged over the years, particularly in the aftermath of the Irish famine of 1845–50. However, for Gladstone himself the real turning point had less to do with either Ireland or political economy than with the 1875–78 Balkan crisis. The Turkish Empire in Europe was crumbling under the combined impact of external pressure and domestic revolts. In trying to crush a rebellion in Eastern Rumelia, Ottoman irregular troops killed thousands of civilians (as many as 15,000, it was claimed at the time), in the course of what came to be remembered as the Bulgarian Atrocities. Similar episodes had taken place in previous decades in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, but this time the massacres received extensive media coverage, with the *Daily News* and other newspapers describing them in chilling detail. British opinion was outraged, with the Nonconformists and other pressure groups demanding government action to stop the atrocities, whether or not this was consistent with British realpolitik. But Disraeli – who was then Prime Minister, his party having defeated the Liberals in the 1874 election – was sceptical about the reports and remained supportive of the Ottomans,

the politics of human rights. Traditional liberalism was a creed of gradual constitutional reform, combined with classical political economy, free trade and self-help as the basic rules defining the relationship between state and society. Having established these principles as government practice, Gladstone himself began tinkering with them from as early as 1870 with his first Irish Land Act, which interfered with property rights in an attempt to improve the lot of the tenants. This was a departure from laissez-faire, although we must bear in mind that Gladstonian liberalism was not really about the 'minimalist state', but about 'dismantling protectionism and chartered state monopolies, creating a sense ... that the state was not favouring a group over another through tax breaks or privileges', and therefore 'about a new form of regulation and anti-monopolism'.²

In fact, in Gladstone's day government intervention became increasingly popular. Although most of it was carried out by local authorities – as exemplified by Joseph Chamberlain's municipalisation of gas and water supplies in Birmingham – Whitehall was prepared to step in whenever necessary: Gladstone nationalised the telegraphs, which became a state monopoly in 1870,³ and in 1881 his second Irish Land Bill established farmers' rights through a system of joint ownership. This measure was an attempt to stabilise social relations in the Emerald Isle by giving tenants a stake both in their country and in the rule of law. But there was a further dimension to Gladstone's argument, which emerged during the parliamentary debate leading to the adoption of this measure. When the free-market MP and economist Bonamy Price criticised the Prime Minister for his cavalier handling

Britain's traditional allies in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Gladstone was at first reluctant to intervene: although he had long been interested in human rights, he was weary of popular imperialism, which had humiliated him more than once, and in any case at the time he was not Liberal Party leader, having stepped down in 1875. But as the Parliamentary Liberal Party failed to challenge the government and the groundswell of protest continued to grow, in September 1876 he finally threw himself into the agitation. He articulated his views in a pamphlet, *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, which became an immediate best-seller, and in public speeches which attracted wide audiences and sparked off a national debate. He criticised both the Tory government and, indirectly, also the leaders of the Liberal Party. They were all 'guilty men' for their complacency about human suffering, to which they turned a blind eye for the sake of misconceived British imperial priorities. The debate went on for years. In 1878 Disraeli (by then Lord Beaconsfield) secured a temporary triumph for his approach to the crisis at the Berlin Congress, but Gladstone struck back in 1879 with his first Midlothian campaign, during which he enunciated the principles of a Liberal foreign and imperial policy based on European cooperation and a Christian understanding of international law. Effectively, he claimed that Tory politics were both immoral and counterproductive, and that humanitarianism was the best form of realpolitik.⁴

The Liberal front bench was not pleased, but in the country activists revelled in the sense that party stood for 'righteousness' and 'truth'. This was particularly important for both the Nonconformists and working-class radicals, for whom humanitarianism had

always been part of politics, as illustrated by the anti-slavery campaigns and other moral and social reform agitations. Not only did humanitarian rhetoric appeal to radicals across the class divide; it also spanned the gap between the genders, evoking a strong response among women, who perceived Gladstone's new liberalism as a natural development of the religious and charitable work which was – according to contemporary expectations – part of their social and civic duty. In the 1876 Bulgarian agitation women had played a large role, and, by encouraging their further involvement in later Liberal crusades, such as those for Irish Home Rule, Gladstone brought about a significant redefinition of civic identity, the Liberal 'self', and the public conscience.⁵ That this happened, despite him and the party being opposed to political rights for women in parliamentary elections, was entirely typical of this age of transition from a system based on a restricted franchise to one of fuller democracy.

