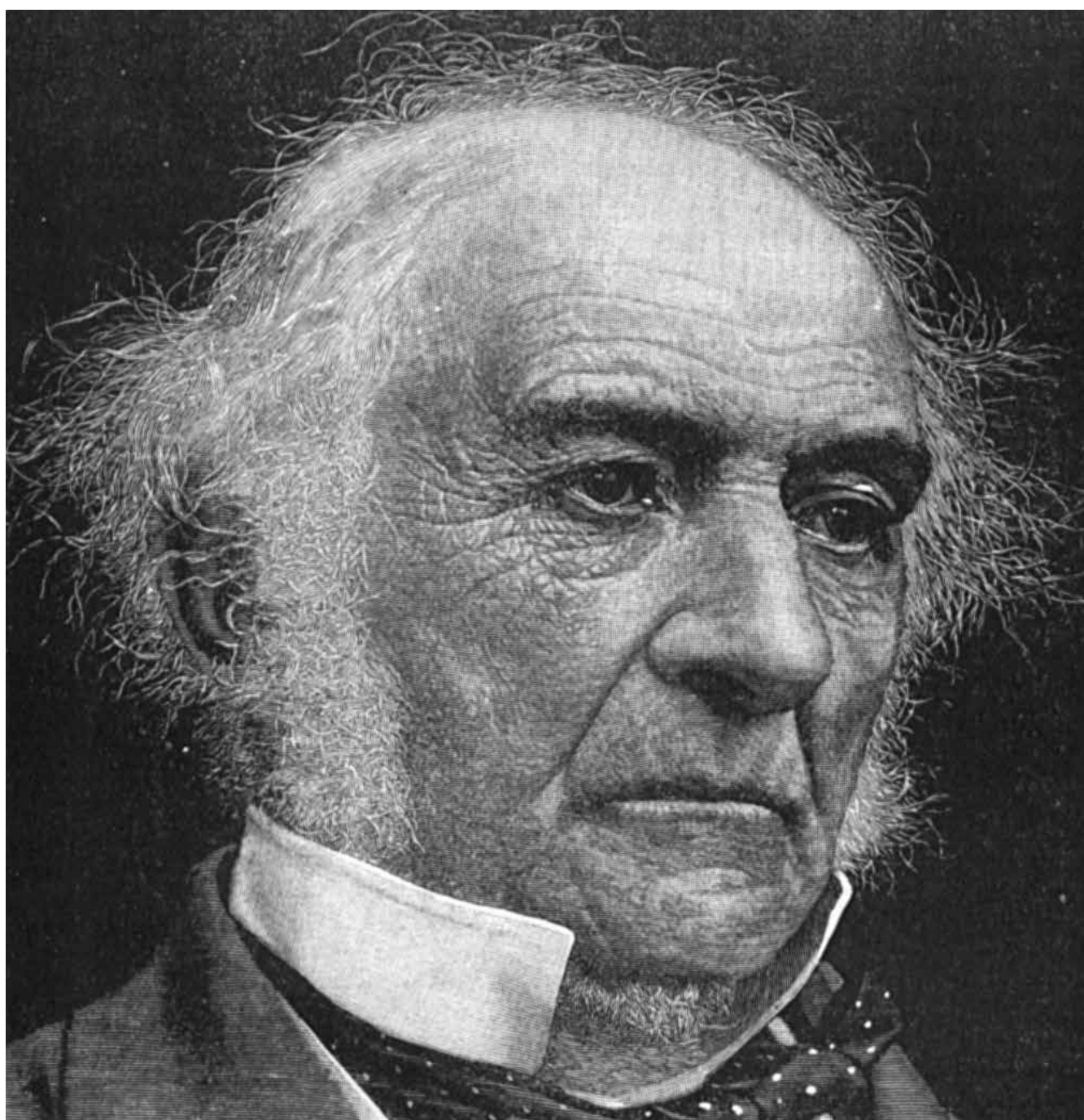


Prime Ministers

Iain Dale's new book, *The Prime Ministers*, includes fifty-five profiles by fifty-five different writers, politicians, journalists and academics of every prime minister, from Walpole to Johnson. Here we reprint the chapter on Gladstone, by Simon Heffer.

