

Reports

Religion and the Liberal Party

Evening meeting, July 1997,
with Alan Beith MP and Jonathan Parry
Report by *Nick South*

In *The Optimists*, his study of Victorian Liberalism, Ian Bradley begins his chapter on 'The Nonconformist Conscience' with Gladstone's comment in 1877 that 'nonconformity supplies the backbone of English liberalism' – and suggests that this view would have been shared by supporters and critics of Victorian nonconformity alike.

Some Liberals, however, believed that their political creed had been made too 'puritanical and provincial' by the nonconformists; some nonconformists believed their religion had been compromised and subordinated to the demands of politicians. Nonconformists and Liberals may have been bound together by a 'mutual need and a certain mutual respect', but the relationship, Bradley suggests, was not always an easy one.

This tension lay at the heart of the historian Jonathan Parry's analysis of the relationship between Liberals and dissenters when he spoke at the History Group AGM in July. But Parry's conclusion was more damning: that all through the nineteenth century, the Liberal Party had to appeal to more than just radical nonconformists, and that religion was a divisive force, hindering party unity and damaging its electoral prospects. Indeed, he argued, the Liberal Party's worst electoral experiences in the nineteenth century occurred when the middle classes were frightened away by radical dissent.

His analysis began in the 1830s. The broadening of the political class after the Great Reform Act made new coalition-building essential. As the two-party system firmed up in the 1830s, and Tories and Whigs di-

vided on the key issues of the day, by far the most controversial of these issues were religious. By the end of the 1830s, the Whigs were identified with dissenters and Irish Catholics, and the Tories with die-hard churchmen. As the influence of the middle classes grew after 1832, so did the influence of dissenters in the majority of large towns. They had real grievances – over church rates, their exclusion from Oxford and Cambridge, compulsory Anglican marriage rites, and the social stigma that flowed from this discrimination.

Whig leaders were most sympathetic to these dissenting concerns, at least in the abstract. The Whig mythology of the state as a sink of corruption – a self-sustaining belief through the years of opposition at the start of the nineteenth century – gave Whigs and dissenters a shared disdain for the power and social stranglehold of church and state, squire and parson. There was also a younger, more intellectual group of Whigs, who admired the rational and intellectual vigour of dissenters, especially on education. The most prominent of these was Lord John Russell, who led the attempts at religious and educational reform in the 1830s.

This, Parry argued, was the main reason for the Tory revival towards the end of the 1830s. But the die had been cast. While some lower middle-class dissenters, suspicious of the political establishment which included the Whigs, devoted their energies to voluntarism, for the next 20 years the broad body of dissenters found themselves allied to the Liberal Party.

If, pre-1867, political liberals and religious dissenters were brought together by the latter's practical grievances, post-1867, with most of these resolved, the bond between nonconformists and Gladstone's Liberal Party was increasingly built around the shared language of conscience, morality and the crusade. In some ways, the pattern of this second period was similar to that of the first. The broadening of the franchise in 1867 excited radicals, and dissenters sprang to life, particularly over the issue of disestablishment. Gladstone's commitment in 1868 to disestablishment of the Church of Ireland was seen by dissenters as a prelude to the disestablishment of the Church in England, Scotland and Wales.

But this did not happen, for two reasons. The first success, in England at least, was that the dissenters' increasing enthusiasm and activism on the issue frightened middle class Anglicans. Combined with the 1870 Education Act, this roused the Anglican community, revived the Conservatives, and led, in 1874, to the Conservatives' first clear-cut election victory since the 1840s.

The second reason for the failure of disestablishment, Parry argued, was that nonconformists themselves were unenthusiastic about legislation in general in the second half of the nineteenth century. In part, this was because so many dissenters were locked into an attitude that everything the state did was bad. In part, it was simply because, by the late nineteenth century, there were so few practical dissenting grievances left. Marriage, deaths, university entrance tests – all had been dealt with. Disestablishment was still there as an

issue, but it was an abstract one, not a practical one, and the most respected dissenters were not particularly committed.

