Gladstone and Britain's Imperial Role

Imperialism has now become a term of abuse, but *Dr Eugenio Biagini* shows that Gladstonian Liberal policy aimed to develop a partnership of self-governing colonies.

What Gladstone preached in the last quarter of the nineteenth century became the orthodox colonial policy of the Liberal Party and remained so until about 1939. During his lifetime his perorations of right and justice in international relations and of self-government within the empire enthused both the National Liberal Federation at home, and, in the colonies, constitutional nationalists in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, India and South Africa. Great historians such as John Morley and Paul Knaplund described him as the precursor, if not the 'father', of the idea of the modern Commonwealth.

Eschewing old hagiographic accounts as much as recent revisionist critiques, in the present article I shall suggest that Gladstone's imperial and colonial policies – when placed in their historical context – appear as genuine expressions of Victorian Liberalism.[1] The latter was not concerned with such modern ideas as colonial 'self-determination', and the liberties it proclaimed were of a different sort. With its emphasis on social and political peace, financial retrenchment, individual responsibility, moral improvement and civic virtue, Victorian Liberalism offered values which colonial elites were ready to accept. The Liberal status of Gladstone's policies must be assessed against this context: only then will he emerge for what he was, namely an 'evangelical' preacher and practitioner of the universal, normative values of western Liberalism.

A further qualification is perhaps necessary at this stage. By late twentieth century standards there is little radical, and perhaps not much Liberal, in Gladstone's views, which may well be perceived as Eurocentric and culturally imperialistic. However, we should be wary of drawing hasty but anachronistic conclusions. It should not be forgotten that in some crucial way the world was 'Eurocentric' in the 1880s. More particularly, between 1815 and 1914 the world was, to some extent, 'British-centric': Britain was the largest economy of the time, the greatest exporter of manufactured goods, the greatest world market for raw materials, the greatest sea power, and the only nation with a genuine global policy reflecting the range of its economic interests. Furthermore, as the classical model of a parliamentary government enshrining effective political and civil liberty, Britain was much admired both in Continental Europe and in America and Asia.

There was no necessary conflict between this liberal/free-trade image and reputation, and Britain's imperial role. At the time all the other powers, both European and extra-European (including China and the USA) were – to some extent – imperialistic; in itself the notion of 'empire' bore neither stigma nor negative connotation. As far as the British empire was concerned, admirers and critics alike were astonished that a quarter of the total population of the globe – Victoria's subjects – could be kept in check by an army and constabulary which were smaller than the forces at the disposal of minor European countries such as Italy. Though little localised wars were commonplace, no major challenge was mounted against British rule with the exception of the 1857 'Mutiny' in India. The British Empire was, in many ways, a 'Liberal' empire which was distinctive for being based, apparently, more on the cooperation of the native populations, than on repression and military control.

'Govern them upon a principle of freedom'

Gladstone's fame as an imperial reformer is based on his life-long preference for self-government rather than direct rule, and for conciliation rather than repression. He insisted that the Empire was essentially a community of countries held together by loyalty to British culture and by shared economic interests in a free-trade world. He had developed this 'proto-Commonwealth' vision from Edmund Burke – particularly from the latter's analysis of the 1776 crisis in the Thirteen Colonies, and from his stipulation that imperial rule could only be founded on an equitable reconciliation between British interests and those interests of the natives. As Gladstone declared in a speech in 1853:

'Experience has proved that if you want to strengthen the connection between the colonies and this country – if you want to see British law held in respect and British institutions adopted and beloved in the colonies, never associate with them the hated name of force and coercion exercised by us, at a distance, over their rising fortunes. Govern them upon a principle of freedom. Defend them against aggression from without. Regulate their foreign relations. These things belong to the colonial connection. But of the duration of that connection let them be the judges, and I predict that if you leave them the freedom of judgement it is hard to say when the day will come when they will wish to separate from the great name of England. Depend upon it, they covet a share in that great name. You will find in that feeling of theirs the greatest security for the connection. ...Their natural disposition is to love and revere the name of England, and this reverence is by far the best security you can have for their continuing, not only to be subjects of the crown, not only to render it allegiance, but to render it that allegiance which is the most precious of all – the allegiance which proceeds from the depths of the heart of man.'[2]

For various reasons, including contemporary racial prejudice and the constraints inherent in a policy of imperial security (to which all British governments, irrespective of their political inclination, were obviously committed) such a policy was easier to implement in the colonies of 'white' settlement than, let us say, in India. Yet, even in India and in Africa Gladstone emerged as a consistent advocate of what he termed 'local freedom'. Moreover, in the heyday of Victoria's rule, Gladstone stood up against the rising tide of militant jingoism, and advocated national restraint, proposing policies which some contemporaries hailed as God-inspired, though others deplored as a wholesale surrender of imperial pride and interests to the foreigner and the 'savage'.

