

Reports

Gladstone's First Government 1868–74

Meeting following the AGM, 28 January 2019, with Professor Jon Parry and Dr David Brooks; chair Tony Little

Report by **Tony Little**

DESCRIBING GLADSTONE'S FIRST ministry as one of the great reforming progressive governments standing comparison with the Whig ministries of the 1830s, the Liberal government of 1906 and the Atlee Labour government, David Brooks went on to suggest that such progressive governments faced two key problems – sustaining the momentum of their reforms and managing the expectations of their supporters. He argued that progressive governments have been shadowed by two important elements – money and religion. This applied in spades to Gladstone's administration, as he outlined by taking the audience through its major achievements, particularly his Irish reforms which represented both his most notable accomplishments and his nemesis.

Sustaining momentum and managing expectations

The priority given to the disestablishment of the Irish Church derived from a combination of internal Liberal divisions, which Gladstone needed to heal, and the 'mission to pacify' Ireland after a series of violent Fenian outrages. The Liberal Party had been split by Disraeli's tactics in securing the passage of the Second Reform Act, while the Conservatives remained united despite disagreement over Disraeli's objectives. Whigs were suspicious of Gladstone, whose background had been as a disciple of Peel, and who, they felt, was too intensely religious. The Fenians had recently caused two explosions on the British mainland and had attempted an invasion of Canada using Irish US civil war veterans. Security measures against the Fenians required compensating action to remove Irish grievances.

Disestablishment met all of these objectives. It reunited the party, enabling Gladstone to win the 1868 election with majorities in all four constituent

parts of the United Kingdom, the only time this was achieved. Taking power from the Church of Ireland pleased both the Liberal-voting Nonconformist Radicals, who anticipated similar action in England and Wales, and the Erastian Whigs who preferred a more modest role for a Church long associated with the Tories, and involved no cost to the taxpayer. Indeed the accompanying abolition of the grant to the Catholic Maynooth Seminary saved money. Disestablishment was tailored to Gladstone's strengths as a master of ecclesiastical detail and finance.

The accompanying disendowment of the Irish Church began Irish disenchantment with Gladstone. The funds from the church could have been used for a social transformation or for land purchase to assist the broad mass of the Irish people, but this was not Gladstone's way. He believed it would have set class against class and encouraged dependence on the state. Instead a charitable fund was created assisting the deaf, dumb and blind: worthy objectives, but disappointing against the expectations that had been aroused. In turn the disenchantment led to the creation of the Home Rule Party, which drew initial support from both Catholics and Protestants.

Similarly, the follow-up Irish Land Reform Act of 1870, while giving some security for tenants and providing compensation for improvements, disappointed by not conceding the 3Fs – Freedom of Sale, Fair Rents and Fixity of Tenure – which Gladstone conceded under duress in 1881. Although Gladstone had won 65 of the 105 Irish seats in 1868, the Home Rulers began to beat Liberals in subsequent by-elections. By-elections were also going against the Liberals in Britain. Gladstone, who was fascinated by psephology, noted the way in which these contests, for the first time, had become a bellwether of government popularity.

A Liberal measure by illiberal means

Dr Brooks suggested that the 1870 Education Act disappointed British expectations particularly among Nonconformists, who felt that Gladstone should have loosened the Anglican hold over primary education. Rather, Gladstone greatly expanded education by creating non-religious schools, where no religious school existed, but allowed Anglicans to remain entrenched, particularly in rural areas.

Even after the government had been in office for some years, Gladstone remained energetic and restless, but this ceaseless activity created a reaction and an unease about Gladstone's style – he had a tendency to be arbitrary and dictatorial. Dr Brooks illustrated this with the Army Act, an important piece of legislation from 1871, which gave Britain a professional army and did away with the purchase of promotion. But to pass this bill Gladstone had to battle the House of Lords and utilised the power of the Crown to sidestep the obstruction. Eliminating purchase of commissions by a royal warrant was seen as authoritarian – a Liberal measure by illiberal means.

Gladstone's third Irish reform, the University Bill of 1873, never became law. He tried to appease Catholic opinion, by providing for the first time non-denominational universities which they could attend. But Catholics wanted money spent on a university of their own and Gladstone opposed expenditure. Rather, he offered a drastically reorganised curriculum banning certain subjects, including history, as too controversial in religiously mixed institutions. This illiberal approach was opposed by the left wing in his own party and the bill failed. This lost the Catholic vote and Ireland would never be electorally Liberal again. Gladstone tried to bounce back with a snap general election in early 1874. But as Mrs May discovered, snap general elections are not always a good idea. Disraeli, who didn't often score heavily off Gladstone, suggested that Gladstone's promise to repeal the income tax, paid by only the richest 10 per cent of earners, had not been thought through. What would fill the gap in the public finance, a tax on the poor? Disraeli implied that this effort to shore up Gladstone's authority was a 'bit French' – a bit like a referendum, a tactic employed by Louis Napoleon. After the electoral defeat Gladstone gave up the

Liberal leadership, and, as he thought, his political career, but there was of course a rebound at the end of the decade.

