

## Policy overview

Jonathan Parry analyses Gladstone's government's record of achievements

# Gladstone's First Government



“Self and Partner.” Mr Gladstone: “My dear First Lord, I have the utmost confidence in you.” Mr. Gladstone: “And I in you, my dear Chancellor of the Exchequer, and if our colleagues were only like us, we should all be as one man!” Gladstone appointed himself his own Chancellor of the Exchequer in August 1873 (*Punch*, 20 September 1873)

# ment: a Policy Overview

**T**HE GOVERNMENT THAT William Gladstone formed in December 1868 has often been seen as the first real Liberal government in Britain, following the formation of a 'Liberal party' in parliament in 1859 and in the constituencies in the 1860s.<sup>1</sup> The passage of the 1867 Reform Act is still generally viewed as a major dividing line in British political history, on account of the extension of the franchise to urban working-class male householders, and the consequential development of mass political organisation.<sup>2</sup> These changes certainly had a profound impact on political culture – but they took at least ten years, and in most respects twenty, to work through to parliamentary politics. If we focus on political behaviour at Westminster, a lot of historical work since the 1980s has made it clearer that the Liberal Party that Gladstone inherited in 1868 was shaped by the perspectives of the previous thirty or forty years. There was no major discontinuity in 1867. Throughout the nineteenth century there had been a strong Whig tradition and a strong Radical one in parliament, but these groups were used to cooperating, and already in the 1830s and 1840s, the term 'Liberal' was frequently used to describe the non-Conservative parliamentary party.<sup>3</sup>

The historical writing on the policy initiatives of the Whig–Liberal governments of 1830–66 allows us a better perspective on the opportunities and difficulties faced by Gladstone as prime minister between 1868 and 1874.<sup>4</sup> He was a new leader of an old parliamentary grouping, albeit operating in a changed post-Reform Act setting. He wanted to do bold things as party leader; indeed he saw this as the politician's social and moral obligation. But his supporters were a coalition of independent-minded gentlemen of different traditions and approaches, unused either to discipline or to tight policy agendas. In 1868 Gladstone had a majority of 110, but this emphatically did not make his party easy to manage. This essay tries to explain why government policy took the form that it did, and why the ministry started so well and ended so badly. It suggests that the crucial explanatory factor is the context in which it

operated – both its inheritance, and contemporary international events.

There had been three stages to Whig–Liberal government between 1830 and 1866. The first was a broad coalition of various parliamentary groups formed under Earl Grey in 1830 in a climate of severe national crisis to pursue parliamentary reform and cuts to government spending, both of which seemed essential for political and social stability. These reforms established the basic principle of Victorian Liberalism, of pragmatic adjustment of parliamentary representation so as to allow matured public opinion to have an effective voice, especially in protesting against excessive taxation and other forms of 'oppressive' government. This government also responded to a massive middle-class petitioning campaign for the abolition of slavery and for Poor Law reform, but in the process used official investigations to reshape social policy on poor relief and criminal punishment in line with prevailing elitist enlightenment assumptions about how to 'improve' and moralise the lower classes. The second stage, between 1835 and 1841 and again from 1846 to 1852, was a more party- and creed-based government dominated by Lord John Russell (though with Viscount Melbourne as prime minister during the first period). Though Russell had been one of the main authors of the 1832 Reform Act, and was to take up the cause of Reform again in the 1850s, during this period he tried instead to organise Liberal MPs around a pluralistic religious, Irish and educational strategy designed to conciliate the Irish (especially the Catholics) to accept the Union with Britain, to reconcile Protestant Nonconformists to the Anglican Church Establishment in England, and to integrate Anglican and Nonconformist elementary schools in something approaching a state-assisted system. These policies conciliated Daniel O'Connell and his Irish followers but alienated many former Reformers, of whom some, led by Lord Stanley (the future 14<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby), defected to the Conservatives. From 1841 the leading Liberals also moved towards the free trade policy adopted by Richard Cobden, the Anti-Corn Law League,

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and many urban MPs, initially slowly, but much more decisively once they inherited government in 1846 from Robert Peel after he had split the Conservative Party on the issue. And in the late 1840s Russell and like-minded ministers also extended state regulation of public health and reduced hours of factory labour.

