Gladstone: The Colossus of the Nineteenth Century - Politics Then and Now

***Roy Jenkins,** giving the Guildhall Lecture to an invited audience in June, took the contrast between the patterns of political life in the nineteenth century and the late twentieth century as his central theme.*

Gladstone is a wonderful vehicle for such comparisons because of the meticulousness of his diary. It was not a journal, but a calendar, an engagement diary – *'an account book to God for the all-precious gift of time'*, as he put it. And as he assumed that God was interested not merely in how he spent his days but in how he spent each quarter of an hour of them, the diaries are an exceptional source book for patterns of life.

The main myth that they kill is that the House of Commons in the second half of the nineteenth century was an undemanding occupation for gentlemen of leisure. So far as ministers and leading members of the opposition were concerned Parliament, as distinct from Whitehall departmental routine, was more onerous *during the session* in the second half of the nineteenth century than it is today. And even in the case of the much larger number of MPs who saw their duties as being to listen and to vote rather than to speak, their assiduity in providing an attentive audience throughout mammoth orations was far greater than is the case with the perfunctory speeches and empty benches of today.

The key phrase in the preceding paragraph is however 'during the session'. Nineteenth century parliaments normally spent half the year in session and half the year in recess. The recesses were long but the sessions were very strenuous, and if anything they were slightly longer than the recesses. It could be 6½ or even 7 months as against 5½ or 5 but it was practically never more. The essential basis of this almost even divide was the avoidance of autumn sessions. And this was nearly always achieved. Between 1855 and 1870 there was only one very brief exception. That was in 1867 when there was a ten days' reassembly to vote credits for an expedition against the Emperor of Ethiopia. After the July election of 1865 the House did not meet, even to chose a Speaker, until February 1866, although Palmerston, Prime Minister and a member since 1807, had died suddenly in October. He had to wait four months for his tributes.

This habit of relaxed autumns was violently broken in 1893, Gladstone's last year in office, when the second Home Rule Bill and its consequences caused Parliament to sit with only an October break from the end of January 1893, to March 1894, with no summer recess and only four days off for Christmas. Although these horrors were never exactly to be repeated, the old habits broadly died with the turn of the century. 1907 and 1913 were the only twentieth century years ever to be without an autumn session.

While these habits persisted, however, the parliamentary year, like the parliamentary day, was slung late. The English pattern was for the summer, despite the Thames often stinking in July, to be for London and the autumn and early winter for the country. Parliament did not even aim to rise before the symbolic 12th August, and quite often missed that target by a week or two. The new session typically began in the first week of February.

For the next 25 weeks or so, with short Easter and Whitsun breaks, the programme was strenuous. Mondays, Tuesday, Thursday and Fridays were full parliamentary days. Wednesdays were the equivalent of modern Fridays, when major government business was not taken and the House adjourned early – but early should be interpreted as in time to dine out in London and not to get away for the weekend just after lunch. 'The weekend', a term which has since invaded French but was then many decades short of establishing itself in English, was accorded little protection. Saturday sittings were not regular, but not very exceptional either. I experienced two in my 39-year span in the House of Commons, one for the Suez expedition in 1956 and one for the Falklands War in 1982. A mid-nineteenth century politician would have experienced twice as many in the course of an average session. Furthermore, even if the House was not sitting, Saturday was then the regular Cabinet day. Palmerston habitually summoned his for 1.00pm on that day, thereby killing at one blow both the possibility of lunch (of which more later) as well as of the weekend. And Gladstone, in his first government (1868-74) continued the practice.

Nevertheless the habit of going away for brief 'Saturdays to Mondays' (there was no other phrase for them) did develop quite strongly in the 1850s and 1860s. It could not be very far, but in the Thames Valley and other parts of the Home Counties the improvement in the speed and reliability of the railways from about the mid-century point meant that a journey like that to Taplow for Cliveden (then owned by the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland), where Gladstone was a frequent guest, took very little longer that it would today. On the other hand, long journeys would not have made sense. There were a lot of smuts and no restaurant cars. It was the 1880s before meals on wheels became at all widespread. And the great houses of the North and Scotland were reserved for the recess, with visits then more on a weekly than a weekend basis.