William Ewa



rt Gladstone

GLADSTONE'S REPUTATION ALMOST a century and a quarter after his death relies too much on folk memory and too little on the hard facts of history. He was an unbending religious zealot who used to flagellate himself; he took prostitutes into Downing Street and sought to reform them; he spoke to Queen Victoria as though she were a public meeting; he saw the means of settling Ireland's differences with Britain but was thwarted by reactionary Tories; he was a rigid economist who believed in the small state; he was a fanatical chopper-down of trees (what is less well known is that he was an equally fanatical planter of them) and he spent much of the mid nineteenth century sparring with Benjamin Disraeli, his Tory counterpart. There is enough truth in all those statements to make one understand why so many people hold them to be entirely accurate, but as with all aspects of a man as complex, brilliant and long-lived as Gladstone, they are nowhere near the whole truth. And his is a life about which we know a great deal; from the age of sixteen he kept a diary, which runs to fourteen published volumes, and left behind a vast correspondence.

Gladstone is the incarnation of nineteenth-century liberalism, yet he started his privileged political career (he was given a pocket borough by the Duke of Newcastle at the age of twenty-two, fresh from Eton and Oxford, where he took a Double First in *Literae Humaniores* and mathematics) as a Tory, and as a Tory fiercely opposed to one of the main political movements of his youth: the abolition of slavery. This was not least because the Gladstones were a family of slave owners; when slavery was abolished, the family received over £100,000 in compensation: more than £15 million, tax free, in today's values. He had grown up in an intensely politically minded family, and his

interest in politics had driven him to become President of the Oxford Union. The wealth of his mercantile family meant he did not need to work for a living; a political career, if he could find a patron, was the obvious next step. Newcastle was that patron. In his first election at Newark, Gladstone demonstrated his power as a stump-orator and campaigner, qualities that would mark him out throughout his political career. In a further irony, given the direction of his later career, he argued forcefully in his first campaign against Whig plans for parliamentary reform, as he had in his career in the Oxford Union. Even then, he was not against a measure of reform; he just feared the Whigs wanted too much too soon.

Gladstone's immense talent was spotted as soon as the Whigs left office, when Sir Robert Peel – his first and most important political influence – gave him a junior position in the Treasury at the end of 1834. Within a month he was moved sideways to a job at the War Office, but soon Peel left office. In opposition, Gladstone's main cause became to attack British encouragement of the Opium trade in China, which Britain fought to ensure could continue. His sister Helen had suffered as a result of taking the drug, and Gladstone considered the Whig government's support for the trade immoral. It would not be the last time he would savage a government for what he considered its ethical shortcomings.

Gladstone had not only imbibed Tory politics as a young man: he had also imbibed Christianity, a creed that, unlike Toryism, would stay with him for life. It underpinned his ethic of public service, even if it made him, in the eyes of some of his critics, priggish or, at times, messianic; some of his Oxford contemporaries found him so insufferable that, in 1830, they went to his rooms and beat him up. He

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Full name: William Ewart Gladstone

Born: 29 December 1809, Liverpool

Died: 19 May 1898, Hawarden Castle, Flintshire. Buried at Westminster Abbey

Education: Eton; Christ Church, Oxford

Married to Catherine Glynne; 4 sons, 4 daughters

Prime Minister: 3 December 1868 to 17 February 1874; 23 April 1880 to 9 June 1885; 1 February 1886 to 20 July 1886; 15 August 1892 to 2 March 1894

Quotation: 'All the world over, I will back the masses against the classes.' (Liverpool, 28 June 1886)

considered offering himself for ordination, but his family talked him out of it. However, religion would increasingly inform his political decisions and, in many respects, necessitate in his estimation his move from Toryism to Liberalism. In 1839 he published *The State in its Relations with the Church*, his first great intellectual treatise, which caused him to be denounced by Macaulay as 'the rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories'. When Peel returned to office in 1841, Gladstone was reluctant to join his ministry, because of what he saw as the Tory Party's equivocation over the opium trade, but he accepted the post of Vice-President of the Board of Trade; he was promoted to President, and the Cabinet, in 1843. This would have a seismic effect on the future of Britain, in more ways than one.

Gladstone's first legislative priority was also morally driven: it was to ensure some degree of security for the large number of men employed as 'coal-whippers', the name given to those who moved coal from vessels to barges at docks. There was not only no security, but the men, in order to get work, had to frequent dockside pubs and have the approval of the landlord, which meant they spent most of their earnings on alcohol, and were frequently drunk. This appalled Gladstone. He intervened in what he considered to be the most 'socialistic' act of the era, and set up central employment exchanges for them.