The third stage was a reaction against activist Russellism – a reaction against the idea that Liberalism required a vigorous policy of concession to Nonconformists and Irish Catholics, a contentious extension of state power in social and educational matters, or – above all – the return to parliamentary reform that Russell floated in response to the European revolutions of 1848. This stage saw the dominance of Viscount Palmerston, who used his populist liberal foreign policy to wrest control over the Liberal side of the House of Commons from Russell in the early 1850s, and to see off the threat from the leading Peelites, and who was prime minister for most of the time from 1855 until he died in 1865. Palmerston relied for success on an assertive foreign policy, free trade and the complacency arising from national prosperity. He was also less of a party man than Russell, determined to project a national appeal and willing to draw support not only from the Peelites (formally integrated from 1859) but occasionally from the Conservative opposition (led by Derby and Disraeli) when it helped him to avoid uncongenial demands from radical Liberal MPs. Thus Palmerston managed to define himself against Russell and against the opposition while using both for his purposes. His most consistent opponent, arguably, was Cobden, leader of the Manchester school radicals who advocated peace and a low-spending foreign policy and sought to expose Palmerston's bombast. Even so, these radicals stayed within the capacious Liberal tent. Within months of Palmerston's death, his sprawling coalition lost office in 1866 when Russell, his obvious successor, was defeated in an attempt to bring in a Reform bill, a telling example of how Palmerston had purchased stability for so long by avoiding contentious policy. In 1867 a new minority Conservative government drove through a Reform Act of its own, outmanoeuvring and splitting the Liberal Party and leaving it in uncharacteristic turmoil. It was obvious to everyone, except perhaps Russell himself, that the 75-year-old needed to be replaced by a new party leader, and equally obvious that this would be Gladstone, the former Peelite and chancellor of the exchequer. In March 1868 Gladstone took the initiative by using the issue of Ireland to reunite the Liberals and to undermine the Conservative government; an autumn election on the new franchise confirmed and indeed increased their majority. The result was no surprise, but over two million people voted (more than twice the number in 1865), giving his new government an extra legitimacy.

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Gladstone's parliamentary Liberal Party essentially comprised the same groups of MPs as had Palmerston's large coalition. However Gladstone, like Russell, believed that the party could best be kept together by pursuing an active policy agenda – though for Gladstone, as for Russell, this activist preference was driven by personal temperament at least as much as by calculation. It would be wrong to think that the election campaign had provided him with that unifying, policy-based agenda. The idea that elections should be fought in order to bind a party around an extended policy programme was not to be accepted for decades – it was controversial even when the Liberals tried it with the Newcastle Programme in 1891–2. Local candidates fought on a great array of issues, mostly related to the various policy traditions sketched above, resulting in many different expectations for the new ministry. However Gladstone's speeches in his South-West Lancashire constituency were extensively reported in the press and set the main terms of debate. He concentrated almost exclusively on two subjects which he claimed marked the difference between Liberals and Conservatives: the Irish Church, and economy in public spending.

Gladstone argued that Ireland required the urgent attention of British politicians, because of the recent re-emergence of a constitutional reform movement there, and Fenian outrages in Manchester and London. He asserted that it was a moral imperative to remove a Tory government which could never solve the Irish problem because of its institutional religious biases and general shortsightedness. (His passion in making this argument was surely swayed by his dislike of Disraeli, who had recently succeeded Derby as prime minister.) The British state needed to win Catholic respect by pursuing a policy of disinterestedness as between the religious sects in Ireland, removing the Protestant Establishment and abolishing state funding for religious institutions at university level. Tories, however, were trying to buy Catholic support for the Anglican Church Establishment by subsidising Catholic college education. Gladstone's emphasis on disestablishment and the removal of funding for university religious teaching was a good strategy for unifying the Liberal Party because it was a reworking of the assault on the Irish Church Establishment which had bound the Whigs and Irish Catholics together to form the government of 1835, with the addition of an explicit commitment to disestablishment which excited Protestant Nonconformists as a general principle, plus a rejection of the policy of state funding of Catholicism, which had been a running sore in British politics since the grant to the priestly seminary at Maynooth was increased in 1845. At the election Gladstone claimed that the difference between the parties was that the Liberals wanted no Church Establishment in Ireland and the Conservatives 'three or four'.<sup>3</sup> Gladstone thus asserted that his Irish policy

