



Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter Seven

June 1995

A Liberal Democrat History Group
Evening Seminar

The Legacy of Gladstone

Professor Colin Matthew

Joint editor of the Gladstone Diaries; author of the definitive biographies, *Gladstone 1809-1874* and *Gladstone 1875-1898*; Editor, *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Andrew Adonis

Journalist, *Financial Times*; prospective Parliamentary candidate, Westbury; formerly Nuffield College, Oxford.

7.00pm Monday 26 June
Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club
1 Whitehall Place, London SW1.

(The seminar will be preceded (at 6.45pm) by the AGM of the Liberal Democrat History Group; all members and prospective members welcome. Please remember the NLC's dress code!)

Jointly supported by the National Liberal Club and the Gladstone Club.

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP. We aim to fulfil this objective by organising discussion meetings, by spreading knowledge of historical reference sources, by assisting in the publication of studies of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties, and by publishing this Newsletter.

Membership of the History Group costs £5.00 (£3.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

Contributions to the Newsletter - letters, articles, and book reviews - are invited. Please type them and if possible enclose a computer file on 3.5" disc. The deadline for the next issue is 27 July 1995; contributions should be sent to Duncan Brack at the address below.

The Legacy of Gladstone

by H. C. G. Matthew

[Reproduced by kind permission of Oxford University Press from H.C.G. Matthew, Gladstone 1875-1898 (OUP, 1995), © H.C.G. Matthew.]

It is not difficult to see the latter part of Gladstone's public life as a failure, and his sense of imperfectibility encouraged him to do so also: religion on the wane, the free-trade order of the mid-century giving way to militarism and protectionism which the Concert of Europe was powerless to prevent, Britain bloated by imperial expansions, Home Rule unachieved, the Liberal Party divided. And in certain moods Gladstone certainly felt himself to be 'a dead man, one fundamentally a Peel-Cobden man' whose time had passed.

Yet when we place him and his generation in a longer chronological context their record was remarkable. Gladstone was a chief agent in the process by which the Anglican university elite adapted itself and public life to the requirements of an industrial age while substantially maintaining traditional institutions and securing, for the most part, its own dominant political position. In the European

In this edition of the Newsletter:

Colin Matthew: The Legacy of Gladstone

Book Review:
Rosebery

Opinion:
What is Liberal Democracy?
The Importance of History

Research in Progress:
The Liberal Party 1945-1964

Conference fringe meeting report:
Old Heroes for a New Party

context of the time it was uniquely successful in so doing. From the 1840s, Gladstone's view had been that this could only be achieved by sometimes dramatic measures - legislative and administrative proposals usually deeply shocking to conservative opinion. He had rarely been reluctant to propose such initiatives and in most cases was able to carry them through. The notable exception to the latter was Home Rule for Ireland, the greatest and most dramatic of Gladstone's proposals of radical conservatism.

This achievement was based on a coherent methodology of politics which skilfully fused theory and practice. Gladstone did not subscribe to the view that politics is merely a process, its content irrelevant. On the contrary, he held very firmly that the content of policy, the concepts that underpinned it, and the process of achieving it through political action were organically related. To remove any of the elements was to corrupt the whole: concepts - 'abstract resolutions' - were useless without formulation as to content and means of achievement; policies whose contents were unprincipled led to disaster; a process of politics removed from ideas and their related policies meant sterility in the body politic. It was the special function of the executive politician to hold these three elements in balance. Gladstone found the method of the 'big bill' the best way of bringing all three into coherence and by the subsequent controversy it generated linking the activities of Parliament dramatically and rhetorically with the interests of the country, legitimising the former and enlivening the latter.

Gladstone's achievement was based on a coherent methodology of politics which skilfully fused theory and practice.

Politics and ideology, the focus of public discussion, necessarily changed as times changed, for politics was a second-order and largely secular activity whose nature was not, like theological dogma, set in stone. In a long life in politics, Gladstone was not always consistent in his policies, nor did he seek to be. His recognition of this - and the way he explained it - bewildered some of his contemporaries. A degree of inconsistency because of short-term political difficulties is the necessary occasional refuge of any politician. But Gladstone's political philosophy of learning by experience provided for a reasoned change in his political position on a number of major questions: church and state in the 1830s and 1840s, tariffs in the 1840s and 1850s, political reform in the 1860s, Ireland in the 1870s and 1880s. His consistency was, he contended, one of method of change rather than maintenance of content. Indeed the acknowledgement of the need to change, to move on, in the imperfect world of politics was, Gladstone thought, the best preparation for distinguishing between what required changing and what was best kept.