However, his main job at Trade was to manage the outbreak of 'railway mania' – the desire to link up towns and cities across the country by the revolutionary new means of the steam train. He streamlined legislation to assist the construction of long stretches of line; he also laid the foundations of the modern regulatory state, by forcing railway companies to provide cheap fares. This had an immense effect on the British economy, enabling greater physical mobility of labour and establishing around London and other major cities a commuter belt,

allowing the expansion of those cities and the growth of a clerical, middle class. Gladstone ensured two other important by-products of the railway boom: he ensured that the equally novel invention of the telegraph could run on wires and poles alongside the new network of railways; and he put a contingency in the rail legislation that, in times of emergency, the network could be commandeered by the state. Long after Gladstone's death, in the Great War and the Second World War, this contingency would prove invaluable.

Yet the most influential and far-reaching act of Gladstone's time at the Board of Trade was his advice to Peel that, if Ireland were not to starve during the potato famine of the mid-1840s, the government should repeal the Corn Laws to enable the importation of cheaper grain. The laws had been passed by Lord Liverpool's administration after the Napoleonic Wars to safeguard the income of Tory landowners; tariffs placed on imports of cheap grain from overseas kept the price of home-grown crops artificially high. But it also caused immense hardship to poorer people, and when the potato crop failed in Ireland, there was no chance of most of the starving population being able to afford grain, and therefore bread, as a substitute. Gladstone succeeded in convincing Peel that basic humanity demanded a reversal of thirty years of Tory policy; the process of repealing the Corn Laws followed in the teeth of opposition from Peel's own party, and was completed only with the help of what was now called the Liberal Party. The internal opposition was led by Disraeli, in a series of morally shameful speeches made in his capacity as a client of the landed Cavendish-Bentinck family: it confirmed Gladstone's dismal opinion of the man who would soon become his main political adversary. No one at the time could realise just what a profound effect Gladstone's advocacy to Peel of free trade in cereals would have on British prosperity. When prices fell and people

felt their purchasing power, and therefore their standard of living, increasing, it became apparent that free trade in all commodities – not just in grain – was likely to improve prosperity. More fundamentally, as Britain removed tariffs from all sorts of imports, so did other countries lift their taxes on goods imported from Britain. At a time when Britain was the leading manufacturing nation in the world, this was hugely significant. From 1846 to 1873, when an agricultural depression started, the country enjoyed almost three decades of non-stop growth. This was Gladstone's triumph as much as Peel's, and one of his greatest legacies.

But before the repeal could happen, Gladstone had left the Cabinet, for the most abstruse moral reasons. The government made an annual grant to a Catholic seminary at Maynooth in Ireland; Gladstone had long objected to the taxpayers of a country with an established Protestant church funding a training school for clergy of what he saw as an alien religion. So when the government decided to increase the grant in 1845, he voted for it, under collective responsibility, but then resigned in case anyone should think he had done so out of hypocrisy in order to keep office and further his ambitions. Later in the year Peel restored him to office as Colonial Secretary. Under the law at the time, he had to resign his seat and fight a by-election on receiving his new office, but because of his support for the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Duke of Newcastle (an avid Protectionist) removed his patronage. Gladstone kept his post while searching for another seat, but soon the search lost its urgency, as Peel's government was defeated within weeks on a measure unrelated to the Corn Laws.

The behaviour of the Tory Party over the repeal ended Gladstone's affiliation with the party: but he did not yet join the Liberals. He became, after Peel himself, the most prominent member of the Peelite faction, a group that can now be seen as 'transitioning' from the Tory Party to a Liberal Party, which, under the growing influence of men such as William Cobden and John Bright, was becoming increasingly associated with free trade in all its forms. Gladstone managed to get elected for Oxford University in 1847, and would never be without a parliamentary seat again.

While out of office in the late 1840s, Gladstone continued to do important work. He lived on his wife's family's estate at Hawarden in Flintshire, and applied his mind to making it profitable, in which he succeeded. He was a founder of a school at Glenalmond in Scotland – this was an era of the establishment of

numerous private schools – rooted in the principles of Anglicanism. He also, in 1848, founded the Church Penitentiary Association for the Reclamation of Fallen Women: from the following year he started to encounter prostitutes on the street, and would take them back to the kitchens of his house in Carlton House Terrace where he would sit, often with his wife, and talk to them, and try to persuade them to end their life of vice. He helped support institutions for them, and to find work for them, often overseas in the colonies. This work brought ridicule and suspicion upon him, but in his papers after his death was found a sworn declaration by him that he had never been unfaithful to his wife. He did, however, feel severe temptation, and between 1845 and 1860 often flagellated himself as a punishment, noting the act in his diaries.

