

# OUT OF CHARTISM, POPULAR RADICALS AND THE LIBERAL

One of the most remarkable political developments during the first half of the nineteenth century was the rise of a more coherent, organised and assertive popular radicalism, culminating in the Chartist movement of the late 1830s and 1840s. **Matthew Roberts** examines the ways in which the nascent Liberal Party was able to use the ideas, values and beliefs of the Chartists and other Radicals to construct broad-based coalitions of support – a process which was fraught with tension and liable to break down at any time.

**T**HE 'AGE of the Chartists' was the golden age of popular protest, of crowds meeting in town squares, public parks and on moorland summits (sometimes with weapons and under the protective cover of darkness) to demand their democratic rights. So unnerved were the state and the propertied classes that forces of surveillance and suppression were unleashed on the Chartists which – along with internal divisions and the failure after ten years to secure the enactment of the coveted 'People's Charter' – led to the decline of the movement after 1848.

In contrast to the tumult of the early-Victorian years, the mid-Victorian decades were tranquil. Politically, this 'Age of Equipoise' manifested itself in the constituencies in the rise of popular Liberalism, based on a coalition of ex-Chartists (popular Radicals) and Liberals. But why did these popular Radicals and Liberals, after two decades of conflict with one another, agree to cooperate? Historians have been divided. It used to be argued that this transformation was largely the result of underlying changes in the structure and outlook of the working class: rising real wages, greater job security, the rise of an influential and politically moderate group of 'labour aristocrats', and the splintering of the working class in terms of occupation, status and culture. More recently, these

structural explanations have fallen from favour, which, to a new generation of post-Marxist, post-Modernist historians, seem rather crude and simplistic. In seeking to explain the rise of popular Liberalism, revisionist historians have rejected social explanations and have turned their attention back to politics itself.<sup>1</sup>

This article develops this politics-centred approach by paying attention to some of the ways in which the Liberal Party was able to use ideas, values and beliefs to construct broad-based coalitions of supporters. Whilst agreeing with the renewed emphasis which has been placed on the importance of political ideas, this article lends further weight to a growing body of post-revisionist work which has reemphasised just how painful and protracted the transition was from Chartism into Liberalism, a process that was fraught with tension and liable to break down.<sup>2</sup> The first section of the article surveys the various explanations of mid-century political stability which have been put forward by historians and relates these to the debates on the rise of popular Liberalism. The second section looks at what Liberals and popular Radicals were able to agree on by focusing on some of the key political issues of the day in the mid-Victorian decades. While the third section highlights some of the differences of opinion and conflict over principles which bedevilled the

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popular Liberal coalition during this period.

Why did the confrontational politics of Chartism give way to the relatively harmonious and compromising politics of moderate reformism? This question was central to the Marxist inspired historiography of the 1960s and 1970s, not least because it presented Marxists with the uncomfortable question of why the working class, having come so close to achieving

its revolutionary destiny in the 1840s, abandoned its mission and reconciled itself to the established order. A whole range of 'consolatory' explanations were advanced to explain this apparent 'false consciousness', most of which highlighted the socio-economic foundations of mid-century stability. Against the background of economic recovery in the late 1840s and the boom conditions of the 1850s, social tensions began to lessen as cyclical unemployment

**Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common, 10 April 1848 (this and accompanying daguerrotypes were the first ever taken of a crowd scene)**

began to decrease and real wages began to rise, thus limiting the appeal of a radical politics based on 'hunger and hatred'.<sup>3</sup> The rising profit margins of the manufacturing middle class allowed it to engage in a variety of practices, the objective of which was to reshape the workers in their own image in the workplace (by creating an elite stratum of workers – labour aristocrats – to control the rest of the workforce, and by engaging in paternalistic practices

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to keep the rest of the workforce content) and in the community (by sponsoring rational recreation). Whatever the cause, the effect was the same: the dilution of working-class radicalism.<sup>4</sup>