Representative government is founded on the assumption of change: it is a means of arranging and legitimising it. A chief purpose of such a system is to debate such changes, to reach conclusions upon them, and then to state those conclusions in laws and administrative acts validated by the community through its representatives. Such a system, and especially one such as the British where the executive and the legislature was fused, makes very high demands on its practitioners. None

gave more to it than Gladstone in a life-time's work as an 'old Parliamentary hand'.

Three aspects of Gladstone's career have proved of especial significance for posterity.

First, the minimal state in whose construction he played so large a part proved remarkably enduring in practice and even more so in the rhetoric of public life in this country. Here, once he had established it, Gladstone experienced nothing which suggested a need to modify or to amend, only from time to time a need to perfect and to systematise. The powerful, almost schematic model of this state was of striking simplicity considering the complexity of the society to which it was applied. It was based on Treasury control and public accountability, a sharp and fundamental distinction between economic development and the government's duty as raiser and spender of revenue, and free trade in currency and commerce providing a moral as well as a fiscal context for development. Despite his Butlerian emphasis on the role of individual agency in shaping public life, Gladstone had an almost Marxian sense of State-structure, seen at its strongest in this area of the codification of the minimal state. The late-twentieth century Chancellor carrying his budget to the Commons in Gladstone's battered dispatch case - which he used to carry the 1853 budget - is making no mere symbolic reference to the past. Free trade remained intact until the First World War and staged a strong resurgence after it; the budgetary strategy which accompanied it lasted even longer, enduring long after it ceased to be an appropriate mechanism for the economy it claimed not to affect.

The character which Gladstone and those with him gave to the free-trade state was one of un-British rigidity. Free-trade absolutism was in marked contrast to the usual fluidity of British politics, exemplified by their adaptability in constitutional matters. When the Cabinet debated whether the registration of sellers of foreign meat would be a condoning of protectionism, it showed a bizarre fascination with dogmatic purism. The Gladstonian distinction between state and economy proved a heavy and distorting millstone around the nation's neck, and one that proved very hard to remove. When J. M. Keynes wrote that we 'are usually the slaves of some defunct economist' he probably meant Ricardo; but he could have better written 'defunct politician' and meant Gladstone. For it was the institutionalisation and politicisation of free-trade theory which were the vital elements in its remarkable hold on British political culture, and Gladstone had deliberately undertaken and achieved both. Keynes' *The General Theory* with its emphasis on imperfection, the psychological aspects of markets, the need to apply experience and to experiment, was quite consistent with an application to economics of Joseph Butler's theory of probability. It was a supreme irony that Keynes' book was designed, in effect, to undermine the intellectual foundations of the model of minimal state organisation in whose construction Gladstone - that arch-Butlerian - had played so central a role. The *General Theory* (1936) was the response of progressive twentieth-century Liberalism to Gladstonian economics. H. N. Gladstone commissioned F. W. Hirst's *Gladstone as financier and economist* (1931) to counter the influence of the Liberal Summer Schools from which Keynes' book emerged. It was remarkable, but true, that the tradition Hirst described was not merely of

historic interest but still the dominant ethos in the Treasury.

Gladstone and his generation accepted the implication of the concept of the minimal state: welfare-in its broadest sense-must be provided by voluntary agencies. He was an energetic participant in helping this system to function, taking part in a range of trusts, schools, hospitals, and other sorts of voluntary societies and raising money for them from others and from his own funds. The image of the young President of the Board of Trade slipping out to oversee a ragged school in Bedfordbury (off Trafalgar Square) represents the dedication of a generation of public figures to a view of 'active citizenry' which was energetically committed but ultimately inadequate.