would deal a blow to Roman Catholic political pretensions in Ireland. Indeed many Liberals drew parallels between their Irish policy and their recent support for the unification of Italy as a secular liberal state, which had diminished the temporal power of the Pope on that peninsula.

This disinterestedness as between sects, together with a nod towards upholding the different historic traditions of land tenure in Ireland, was what Gladstone meant by 'justice to Ireland'. (His lack of any commitment to Irish reforms beyond the religious sphere is striking.) The principle of state disinterestedness could equally be applied to public spending, the other great theme of Gladstone's election speeches. He warned repeatedly that there were vested interests – 'knots and groups, and I may say classes' – who were constantly trying to take public money for themselves, and that the Tories' bargain with these groups explained the increase of £3 million in public expenditure during their short government. This was un-English and unsafe – a 'Continental system of feeding the desires of classes and portions of the community at the expense of the whole' – and was directly related to their absence of a popular mandate.<sup>6</sup> Only Liberals could manage the public finances fairly as between the classes and interests of the country. The purpose of economical government was to leave the nation's financial resources free to grow and be productive, but there was a more fundamental political objective, which was to demonstrate to the working classes, to Radicals and to any other potential critics that the state was in good hands and no longer a tool of elite oppression and 'Old Corruption'. This was a way of bringing the Cobdenites in from their Palmerstonian exile – most symbolically with the admission of John Bright to the 1868 cabinet – but also of shooting the radicals' fox and indeed of exterminating the whole vulpine species which radicals had summoned to threaten the political elite for the last century. Just as the Peelites had done with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, this was a strategy of removing contentious financial impositions that generated dangerous complaints at the class bias and general corruption of the state. The absorption of so many workingmen in the constitution made it viable to claim that the state was now finally in popular ownership. Bright announced in 1868 that by the Reform Act 'power ... has been given henceforth and for ever to the people ... we have no longer charges to bring against a selfish oligarchy; ... we no longer feel ourselves domineered over by a class ... the responsibility of the future must rest with the great majority of the people'.<sup>7</sup>

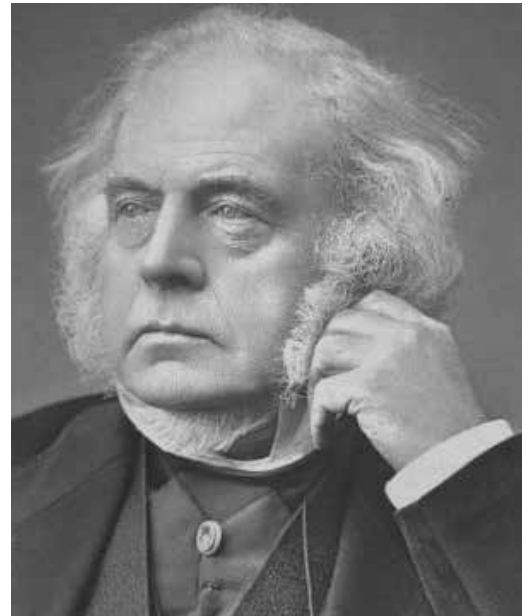
As prime minister Gladstone delivered on these promises by disestablishing the Irish Church in 1869 and passing the Irish Land Act in 1870, and by reducing defence expenditure by 15%. Moreover in 1870 his government made two administrative changes which were designed to show that vested interest politics had ended. The

Liberal cabinet ministers:

Spencer Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington (1833–1908): Postmaster-General 1868–71, Chief Secretary for Ireland 1871–74

John Bright (1811–89): President of Board of Trade 1868–71

Robert Lowe (1811–92): Chancellor of the Exchequer 1868–73, Home Secretary 1873–74