In more recent times, historians have become increasingly sceptical of the explanatory value of structural interpretations of mid-century stability. To take one example, it is surely not possible to explain the rejection by the working class of the far-reaching goals of Chartism by focusing on the privileges of a few labour aristocrats who may, or may not, have exercised a moderating influence over the rest of the workforce. Even during its interpretative heyday, critics of the labour aristocracy thesis pointed out that the widespread existence of a skilled labour force was hardly a novelty in the mid-Victorian decades, that it was difficult to pinpoint which workers were labour aristocrats as there was no sharp division between them and the rest of the working class, and that it was simplistic and reductionist to try and map values like respectability on to particular sections of the working class. In addition, if labour aristocrats really were that privileged and went to such lengths to distinguish themselves from the wider working class, are we really to believe that they exercised such an influential position?<sup>5</sup> Similar arguments can also be levelled at middle-class 'moral imperialism'. Middle-class sponsored initiatives such as improvement societies were often shunned, subverted or hijacked by workers who, in any case, had their own versions of respectability and independence.<sup>6</sup> Even where attempts to mould workers in a middle-class image seemingly triumphed it could just as likely be the result of what Peter Bailey has termed 'role-playing' by the working class: feigning middle-class values, as it were, because it was expedient for workers to do so.<sup>7</sup>

Turning more directly to popular politics, it used to be argued that the rise of a more cautious and moderate organised labour movement was one of the key factors in mid-Victorian political stability. But this is not a satisfactory explanation either. Many labour activists who had previously been

Chartists turned away from politics altogether, channelling their efforts into cooperatives, friendly societies and trades unions.<sup>8</sup> Now, the fact that many ex-Chartists turned their backs on politics might account, to some extent, for the political stability of these years by virtue of their absence, but it cannot explain why many of those Radical activists who remained convinced of the efficacy of political solutions attempted to cooperate, when possible, with the Liberal Party. And neither can employer paternalism explain why members of the working class seemingly moderated their politics. As recent work has made clear, even when employers did practise paternalism towards their workforce (and it is worth pointing out that many employers simply could not afford to do so, or, at any rate, not on any significant scale), working-class employees did not necessarily vote at the behest of their lords and masters.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, these structural explanations can only be made to explain so much. As a growing number of historians have come to appreciate, a more satisfactory explanation of mid-century political stability and the rise of popular Liberalism is to be found by focusing on political change itself. After all, the transition from Chartism to popular Liberalism was a political development. We cannot read off the trajectory of popular politics from the state of the economy. If such a correlation existed between economic depression and the popularity of Chartism then how can we explain the collapse of Chartism in 1842 amidst continued poverty and unemployment, or Chartism's revival in 1848 against the background of economic improvement? Finally, acute poverty and unemployment, although not as pervasive, did not disappear in the politically tranquil mid-Victorian decades.<sup>10</sup>

So what does a focus on politics tell us about why popular Radicals and Liberals were able to cooperate? Firstly, that Chartism had been a victim of its own success. Not only had the Chartists genuinely alarmed the political elite in 1848 (giving rise to a sort of 'never again' mentality), they had also drawn attention in a dramatic way

to the privations of the masses. So powerful was Chartism's critique of the state as utterly partial and negligent that it undoubtedly played a significant part in making the state more responsive to popular grievances. True, the state responded largely on its own terms, and in a way that did not look like a direct concession to Chartism (which, for obvious reasons, it could not be seen to do). Where the Chartists were proved wrong was in their claim that the state was incapable of reforming itself without being democratised, which has led some historians to argue that Chartism had been ideologically bankrupt all along.<sup>11</sup> But, surely, it would have been naive of the Chartists to have presumed otherwise. Without the threat of democratisation at the back of the minds of the political elite, the state would never have reformed itself in the way that it did. Secondly, just as the state had been unnerved so too had the propertied classes. Chartism had jolted urban Liberals (and Tories) out of their complacency and convinced many of their leaders that social conditions would have to be improved if a return to unrest was to be prevented. Thus, urban Liberals became less dogmatic in their commitment to the strictures of political economy.<sup>12</sup> As Mark Hovell observed many years ago, Chartism gave Liberalism 'a wider and more popular outlook'.<sup>13</sup> On the other side, growing numbers of Radicals were also coming round to the idea of moderate, piecemeal reform and to the need to cooperate with Liberals (and to a lesser extent Tories) to secure it, although it took some longer than others. As we have seen, Chartism as a particular strategy had failed to bring about radical political change, and so it made sense for popular radicals to reassess their strategy and tactics.<sup>14</sup>