These principles were tested during his second administration (1880–85). When Gladstone returned to power in the spring of 1880 at the head of a large Liberal majority, his priorities were to purge the country from 'the fit of delirious Jingoism' – allegedly provoked by the previous Conservative government – and to restore commercial prosperity and high levels of employment. These two aims were inextricably linked, as trade problems and the rise in unemployment were widely ascribed to the 'wars and rumours of wars' which had characterised the latter part of Disraeli's Government, and particularly the years 1878–80. With typical energy, and combining the positions of Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gladstone set out to pacify the empire and restore the economy. At first it seemed that he would succeed: however, at the beginning of 1881 the Liberal government ran into major difficulties, as imperial commitments entangled the country in a number of new colonial and international crises, particularly in South Africa and Egypt.

In the case of South Africa, when the Boers took up arms against British rule, Gladstone was faced with the alternative of enforcing large-scale repression or conceding something like independence; he opted for the latter course, even at the cost of giving the impression that he was 'capitulating to the rebels.' This move from coercion to conciliation was the prelude to a similar change in Irish policy from 1886. In India too there followed an important move towards a more liberal regime with the appointment of Lord Ripon as Viceroy. The establishment of forms of representative government at the provincial level, the repeal of the restrictive vernacular Press Act, and the passing of the Ilbert Act, which gave Indian magistrates jurisdiction over Europeans, were highly controversial among the British community in India. Gladstone, however, firmly

supported Ripon all the way along. This was the context in which the first Indian National Congress (1883–85) was established as an organisation basically inspired by the ideals of Gladstonian Liberalism.[3]

The Egyptian imbroglio

Rather different was the outcome of Liberal policy in Egypt. British involvement in the Suez Canal Company, together with Anglo-French financial control of the country and the imposition of a British-friendly Khedive, generated growing discontent and hastened the formation of a nationalist movement spearheaded by Egyptian army officers. Gladstone initially regarded this movement with sympathy, but in the course of 1882 local British officials, fiercely hostile to the nationalists, managed to convince him that the situation was degenerating into anarchy and military despotism. When most Liberal ministers demanded the forcible restoration of the status quo, Gladstone was apparently reluctant to act. However, once embarked upon a policy of intervention, he pursued it without vacillation or misgivings. Militarily successful, it soon emerged that the operation had opened a Pandora's Box of troubles for the Liberal government. Like the Americans in many of their late-twentieth century semi-colonial involvements in Asia and Latin America, the British in Egypt found that their 'police' operation had to be prolonged indefinitely in order to fill the power and legitimacy vacuum created by their intervention.

Contemporary critics and many modern historians have claimed that the Egyptian imbroglio revealed the full degree of duplicity and hypocrisy inherent in Gladstone's Liberalism, since his commitment to peace and international justice seemed to apply only when a Conservative government was in office. There may be something in this criticism, though, on the whole, it is based on a series of misunderstandings.

First we must remember that, as H. C. G. Matthew has pointed out,[4] Gladstone's notion of international right was explicitly limited to the Christian world,[5] with the qualified addition of the Ottoman Empire. As for the rest, he applied general humanitarian considerations, such as respect for human life and avoidance of any unnecessary bloodshed, but recognised no inalienable right to either independence or self-government for countries which, like Egypt, had long lost both their independence and national identity.

Second, we must also bear in mind that Gladstone was in no way hostile to empires whose legitimacy he did not question. He simply insisted that within empires – whether British, Austrian or Ottoman – respect for 'local freedom' should be the general guideline. Coupled with the principles of the 'Third Midlothian Speech' quoted above, such a vision could be mistaken for a blanket endorsement of national aspirations, though, as D. Schreuder has pointed out, it was actually 'concerned ... with both liberal reform (devolution, autonomy, freedom, voluntaryism) and imperial conservation (reserved powers, delineated responsibility, circumscribed status, and qualified home rule in colonial societies).[6]

Finally, it must be observed that, in contrast to radical pacifists like John Bright, Gladstone accepted that coercion might sometimes be necessary as a short-term restraint for 'evil' tendencies and 'irrational' behaviour, which, as a Christian, he saw as deeply rooted in fallen human nature. Liberal imperial policy consisted in moving from occasional and limited coercion back to conciliation as the general rule. Given that conciliation was the rule and self-government the method, coercion might be applied whenever the circumstances required.

It has been suggested by some historians that there was a fundamental difference in the Liberal approach to imperial reform: Gladstone's model 'for colonies of non-white settlement ... whether Jamaica or India, was the empire of Rome' rather than the 'Greek model' of self-governing colonies, to be reserved for the 'white settlements'.[7] It is true that such a position was held explicitly by some members of Gladstone's first and second governments, including Joseph Chamberlain, who had strong misgivings about any further extension of Indian self-government. However, as far as Gladstone is concerned, it is difficult to see how such a sharp distinction can be maintained. When we consider his preference for 'indirect rule' and colonial assemblies based on limited electoral franchises in both India and Egypt, as well as his concern that representation and financial responsibility should go hand in hand, it is problematic to argue that the aims and strategies of his policy in India, and indeed in Egypt or Jamaica[8] were fundamentally dissimilar from those he deployed in the British Isles.