Defending the liberty of the people?

Jonathan Parry set his remarks in the context of three concepts which are of current interest and which were of interest to Gladstone: the rights of parliament, laissez faire and internationalism. Gladstone respected and defended these ideas but their relationship to his first government is more complex and qualified than many have believed.

Upholding the rights of the Commons was seen by Victorian politicians as defending the liberty and property of the people. Gladstone took it seriously. Like Lord Palmerston before him, he sat listening on the front bench eight hours a day, four days a week to show that he was attuned to the opinions of MPs. But the more important factor in his approach was the boldness with which he filled the parliamentary agenda with government rather than back bench business: Irish Church, Irish land, education, secret ballot, licensing reforms etc. This was fundamental to the nature of the government and its initial success but fundamental also to its eventual failure. It represented a break with the style of the previous leader, Palmerston.

In 1856 Gladstone had published an article on the 'declining efficiency of parliament' criticising the lack of legislative purpose of both Palmerston and the minority Conservative governments of the 1850s. Their failure to use power allowed social tensions to fester and the ruling class needed to demonstrate to the expanded electorate that they 'were working for them'. Gladstone also believed that passing lots of legislation would prevent MPs from doing mischief, from making the Commons factious, contentious and difficult to control. His belief in a strong executive was part of his Peelite inheritance. Palmerston had been more relaxed, happy to accept defeats in the House and, like Theresa May, happy to make deals with this group or that to muddle through; a stance that did Palmerston's reputation no harm, he died a national hero.

Nevertheless, Gladstone was not seeking to impose his own ideology but rather to harness the pressures for a variety of reforms from different groups. For example, the education reforms derived

from a backlog of three different Royal Commissions which Palmerston had ignored. Similarly he responded to lobbying from backbenchers such as Jacob Bright on women's municipal franchise and Tom Hughes on trade union rights. Gladstone's approach shadowed the 1830s Liberal government, which had been active in the abolition of slavery, the new poor law, Irish church reform, police and prison legislation after the 1832 extension of the franchise as Gladstone's government followed the Reform Act of 1867. Meeting the needs of the new electorate legitimated the enhanced legislative activity against the naturally obstructive culture of parliament.

Echoing David Brooks, Professor Parry argued that the energy that delivered these great reforms was also the key to its failure. The government lost control of the Commons in 1871 and never really recovered, it exhausted its own backbenchers and public opinion as was evidenced by the by-election losses and Disraeli's jibe about the government as exhausted volcanos. Questions were posed about the government's mandate. In the election Gladstone had spoken only about the Irish Church and economy of government spending. Irish university reform had been opposed by most Irish MPs; Abolition of Purchase had been opposed by most army MPs; trade union reform alienated both supporters and opponents of trade unions, while licensing legislation was opposed by supporters and opponents of temperance; Radicals were upset by the strengthening of state interventionism. These are the roots of the reaction and defeat in 1874

Was there a Gladstonian ideology in economic policy?

If there was not an overarching Gladstonian ideology, was there a dogma of laissez faire – tax cuts and retrenchment in government spending (later called neo-liberalism)? Gladstone was strongly concerned with economy in government spending and he did cut income tax to 2d in the pound. But this was a political rather than an economic strategy. He attacked powerful but minority, often Conservative, lobby groups such as the military establishment promoting higher defence expenditure, to prove that the state provided a level playing field. He used the power of the state to demonstrate its disinterestedness. Famously Gladstone ascribed his 1874 defeat to the

torrent of 'gin and beer' used to promote the vested interest of the brewers against Gladstone's Licensing Act. His policy was a continuation of the Radical condemnation of what was called Old Corruption and a case can be made that his government was the culmination of a movement, going back to the 1780s, to cleanse the state of corrupt patronage. The focus on Ireland may be perceived as securing fairness and equality in religion by removing state funding from both Catholic and Protestant churches.

As an economic doctrine, laissez faire always had supporters in the Liberal Party, such as Robert Lowe and George Goschen. However, they were not typical Liberals, as both were anti-democratic, fearing that the people could not be trusted. Professor Parry argued that a misunderstanding of nineteenth-century laissez-faire may be contributing to today's Conservative Party problems following its adoption of neo-liberalism.

Liberals saw no clash between internationalism and nationalism

Professor Parry went on to explore some of the complexities of Gladstone's position as an internationalist. Most Liberals saw no clash between internationalism and nationalism. Their patriotic Liberalism was inherently internationalist, viewing Britain as a virtuous power for which peace reinforced its economic lead, sustaining the margin in naval forces which allowed it to exercise benevolent domination. This he illustrated by relations with the US, where Britain maintained friendly relations, did not wish to station a fleet in its vicinity and had a record of resolving border disputes, such as over Canada, by conversations between two governments that believed in the rule of law. The US Civil War period was exceptional, and saw the Gladstone government's innovative acceptance of international adjudication to resolve the *Alabama* dispute. Britain compensated the US for the damage to Union shipping caused by the British-built Confederate vessel *Alabama*. However Gladstone saw arbitration as a 'one off' and believed international law was incapable of resolving most international disputes.

