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LETTERS

Party Agents

It is always a pity to spoil a good anecdote, but I am impelled to do so in deference to this *Journal's* reputation as a source of accurate history. The correspondence on this subject was stimulated by David Steel's story about Jo Grimond being asked about his politics by a Lerwick solicitor, Mr Goodlad, after, not before, that solicitor had agreed to be his election agent (*Journal of Liberal History* 80, autumn 2013).

I have now come across an earlier reference to Peter Goodlad; he was the Liberal agent in the Shetlands in 1938, not at an election, but as organising a summer vacation campaign tour by the President of the Glasgow University Liberal Club, in support of Lady Glen-Coats, then the constituency's newly-selected prospective Liberal candidate.

The Liberal student concerned did later twice come close to becoming a Liberal MP himself, in West Aberdeenshire in 1945 and Dundee West in 1951; much later he became

better known as a right-wing journalist. John Junor tells the full story of his youthful campaigning in the Northern Isles and with Lady Glen-Coats on pages 7–11 of his *Memoirs* (1990).

Incidentally, Orkney & Shetland was only twice won by a Conservative, in 1935 and 1945; apart from being local Liberal organiser, Peter Goodlad would have been well aware that Jo was the sitting Tory MP's challenger.

Michael Steed

John Buchan and the Liberal Party

Two memories came flooding back when reading of Liberalism in John Buchan's life ('Liberalism and Liberals in John Buchan's life and fiction', by Malcolm Baines, *Journal of Liberal History* 82, spring 2014). I regret I cannot recall the exact quote nor its location, but I remember coming across the statement attributed to Buchan when he resigned as prospective Tory candidate for his native

Peebles and Selkirk (later part of my own constituency). He declared that the Borders was a real hotbed of Liberalism and went off instead to become MP for the universities seat.

My second recall was triggered by your report that the Buchan family became Tories because of Gladstone's 'weakness in leaving General Gordon to be killed in Khartoum'. In the 1966 general election when I was fighting to retain the seat I had won in the by-election the previous year, my wife was told on the doorstep by one woman: 'I quite like your husband as our MP, but I could never vote Liberal'. 'Why not?' Judy enquired. 'Because they did not send help for General Gordon! Years later when I saw the plaque in Khartoum on the murder spot I reflected 'that cost me a vote'.

David Steel

Queries

Two queries following the excellent spring edition of the *Journal* –

First, how was it that the individual votes in the different boroughs were apparently officially known? ('Lloyd George and the Carnarvon Boroughs', by Dr J. Graham Jones). My understanding was that, following the Ballot Act 1872, in order to guarantee the secrecy of the ballot, given that the ballot paper number was recorded on the counterfoil, once the number of ballot papers in the ballot box had been verified, all the papers from all the boxes were mixed so that there were so many consecutive series of the same numbers that it would be impossible to identify a particular voter's ballot paper. Was there a different rule in Wales, or was it not introduced until after the period dealt with?

Second, there is a review of J. B. Williams' biography of Dr Charles Leach MP, on the cover of which it is stated that he was 'The only MP to lose his seat for being of unsound mind.' However, the inquest on

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moved forward and to praise the eccentric French intellectual Auguste Comte as the only person to have previously attempted such a task. He described Comte as 'one of the great intellects of our time, whom I regard with the most esteem and admiration' (p. 100). Comte had argued that societies moved forward through theological and metaphysical stages before reaching the ultimate positivist one. He believed in phrenology, a once popular pseudo-science that now seems risible, and also practised what he called 'cerebral hygiene', that is not reading anyone else's writings so as to keep his own mind clear. Ultimately Mill came to reject Comte's vision of a society where the rulers declare they know best and so can do the thinking for everyone else, whilst Comte's assumption of female inferiority ran directly counter to Mill's ethology. Rosen reminds us that Mill's falling out with Comte has left a much stronger impression than his earlier significant deference.