A short Home Counties jaunt, however, particularly if it could start off after a Saturday afternoon Cabinet, was much facilitated by the fact that it was rarely thought necessary to get back before midday on the Monday. Indeed a balancing feature with Victorian politicians for their willingness to sit in the House of Commons late at night was their reluctance to do much serious work not merely on Monday but on any other morning. Gladstone's favourite form of entertaining – and he was far from alone in this – was the breakfast party. He habitually gave about a dozen a session, with about the same number of guests. They bore no relation to the modern American-influenced business breakfast with orange juice and yoghourt and not much else at 8.00 or even earlier.

Nor indeed were they much more similar to Lloyd George's famous persuasive breakfasts at first 11 and then 10 Downing Street half a century later. These were a little but not much later than 8.00, and were a matter of bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade and ear-bending. Gladstone's took place in his own grand house at 11 Carlton House Terrace and not in the liver-coloured and unesteemed Downing Street, were at 10.30am, were mixed and essentially social in purpose, and involved entrées and wine. They were not all that different from the *déjeuners* at the Café Anglais in Paris, of which the Prince of Wales was so fond at that time. Moreover they did not end until noon, and even after that Gladstone at least was very inclined to go on a picture-viewing or porcelain-buying expedition.

The great time-saving, however, was that luncheon as either a nutritional or a social occasion did not effectively exist until the last twenty, almost the last ten, years of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s Gladstone's diaries only mention two luncheons, one in 1863 and one in 1867, and both of them on a Sunday and therefore a bit outside the pattern. The hours between one and three, in complete contrast with Churchill's habits, even under the worst stresses of World War II, were free for ministerial meetings or other business.

The hours kept by the Commons in its period of classical glory were still more bizarre and irrational than those which evoke much criticism in its present-day decline.

There are three further glosses to be put on this pattern for the first half of the day, that is to say before the hour of the sitting of House of Commons – which was 4.15pm.

(1) The emergence of lunch was a function of the latening of the fashionable hour of dinner. In the earlier part of the century it had been 6.00 or even 5.00pm in London, in the country sometimes as early as 3.00. By the 1860s it was 7.00 or 7.30 (in London) and then by the end of the 1870s it settled down at 8.00 or 8.30, where it has remained for nearly 120 years, in sharp contrast with the shifting pattern of the previous decades.

(2) Ministers in those days, although they often worked very hard – Palmerston for instance conducting a large part of the diplomatic business of the Foreign Office in his own beautiful handwriting – did not work routinely in their departments in a way that is now thought natural. Gladstone was indisputably a very hard worker. In his pre-Budget periods when Chancellor he was said to average 17 hours a day, although I believe that to be an exaggeration. But he hardly ever sat in his room in the Old Treasury building at the corner of Downing Street and Whitehall, working through Exchequer papers with his civil servants on hand. Even during the London six months he did it much more from his own house, and therefore mixing it up with his own private reading and correspondence. And in the recesses he – and others – rarely thought it necessary to be in London and at the Treasury unless the Cabinet was meeting.

(3) Gladstone had the gift – although one which was not without its disadvantages – of being able to make immensely long speeches with the minimum of preparation. In the days when I delivered what I regarded as major House of Commons speeches – mostly 9.30–10.00pm wind-ups with a full house, which existed 25 years ago as it does not today – my ratio of preparation to delivery time was about 15 to 1. Gladstone's for his habitual 2½ hour orations, although they sometimes extended into the fourth and even once or twice into the fifth hour, was about 1 to 3, 1 hour of preparation to 3 of delivery. This economy of his own time, combined with profligacy of his listeners' time, tended to a perisphrastic style, although he was never just a windbag, but it gave him many hours of reading and writing time which would otherwise have been consumed by preparing reams of text.

The majority of these massive speeches were made late at night, many of them after midnight. The hours kept by the Commons in its period of classical glory were still more bizarre and irrational than those which evoke much criticism in its present-day decline. It may not have troubled members before the late afternoon, but it then proceeded to keep them there far into the night, with many of the most crucial and strongly attended divisions occurring at one or two in the morning. An early Victorian example was the Don Pacifico debate of June 1850. This was the greatest parliamentary set-piece of the nineteenth century, the equivalent of the twentieth century's Norway debate of 7th–8th May 1940. They were similar in that almost every member of note spoke on each occasion and that the phrases used by at least some of them carried a continuing resonance. They were different in that much more followed from the Norway occasion than from the Pacifico one. Pacifico was just a debate, although a great one, with few consequences except for the enhancement of the reputation of some (notably Palmerston) and the decline of that of some others. Norway changed the government from Chamberlain to

Churchill, and maybe the whole course of Britain's history.