Gladstone's legacy in the twentieth century

'Come back, William Gladstone, the saddened left has need of you.' Thus pleaded *The Economist* in 1992, inviting reformers to embrace his legacy, which '[had] gone begging for a proper party champion ever since Labour displaced the Liberals in the 1920s'.⁶ The strategy it endorsed was 'Gladstonian' not only in its disdain of class politics and its reclaiming of individualism as part of the tradition of the 'left', but also in its championing of a revival of the Lib-Lab alliance reminiscent of that over which Gladstone had presided in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

If the GOM was now *The Economist's* 'prophet', this article proved prophetic indeed. On

9 May 1992 Paddy Ashdown delivered what he regards as '[his] most important speech as Lib Dem Leader, and one [he] had been thinking about for almost a year': '[i]t proposed ... a new coming together of the Left to form a progressive alliance dedicated to ending the Tory hegemony and bringing in radical reforms to the British Constitution, beginning with a Scottish Parliament.'⁷ He also championed a more active foreign policy: rejecting the pragmatic empiricism of John Major, he wanted Britain to stand up for human rights. His adoption of such a platform was a direct consequence of his witnessing the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans – in a region not far from the setting of the 1876 'Bulgarian Atrocities'.⁸ He himself became more and more Gladstonian in his commitment to the rights of persecuted minorities in the Balkans and elsewhere.

Almost simultaneously, from as early as 1993–94, his rival Tony Blair was reaching similar conclusions about the new politics of the left. As Denis Kavanagh has observed, there was the sense that Blair was taking an approach to politics which was 'an echo of Gladstone', in that it had 'deep moral and ethical rather than ideological roots'.⁹ Something like a Lib-Lab electoral pact did take shape in the run-up to the general election of 1997, at which each of the two parties secured a historical electoral victory. Was it the beginning of a neo-Gladstonian phase in British politics? Certainly 'New Labour' managed the Treasury along post-Thatcherite lines, Robin Cook proclaimed the government's adoption of an 'ethical' foreign policy, and Blair started to apply what looked like Ashdown's militant humanitarianism to troubled areas of the world. Over the following five years the press had plenty of opportunities to explore the GOM's relevance to twenty-first-century politics – and to

'Come back, William Gladstone, the saddened left has need of you.' Thus pleaded *The Economist* in 1992.

criticise Blair as the new Gladstone.¹⁰ Political analysts and, soon, historians did the same, noting that that there was the sense of Blair trying to deal with Gladstone's 'unfinished business' – in particular with Scottish and Welsh devolution (first debated in the late 1880s), the reform of the House of Lords (which Gladstone had recommended in his last speech in the Commons, in 1894), and the attempt to 'pacify Ireland'.¹¹

It was ironic that, in order to 'modernise' the Labour Party at the beginning of the twenty-first century, its leader felt compelled to hark back to the man who had led the Liberal Party a century before. It was – or ought to have been regarded as – a major admission of failure of the whole Labour project. However, Blair claimed that he was merely returning to the movement's origins. After all, in the 1880s Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden, Arthur Henderson, and George Lansbury had all started from Gladstonianism, which was then the common ground among all the 'currents of radicalism' in Britain.¹²

When did such Lib–Lab fraternity come to an end? It is not easy to say, because within Labour there were always 'liberals' of one type or another. The First World War was not necessarily a turning point: from 1914 to 1917 both Herbert Asquith and Arthur Henderson sang from the same Gladstonian hymn sheet. Henderson in particular was fond of quoting Gladstone about:

public right as the governing idea of European politics ... the definite repudiation of militarism as governing actor in the relations of states. ... the independent existence of smaller nationalities ... And ... [the development] of a real European partnership based on the recognition of equality of rights and established and enforced by a common will.¹³

It was ironic that, in order to 'modernise' the Labour Party at the beginning of the twenty-first century, its leader felt compelled to hark back to the man who had led the Liberal Party a century before.