Second, and in marked contrast to the inflexibility of the minimal state, Gladstone's evolving view of the constitution - so arrestingly stated in 1886 - posed a question which challenged the next century in almost every decade: how far was the unitary constitution of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland sustainable? Most of Ireland went its way out of the Union, the United Kingdom offering an agreed Home Rule settlement only after the constitutional movement in Ireland had been stranded by British inaction. The length of time Irish Home Rulers had been prepared to wait and their remarkable electoral solidity until 1914 testified to the strength of their commitment. Within Great Britain, no settled formulation for the devolution of power from Westminster was found. There was an unresolved conflict between Home Rule and regional devolution. The former would be an admission of the status of local and historic nationalism and thus would relate to existing local patriotisms; the latter would largely ignore or even cut across nationality, would set aside the discrepancy of size between England and her neighbouring countries, and would be administratively neater. The nationalism that Home Rule sought to accommodate was never as homogeneous as the Home Rulers claimed; the administrative convenience of regional devolution lacked sufficient passion to succeed.

Gladstone's evolving view of the constitution posed a question which challenged the next century in almost every decade: how far was the unitary constitution of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland sustainable?

Gladstone's view that the unitary constitution was not sustainable was confirmed, not by devolution, but by Britain's signing the Treaty of Rome, thus merging its sovereignty with other European states in a dramatic constitutional change accompanied by financial transfer arrangements similar to those negotiated between Gladstone and Parnell in 1886. In recognising that constitutions can represent nationalities and their interests in a variety of ways and at several levels, the European Union was based on just the sort of flexible and evolving constitutional arrangements which the Home Rule bills were intended to introduce. The British within the European Union accepted a status not exactly of Home Rule, but one closer to Home Rule than to independence. But the English remained unwilling to make similar changes within what remained of the United Kingdom. Ironically, Gladstone's 'mighty heave in the body politic' - a major change in the

character of British sovereignty - was achieved upwards from Westminster, by a Unionist cession of power to the European Union, but not downwards within the United Kingdom itself.

Third, the politics of 'The Platform' of which Gladstone was the dominant exponent offered one solution to the question of how a governing elite could legitimise itself in the wider political franchises established by 1832, 1867 and 1884. The enfranchisement of 'capable citizens' (in Gladstone's phrase of 1884), the assumption that a healthy political community depended on their active involvement in politics and the development of the mass meeting rationally addressed and nationally reported was a concept of democracy important for the Western world, and influential in it. Gladstone also had a prescient sense that a political culture of 'capable citizenry' was one whose passing Liberalism would not long survive and that the leaders of the working-class organisations emerging at the end of his life could either develop or frustrate the democracy which it had made possible.

'Working the institutions' of the country - the day-to-day duty of the executive politician - had therefore always to be done in the context of this wider awareness, and those workings should be willingly explained and defended in the wider court of public opinion as well as in the traditional forum of Parliament.

Liberals, of course, saw the Liberal Party as the natural agent of this process. The Liberal Party which Gladstone helped to build was a rare and transitory phenomenon. It was not a 'party' in the twentieth-century sense: it had no formal structure and no membership. It achieved a degree of political integration unparalleled in Europe. It was constituted by a mutual association of class and religion whose delicate balance was the envy of its European equivalents. At its fullest, it comprised the Whigs, the free-trading commercial and industrial middle classes, and the working class's 'labour aristocracy' (a term now out of favour with historians but an accurate description of the working-class people the Liberals set out especially to attract). It contained the whole of the religious spectrum of the day, from Roman Catholics through a ballast of Anglicans to Nonconformists; and to all of these it also attached the secularists and the Jews.

The Liberal Party was thus a double rainbow of class and religion, and, like rainbows, depended on especial conditions of light: in this case upon a political culture which especially represented positive political self-consciousness. Gladstone was the chief facet of the prism through which the light of late-Victorian Liberalism gained coherence and, as we have often seen, he was a successful articulator of that political self-consciousness. Despite his cautions about the future, Gladstone was a powerful optimist. Though often full of alarms, and in the late 1870s almost a Cassandra, he could none the less make a gloomy warning seem a step forward, the proclamation of the warning being in itself a public atonement. And he had in abundance the capacity - required of any public figure of real staying power - to see victory in defeat. His private verdict on the defeat of the first Government of Ireland Bill was that 'Upon the whole we have more ground to be satisfied with the progress made, than to be disappointed at the failure.' One's immediate reaction is that such a remark is pure self-deception. But the historian is

not a Prime Minister. Gladstone had the capacity - useful in any party and vital in the 'party of progress' - to move onwards even when seeming to be thrust back.