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introduction of competitive examinations across almost the whole civil service put the last nail in the coffin of 'Old Corruption' by removing the Treasury's remaining patronage powers, addressing the radicals' long-standing charges about political jobbing. In 1871 Gladstone claimed to his constituents at Blackheath that, with regard to clerkships in his Treasury, 'every one of you has just as much power over their disposal as I have'.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the civil government definitively and boldly asserted its control over the military administration. The Horse Guards, the seat of the power of the Duke of Cambridge, the royal commander-in-chief, were moved to Pall Mall and placed within the War Office bureaucracy, which was restructured into three large divisions.

Had Gladstone been so minded, he could have claimed that his task was done within two years of becoming prime minister. However his executive temperament drove him to organise an ambitious roster of further legislation. Keeping busy was partly a personal need, but it was also his strategy for keeping Liberal MPs disciplined and orderly; he was to write in 1877 that 'the vital principle of the Liberal party, like that of Greek art, is action, [which alone makes] it worthy of the name of a party'.<sup>9</sup> Much of the legislation of these years was born from official reports and debates instigated under previous governments but not brought to fruition: thus middle-class schools were reformed in 1869, religious tests in universities were abolished in 1871, and trade unions were legalised in the same year. These reforms were important, and contentious in some respects, but they did not undermine party unity or the government's parliamentary position.

Party unity and the government's position were both undermined, however, for other reasons. Between 1870 and the government's electoral defeat in 1874 it suffered many backbench rebellions, it lost over twenty by-elections, and eventually its authority ran into the sand. Fundamentally this was because of a clash within the party between two policy traditions from the Liberal past, embodying different attitudes towards the role of the state. They would have been at odds in any case, but the tensions between them were made worse by a dramatic deterioration of the global situation as a result of the Franco-Prussian war and other international developments.

On the one hand, the far-reaching extension of the franchise in 1867 emboldened those interventionists who, as in the 1830s, wanted to accompany parliamentary reform with a series of measures which aimed to discipline and improve the character of workingmen and thus underpin social stability. This was an approach shared by many Russellite Whigs, Benthamite intellectuals and Christian socialist moralist gentlemen, as well as public-spirited representatives from several large towns. Their flagship policy was the 1870 Education Act, but there were other examples of a similar tendency. In 1869 the government

tightened the workhouse test in order to reduce the poor-rate burden, and passed a Habitual Criminals Act to strengthen its power to arrest frequently offending criminals. The 1870 Married Women's Property Act was a response to anxieties that drink was preventing working-class husbands from protecting the living standards and respectability of their families; it sought to give the wife limited control over her own property, as a check on indebtedness. Public health legislation of 1871 and 1872 created a comprehensive network of local sanitary authorities, each with specific obligations and a medical officer.

On the other hand, many radical MPs expected that the 1867 act would be followed by a final push against those parts of the state apparatus which had resisted popular control up to now. This was partly about cutting expenditure further: at the 1868 election it was common to point to Cobden's plan of 1848 to reduce central state expenditure by £10 million back to the 1835 level, and to rue the fact that instead £10 million had been added since then. More generally the moment seemed to have come to tackle the remaining bastions of class privilege: the diplomatic service, the army and the monarchy. Auberon Herbert claimed that 'an end must be put to those privileges and exclusions which still existed as between different classes in this country'.<sup>10</sup> Peter Rylands secured a select committee to push for drastic expenditure reductions in the diplomatic service. George Otto Trevelyan continued a family battle for administrative reform, attacking army extravagance and inefficiency. Many Liberals felt that behind-the-scenes royal influence in foreign as well as military policy sat ill with the logic of 1867 that popularly elected institutions should determine policy. A number of MPs criticised the cost and utility of the monarchy, all the more so because of the queen's invisibility and the Prince of Wales's involvement in the Mordaunt divorce case in 1869. At the 1868 election, many Liberal candidates took advantage of the Irish Church debate to oppose all new endowments of religion, arguing that it was an outdated and immoral policy to give taxpayers' money to particular religious vested interests. They pointed to Canada, Australia, Scotland and Italy, where voluntary churches were thriving. Some pledged to remove Anglican bishops from the Lords as a first step towards disestablishment in England. More electoral reform would also entrench popular control: the next step was generally thought to be the introduction of the secret ballot. This in fact became law in 1872, while in 1870 the principle of popular election was extended to the new school boards; moreover, single women ratepayers were allowed to vote for these boards, as well as in local government elections from 1869.