Peel died in 1850, but Peelism lived on, and when Aberdeen formed a government in 1852 it was with a coalition of Whigs, Liberals and Peelites, and the free-trading strict economist Gladstone – who had already exhibited, in his attitude towards Maynooth, an almost religious zeal in spending taxpayers' money responsibly and frugally – was the obvious choice as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Gladstone had dismissed with predictable distaste an approach by Disraeli, his predecessor as Chancellor, on behalf of the Tories to swallow his principles and bring the Peelites back to the Tory Party. Disraeli was desperate to cling to office, Gladstone desperate to cling to his principles; the twain would never meet, and the cynicism of Disraeli's approach further disgusted Gladstone, and lowered his opinion of the latter still further.

Once in the Treasury, Gladstone proceeded in a familiarly Peelite way. His first priority was further tariff reform. He also made a strategic plan to cut government spending so that, in time, he could abolish the income tax, and put more weight on indirect taxes. In his 1853 Budget he cut the threshold on income tax from £150 to £100, believing that the more people he forced to pay it, the more they would demand its abolition by supporting an administration that promised to cut public spending; and the sudden increase in revenues helped make up for what was lost from import duties, until rising consumption of goods bearing indirect taxes made up the shortfall. The 1853 Budget, and the five-hour speech in which it was delivered, was regarded as one of the greatest financial measures ever introduced, and one of the finest parliamentary performances ever heard. Again, the moral underpinning of the speech was profound: Gladstone believed, plainly and

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simply, that the state had no right to help itself to a share of people's income, and that the fairest form of taxation was levied on goods such as alcohol, tobacco, sugar and other luxuries that people chose, but did not need, to buy.

His determination to eliminate income tax was thwarted by the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854, when he had to raise the rate from 7d in the pound to 1s 2d in the pound over two Budgets in two months. When the conduct of the war led to a demand for an enquiry, all the Peelites in the government resigned, and from 1855 to 1859 Gladstone was out of office. It was during this respite that he discovered the pleasures of forestry, not merely felling trees (principally as part of generating income for his estate) but also extensively planting them. In 1858 Lord Derby formed a Conservative government in which, once more, the Peelites refused to serve because of Derby's and Disraeli's rigid commitment to Protectionism. When Palmerston returned to power in 1859, the Peelites went in with him, and Gladstone was once more Chancellor.

The underlying principle of his seven years at the Treasury – he would be there until the Liberals went out of office after the defeat of their Reform Bill in 1866 – was a refusal to borrow to cover the deficit he had inherited from the Tories. So income tax, which had been cut to 5d in the pound, was raised to 9d, with a 1s 1d rate for those on higher incomes. Gladstone continued to promote free-trade arrangements with countries resistant to them, his first success being with France. He had a further moral purpose in this, believing that countries who traded with each other would not fight each other, and so Europe would continue to be at peace.

In the 1860 Budget, Gladstone abolished 85 per cent of the remaining duties on imported goods, and by 1865 he had cut income tax to 4d in the pound. It was in this period that he talked of preferring to allow money to 'fructify in the pockets of the people' rather than have it wasted by the government. In 1861 he encouraged the spread of knowledge by removing the duty on paper; this was the era in which he became 'the people's William', being credited with making the essentials of life, notably food, more affordable, and fuelling the rise of British industry through his deregulatory policies. Working people came to see Gladstone as a man who believed – to use a phrase from a later era – in social justice. In less than twenty years since the repeal of the Corn Laws, wealth in Britain had, slowly but unmistakably, come to be shared more evenly; and Gladstone was celebrated for having been the main agent of this.