Britain's diplomatic difficulties were with Russia, Germany and Austria, which opposed the British world vision. Actions by these nations challenged the optimistic British outlook and provoked

a negative reaction at home. This challenge was evident in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. The defeat of France and rise of Germany created a panic over British military preparedness and destroyed Gladstone's budget plans. The reason he called the 1874 election was to circumvent the demands of the defence ministers for higher expenditure but public opinion had moved against him. The war was followed by the raising of tariffs on the Continent undermining free trade and the Eastern Crisis, which further polarised public thinking. The right-wing press exploited the development of a consciously anti-Gladstonian feeling, backing the military demands and accusing Gladstone of lacking patriotism. This beginning of a new attitude to empire and its expansion is what makes Gladstone look unusual as an internationalist.

An early question from the audience asked about the attitude of Gladstone's government to the Franco-Prussian war. Professor Parry responded that the government was anxious to be neutral and it would be hard to see which side they could have taken. The prime British objectives were to preserve Belgian neutrality and to arbitrate between the two powers, though this was declined.

The Great Energiser

Other questions ranged between aspects of the first government not developed in the speeches, electoral issues and Gladstone's personality.

Asked why Gladstone failed to secure re-election at the end of his periods as premier, the speakers pointed out that this was not unusual in the Victorian period, rather that Palmerston's 1865 victory was exceptional. David Brooks added that Disraeli was wise in not taking office in 1873 after the defeat of the Irish University Bill, as he would have needed to propose a programme for government and given the Liberals a chance to recover. Instead, at the 1874 election he needed only to attack Gladstone's failings to win.

In response to a question about the lack of welfare reforms, it was argued that Gladstone believed more in individual responsibility and the role of charity rather than public expenditure. Indeed Conservatives were earlier than Liberals in taking up housing policy. Paraphrasing Gladstone's words, David Brooks suggested that he believed

the Conservatives were 'all socialists at heart'. Most welfare was provided through the Poor Law operating at a local level, which Gladstone supported. Despite its poor reputation, the Poor Law was the nursery of the welfare state. Jon Parry added that education was the exception promoted by Gladstone despite the controversy aroused among Liberals suspicious of state interference in most areas.

Asked if Gladstone changed his mind in a 'constructivist' direction by endorsing the Newcastle Programme in 1892, David Brooks suggested that the programme was less collectivist than might be thought. There were around twenty-five proposals with home rule very much at the top followed by Welsh Church disestablishment. What it did not contain was old-age pensions, which Joe Chamberlain proposed the same year in alliance with the Conservatives. Nevertheless Gladstone's final government did restrict the hours of railway workers. Jon Parry added that Gladstone, reflecting on the problems of the 1868–74 government, was determined to avoid the destructive effects of factionalism within Liberalism. He focused on the single-issue crusade, as defined by himself, such as Bulgaria or home rule and resisted the tendency among Liberal MPs to promote competing social interests.

Jon Parry believed that the adoption of the secret ballot was not consequent on the example of other nations but a response to the expansion of the

electorate. It became a key Radical demand in the 1830s in reaction to the pressure put on electors by landlords and employers, and a consensus developed after 1867 when the Radicals were joined by the Right who feared pressure on workers from organised trade unions.

Asked how essential Gladstone was to the government, David Brooks mused about whether one of the Whigs, Clarendon (died in 1870), Granville (too emollient) or Hartington (too laid back), might have stepped up to the position, without convincing himself, before concluding that Gladstone was the government's great energiser who dominated the House of Commons. Jon Parry added that it would be difficult to imagine anyone else leading while Gladstone was around. He was obsessed, in a positive way, with the process of government, fascinated by drafting, shaping and driving legislation through parliament. His very hands-on style reflected his religious belief that he had to account before God for every hour and therefore that parliament had to account for every hour, a style that others found completely exhausting.

Tony Little is chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group and guest-edited the special issue of the Journal marking the 150th anniversary of Gladstone's first government. He was joint editor and contributor to the History Group's British Liberal Leaders, published in 2015.

Reviews

Liberal lives

Trevor Smith, *Workhouse to Westminster* (Caper Press, 2018)

Review by **Seth Alexander Thévoz**

TREVOR SMITH HAS written an exceptionally enjoyable memoir, which may suffer from the lack of any obvious single audience. This should be a tribute to the man; and particularly, to the range of worlds his life has stridden, as a political scientist, as

head of one of the largest political funding bodies in British history, as head of the University of Ulster, and latterly as a member of the House of Lords. I fear that this means that the book is doomed to be 'raided' by future scholars looking for pithy quips focused on just one of