It was over elementary education and disestablishment that these two approaches clashed most painfully. The 1870 Education Act was the culmination of years of pressure for a national system

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of elementary education from philanthropists, backbenchers and some frontbenchers, including Russell. The idea had previously foundered on Dissenters' instinctive suspicion of state involvement in religious teaching, combined with ratepayer anxiety about the cost and the principle. The large-scale extension of the franchise in 1867 made it essential, in the eyes of moralistic elite Liberals, for something to be done to 'compel our future masters to learn their letters', as Robert Lowe famously said.<sup>11</sup> At the same time it diluted the Dissenters' historic aversion to the exercise of state power sufficiently to allow them to support the basic principle of the 1870 act, the idea that popularly elected school boards would be set up to provide schools where existing provision by the various churches was inadequate. However they were so instinctively worried that the state would favour the interests of the established Church – or, even worse, Roman Catholicism – that they reacted vehemently to section 25 of the act, which allowed authorities to pay the school fees of poor parents at any school of their choice. Opposition to 'Clause 25' drove the so-called 'Nonconformist revolt' against the act, which most Liberal MPs found it impossible to resist; in 1872, only sixty-seven backbench Liberals voted against a motion to abolish the section. In 1871–2 the Dissenting leaders expanded this campaign into an agitation for disestablishment of the Church of England, and in many places also for the restriction of ratepayer school funding to secular subjects rather than religious teaching, a policy that was already being adopted in radical Birmingham. To them the abolition of the connection between the state and religious provision was a natural consequence of Gladstone's pledge to implement this in Ireland in 1868. It was also an example of the new politics that they thought 1867 would usher in, in which all examples of state bias in favour of the propertied and Anglican classes would be abandoned. However the proposals to disestablish the Church in England and remove compulsory rate-supported bible teaching from board schools antagonised many moralistic Anglican Liberals – such as Thomas Hughes the Christian Socialist novelist and MP – and swung them towards the Church defence camp. While the Liberal Party split over the future of religious policy, the Conservative opposition received a great boon: the electoral reaction in favour of the Conservative Party that resulted in the shock 1874 election victory was driven very largely by a propertied voter panic that radicals would use their increased power in the new political order to abolish all institutional safeguards for religion and morality.

Division over the role of the state in shaping popular morals was also evident on the issue of drink. The 1871 Licensing Bill proposed a special police inspectorate for public houses, to be appointed by the Home Office. This touched a radical nerve, and led the old Chartist J. R. Stephens to discern a French-style government

spy system designed to restrict the liberties of Englishmen. Even the milder version of the bill which became law in 1872, and which put the police inspectorate under local rather than central control, still restricted opening hours, and inspired protests including the singing of 'Rule Britannia', asserting that Britons never would be slaves to tyranny. Temperance was a particularly impossible issue for the party because some Dissenting moralists took the side of intervention and indeed started to urge a more thoroughgoing assault on the scourge of drunkenness. Just as Education Minister William Forster's Liberal career was ruined by the Education Act, his friend Henry Bruce's was destroyed by being home secretary responsible for these Licensing Bills. The split between statist moralists and libertarians was also apparent in other areas, particularly the growing agitation (not successful until the 1880s) against the Contagious Diseases acts of 1864 and 1866 which attempted to check prostitution by allowing the incarceration of prostitutes suspected of infection in special hospitals. In 1871 and 1872 there were also two successful protests by backbench Liberal MPs against government attempts to sell off crown land in Epping Forest and to restrict public access to the royal parks in London, both of which they portrayed as ministerial attempts to limit the people's recreational freedom.