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It was a natural progression from this belief in enriching the working man to enfranchising him; and by 1864 Gladstone firmly believed there should be another measure of reform, and argued for it passionately in Cabinet – not least because he believed that by giving the working man a stake in the country's future he would rise to his responsibilities, and above all would support the Liberals for having given him the vote. Palmerston, the prime minister, violently disagreed: but when he died in 1865 his successor, Lord Russell, was more amenable. The bill he and Gladstone tried to get through Parliament in 1866 failed because of opposition from Whigs, led by Robert Lowe, who doubted the ability of the lower classes to cope with the challenges of enfranchisement, and who joined forces with the Conservatives to defeat it. Disturbances broke out around Britain in the autumn and winter of 1866–7, terrifying the Tories so much that Disraeli ended up piloting through the Commons a Reform Bill far more liberal than Russell and Gladstone had tried to secure. Lord Derby handed over the leadership of his party to Disraeli, and Russell to Gladstone: the peak of the rivalry of the two men thus began in 1867, and when Disraeli was forced to call an election in 1868, Gladstone's chance to hold the highest office came at last.

In that era, elections were held over several days, and Gladstone, famously, was cutting down a tree at Hawarden in December 1868 when he had word that General Grey, the Queen's private secretary, was on his way to him to invite him to an audience with the Queen, to kiss hands and become prime minister. It was at this point that, somewhat ahead of the game (though there had been Fenian outrages during the 1860s, notably some bomb attempts in London in 1868 itself), he said that 'my mission is to pacify Ireland'. The Queen, a few years later, equally memorably told her daughter, the Crown Princess of Prussia, that Gladstone spoke to her as if she were 'a public meeting'. The two of them would never get on, especially after 1880 when the Queen had had six years of Disraeli fawning and grovelling to her in a way she was too stupid to see through. Disraeli told Matthew Arnold at this time that, when flattering royalty, the secret was 'to lay it on with a trowel'; no one had a bigger trowel, or laid it on more lavishly, than he did. Gladstone, who quite probably had more genuine respect for the Queen than Disraeli did, demonstrated it by treating her with sincerity rather than with flannel, and speaking to her as someone on his intellectual level (which she plainly was not) rather than patronising her.

Gladstone's administration of 1868–74 was one of the greatest, perhaps *the* greatest, of the nineteenth century. It was informed by his profound sense of morality and belief in justice and meritocracy. He did not believe in the latter – the word itself would not be coined until a hundred years later – for its own sake, but because he saw how acting on its principles would enrich the country. The measure whose effects still echo today was the 1870 Education Act. It did not provide a free school place for every child; but it did ensure that every child up to the age of twelve had access to such a place. This accelerated the opportunities for working-class children to be educated, and to enhance social mobility and prosperity in Britain, and was fundamental to the development of society.

His administration did two other things that brought radical change to Britain. He abolished the purchase of army commissions, which meant that promising men could become army officers without having a fortune behind them. And he ensured that admission to all senior jobs in the home civil service was secured by examination rather than by patronage – the diplomatic service finally followed suit after the Great War. He also brought the secret ballot into parliamentary elections, began the reorganisation of the English courts system, and introduced a Licensing Act that regulated the sale and content of alcoholic beverages. The main policy front on which Gladstone made no advances during his first administration, ironically, was Ireland, where matters largely pacified themselves during the period; though Irish politics were changing, and matters would not remain quiet for long.

He had, through his Chancellor Robert Lowe, maintained a determination to cut spending and taxation, and with nearly two years of what was then a seven-year mandate still to run, he called an election in the winter of 1874 to seek a mandate for the complete abolition of income tax. He lost. The main reason for his defeat was that Disraeli, in opposition, had developed a serious organisation for the Conservative Party, which was mobilised to enlist the support of what was still a relatively new electorate. The Liberals had made no such provision. The result was that Gladstone, having lost, gave up the leadership of his party, and departed mainly to Hawarden to fell trees and pursue his intellectual interests, notably in theology and classical studies. His first task was to write and publish a pamphlet attacking the doctrine of papal infallibility. His antipathy to the Roman Catholic Church, which he regarded as a repository of superstition, was deep-seated

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and lifelong. At the time of his death he had a library of 32,000 books, and consumed information greedily.

His adherence to Christianity led him to denounce the Disraeli administration's toleration of attacks by Ottoman Muslims on Bulgarian Christians: what became known as the Bulgarian atrocities. At the same time, Russia was persecuting the Jews, and British Jews waited in vain for Gladstone to speak up against this. However, he felt motivated to attack the morality of the Conservative Party's foreign policy between 1878 and 1880, not merely over Bulgaria, but also over the war it was conducting in Afghanistan and in southern Africa against the Zulus. This vigorous assault on the government has come to be known as the Midlothian campaign, after the constituency he was contesting: and it is regarded as having been a template for election campaigns for decades to come. It was in any case obvious to the electorate that the Conservatives had run out of ideas, and lacked vision; the Liberals won the ensuing election comfortably.