So the crucial difference, in the mid-Victorian decades, from the Chartist era was that the 'instalment men', as Feargus O'Connor had once derisively dubbed them, now held sway. This position was illustrated by the atheist and republican Charles Bradlaugh, who told one audience at the time of the Second Reform Bill that, while he favoured universal suffrage as a natural right, 'if

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he could not get all that he asked for, rather than have nothing ... he would take what ameliorations he could get without ceasing to aim at ultimately winning the whole'.<sup>15</sup> The freethinking radical Robert Cooper made a similar point in a letter to the north-east Radical Joseph Cowen in which he advised the radical movement to 'work for an instalment, until the whole is gained'. For Cooper and many ex-Chartists, experience had taught them that 'every great measure, political or social, has only been carried by the joint action' of the middle and working classes.<sup>16</sup> What made instalment politics easier to accept for popular Radicals was that they were now faced with a much more responsive Liberal Party.

The Liberal Party used to be seen by historians as an incoherent and contradictory group of reformers, each preoccupied with their own particular 'fad'. Precarious and transient unity was achieved only when the party's leaders were able to rally the ad hoc group of reformers behind a transcending issue, such as Gladstone's support for the disestablishment of the Irish Church in 1868, or his indictment of Disraeli's foreign and imperial policy in the late 1870s.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to the work of Jonathan Parry, Eugenio Biagini and others, it has become clear that both parliamentary and popular Liberalism was, in fact, a far more coherent political movement than was once thought.<sup>18</sup> What enabled some ex-Chartists and Liberals to come together in the 1850s and 1860s was a shared, if problematic, commitment to 'liberty, retrenchment and reform'.

In terms of ideology, liberty was, of course, central. This was a rallying cry around which a broad spectrum of reformers coalesced.

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Liberty, at its most abstract, meant support for 'civil and religious liberty, for all men and for all countries'.<sup>19</sup> Civil liberty meant that all people, regardless of their status or beliefs, should be equal in the eyes of the law. This overlapped with religious liberty. As the *Liberal Weekly Times* put it in 1867, 'where divers [sic] religions co-exist in the same community, none should be petted and none coerced'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Radicals and many Liberals were opposed to an established church. As is well known, middle-class Nonconformity spearheaded this campaign; but this was not just a middle-class battle. Opposition to the Established Church was also voiced by Radicals (many of whom were also Nonconformists and secularists; and a few were even atheists), who viewed the Church as one of the pillars of a corrupt, aristocratic and selfish state. In Radical eyes, the Church was tainted by its large interest in land and by its close association with landowners, a good many of whom were Whigs.<sup>21</sup>

Notions of liberty also informed Liberal and Radical views on the role of government. The purpose of government was to preside over a disinterested state that did not identify with or reward specific interests at the expense of others. Former Chartists could take some comfort in the fact that the Whig-dominated Liberal governments of the mid-Victorian decades sought to position themselves as the impartial custodians of the national interest (this was far more difficult for the Conservative Party, as it was still associated with the deeply unpopular Corn Laws). This was achieved by reducing or abolishing duties on articles of popular consumption, by repealing the last remaining 'taxes on knowledge', and by removing civil disabilities. That much of this was presided over by aristocratic Whigs went some way to rehabilitate their reforming reputation in popular Radical circles, who for the last two decades had castigated the Whigs as the enemies of the people.<sup>22</sup>