In fact the Nonconformist revolt on education and disestablishment was so intense mainly because Dissenters felt the need to strike a pre-emptive blow against what they saw as the growing threat of ultramontane Catholicism in Ireland and the threat of a pro-clerical policy on both sides of the Irish Sea. Gladstone's Irish Church and Land reforms had been designed to prevent the threat of destabilising 'foreign' interventions in Irish politics – either from 'American' Fenian-style agitation or Popish priestly organisation. Unfortunately many were convinced that neither threat had disappeared. Disorder continued, a home rule movement began to emerge, and at the Vatican Council in 1870 the Pope asserted his 'infallibility' in determining what doctrine should be accepted by Catholics everywhere. Though in fact secular nationalist politics was to be the greater risk to the Union in the future, most British Liberals now prioritised resistance to the Irish Roman Catholic bishops' demands, which increasingly focused on the need for a state-supported Catholic university. This meant that there was a marked lack of support for the third prong of Gladstone's Irish reform agenda, the restructuring of Irish universities in line with his hopes of 1868. Gladstone believed that voluntary Catholic denominational colleges must have the right to affiliate with other colleges under a proposed university board, with the result that the university syllabus must reflect Catholic sensitivities on theological matters. The measure thus alienated both Irish Catholic MPs, who

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All politics is about balancing differences and reconciling potential clashes, and between 1868 and 1874 this was done to a remarkable, unprecedented degree. Gladstone's first government is a topic of such continuing fascination to the political historian because it was not dominated by a simple story or individual, but because of the rich interplay of all sorts of impulses, themes and personalities.

demanded their own university, and enough British Liberals to defeat the bill, forcing the government to resign in March 1873, though it had to return, much weakened. This conflict revealed a complete breakdown of sympathy between British Liberals and Irish Catholics, and the death of all the liberal aspirations of 1868 for Ireland. At the 1874 election Irish Liberalism was more or less annihilated in favour of a new home rule movement. And across Britain and Ireland as a whole, the educational disputes of 1870–3 produced a three-way falling out between Dissenters, Irish Catholics and increasingly conservative-minded British Anglicans, destroying Liberal electoral hopes in Ireland and Britain at the same time.

Ultimately this three-way split was caused by the fact that the global climate of the 1870s was much gloomier and less instinctively liberal than that of the 1860s. In the early 1860s, under the influence of the unification of Italy and the free trade treaties of that decade, it was possible for British Liberals to believe that the world was moving in their direction, away from tariff barriers and towards the peaceful acceptance of constitutional government across the continent. It was in this light that 'justice to Ireland' on a pluralist liberal basis seemed both possible and adequate to reconcile the Irish to the Union, and also in this light that, in benign economic conditions at home, it seemed possible to cut taxes and defence spending and yet to maintain Britain's position as the most influential and respected nation in the world. In 1870–1, the Franco-Prussian war, German unification, and Russia's reclamation of naval rights in the Black Sea, on top of the Vatican Council, demonstrated the emptiness of this optimism, especially since at the same time Britain was embroiled in a prolonged dispute with the United States over the Alabama affair. Britain was now isolated internationally, facing a continent dominated by conservative and clerical empires.

Therefore this changed foreign climate also undermined the basis of Gladstone's economic promises at the 1868 election, and completely destroyed the Radicals' hopes of a new, lean Cobdenite state based on low spending, peace and the abolition of the expensive diplomatic structure. In 1870 the government had to respond to the Franco-Prussian war by asking parliament to fund an extra 20,000 troops. After the Prussian triumph, in 1871 Britain's new-found vulnerability to invasion was highlighted by a severe panic, fuelled particularly by right-wing newspapers and commentators keen to criticise the drift of defence policy towards *bien pensant* Cobdenism. This was one reason why government decided in 1871 on an expensive overhaul of the process of buying army commissions, in the name of efficiency. From now on the media pressure was all for a stronger foreign policy rather than for further reductions. Gladstone's earlier cuts in spending on the army and navy were reversed, while overall government spending rose from £67.1m