Parry went on to argue that, in the absence of practical dissenting grievances, what is interesting about the second half of the nineteenth century is how often the established church and nonconformists seemed to find themselves on the same side – for example, in urban communities. Disestablishment, many felt, would actually weaken the ability of the Christian church as a whole to

conformist concerns – such as temperance reform – this was usually at the expense of support from other quarters. In the final analysis, the only way Gladstone could keep the different groups of Liberal supporters together was by quashing the radical dissenter demands, and relying on moral tone and language to keep them on board.

Alan Beith then took up the story, concentrating on religion and the Liberal Party in the twentieth century. He began by emphasising the party's appeal, not just to non-

preoccupied with running their own congregations in a declining denomination. Nonconformists whose backgrounds led them naturally into trade unionism had little affinity with the Liberal Party – and the drift of Methodists, in particular, into the Labour movement via the unions was increased by the attractions of the Christian Socialist movement.

For all these reasons, the influence of nonconformity in the Liberal Party diminished. And yet nonconformists remained extremely important in the survival and revival of the party. On one level, this was due to the basis for recruitment which the chapels provided, especially in the west country. Alan Beith recalled his decision to join the party, as a young teenager after the Torrington byelection. He looked up who to contact and discovered that it was the Sunday School supervisor. When he approached him and asked to join, the supervisor commented that 'no-one has done that for a while!' To build up branches, they went round the chapels which were known not to have links with the Labour Party.

There was an important affinity on another level, too, and that was through the Biblical idea of the 'righteous remnant' (Isaiah 9, Romans 11) – a natural attitude among post-war Liberals, and characteristic of nonconformists' view of their own religious status.

Finally, Beith argued that in policy and ideological terms, nonconformists in the party played an important role in asserting the distinctiveness of liberalism from socialism. While the main ideological influence on twentieth century liberalism may have been the 'social liberal' agenda, this was not an exclusive agenda. Those nonconformists who had not gone over to the Labour Party, and who remained with the Liberals, knew why they had done so. In socialism, they saw a statism to which they were deeply hostile, on religious as well as political grounds – and this hostility was rooted in the nineteenth cen-

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be a missionary force. So in England, at least, pressure for disestablishment weakened – though it endured in Scotland and Wales, where it was tied up with other issues.

In the 1870s, Parry argued, there was little that dissenters actually wanted from the Liberal Party – a good job, he suggested, since the party was led by then by Gladstone, a great churchman who was highly dubious about disestablishment. The rapport between Liberals and nonconformists by then was less to do with sharing the same grievances, and more to do with sharing the same language – not the language of dissent, but of the crusade. It was evangelical politics which lay at the heart of the Liberal Party's relationship with dissenters in this phase – most notably, of course, over the Bulgarian atrocities, but on a wide range of other issues as well. Gladstone's affinity with nonconformists, Parry suggested, was not because of the issues, but because he talked about them. His speeches were like nonconformist sermons – and he bonded with his nonconformist audience because he told them how virtuous they were!

But as the Liberal Party found, whenever it got too close to non-

conformists, but also to other religious denominations, and then focused on how the party's 'special relationship' with nonconformists had fared over the last 100 years.

The 1906 Liberal landslide resulted from many factors. But the party's nonconformist supporters, fired up by the education issue, put a lot of passion into the election, and saw the victory very much as theirs. Their enthusiasm after 1906 diminished somewhat, and they saw the loss of the Birrell reforms as a serious setback in the new government.

After World War One, the influence of nonconformists in the party diminished significantly. In part, of course, this was due to the post-1918 decline of the Liberal Party; in part due to the decline of nonconformity from its peak of support around 1910–12. Nonconformity provided an increasingly weak reference point in a period when the religious division that dominated politics was between Irish Protestants and Catholics.