Gladstone was aware of the tension between what he described as the 'Christian races' and the 'Muslim races', but to him the differences which mattered were cultural, not biological. Overseas he was not interested in the establishment or preservation of British control over peoples of darker pigmentation in tropical contexts: he was much more concerned about the identification of social groups which, whether native or European, could become Britain's economic partners and political allies. Empire was, from this point of view, a means to an end: and the end was the creation and expansion of a political and economic system based on those 'bourgeois' values which were foundational both for modernisation and social development in a capitalist, free-trade world economy.

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personalities than issues. Other works by Lucy well worth sampling.

The Literary Companion to Parliament: Ed. C. Silvester.

A selection of articles, extracts and sketches covering the whole history of parliament – well worth enjoying in its own right. It has a chapter on Gladstone and is more easily obtained than Lucy.

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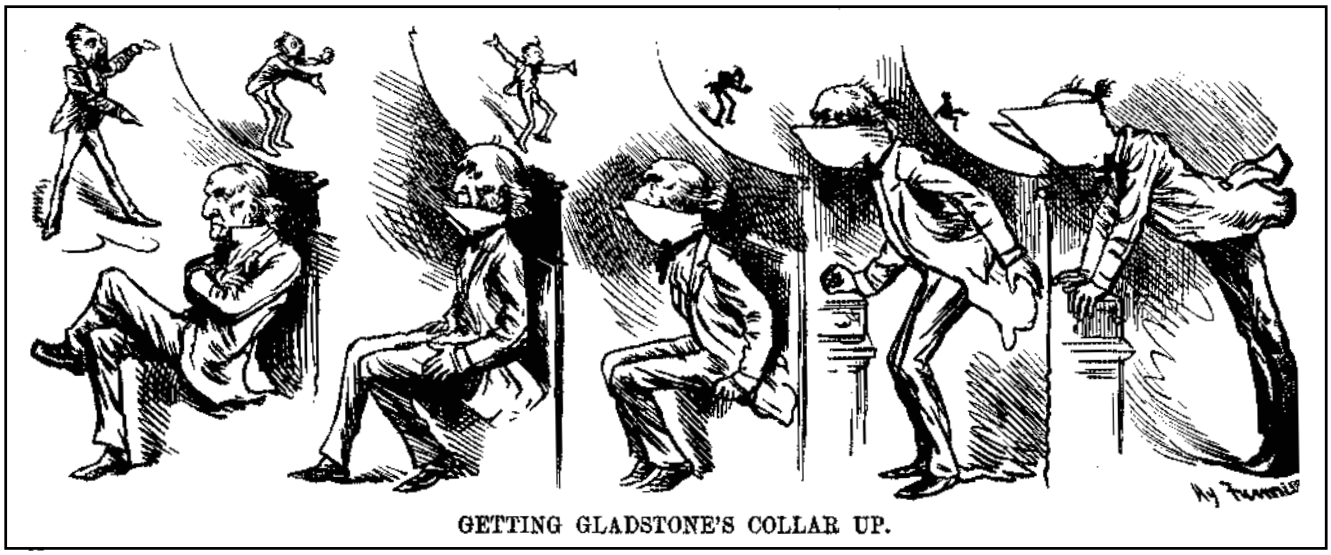
Isles, 1865–1931 *(CUP, 1996), and author of* Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–80, *(CUP, 1992).*

Notes

1. I have further developed this analysis in my article 'Exporting "Western & Beneficial Institutions": Gladstone and Empire, 1880–85', in D. Bebbington and R. Swift (eds.), *Gladstone Centenary Essays* (Liverpool University Press, 1999).
2. Cit. in J. Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (1903), vol. 1, pp. 363–64.
3. See O. Ralph, *Naoroji: The First Asian MP* (1997), p. 92 ff.
4. H. C. G. Matthew, 'Introduction' to *Gladstone Diaries* (1990), vol. 10, p. xc.
5. W. E. Gladstone, *Midlothian Speeches 1879*, with an introduction by M. R. D. Foot (1971), pp. 123, 129.
6. D. Schreuder, 'The making of Mr Gladstone's posthumous career: the role of Morley and Knaplund as "Monumental Masons"', 1903–27', in B. L. Kinzer (ed.), *The Gladstonian Turn of Mind* (1985), p. 230.
7. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj: The New Cambridge History of India* (1995), III.4, p. 54.
8. For interesting parallels between Jamaica and Ireland in terms of ethnic conflict and the problems involved in granting self-government, see Gordon to Gladstone, 21 January 1882, *ibid.*, p. 84. For the general methodological and historical context see C. A. Bayly's masterly *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780–1830* (1989).



GETTING GLADSTONE'S COLLAR UP.