



Editorial

W. E. Gladstone: Lessons and Legacy

One hundred years ago William Ewart Gladstone died. He was buried amid scenes which bore a full tribute to the place that he held in the affections of the people. He was a man of immense energies who participated in most of the major theological controversies of his time, published extensively on classical studies, rescued his wife's family's financially troubled estate and felled trees until after he was eighty.

In between times he was an MP for more than sixty years, Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time when Britain's prosperity was greater than any other nation, and Prime Minister four times as Britain approached the height of its empire. He did not shrink from tackling the major issues, whether controlling government expenditure, reforming the civil service or seeking the answer to the Irish or Bosnian questions. He stepped down from office in his

eighties, ostensibly on health grounds but in reality in a squabble with colleagues over restraining military expenditure and challenging the House of Lords. His governments extended the vote, introduced the secret ballot, provided state-funded primary education and disestablished the Church of Ireland.

Chairing a meeting of the Liberal Democrat History Group in July 1998, David Gladstone noted that W. E. Gladstone's reputation had changed from being that of a piece of Victoriana like St Pancras Station, through the media interest in his rescue of prostitutes, to being again a source of political inspiration. Mrs Thatcher declared in a Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture that the Conservatism she favoured was best described as: 'Liberal in the old fashioned sense. I mean the Liberalism of Mr Gladstone.' David Gladstone noted that Gordon Brown regarded Gladstone as a role model but that the Liberal Democrats had been curiously silent on his legacy. It seemed to him that Liberals throughout the century 'have never quite known what to do with the Grand Old Man's legacy'.

This edition of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* cannot hope to provide a full answer to this problem, but we seek to make a start. Our aim is to show how Mr G tackled some of the major issues of his day which are still of relevance, to give some clues to his personality and, through Conrad Russell's article, to demonstrate his importance to the Liberal Democrats today.

Tony Little
Guest Editor

Gladstone on ...

'You cannot fight against the future. Time is on our side. The great social forces which move onward in their might and majesty ... are against you. They are marshalled on our side.' (Speech on the Reform Bill in the House of Commons, 27 April 1866.)

'I will venture to say, that upon the one great class of subjects, the largest and the most weighty of them all, where the leading and determining considerations that ought to lead to a conclusion are truth, justice, and humanity – upon these, gentlemen, all the world over, I will back the masses against the classes.' (Speech in Liverpool, 28 June 1886.)

'No Chancellor of the Exchequer is worth his salt who is not ready to save what are meant by candle-ends and cheese-parings in the cause of his country.' (Speech in Edinburgh, 29 November 1879.)

'Your business is not to govern the country but it is, if you think fit, to call to account those who do govern it.' (Speech to the House of Commons, 29 January 1869.)

'Let the Turks now carry away their abuses in the only possible manner, namely by carrying off themselves ... one and all, bag and baggage, shall I hope clear out from the province they have desolated and profaned.' (*Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, 1876.)

'What, because a man is what is called a leader to a party, does that constitute him a censor and a judge of faith and morals? I will not accept it. It would make life intolerable.' (On being asked to condemn Parnell publicly after the divorce case. Quoted by R. Blake in *Gladstone, Politics and Religion*, ed. P. Jagger, 1985.)

'I was brought up to distrust and dislike liberty. I learned to believe in it. That is the key to all my changes.' (To John Morley, quoted in *Gladstone's Boswell*, ed. A. Briggs, 1984.)

The **Liberal Democrat History Group** promotes the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and the SDP. The Group organises discussion meetings and publishes the quarterly **Journal of Liberal Democrat History** and other occasional publications.

For more information, including details of back issues of the *Journal*, tape records of meetings, *Mediawatch*, *Thesiswatch* and *Research in Progress* services, see our web site: www.dbrack.dircon.co.uk/ldhg.

Hon President: Earl Russell. Chair: Duncan Brack.

Cover illustrations:

Gladstone in 1833 and 1868 (top); 1880 and 1892 (bottom).