

Roots of Liberalism

James Moore introduces this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* on the early-nineteenth-century roots of Liberalism.

Early Liberalism – a



The first session of the House of Commons, on 5 February 1833, after the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832. In the foreground, the leading statesmen from the Lords: Grey, Melbourne and the Whigs on the left, Wellington and the Tories on the right. Sir George Hayter, oil on canvas. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

ONE OF THE curiosities of Liberal history is that there is no universally agreed date for when modern Liberalism or the Liberal Party began. The party celebrated its ‘official’ centenary in 1977 and produced all manner of mugs, pens and plates to celebrate this auspicious event. Some of these, no doubt, still lie in the attics of older Liberal Party members. However, this was an odd date to commemorate a ‘centenary’. 1877 marked the formation of the National Liberal Federation – a national network of Liberal Associations – but this was hardly the beginning of the national party. Palmerston had already been Liberal prime minister from 1859 to 1865, and Gladstone from 1868 to 1874. Many historians, therefore, look to 1859 as being the real moment that the Liberal Party was formed. On 6 June 1859, a meeting in Willis’ Rooms in St James Street, London, brought together a coalition of 274 Whigs, Peelites and Radicals, under Palmerston, to oust the minority Conservative

administration. The years that followed were ones in which the Liberal Party established its modern reputation: introducing the great reforming legislation of 1868–74, including the secret ballot in 1872, and the anti-corruption legislation of 1883, which established the electoral laws that are still the basis for our modern democracy.

Yet, in truth, the Liberal Party can trace its roots back to a much earlier period in the nineteenth century. Members of Parliament could be found calling themselves Liberals in the 1830s and 1840s. Palmerston’s road to Liberalism came through a faction called the Canningites or Liberal Tories in the 1820s. Palmerston’s first cabinet post was as a minister in Canning’s government in 1827, before he joined the Whigs in 1830. Further splits in the Tory Party provided additional strands of the future Liberal Party. Most famously, Peel’s support for the abolition of the Corn Laws and support for free trade made his followers natural allies of a Whig

a search for origins

Party committed to the principles of economic liberty, a key component of what would later be called classical liberal economics. It would be this commitment to free trade that would be one of the most important bonds that kept the Liberal parliamentary coalition together. Free trade laid the foundations for a broader belief in internationalism that became one of the strongest characteristics of the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats.

Of course, the story of Liberalism is much more than the story of parliamentarians. In this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, we stress that many of the roots of Liberalism lay outside parliament. In these pages, our authors examine aspects of Liberalism in the very early years of the nineteenth century, the days when Gladstone was still ‘the rising hope of those stern, unbending Tories’ and when the very term Liberal was often one of insult, rather than of approbation. While core Liberal beliefs – individual rights, freedom of religion, freedom of contract – predated the nineteenth century, the term Liberal only came into common parlance in the 1820s. As our authors suggest, it was a cultural as well as a political label, indicating a philosophical and artistic outlook, as much as a defined political position. It represented a tendency and a state of mind: a willingness to be open to change and a desire to challenge social and political orthodoxy.

Many historians have viewed Liberalism as a series of intellectual and cultural strands wound together – strands that occasionally came apart during particular crises. Our present writers address this metaphor in a number of ways. First, they identify some of the key moments in which individuals self-identified with specifically Liberal tendencies or attitudes and, in so doing, formed communities of similarly minded Liberals, aside and apart from an orthodox mainstream. Secondly, our writers identify specific circumstances which created opportunities for social, cultural or political collaboration between Liberals. Thirdly, they identify the specific contemporary issues on which

Liberals united and which formed the basis for future associations and collaborations.

There is an inevitable tendency to view early-nineteenth-century Liberalism through the prism of its later successes. One should, of course, guard against teleological assumptions about the ‘inevitability’ of the rise of a Liberal force in British politics. Although British forms of Liberalism and Liberal parties were replicated in the colonies and in many European countries, the emergence of what became known as a ‘Liberal interest’ was, in many respects, the product of a complex series of political and cultural struggles that arose in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars and within the context of an emerging industrial society divided by class and religious denomination. While Liberal leaders offered national and civic visions that were designed to overcome these divisions and tensions, the Liberal tendency in politics was also able to benefit from the power of class and religious identity to mobilise its support, whether it be for the passing of the 1832 Reform Act, the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act or the repeal of the Corn Laws. The rise of a new urban Dissenting middle class provided both a ready political constituency and an opportunity for Liberal forces. Yet the ‘onward march’ of Liberalism concealed a reality that many were still excluded from the franchise – that these early Liberal successes were built on an electoral system that excluded working-class Liberal supporters. Liberal working-class non-electors continued to campaign for more radical reforms and, in many areas, helped foster a division between Moderate and Radical Liberalism that continued into the late nineteenth century. It was not uncommon for a two-member Liberal borough to be ‘managed’ in a way that allowed Moderate Liberals and Radical Liberals to each nominate an MP. Whether these arrangements represented the success of pragmatism or a long-term structural weakness for the party will be debated by historians for many years to come.