Organisation around a dominant charismatic leader is obviously a danger to a political movement. Gladstone sensed this in his constant protestations of the temporary character of his political return, and the point was highlighted by the doldrums of Liberalism after 1894. Yet, operating very much within the Gladstonian tradition of platform rhetoric, the Liberals were able to launch their spectacular if temporary Edwardian resurgence on the very Gladstonian issue of free-trade. Moreover, the issue of constitutional reform provided a significant though limited basis for cooperation with the various elements of what became the Labour Party, just the sort of co-operation which Continental Liberals failed to develop with their socialist equivalents. The twenty years after Gladstone's final retirement saw, with the development and then predominance of a notion of 'positive welfare', as sharp a discontinuity in British public policy as had occurred since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846: Gladstonian issues - free trade, Home Rule, the Lords - gave, however unintended, a continuity to British politics generally and one of especial value to the 'party of progress'. The traditional areas of Gladstonian reforming concern provided the Liberal Party with a coherence in the twentieth century which balanced the ructions which the adoption of 'positive welfare' policies so often caused.

From the longer-term perspective of the late twentieth century - when twenty years at Cabinet level is an exceptional achievement and politicians claim to be little else - it is the range, depth and extent of Gladstone's public life and of the political culture which made it possible which is so striking and so alien. Though it is the combination of Gladstonian attributes which now seems so remarkable - executive politician, orator, scholar, author and, as Lord Salisbury called him, 'great Christian statesman' - its bedrock was a hard political professionalism.

The traditional areas of Gladstonian reforming concern provided the Liberal Party with a coherence in the twentieth century which balanced the ructions which the adoption of 'positive welfare' policies so often caused.

Gladstone was an exceptionally determined, resilient, and resourceful politician who was hardly ever caught out and, when he was caught, was at his most formidable. He used this professionalism to engage public life over the full range of his interests. Rarely in a representative political system can one person have had such a capacity to dominate the agenda of politics over so extended a period. Gladstone was able to do so because on the whole he moved with the mind of his age and indeed represented some of its chief characteristics. He was not like Churchill, in a restless battle against the tendencies of his century, but represented Victorianism more completely than any other person in public life, and certainly much more than the Queen. Even in his hostility to further acquisition of imperial responsibilities in areas of non-British settlement - which Gladstone saw as encumbering, corrupting, diverting the proper focus of British

attention which was the domestic economy - he represented a strong if ineffective tradition and his oratory, more than his actions, was a potent link between the British Liberal tradition and its fast-developing colonial and Indian equivalents. Since the empire was, even by the 1890s, a community of sentiment, that was a far more significant force for practical co-operation than the various schemes of economic and federal union which became fashionable among some of the supposed friends of empire in that decade.

To a curious extent, therefore, an assessment of Gladstone is a personification of an assessment of Britain's moment in world history. In offering freedom, representative government, free-trade economic progress, international co-operation through discussion and arbitration, probity in government and in society generally, as the chief objectives of public life, and in an ideology which combined and harmonised them, Gladstone offered much to the concept of a civilised society of nations. As the twenty-first century approaches, the Victorian world order, complex though aspects of it were, has a hard simplicity which starkly contrasts with the ambiguities of our own times. The Gladstonian moment showed much of what was best about public life at the start of the modern age. But it was a moment only. With the self-confidence and the articulation went a curious absence of self-awareness, an inability to sense that what seemed to be the establishment of 'normal' standards was in the world's context a very abnormal undertaking, hard to sustain and likely to be brief.

Colin Matthew's book, Gladstone 1809-1874, was reviewed by Tony Little in the second History Group Newsletter (February 1994).

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis - or if you know anyone who can - please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information.

The Young Liberals 1970-79: their philosophy and political strategy. MA thesis. Ruth Fox, 9 Chapel Terrace, Headingley, Leeds LS6 3JA.

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945-64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Ph.D thesis. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH. (See full article in this Newsletter.)

The Liberal Party in Southampton 1890-1945 (particularly 1890-1918). Sources needed for Ph.D thesis on the development of labour politics in Southampton. Graham Heaney, 132 Hayling Avenue, Copnor, Portsmouth, PO3 6ED.

If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the front page.