This commitment to liberty was the positive expression of a more fundamental underlying Liberal and Radical principle: opposition to privilege. More than

any other movement, Liberalism eschewed class politics and sought to unite, though not always successfully, the productive classes in opposition to the idle and selfish classes. For Liberals and Radicals, retrenchment provided a powerful weapon to combat privileges, many of which were paid for by the state and, by extension, the overburdened taxpayer. To Richard Cobden – echoing the Utilitarian James Mill and the Radical Thomas Paine – expenditure on the national debt, the army and navy, and the Civil List had 'for the real object the granting of outdoor relief for ... the aristocracy'.<sup>23</sup> The solution was a drastic reduction in state expenditure. In turn, this would reduce taxes, stimulate trade and increase wages. The popularity of Cobden in the 1840s and 1850s, and that of John Bright and Gladstone in the 1860s, rested in part on their commitment to low and more equitable taxation, free trade and cheap food, and to the articulation of these demands in the language of moral entitlement.<sup>24</sup> Liberals and Radicals had no objection to government intervention when it was used to combat privilege. But it was only in this negative sense that they accepted the need for state intervention. This was linked to the belief amongst Liberals that it was not the state's responsibility to provide for the welfare of the community. That was the job of voluntary self-governing organisations (such as cooperatives). Liberty thus created the conditions for a vibrant and inclusive civil society: the voluntary organisation of collective action in pursuit of shared interests. It should be added, though, that Radicals were more willing than Liberals to conceive of a positive role for the state and make more exceptions to the laissez-faire rule in the areas of poor relief, public services, the limitations on the hours of labour and the regulation of working conditions.

When government intervention was necessary Liberals and Radicals were agreed that it was imperative that the people had a say in the affairs of government, to ensure that the right kind of intervention took place. Participation in the political process also fostered active citizenship.

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For Liberals and Radicals, the alpha-omega of citizenship was independence as it was believed that only independent men had the capacity for 'enlightened disinterestedness'. Social responsibility, moral seriousness and personal accomplishment were the stock ingredients of active citizenship.<sup>25</sup> The ideal society they envisaged was self-regulating and composed of independent small-scale producers, in which citizens cooperated with one another on equal terms, hence the preoccupation with facilitating wider ownership, not just of homes though building societies but also of land. It is important to remember, though, that Liberals and most Radicals agreed that there was to be equality of opportunity, not social equality.

Nowhere was this preoccupation with independence more evident than in relation to the franchise. The disinterested maturity that Liberals sought from the electorate, it was argued, would be guaranteed by limiting the franchise to male householders, i.e. those men who had set up house and preferably a family too. In the words of the Liberal MP J. A. Roebuck, 'if a man has a settled house, in which he has lived with his family for a number of years, you have a man who has given hostages to the state, and you have in these circumstances a guarantee for that man's virtue'.<sup>26</sup> Electoral entitlement was bound up with that quintessential Victorian attribute, namely 'character': a wide-ranging concept denoting industriousness, self-help, thrift, duty, honesty, self-restraint and, of course, independence. Although 'character' was potentially open to all, irrespective of birth or even wealth, in the eyes of Liberals these virtues were not universal; they had to be learned (hence the importance of education) and earned through hard work and self-sacrifice. Then – and only then – would enfranchisement follow. Liberalism was thus far from being democratic. To many Radicals, these Liberal criteria seemed elitist, and this explains why they often disagreed over what constituted fitness for the franchise. As we shall see, the Chartist commitment to

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universal manhood suffrage died hard amongst Radicals.

As these divisions over the franchise imply, when it came to translating Liberal ideology into practice, differences and divisions emerged within the Liberal coalition. Biagini highlights the ways in which the watchwords of 'liberty, retrenchment and reform' mobilised diverse constituencies of electoral support for the Gladstonian Liberal Party. Indeed, the very elasticity and capaciousness of these cries, which assumed many different forms, is part of the reason why so many different individuals and interests supported the Liberal Party: from aristocratic Whigs all the way down to artisans. But a note of caution is needed here. It was relatively easy to champion abstract rights such as religious freedom, individual liberty, equality before the law, the rights of oppressed minorities on the continent, and to be in favour of 'reform' (whatever that meant). On the other hand, when it came to specifics, these watchwords could just as easily divide as unite the disparate band of reformers in terms of how they were to be defined and prioritised, let alone achieved.<sup>27</sup> To take one example, despite the Liberal rhetoric on civil liberty and equality before the law, there was a widespread suspicion amongst Radicals that one law existed for the rich and another for the people, and that the Liberal Party was complicit in perpetuating these injustices. This sense of popular injustice was acutely felt in relation to trades unions, as it was widely believed that the law was biased in favour of employers, many of whom just so happened to be Liberal manufacturers. While Gladstone's first government extended legal protection to the unions through the Trades Union Act of 1871, this was accompanied by another act that effectively made picketing illegal. The rapacious and tyrannical elites that Radicals were fighting against could, on those occasions when the 'tyranny of capital' was at issue, be extended to include the manufacturers and commercial plutocrats who dominated urban Liberalism. Thus, class-based tensions could destabilise the Liberal coalition.<sup>28</sup>