There was another difference which is still more relevant to the purpose of the lecture. The 1940 debate lasted over only two days with a cut-off point of 11.00pm on each night. The 1850 one lasted over four with no cut-off point. Palmerston's *Civis Romanus sum* speech began just as on the second day the short summer night was falling and continued until a rosy dawn 4½ hours later. Gladstone on the next night was shorter – barely three hours – and sat down just before two o'clock. Equally, in the first great Disraeli–Gladstone duel in December 1852, when Disraeli, then a short-term Chancellor, was winding up (as he thought) the debate on his Budget with a 2 hour 40 minute speech which concluded at 1.00am, he (and the House) were amazed when Gladstone, pretending to be spontaneously outraged by Disraeli's flippancy, but in fact having devoted more than usual preparation to his words, decided to preempt the custom by which a Chancellor had the last word on his own Budget, and gave the House another two hours, finishing only just after 3.00am. Then there followed a division, with 95% of members voting, which destroyed both the Budget and the Government.

A DIFFICULT PART.

W. E. G. (*as Hamlet*). "THE TIME IS OUT OF JOINT;—O CURSÈD SPITE, THAT EVER I WAS BORN TO SET IT RIGHT!"—Act I., Sc. 5.

No subsequent Prime Minister, except for Baldwin, ever spent nearly so much time in the House of Commons. But Baldwin spent it mostly in the lobbies, the corridors, the smoking room and the dining room, sniffing around at the atmosphere, whereas Gladstone spent it almost entirely on the Treasury bench. He was never very good at sniffing the atmosphere, and indeed claimed that in the whole of his 62½ years in the House of Commons he only once dined there. This must have been more on the grounds of detachment than of gastronomy, for in spite or because of his reputation for chewing every morsel several times over, he did not much care what he ate, although he did it heartily and washed it down fairly copiously, with more regard for the quality of the wine than of the food.

Mostly he walked across the park to his house at 6 Carlton Gardens or later 11 Carlton House Terrace for a brief dinner. The House normally adjourned, but only between 7.30 and 8.30, and even if he were dining out, except on a Wednesday, he was normally back by ten o'clock. This raises a mystery about reconciling the great number of courses which were offered and sometimes consumed in the nineteenth century with the speed with which they must have been served. As an example, when Speaker Denison dined with Palmerston in 1865, which was the 81st and last year of his (Palmerston's) life, he (Denison) was much struck by the Prime Minister consuming two plates of turtle soup, a dish of cod with oyster sauce, a paté, two entrées, a plate of mutton, a slice of ham and a portion of pheasant.

A counterbalancing factor to the long hours was the almost complete freedom, in session and recess alike, from constituency duties. Elections could be rough, rumbustious, and above all expensive affairs. The expenditure of the equivalent of £¼ or even £½ million in today's money was by no means unusual. They were also uncertain affairs, with the added hazard that, after each general election there were always quite a lot – a dozen or 20 would be typical – unseatings on petition for corrupt practices. There was a delicate balance to be struck. If you did not spend enough, particularly in a constituency with an 'Eatanswill' tradition, you did not get elected. If you spent too much you got unseated on petition. This happened to quite a lot of respectable people: it was what their agents did, as well as themselves. Gladstone never had such trouble, but his father and two of his brothers did.

Such hazards and expenses apart, however, constituencies were remarkably undemanding. Gladstone sat for Greenwich – his fourth constituency – from 1868 to 1880. He never liked the borough and they never showed vast enthusiasm for him, electing him in 1874 only in second place to *'a gin distiller'*. Despite it being only seven miles from Westminster he visited it only twice in the 6-year Parliament of 1868–74. Then he did three vast open-air meetings in the '74 general election. Then he did another such meeting in September 1876 and pouring rain. That was it. He never went there again, even to say goodbye.