As the numbers of nonconformists declined, so distinctly Liberal groups such as the Scottish Free Church and the United Methodist Church disappeared – and active nonconformists were increasingly

tury and in beliefs which fostered such an affinity between nonconformists and the Gladstonian Liberal Party. It was probably not without coincidence, Beith concluded,

that nonconformists in the party were still a strong force in emphasising the Liberal Democrats' distinctiveness from the Labour Party today.

From Beveridge to Blair

Fringe meeting, September 1997,
with Frank Field MP and Nick Timmins
Report by *David Cloke*

At the autumn party conference, over 100 Liberal Democrats met in the rather bizarre surroundings of Eastbourne's Tennis Centre to consider the history of the welfare state and to peer into its future. They were welcomed by Archy Kirkwood MP, Chairman of the Commons Select Committee on Social Security – the first member of the party, or its predecessors, to hold such a post. The meeting was an historic occasion for another reason: it was the first Liberal Democrat fringe meeting ever to be addressed by a government minister.

It fell to Nick Timmins, the public policy editor of the *Financial Times* and author of a key work on the welfare state, *The Five Giants*, to outline the role of William Beveridge as midwife to the welfare state and to discuss what responsibility, if any, he had for the problems that have arisen in recent years. Whilst he said that he came to praise Beveridge and not to bury him, Timmins acknowledged that it was not an easy thing to do. Beveridge was not an easy man, he was vain and arrogant and could be cranky. His, often strongly held, views were not consistent throughout his life. Just four years prior to the publication of his Report he was calling for the 'whiplash of starvation' to force the unemployed back into work.

The Beveridge Report itself was an attempt to reconcile two irreconcilable values: individual freedom and compulsion. It was Nick Timmins' view that, for its time, the report managed to achieve the necessary balance to a remarkable degree. What the Report couldn't fore-

see was how wrong it would be for our time. Nonetheless, he argued that Beveridge was extremely concerned to preserve incentives to work and to save. Hence he did not want a system that preserved an individual's income at the level they were previously earning (a 'Santa Claus' system) but one based on national insurance, creating a national minimum below which an individual would not fall.

Whilst he recognised that Beveridge did get much right (not least the creation of a welfare system with massive popular support which served the country for nearly 30 years), Timmins focused most of his remarks on what, for our time, it is thought Beveridge got wrong. These included the creation of an annual bill for pensions of £40 billion, a traditional view of the role of women and of the structure of family life, the destruction of friendly and mutual societies and the granting of too many rights without the expectation of increased responsibilities. There was some evidence to suggest that some

of the problems arose from the way the Labour government implemented the Report's proposals. For example, Beveridge proposed phasing in the pensions scheme and a flat rate for benefits to meet the costs of rent.

According to Timmins, Beveridge designed the welfare state to meet the needs of the norm: two-parent families with the husband at work and the woman in the home at a time of full employment. He assumed that, as had been the case after the First World War, women would give up their jobs and return to the home after the Second. As a result of the findings of the 1931 census, he was concerned about a declining population, not an ageing one. Furthermore, there were a whole range of changes to society that Beveridge could not have foreseen that have had an impact on the effectiveness of the welfare state: the postwar baby boom, the rise in lone parents, the growing need for disability benefits and the return of high levels of unemployment.

In essence Nick Timmins appeared to be arguing that the norms of society had changed, but that the welfare state had not changed to meet them, and that therefore a redesign is necessary. However, he also argued that it was not all Beveridge's fault, as many of the changes could not have been foreseen when the Report was written.

Frank Field MP, Minister of State at the Department of Social Security, perhaps rather dashing some of the hopes of the audience by declaring that he was not able to give details of the government's new policies as yet, but would pose some questions to the meeting. For him, the purpose of looking back was not to apportion blame but to learn. He also informed the meeting that he drew an important lesson from Nick Timmins' book, that the development of the welfare state was a continuing journey.

Field's starting point on that journey was the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, spurred on by the enormous enthusiasm of the social reformers of the time, such as those