However, Gladstone had not led the party in the campaign, whatever had seemed to be the case: since his 'retirement' in 1874, it had been led in the Lords by Lord Granville and in the Commons by the Marquess of Hartington, the heir to the Dukedom of Devonshire. Queen Victoria, who regarded Gladstone as some sort of madman – a word she used frequently to describe him – pleaded with each man separately to form her government, but each said, quite accurately, that the country would only accept Gladstone as leader; and thus it was, with immense reluctance, that she invited him to become her prime minister for a second time.

This administration, though, was to endure far more problems than its predecessor. It coincided with the start of the 'land war' in Ireland and the rise of Parnellism – the demand by the Irish to be rid of absentee landlords, to be allowed a greater stake in their country and to have an element of self-rule. Gladstone was also sufficiently concerned about the neglect of sound economic principles under Beaconsfield (as Disraeli had become in 1876, with the acquisition of his earldom) that he was, until 1882, his own Chancellor of the Exchequer. But his workload became so fraught that he had to give up his second job; and Ireland became increasingly the main cause of his anxiety.

The disturbances there, notably the rise of the boycott – named after the County Mayo land agent ostracised by his local town over his policy of evictions – led to Gladstone's having to pass a Coercion Act in 1881 that, among

other things, allowed detention without trial. However, matters got worse rather than better, and in May 1882 the new Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish, was assassinated alongside the country's most senior civil servant as they walked through Phoenix Park in Dublin on his first day in the country. This initiated a period of increased tension and repression that was entirely at odds with Gladstone's intentions. Further afield, there were other challenges. Gladstone himself was no imperialist, and his party was mostly against the expansion of Empire; but in 1882 the government decided to intervene in Egypt because of a nationalist uprising that threatened Britain's rights to the Suez Canal and the passage to India. It led, however, to a British presence in Egypt for the best part of half a century. Gladstone's main achievement in this otherwise difficult administration, however, was to extend the franchise to the rural working class, and to secure a redistribution of parliamentary seats in 1884–5.

Yet it was events, again, far from home that brought down the administration. Matters remained restive on Egypt's southern border, with the Sudan, and in 1884 General Charles 'Chinese' Gordon, one of the most remarkable soldiers in the Empire, was asked by Gladstone to go out there and take control of the situation. Gordon was a religious maniac with a death wish; he did not expect to come back from Khartoum, and he did not. Communications were poor, and Gordon was slow in asking for reinforcements. They were sent eventually, but by the time they arrived Gordon had been killed. The public were outraged, and Gladstone's reputation collapsed; no one voiced the outrage better than the Sovereign herself, for whom this represented a superb opportunity to vent years of spleen at her prime minister. Normally telegrams between her and her ministers were sent encrypted; the one she sent to Gladstone expressing her disgust at his casual treatment of Gordon was sent from Balmoral to London *en clair*, which meant it was read by every telegraph operator between whom it was relayed. Her views were soon public knowledge and printed in the newspapers. She did, though, offer Gladstone an earldom when he resigned in June 1885, in a state of demoralisation, which he refused.

Salisbury then came to office, but relied on Parnell's Irish nationalists to keep him in power. Gladstone saw a natural comity between the Liberals and the Parnellites, and in December 1885, having thought about the question extensively, sent out his son Herbert to suggest to the press that a measure of Home

Rule should be offered to the Irish – what history has called 'flying the Hawarden kite'. The Conservatives – who quickly became the Unionist party, as the question came to define British politics – were horrified, as were a number of Liberals, including Gladstone's leading lieutenant Lord Hartington and the charismatic Joseph Chamberlain. With Gladstone offering Home Rule, the Parnellites defeated Salisbury, and Gladstone's third, and briefest, administration began in February 1886. The measure had little hope of reaching the statute book; even if it got through the Commons (which, thanks to the Liberal Unionists, it did not), there was no chance of its being approved by the Lords, where the Tories predominated and absentee landlords were thick on the ground. When the Commons threw it out, Gladstone had no choice but to resign, and this time Salisbury was back in power for six years.