The Queen in 1872 played a rather good joke on him (although ironical teasing was not exactly her style) by offering him a grace-and-favour house in Greenwich Park to *'ease the discharge of his constituency duties'*. He declined, courteously but firmly.

After Greenwich he went to Midlothian and was elected there in 1880 following one of the most famous barn-storming campaigns in history. The election over, however, he did not return for three years. And this remained his pattern to the end. He treated constituencies like an exigent hunting man (which he was not) treated his horses. He called for a new one whenever he felt the old one was tiring. Nor was he wholly exceptional in this respect. Until Joseph Chamberlain, with his special identification with Birmingham, no major nineteenth century politician remained faithful to one constituency throughout his political life. Peel sat for Cashel (an unreformed Co. Tipperary borough), Oxford University, Westbury and Tamworth; Palmerston for Newport (Isle of Wight), Cambridge University, Bletchingley, South Hampshire and Tiverton. Disraeli sat for Maidstone and Shrewsbury before settling down in Buckinghamshire. Chamberlain, with his 38 years as member for Birmingham, set an uxorious pattern which was taken up by Lloyd George with his 52 years as member for Caernarvon Boroughs, and then followed by such diverse figures as Anthony Eden, R. A. Butler, Harold Wilson, James Callaghan and Margaret Thatcher.

So long, however, as constituencies were treated as (maybe expensive) conveniences rather than as marriages made in heaven or even as serious obligations, this was a major counterbalancing relief to the strenuousness of the session and only a small or non-existent interruption to the broad acres of leisure time in the recesses. What did politicians mostly do during this six months? Some, perhaps the majority, retired to their own broad acres, or those of their friends and passed the autumn and most of the winter in estate management and country pursuits, intermingled for a few with serious intellectual pursuits. In those pre-skiing and pre-beach life days (Gladstone liked invigorating sea-bathing but was quite willing to do it in the autumn) the sporting recreations of the British ruling classes made the country more attractive in the shortening days than in the spring and summer. Even Gladstone's tree-felling, which was his substitute for shooting and hunting, could not be done for silvicultural reasons until August.

They also travelled. In office they hardly moved outside Britain (which did not include Ireland) unless it was to go to a French or German spa for a cure. Castlereagh had been quite exceptional in going to Vienna in 1815 and to the subsequent mini-congresses which followed in the wake of Vienna. Canning, when he called the new world into existence to redress the balance of the old, certainly did not do so from the soil of South America. Indian Secretaries did not go to India, Foreign Secretaries did not cross the Channel on business, and Colonial Secretaries did not go to the colonies. Joseph Chamberlain in this last category again broke new ground when he spent the winter of 1902–03 on *'the illimitable veldt'* – and came home to destroy the Unionist Government by his conversion to imperial preference.

When they did travel, however, which was mostly in opposition and in the autumn and winter, they still did so on an ample scale. The spirit of the grand tour lingered into at any rate the third quarter of the nineteenth century, even though railways had then transformed the actual journeys. Thus Gladstone, after his longest continuous period in office,, which was as Chancellor in the Palmerston government and its brief Russell epilogue from 1859 to 1866, celebrated his release by going for four months to Rome. It was the sixth of his nine long visits to Italy.

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These, then, are some of the main differences between the patterns of political life in the second halves of the last two centuries. Politics has become much more professional for the great mass of members, but the calling has become less respected. Parliament has become less demanding for the leading participants, except that the rigid division of the halves of the years, like one side of the moon and the other, has ceased. The hours have become a good deal less bizarre, although still striking most people and other countries as distinctly eccentric. Speeches have become much shorter, but paradoxically, the numbers willing to sit and listen to them, both in Parliament and in the country, much smaller. Politicians have become intellectually narrower. Now they nearly all write (or at least publish) their memoirs, but few write anything else. In the nineteenth century political autobiographies published during the author's lifetime were effectively non-existent, but quite a high proportion of the leading figures wrote works of scholarship, as Gladstone did on Homer, on the odes of Horace, and on theology.

Was the country then better governed? Instinctively we probably all think 'yes'. but that is too big a subject for this lecture. The country's position in the world was certainly stronger and the national mood was more self-confident, but there are issues much wider than political habits here involved.

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