Freethinking and a willingness to challenge social, cultural and political orthodoxy

Of course, the story of Liberalism is much more than the story of parliamentarians. In this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, we stress that many of the roots of Liberalism lay outside parliament.

While core Liberal beliefs – individual rights, freedom of religion, freedom of contract – predated the nineteenth century, the term Liberal only came into common parlance in the 1820s. As our authors suggest, it was a cultural as well as a political label, indicating a philosophical and artistic outlook, as much as a defined political position.

are some of the enduring characteristics of Liberalism. This can be seen at the heart of Ian Macgregor Morris's study of the 'Pisan Triumvirate' and the story of the journal *The Liberal*. The figures behind this journal were three of the most notorious and celebrated figures of the early nineteenth century: Leigh Hunt, editor of radical newspaper *The Examiner*, and the poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. Their Liberalism had its roots in the culture and practices of the eighteenth century, but it is one that, in some ways, speaks to a twenty-first-century audience more easily than the more austere, religiously influenced Liberalism of the Gladstonian era. In the pages of *The Liberal* is a world view that is cosmopolitan, individualistic, tolerant and very open-minded. Influenced by the libertinism of its day, it is a liberalism of action and performance; one willing to scandalise and shock. It expressed high cultural ideas, while revealing the absurdities of modern political life and the hypocrisy and self-interested nature of the established church and the monarchy. Perhaps most radically of all, it raised questions rather than providing answers – challenging readers to think and formulate answers from within themselves. In doing so, the journal provided an intellectual manifesto for the age and identified the term 'Liberal' with a very specific cultural and political worldview.

Each member of the 'Pisan Triumvirate' made other important contributions to the history of Liberalism. Shelley's early death in a boating accident did not prevent him from becoming an icon of Liberal romantic thought. Byron's support for the struggle for Greek national independence, and his death for the cause, made him a heroic symbol of Liberalism, not just in Greece, but in all countries seeking national liberation from a colonial oppressor. Leigh Hunt made his name back home in Britain, as a Liberal critic and parliamentary reformer. It was this latter struggle that was to become one of the defining features of early-nineteenth-century Liberalism. Robert Poole reminds us of the violence used to put down popular political protests and, in particular, the political consequences of the famous Peterloo massacre of 1819. Ian Cawood's review of books on Peterloo and the report of the 2019 meeting of the Liberal Democrat History Group reveals how contentious and controversial this incident was in modern British political history. The killing of peaceful protestors by armed mounted militia shocked a public that increasingly feared the growth of a bloated military state in the years after Waterloo. Polite opinion

was roused to raise petitions in protest, rallying behind a Whig Party who charged the Tory establishment with being complicit in the violence. Although the Whig Party failed in its immediate attempt to either change the parliamentary system or even eject Lord Liverpool's government, the popular agitation created by Peterloo laid the foundations for the creation of a new Liberal public that rejected coercion and violence and favoured at least modest political change. The Whigs returned to power a little over a decade later and the passing of their 1832 Reform Act owed much to a new Liberal sentiment within the rising middle classes – one that would continue to grow and form a core part of the electoral base of mid-Victorian Liberalism.

The political alignments of the 1820s were, however, very complex. Stephen Lee reminds us that some of the key figures of mid-Victorian Liberalism were, in the 1820s, still part of the Tory governments that resisted reform. By the latter part of that decade, there emerged a group of 'Liberal Tories' who sympathised with George Canning's foreign policy towards national independence movements in South America and his support for Catholic emancipation and the removal of the restrictions on Roman Catholics participating in public life. However, as Lee points out, Canning was also a Tory and often adopted apparently 'Liberal' positions for reasons of good politics. Canning and his followers sat somewhat pragmatically between traditional Tory positions and new Liberal ideas on freedom of conscience and support for the spread of representative political institutions. However, after Canning's death, some of his notable followers contributed to the development of Liberal positions in the Whig Party and, of course, Palmerston became the first Liberal Party prime minister. The history of the Canningites and Liberal Tories shows us how the language of Liberalism and Liberal ideas had begun to permeate mainstream political discourse, and how this helped facilitate the future political alliances of the 1830s and 1840s.