To return to the issue of state intervention, although Radicals were often to the fore in demanding legislative protection for certain vulnerable groups, such as factory workers and trades unionists, it would be wrong to presume that they were in favour of widespread state intervention. Indeed, Radicals could be far more libertarian than mainstream Liberals, especially over issues concerning personal freedom, as shown by their hostility to the centralisation of state power, towards temperance legislation, and compulsory vaccination. On these issues, Radicals were sometimes closer to Tories than they were to Liberals. The latter, especially the Nonconformist wing of the party, were generally in favour of legislative intervention in these spheres on the grounds that wider public interests and morals needed protecting.<sup>29</sup>

As for the contentious issue of franchise extension, we have already seen that Liberals and Radicals all too frequently found themselves at loggerheads. For Biagini, democratisation 'was the really all-embracing issue for popular Liberals' and popular commitment to franchise extension was the most conspicuous issue that 'illustrates the continuity between Chartism and working-class Liberalism'.<sup>30</sup> While Radicals and advanced Liberals might have worked for democratisation, moderate Liberals and Whigs were deeply fearful of moves in this direction. For these Liberals, the all-embracing issue was how to restrain democratic excess through safeguards such as education, the ballot, and voting systems that would ensure continued representation for minority interests. Thus, different attitudes towards democracy strained the Liberal coalition, as was dramatically illustrated in 1866–7 when the right-wing Liberal Robert Lowe spoke out against franchise extension and in doing so incurred the wrath of popular radicalism.

A growing body of recent work on post-Chartist radicalism has demonstrated that the movement of former Chartists into the Liberal Party between the 1850s and 1870s was anything but smooth: the process was often painful,

occasionally violent, and liable to break down. To present this transition as seamless, consensual and inevitable is to take Liberal and even some Radical rhetoric at face value. Indeed, there is something almost 'official' about this vision of popular Liberalism, a vision seen through the rose-tinted lens of John Bright and Gladstone who fell in love with a largely imagined self-sacrificing artisan who had renounced his Chartist past (at least this was the story that Gladstone and Bright told themselves and others to justify giving the vote to urban working men in 1866–67). As Robert Hall has shown, this vision was also projected by those former Chartists who eventually threw in their lot with the Gladstonian Liberal Party.<sup>31</sup> These ex-Chartists deliberately played down their radical pasts so as to make themselves acceptable to the Liberal Party. As such, we need to be aware that it could be expedient for both Liberals and Radicals to present the Liberal coalition as consensual.

The Liberal Party – inside, but especially outside of, parliament – was ultimately a coalition of reformers who maintained their own distinct identities. While the balance of forces might have been in favour of cooperation between reformers under the capacious umbrella of Gladstonian Liberalism, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Liberals and popular Radicals continued to be divided by ideas, goals, priorities and strategies. It makes little sense to reduce these differences to underlying class conflict between a middle-class Liberal Party and a working-class radicalism. As in the Chartist era, Liberal–Radical tensions were, first and foremost, political not socio-economic and were concerned with real ideological differences which do not map very easily on to different social classes.

The differences between Liberals and Radicals were reinforced by their readings of English history. For Radicals the leitmotif of English history was the struggle of a virtuous and dispossessed people doing battle against tyrannical and corrupt forces. In this reading of history, a succession of monarchs and aristocrats after 1066 had progressively stripped the

people of their rights and liberties, despite the heroic actions of popular crusaders such as Wat Tyler, the leader of the Peasant's Revolt of 1341, and the Levellers of the English Civil War. To the Radicals of the nineteenth century, the present-day aristocrats were nothing more than the descendents of the illegitimate Normans.<sup>32</sup> Liberals, on the other hand, rather than look back to a vanquished golden age, viewed the past as the progressive unfolding of liberty in its triumph over arbitrary rule and religious intolerance. While their Whig aristocratic allies focused more on the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, the Liberals looked more to the preceding Civil War period and, particularly, to the battles of Oliver Cromwell and his supporters against political tyranny and religious intolerance.<sup>33</sup> These competing histories thus reinforced the distinctiveness of Liberal and Radical identities, especially in times of political conflict when Radicals became frustrated with Liberalism.