Many of Gladstone's contemporaries thought that the Grand Old Man (as he had become known, before the abbreviation was reversed and he became the Murderer Of Gordon) would retire: but the fires of righteousness still burned within him, and he planned to do nothing of the sort, despite being in his seventy-seventh year. He used the years of opposition to step up his crusade for social justice. He wanted more civil rights for the Irish; he supported the London Dock Strike of 1889 on the grounds that the wages dockers were paid were exploitative; and he began to make the case for a country so wealthy as Britain to consider old-age pensions, rather than consigning the indigent elderly to the workhouse after a lifetime of labour. In this way he set out the intellectual agenda for successors such as Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith and Lloyd George. He did, however, raise hackles: his radicalism having been too much for the Liberal Unionists, he now found himself accused by some of veering towards socialism in his old age, in his attacks on the greediness of capitalists.

Gladstone went to the country at the 1892 election on a programme spearheaded by a promise of Irish Home Rule and the disestablishment of the Scottish and Welsh churches. The Liberals won fewer seats again than the Tories, but the Tories lacked a majority, and were soon defeated in a vote of confidence; thus Gladstone, in August 1892 and to the Queen's horror, found himself prime minister for the fourth time. This time Home Rule passed the House of Commons, but was heavily defeated in the Lords in September 1893. By now it was clear not only that Gladstone's considerable powers were failing, but that his doctrinaire

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refusal to countenance greater public spending put him greatly out of step with the rest of his party. For example, his Cabinet wanted expansion of the navy to help keep growing German sea power in check; Gladstone would not have it, sticking to the principles he had exercised as Chancellor forty years earlier. He was also horrified by the proposal of his Chancellor, Sir William Harcourt, to impose death duties that would lead to the break-up of Britain's network of landed estates, and threaten the stewardship of that land. Similarly, he felt it was immoral to inflict a burden of taxation on so small a group of people: the rich, in his view, were as entitled to justice as the poor. His Cabinet opposed him on that too, and by February 1894 he recognised, at the age of eighty-four, that it was time for him to go. He was the oldest man ever to form a government in British history, and remains the oldest ever prime minister.

He left the premiership on 2 March, two days after his last audience with the Queen, who made a point of not thanking him for his services. Nor, having turned down an earldom, was he offered a peerage again. In his papers after his death was found an exasperated memorandum in which he expressed his bemusement about why the Queen was so relentlessly hostile to him; but then part of his Christian charity was that he never brought himself to see what an incipiently stupid, vain, narrow-minded and ignorant woman Victoria was.

He left Parliament at the 1895 election, and maintained the vigour of his mind as best he could, amid his massive library at Hawarden. He was well enough to travel to Cannes in 1897, where he encountered the Queen, who, like him, was there for her health: and civilities were observed to the extent that she shook hands with him for the first time, he thought, in fifty years. Friends who visited him found that his main political concern, in the era of Joe Chamberlain as Colonial Secretary, was the growth of jingoism and imperialism; he died months before that movement reached its nadir in the prosecution of the Second Boer War. His faculties gradually declined, and he died, aged eighty-eight, on 19 May 1898, after the extensive ministrations of the Church. To the Queen's disapproval he was accorded a state funeral in Westminster Abbey, and to her horror her son and grandson – the future kings Edward VII and George V – atoned for her beastly behaviour towards Gladstone by acting as pallbearers.

Gladstone has a claim to be the greatest of all our prime ministers, despite the failures of his second administration. He was certainly

morally titanic, in a way that puts him beyond equal. His greatness consists not just in the sincerity of his belief in public service, but in the correct application of his immense intellect. His most profound achievement came before he held the highest office, in persuading Peel to reform the Corn Laws, and thereby laying the foundations of Britain's prosperity for the rest of the nineteenth century. His first administration directed society away from advancement by patronage and towards advancement by merit, recognising the moral and economic imperative to maximise the potential of the country's human capital. The second administration expanded the franchise, recognising the inevitability of social progress; the third and fourth recognised the inevitability of Irish Home Rule. What a later prime minister called 'the forces of Conservatism' thwarted Gladstone in his aims, but this visionary's ideas for the extension of democracy and liberty were all achieved within a quarter-century of his death, and together comprise his legacy.

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Iain Dale's *The Prime Ministers: 55 Leaders, 55 Authors, 300 Years of History*, is available at a special discounted price to subscribers to the *Journal of Liberal History*: see inside front cover.

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