Similar ideas – that the war was a 'crusade' and that foreign politics was a matter of humanitarian intervention – were at the time canvassed by Liberal intellectuals, such as Gilbert Murray.¹⁴ Even the rise of 'Parliamentary socialism' did not diminish the relevance of Gladstonianism to international relations and matters of civil rights. Thus the Labour manifesto of November 1918 included the idea of Home Rule ('freedom' for Ireland and 'self-determination within the British Commonwealth' for India), the repeal of wartime restrictions on civil and industrial liberty, a commitment to free trade and to 'a Peace of International Co-operation'.¹⁵ Labour's bold reassertion of Gladstonianism, at a stage when the Liberals were both divided and discredited by coalition politics, appealed to radical intellectuals and publicists – such as C. P. Trevelyan, Norman Angell, Arthur Ponsonby, J. A. Hobson, E. D. Morel and H. N. Brailsford – who abandoned the Liberals because they felt that Lloyd George had betrayed the cause of freedom.

Meanwhile, the Liberals, too, continued to use the GOM's language and further develop his legacy, with Francis Hirst defending Gladstone's record as a financier and an economist, J. L. Hammond celebrating his campaigns for democracy and Irish freedom, and many others looking up to his approach to foreign policy as the Liberal blueprint.¹⁶ From 1919, in foreign policy the League of Nations was the Liberal orthodoxy. Although the historical context was different from the one in which Gladstone had operated, Liberal historians such as Hammond and Paul Knaplund 'made it [their] task to address the problem of international security and the League of Nations, as well as the spasmodically emerging concept of the "Commonwealth", through the idiom and the ideals of Gladstonian Liberalism'.¹⁷ As late as

1930, Herbert Samuel – supporting a parliamentary resolution in favour of compulsory arbitration – cited Gladstone's authority and contrasted the Liberal advocacy of the rule of international law with Conservative unilateralism, which, he said, was no better than international anarchy.¹⁸

It seemed as if in 1930 as in 1876, an updated but perfectly recognisable version of 'Gladstonianism' continued to represent one of the main differences between the Liberals and the Tory Party.¹⁹ Yet, after 1918, the circumstances of the times forced even the Conservatives to adopt many of the policies which the GOM had cherished, including self-government for Ireland and the disestablishment of the Church in Wales, free trade (in 1925–29), and a rejection of their traditional approach to the Empire and foreign policy in favour of a conciliatory strategy which owed more to Gladstone than to either Bonar Law or Salisbury. Thus we have a paradox: in 1918–29 Liberal *principles* dominated post-war British politics, although the *party* was unable to win a majority at the elections.

By contrast, during the period from 1931 to 1979 politics was dominated by continuous domestic and international emergencies which seemed to demand the adoption of policies which were the opposite of what Gladstone had advocated. This applied particularly to social reform: what was incompatible with Gladstonian liberalism was not state intervention as such, but corporatism – the brokerage between organised interests outside the legislature, especially in the shape of the involvement of the TUC in policy-making – which became a feature of the British economic 'malady' in the post-war years. The Tory reaction against such practices in the period between 1979 and 1990 is one of the reasons why some scholars have claimed that the Thatcher years represented the

Conservative Party's 'Gladstonian moment'. Although this is controversial,²⁰ as late as 1996, in her Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture, the 'Iron Lady' herself staked her claims to 'the liberalism of Mr Gladstone'.²¹

Could she have made the same claim about her foreign policy? Were her liberal imperialism and rhetoric of human rights abroad in any way 'Gladstonian'? And what about Thatcher's own legacy to Tony Blair in these particular areas? Both Thatcher and Blair were inconsistent champions of human rights, but then Gladstone himself was more ambiguous than his great speeches suggested, as illustrated by his invasion of Egypt in 1882. The latter was a grand example of 'regime change', which Blair and Bush would have been well advised to study before embarking on their own campaign to 'democratise' Iraq.²² However, to be fair to the GOM, we should also remember that liberal imperialism was not something which he had invented, but rather part of an older British tradition which he had inherited from Palmerston and Canning, and which, at the time, was dictated by Britain's role and interests as the nineteenth century's only global superpower.