to £74.6m between 1870/1 and 1873/4. In 1871 Hugh Childers was replaced by George Goschen at the Admiralty and from this point Gladstone found both service departments increasingly opposed to economy and Treasury control. So was the Colonial Office. Gladstone complained that he could not check the determination of the War and Colonial Offices to send a military expedition to the Gold Coast against the Ashanti in 1873 because the War Office would not let him know the facts. His anger at the influence of these vested interests, these 'knots and groups', was palpable, and in the autumn of 1873 he decided on a dramatic outflanking gesture, proposing the abolition of the income tax that his mentor Peel had introduced as a 'temporary' measure in 1842. This for Gladstone was the ultimate step in demonstrating the economical disinterestedness of the state. However he failed to get the defence departments to give him the £1 million extra in cuts that he needed in order to fund this, and instead decided to dissolve parliament in January 1874 and to appeal to the electorate over the heads of military chiefs, holding out the carrot of income tax abolition if he was returned. The result was a decisive Conservative election victory, a telling example of the limits to the appeal of economy in the new political climate.

The Conservative victory of 1874 was based on a massive political reaction, like that of 1841. To some extent this was an inevitable expression of the fears unleashed among the propertied classes by the far-reaching Reform Act of 1867, as had previously been the case with 1832. More specifically it was driven by a defence of Church interests against perceived Nonconformist and Irish threats, just as in 1835–41, and by a more general defence of institutions against the prospect of radical mobilisation. Radicals seemed to be keen to undermine Britain's foreign policy, army and indeed – in the case of Charles Dilke's controversial venture into republicanism in late 1871 – the monarchy itself. In a world of German and Russian threats, without much hope of support from the enfeebled French, and with the beginning of a scramble for influence outside Europe, to most men of property a strong defence policy seemed essential. Moreover the 1867 Reform Act had done its job so well that it was much less plausible than before to argue that state institutions still needed to be radicalised and made subject to popular control. Of course there were still many who continued to be suspicious of state power, as the 'Nonconformist revolt' showed, but in fact the main driver of that revolt was their fear of a clerical policy in Ireland. The threat of Section 25 was defeated at local level, through Liberal popular control of the school boards, with the result that the 'revolt' did much less damage to the Liberal Party at the 1874 election than was done by the drift of alarmed Anglicans to the Conservative Party. For most voters, the army, the monarchy, and even the Church were institutions to be

valued and upheld as symbols of stability, patriotism and morality. Radical assaults on them seemed misjudged and possibly sinister.

In order to understand the eventful politics of the Gladstone government of 1868–74 – its many legislative achievements and yet its dramatic descent into division and defeat – it needs to be contextualised in two ways: in relation to previous Liberal Party history and to contemporary developments on the continent. The party that Gladstone inherited from Palmerston was large and used to governing, but mostly because its Conservative opponents were always too weak to do so effectively, and not because of any policy-based unity. In 1867–8, good fortune provided Gladstone with a minority Conservative government which decided it had to pursue a contentious Irish policy and an expensive military expedition to Abyssinia and thus gave him the chance of uniting the Liberals behind more attractive approaches both to Ireland and to government spending. These new policies, together with the legitimacy conferred by a large majority from an expanded electorate, gave his government a great deal of momentum, which he used to produce an impressive roster of legislative activity between 1869 and 1871. But from 1871 the tensions within his vast coalition started to come to the fore, most visibly between a moralist interventionism and a radical anti-establishment philosophy, both of which stirred up ill-feeling from a variety of sources. Vestigial radical suspicions of ‘Old Corruption’ in the political establishment came from a dying political tradition, and were no longer capable of generating a unifying campaign – if they had ever been. By the 1870s the more significant political tendency was alarm on the part of the propertied classes at any and every expression of Radical criticism. It is significant that the government’s only significant legislative success after 1871 was the passage of the secret ballot in 1872, which had originally been a Radical demand but was now attractive to conservative-minded MPs anxious about the potential of organised Radical forces such as trade unions to use open voting to threaten electors into pursuing class objectives. However the Russellite moralist tradition was equally too divisive in its social effects to be able to supply any great unity; it would be a long time before Liberalism would be at ease with a policy of constructive social reform.

