

Reviews

Keeping the faith

Duncan Brack and Tony Little (eds): *Great Liberal Speeches* (Politico's Publishing, 2001; pp492)

Reviewed by **Conrad Russell**

This is a book to be proud of. This is not just praise of the editorial team, who wear their scholarship with the deceptive lightness of a Grimond speech. It is a tribute to a party which, from century to century, through good times and bad, has kept a faith worth keeping.

In the first section of the book, the editors have had the good fortune which favours not only the brave, but those who understand the issues with which they deal. This book was complete in proof before September 11th. When it was written, the Anti-Terrorism Bill was not yet even a bristle in David Blunkett's beard. Yet the whole of the first section, dealing with the reaction against civil liberties provoked by the French Revolution, takes us straight into the territory we have been debating since September 11th.

Charles James Fox on the suspension of *habeas corpus*, George Tierney on the Six Acts, down to Macaulay on the Great Reform Bill, state the traditions Liberal belief that we do not deal with the threat of terror by random repression, which maximises the number of our enemies, but by more legal, and more selective, methods which separate our natural enemies from our potential allies. To those of us who have been through recent debates, we might be inside Charles James Fox's mind: we know where he will go next. Yet, contrary to the belief fostered by our opponents that we are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, Charles Kennedy, Shirley Williams and their Home Affairs team have done it better than Fox, who was no minnow in the Liberal aquarium.

Among the inspired selections is the speech by Earl Grey in 1814 against the blockade of Norway. This provides the answer to the question Nancy Seear once shot into my ear in the middle of a boring committee meeting: 'Why were we so much in favour of the nation state in the nineteenth century, and so much against it now?' It is the simple application of the Lockean doctrine of government by consent. In terms of persuasive skills, rather than sheer rhetorical brilliance, this is one of the best speeches in the collection. For the twentieth century realisation that government by consent is more complex than just a matter of nationalism, one may look at Sir Archibald Sinclair's speech in the Munich debate of 1938. That speech is conspicuous for its combination of personal courtesy and devastating evidence. If I had been at the government dispatch box, I would rather have faced twenty of Lloyd George than one of Sinclair: it was so impossible to ascribe anything he said to malice.

The collection is particularly valuable for its refutation of the mythical Friedmanite interpretation our Labour and Conservative opponents agree in trying to fix on us. Macaulay, in one of many expressions of belief in state support for education, warns against 'a disposition to apply to political questions and moral questions principles which are sound only when applied to commercial questions'. Opponents of state education have applied the principle of free competition to a case to which the principle is not applicable.

Any critic of Liberalism should read and re-read the speech by Richard



Cobden, for it is so utterly different from the image Friedmanites have fastened on him. For Cobden, free competition was an assault on monopoly, and therefore an assault on privilege. He casually dismissed his opponents as 'the Dukes and Earls'. It is hard to believe that this man, alive today, would be champion of the Enrons and Monsantos of this world. He would surely regard them as the enemies, not the allies, of the free market. For him, and for his allies, free competition was equal competition within the law. Buying Senators, for example, was not free competition. If the WTO is to continue its resistance to protection, we must aim at getting it to do so in a more Cobdenite spirit. The task is difficult, but surely not impossible.

Pride of place, hardly surprisingly, goes to Gladstone, for three speeches so different in style that it is hard to realise they were delivered by the same man. His speech on Irish Home Rule, in content one which makes a modern Liberal feel inside his mind, is a style which could have been delivered by Robin Cook at his most pugnacious. It puts the reader in stitches, yet the treatment of Chamberlain, in particular, confirms all Roy Jenkins' doubts of his political judgement.

Among the surprises, Palmerston's 'Don Pacifico' speech, which I had always thought of at second hand as rather illiberal, now makes me hope that a copy is on its way to Harare at this moment. For criticism of Labour,

Churchill and Asquith has pride of place, and Asquith's exposition of how to run a Liberal Party in a three-party system is impeccable.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most challenging speech is by Keynes to the Liberal Summer School in 1925. His forecast of the key questions is one we are only just catching up with seventy-seven years later. His prediction that questions of contraception, marriage law and the relations of the sexes will become politically central is only just beginning to come true, as is his similar warning about drugs. His question about

the growing bulk of business Parliament cannot handle is one we are not yet on top of. His most serious warning is that the economy is becoming so complicated that the laws of supply and demand no longer work effectively. When we have come to terms with these fundamental insights, casually tossed off, we may be ready to get started.

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which became the key to Gladstonian decision making: 'first ... to amass information, then to weigh the probabilities, and finally, once a decision was taken, to pursue the policy with undeviating commitment'.³

Gladstone prided himself in his ability to spot that the time was ripe to tackle an issue but did not always prepare his colleagues for the conclusions at which he had arrived or the forceful purpose with which he then pursued them. Although this laid Gladstone open to charges of Jesuitical casuistry and to inconsistency, it was the foundation of his moral strength of character which in turn was the basis of his popularity with the working and non-conformist classes, a popularity reinforced by his politicisation of the Exchequer in the 1860s, particularly when he accomplished the abolition of the paper tax – a 'tax on knowledge' – despite the opposition of his prime minister and the House of Lords.

Gladstone's tax policy eased the creation of a mass media of popular newspapers.

Gladstone quickly demonstrated ministerial competence under Peel but his rise to pre-eminence in parliament was more a tribute to his eloquence than to his man-management skills. Biagini argues that this same oratorical skill saw him supremely well placed to take advantage of and to channel the enthusiasm of the enlarged electorate which emerged from the 1867 and 1884 reform acts and which formed

Restorative Conservatism

Eugenio Biagini: *Gladstone* (Macmillan Press, 2000)
Reviewed by Tony Little

With a political career that spanned more than sixty years, William Ewart Gladstone is the dominant figure in Victorian politics, initially taking office even before Victoria came to the throne and only leaving the premiership in 1894. In many ways, he defined the nature of Victorian Liberalism, based on free trade, fiscal rectitude and the incorporation into active political life of ever-wider groups of the population, in a career which, despite all his intentions, became progressively more radical as it unfolded.

It is no surprise that he has been the subject of a multitude of biographies. But following Colin Matthew, Richard Shannon and Roy Jenkins, who have all produced different modern biographies, is there room for more? Biagini's volume looks very much as if it is aimed at the undergraduate market. The great advantage it has over its competitors is its length, 138 pages including the index, but this is a succinct rather than a skimpy tome. The other difference is Biagini's adoption of a thematic rather than purely chronological approach, which engages with Gladstone on an intellectual level, sparing only the minimum

necessary space for the incidental and personal. This is not the book in which to explore the complexity of his dealings with Peel or Palmerston or in which all the Home Rule intrigues of 1886 are disentangled.

The limitations of space also force Biagini to focus closely on the forces which unified Gladstone's approach and on his major achievements, whose scale few politicians can hope to approach – reform of taxation, tariffs, army, church, education and the electoral system. One cannot hope to understand this statesman without recognising the lifelong influence exercised over him by Burke and Butler. From Burke he gained a 'method of historic assessment and his sensitivity for tradition and the possibility of change through organic growth' – which reinforced Gladstone's Platonic notions of the perfectibility of society, producing a form of 'utopian conservatism'¹ which the Tories of the time were unwilling to acknowledge. It was to Edmund Burke that he turned for the intellectual and historic backing for his ideas for Home Rule. From Bishop Butler² he drew the means to reconcile uncertainty with moral obligation