It is evidence of Gladstone's grip on the radical imagination that his reputation remained almost untarnished despite the glaring inconsistency between his liberal rhetoric and his imperial policies. That he continues to speak to the political imagination of left-wing reformers in the twenty-first century must, however, generate further historical questions. The answer proposed in the present article is that, by injecting a massive dose of politicised humanitarianism into the Liberal creed, Gladstone extended its scope and meaning. The long-term appeal of his vision depends on the fact that many of the issues that Gladstone raised – in particular, the

'atrocities' of ethnic cleansing, the struggle to affirm human rights and the need for public scrutiny of foreign policy – have become even more pressing since he first boarded the campaign train to address his constituents in Midlothian.²³ Sadly, in the twenty-first century we desperately need to go back to Mr Gladstone.

Eugenio Biagini is an alumnus of the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, and has taught at Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Princeton, NJ, before joining the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge, where he teaches British and Irish history.

- 1 M. Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1799–1914* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 63–72.
- 2 M. J. Danton, *State and Market in Victorian Britain* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2008), pp. 4–5.
- 3 I. J. Cohen, 'Toward a theory of state intervention: the nationalization of the British telegraphs', *Social Science History*, vol. 4, Spring 1980, pp. 155–205.
- 4 E. F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007), chapters 1, 2, 6 and 7.
- 5 P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 206 and 210.
- 6 'A prophet of the Left', *The Economist*, 18 April 1992, p. 11.
- 7 P. Ashdown, *A Fortunate Life: The Autobiography of Paddy Ashdown* (London, 2009), p. 268.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- 9 D. Kavanagh, 'New Labour, New Millennium, New Premiership', in A. Seldon (ed.), *The Blair Effect* (London, 2001), p. 7; P. Riddell, 'Blair as Prime Minister', *ibid.*, p. 24.
- 10 See for two examples: 'But is Blair Playing Churchill or Gladstone?', *The Guardian*, G2, 4 October 2001; and 'Blair as Gladstone', *The Times*, 3 October 2004.
- 11 D. Kavanagh, 'New Labour, New Millennium, New Premiership', p. 7; P. Riddell, 'Blair as Prime Minister', p. 24; V. Bogdanor, 'Constitutional Reform', in A. Seldon (ed.), *The Blair Effect* (London, 2001), p. 154.

It is evidence of Gladstone's grip on the radical imagination that his reputation remained almost untarnished despite the glaring inconsistency between his liberal rhetoric and his imperial policies.

- 12 See 'Introduction' to E. F. Biagini and A. J. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism* (Cambridge, 1991).
- 13 A. Henderson, *The Aims of Labour* (London, 1917), p. 36.
- 14 G. Murray, *Faith, War And Policy: Lectures And Essays* (London, 1918); see P. Clarke, *A Question Of Leadership: From Gladstone to Blair* (London, 1999), pp. 87 and 92.
- 15 'Labour Manifesto', *The Times*, 28 November 1918.
- 16 R. S. Grayson, *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement* (London, 2001), p. 3.
- 17 D. M. Schreuder, 'The Making of Mr Gladstone's Posthumous Career: The Role of Morley and Knappund as "Monument Masons"', in B. L. Kinzer (ed.), *The Gladstonian Turn of Mind* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1985), p. 198. The references are to P. Knappund, *Gladstone and Britain's Imperial Policy* (London, 1927) and *Gladstone's Foreign Policy* (London, 1935); and J. L. Hammond, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (London, 1938).
- 18 *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 27 January 1930, Vol. 234, 682.
- 19 Clarke, *A Question of Leadership*, p. 122.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 318; cf. R. Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the 1980s* (London, 2009), pp. 6–7 and 288–89.
- 21 *Cit. in* E. Green, *Thatcher* (London, 2006), p. 31.
- 22 E. F. Biagini, 'Exporting "Western & Beneficent Institutions": Gladstone and Britain's Imperial Role', in D. Bebbington and R. Swift (eds.), *Gladstone's Centenary Essays* (Liverpool, 2000).
- 23 As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, the 'erosion of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants' – which Gladstone had denounced in 1876 and again in 1896 – became a leading feature of post-1914 conflicts, to such an extent that '80 to 90 per cent of those affected by wars today are civilians' (in contrast to 5 per cent during the First World War): E. J. Hobsbawm, *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism* (London, 2008), p. 18.