In the concluding section Rosen outlines the thinkers who, in his opinion, provided Mill's intellectual roots. They are overwhelmingly Greek and British. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, James Mill, Bentham and

Adam Smith are among those mentioned. This categorisation is unusual in downplaying the French thinkers Mill admired. He once wrote that in 'political philosophy the initiative belongs to France at this moment' because of 'the far more elevated terrain on which the discussion is engaged'.² Rosen's elevation of Comte is accompanied by the implicit downgrading of other Frenchmen whose writings were also significantly influential: in Henri de Saint-Simon, Mill found the division of history into critical and organic periods; in François Guizot, a sense of the development of civilisation and its causes; and in Alexis de Tocqueville, an account of how modern democracy gives rise to a dangerous mass society.

One of the pleasures of the political economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is that it covered much broader ground than much of the academic economics that succeeded it. So Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* is economics within a general social science context. Rosen makes the case that the foundations of *On Liberty* are here clearly apparent, most significantly in the belief that a majority could be despotic. Where, then, does this leave *On Liberty*? It seems

to be undermined on all sides: its arguments were elaborated earlier and its principles are best understood by their later application in Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, 1869. As for its contents, Rosen rejects the interpretation of Mill as someone who believed that 'freedom of expression alone would lead to truth' (p. 9) and also repudiates the notion that the designation of a category of self-regarding actions can serve to defend individual liberty. This book, then, stands out among recent scholarship for its downgrading of the work that others have seen as Mill's most durable contribution.

Rosen wants Mill regarded 'more as a profound "contemporary" thinker than as an obscure Victorian moralist' (p. 259) and is bold enough to suggest where he can be placed in terms of today's political issues. We are told that Mill would have rejected the idea that regime change in Iraq could lead to democracy and would also have denied the view that greater economic growth would increase happiness. What about multiculturalism? Rosen thinks that Mill would have been against it in that multiculturalists are illiberal in accepting despotism within the family. We here touch upon one

of the most difficult and fascinating issues in liberal theory, still not sufficiently addressed in recent writings – that of the extent to which liberals should tolerate other's illiberal practices.

Rosen does not claim originality but makes it clear that he picks up on the long-neglected judgments of Alexander Bain, Mill's close friend and first biographer. Following Bain, Rosen thinks Mill's *Logic* was his 'greatest work' (p. 101) yet ends on rather a downbeat assessment of its value: 'Even where he is open to criticism, Mill provides an excellent guide to logic and methodology, though his conclusions or their applications to numerous topics seem in retrospect to be mistaken' (p. 259). This book is significantly different from recent commentaries on Mill and as such is likely to be the focus of much attention.

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- 1 Quoted in P. Rose, *Parallel Lives* (London, 1994), p. 139.
- 2 *John Stuart Mill Collected Works*, vol. xxxiii (Toronto, 1986), p. 446.

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Ben Spoor MP (*The Times*, 27 December 1928), whose chronic alcoholism had led to heart and liver problems and to his being found dead in his hotel room, quotes the Coroner as saying that he 'had actually been certified insane ... and confined in homes.' How is it that this had not led to the forfeiture of his seat? Spoor was the Labour Government's Chief Whip during its first government in 1924 and his state of health was disastrous for the day-to-day organisation of the difficult parliamentary arithmetic needed to maintain the government.

Michael Meadowcroft

Elections of the 1920s

The report by Graham Lippitt (*Journal of Liberal History* 82, spring 2014) on the meeting on 10 February 2014 on the general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924 prompts me to have a closer look at the Liberal and Labour statistics for 1923.

Taking account of the Liberal and Labour MPs elected unopposed and assuming that the votes for such candidates would otherwise have been at least as much as for such candidates in other constituencies, I would reconstruct the 'crude' statistics as follows:

1923 General Election –

Labour 4,439,780 + 41,414
(adjustment for unopposed returns) = 4,481,194
Liberal 4,301,481 + 106,090
(adjustment for unopposed returns) = 4,407,571
Accordingly, the gap between Labour and Liberal was, in reality, much less than the 'crude' 138,299, although allowance would have to be made for some other facts.

Labour did not contest 176 constituencies and Liberals did not contest 146 constituencies in Great Britain. G.M.L. Davies (Christian Party, University of Wales) and O.E. Mosley (Independent, Harrow) took

the Labour Whip and Rhys Hopkin Morris (Independent Liberal, Cardiganshire) took the Liberal Whip in the new Parliament.

I take the view that Asquith might have, at least, addressed the possibility of forming a minority Liberal administration in early 1924.

Dr Sandy S. Waugh