Meanwhile the policies on which Gladstone had campaigned in 1868 both fell foul of the international tensions that arose in 1870 and that defeated the liberal optimism of the Palmerstonian era. By 1873–4 the happy vision of 1868, of a pluralist common ground between British Liberals and Irish Catholics, had been destroyed. Nor did the state of Europe make it remotely possible to unite the party and win an election on the zealous pursuit of tax and defence cuts.

For all these internal Liberal divisions and tensions, however, it is important to point out that they were a necessary evil in Victorian politics, if indeed they were an evil at all. A party held together by tight agreement on strategy would have been unattractive to most Victorian MPs, and would not have lasted for long. The dirigiste programmatic approach suggested by Joseph Chamberlain in 1885 would have been even less successful, and it was as well for Chamberlain’s reputation that he left the party before he had the chance to try it. The Liberal Party was the dominant party of Victorian Britain because it was a loose coalition of different traditions and interests. Leading it without difficulty and occasional embarrassment was an impossibility. All politics is about balancing differences and reconciling potential clashes, and between 1868 and 1874 this was done to a remarkable, unprecedented degree. Gladstone’s first government is a topic of such continuing fascination to the political historian because it was not dominated by a simple story or individual, but because of the rich interplay of all sorts of impulses, themes and personalities.

*Jonathan Parry is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Pembroke College.*

### Bibliographical note

I am grateful to John Powell for suggesting that I write on this theme. I have not tackled it in quite this way before, but I have often addressed aspects of it, going back to the Ph.D. thesis which I wrote on the religious and Irish policy of this government and which became a book as *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986). Therefore this essay draws on more specific pieces that I have published previously. I have not provided footnotes to these publications, just to direct quotations by politicians. Anyone wanting a deeper development of my arguments

might consult, in particular: *The Politics of Patriotism: English liberalism, national identity and Europe 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006) [particularly on the interplay of foreign and Irish policy after 1870]; ‘Gladstone, Liberalism and the government of 1868–74’, in David Bebbington and Roger Swift (eds.), *Gladstone Centenary Essays* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 94–112 [particularly on domestic and defence policy], and ‘The decline of institutional reform in nineteenth-century Britain’, in David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (eds.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 164–86 [on this government’s role in undermining the traditional radical campaign against institutional ‘Old Corruption’]. I have also written on Liberalism before 1867, in *Politics of Patriotism* and in *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993).

- 1 See, typically for its time, R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870–1914* (Oxford, 1936), p. 2. On the 1860s, the classic work remains J. R. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857–1868* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Hassocks, 1976).
- 2 See Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: ‘Habits of Heart & Mind’* (Oxford, 2015), chs. 7 and 8.
- 3 As shown particularly by Joseph Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832–52* (Parliamentary History Book Series, Chichester & Malden, MA, 2011).
- 4 There is a good summary of this literature in Ian Packer, ‘Whigs and Liberals’, in David Brown, Robert Crowcroft and Gordon Pentland (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History 1800–2000* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 288–94.
- 5 At Warrington, 12 Oct. 1868: *Speeches of W. E. Gladstone, MP, delivered at Warrington, Ormskirk, Liverpool, Southport, Newton, Leigh, and Wigan, in October 1868* (London, 1868), p. 15.
- 6 At Warrington, 12 Oct. 1868 and Leigh, 20 Oct. 1868: *ibid.*, pp. 6, 57.
- 7 At Edinburgh, *The Times*, 6 Nov. 1868, p. 5.
- 8 28 Oct. 1871: A. T. Bassett (ed.), *Gladstone’s Speeches* (London, 1916), p. 408.
- 9 To Granville, 19 May 1877: Agatha Ramm (ed.), *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville, 1876–1886*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1962), vol. i, p. 40.
- 10 At Windsor, *The Times*, 5 Nov. 1868, p. 3.
- 11 A. P. Martin, *Life and Letters of Robert Lowe Viscount Sherbrooke*, 2 vols. (London, 1893), vol. ii, p. 330.