Michael Winstanley's article on Lancashire politics after 1832 reminds us of the importance of local politics if we are to understand long-term political change and how Liberal politics was consolidated in the two decades after the First Reform Act. The political responses to 1832 were complex. For some Liberals it was a political triumph that guaranteed constitutional stability, while for many Radical Liberals 1832 was not a triumph but a grave disappointment. As John Belchem reminds us, Henry Hunt, the principal speaker at the Peterloo demonstration, condemned the Whigs'

‘betrayal’ of radical reformers, as the working class were left without the vote. Many of Hunt’s supporters continued to embrace political Liberalism, but turned to Chartism – the first mass, organised, working-class political movement – to redress their immediate grievances. Mass demonstrations and direct action became the tools of the non-voter. But what of those who did have the vote? In the days before the secret ballot, poll books offer us a great opportunity to look into the minds of voters and understand the patterns of their allegiances. The individualism and freethinking culture of the rising middle classes drew them to the Liberal cause and provided the basis for much of the party’s support. Religious cleavages were also important, although religious Nonconformity’s alliance with Liberalism was not unqualified. As Winstanley notes, older Nonconformist movements – ‘Old Dissent’, such as Quakerism and Unitarianism – tended to be more closely bound to early Liberalism than newer Nonconformist denominations. It was not until later in the nineteenth century that newer denominations, such as Wesleyan Methodism, became closely associated with the Liberal movement. The Church of England – often jokingly called the ‘Conservative Party at prayer’ – remained closely associated with Toryism, not least because of Liberalism’s association with Dissent and Irish Catholic political causes. The patterns

of religious allegiances in Lancashire help explain some of the successes and failures of the Liberal Party in the county, but also highlight how denominational and sectarian differences scarred local politics to the end of the century.

Yet there is also a paradox here. For all its later associations with religious Nonconformity, the success of early-nineteenth-century Liberalism lay in its ability to create an alliance between a wide range of social groups. While it appealed to religious Dissenters in the new industrial towns, many of its parliamentary leaders were Anglican men of the shires. ‘Liberal’ was a label that could be adopted by aristocrats, bankers, mill-owners and working men. It represented not a doctrine, but a tendency, perhaps even a frame of mind. It became the language of those who valued freethinking, individualism, cosmopolitanism, tolerance and the determination to modernise. For these reasons, it soon came to represent the spirit of the mid-Victorian age and produced the intellectual and cultural legacies that we still enjoy today.

Dr James Moore is a lecturer in modern history at the University of Leicester. He is author of The Transformation of Urban Liberalism and editor of Corruption in Urban Politics and Society. He is a former Liberal Democrat councillor and parliamentary candidate and a member of the committee of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

‘Liberal’ was a label that ... represented not a doctrine, but a tendency, perhaps even a frame of mind. It became the language of those who valued freethinking, individualism, cosmopolitanism, tolerance and the determination to modernise.

Liberal History

350 years of party history in 32 pages

The essential introduction to Liberal history. Now available in print, Kindle and audio versions.

Starting with the earliest stirrings of Liberal thought during the seventeenth century, this booklet traces Liberal history through the emergence of the Whigs, the formation of the Liberal Party, the ascendancy of Gladstone, the New Liberalism of Asquith and Lloyd George, dissension and eclipse by Labour, the decades of decline followed by successive waves of Liberal revival, the alliance with the SDP and merger in 1988, and the roller-coaster ride of the Liberal Democrats, from near-obliteration in 1989 to entry into government in 2010 to electoral disaster in 2015 and the road to recovery thereafter. Up to date as of spring 2020.

- **Print version.** Full price £2.
- Order via our online shop (www.liberalhistory.org.uk/shop/), or by post from LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN (cheque payable at ‘Liberal Democrat History Group’, add £0.70 P&P).
- The booklet makes an ideal gift for new party members; a 50 per cent discount is available for **bulk orders** of 40 or more copies. Order via our online shop, as above.
- **Kindle version.** Price £2. Order direct from Amazon. This version up to date as of spring 2020.
- **Audio version.** Order direct from Amazon, Audible, Audiobooks or Apple Books. This version up to date as of summer 2018.