Radical frustration within the Liberal coalition had the periodic effect of reinvigorating a radical politics that was independent and critical of the Liberal Party, which manifested itself in a variety of guises: latter-day Chartism (especially in London where household suffrage was held to be of limited value); labour militancy, which spilled over into radical suffrage politics as trades unions sought to end the legal restrictions hampering them; republican and secularist radicalism as personified by Bradlaugh, who had, at best, an uneasy relationship with mainstream Liberalism; rival Liberal candidatures in the constituencies; and, by the 1880s, socialism. This independent radicalism also supplied the leadership and activist core for a plethora of popular campaigns. These included the International Workingmen's Association (1864), the Reform League (the organisation which spearheaded the popular radical campaign for franchise extension in the 1860s), the Land and Labour League (1869), the republican movement of the early 1870s, Bradlaugh's campaign in the 1880s to establish the right of voters to elect representatives of their choice, and the Trafalgar Square

demonstrations against unemployment in 1887 and the attempt by the state to prevent public meetings from being held there along with a host of other campaigns around the issue of public access to open space.<sup>34</sup>

These campaigns were taken to a wider constituency via the national radical press – notably the widely circulating *Reynolds's Newspaper* and Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*, both of which continued to fulminate against the elitism and corruption of the political system much as the Chartists had. Newspapers such as these played an important part in mobilising a radicalism that was often at odds with mainstream Liberalism. The gothic idioms of romanticism that had characterised early Victorian radicalism could still be found in mid-Victorian radical rhetoric, as the following attack by *Reynolds's Newspaper* in 1868 illustrates: 'Royal, clerical and aristocratic lechers are all at one-time sucking at the veins of the people and vampire-like, drawing their life-blood'.<sup>35</sup> Even when popular Gladstonianism was at its zenith in the 1870s and 1880s, the Liberal coalition could fracture in the provinces, especially in the absence of a strong Tory opposition (when internal differences between Whigs, moderate Liberals, advanced Liberals and Radicals could become much more pronounced), as was the case in some northern towns.<sup>36</sup> This was revealed at the 1874 general election when a number of Radicals contested seats against Liberals. Loyalty to Gladstone, it seems, did not preclude opposition to the Liberal Party and, very occasionally, loyalty to the Liberal Party did not preclude opposition to Gladstone.

The dynamics of electoral politics in Leeds provide a good example of these Liberal–Radical tensions. At the 1874 general election, the sitting Liberal MPs – one of whom was the ex-Chartist Robert Carter, and the other was the politically moderate journalist Edward Baines Junior – were challenged by the temperance lecturer Dr Frederick Lees. The intervention of the latter has usually been interpreted as evidence of Non-conformity's dissatisfaction with the policies of Gladstone's first

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government.<sup>37</sup> This was certainly a factor in Lees' candidature, but there was a lot more to it than this. For one thing, Lees was actually nominated by the Leeds Trades Council and was well known to the workmen of the borough, as was Carter. Both Carter and Lees had been elected to the Leeds Town Council in 1850 as Chartists. At that time, neither of them could see any difference between Whigs and Tories. Twenty-four years later, Lees was telling his working-class audiences much the same, and claimed that his principles had remained unchanged for forty years. Carter, on the other hand, believed emphatically that it was a distinction worth drawing. Similarly, while Lees looked back on his Chartist past with pride and used it to legitimise his candidature with the working class, Carter made no mention of his political origins and had in fact been playing down his radicalism since the late 1850s, culminating in his adoption as one of the official Liberal candidates at the 1868 general election.<sup>38</sup> Although Lees' supporters urged the working class to cast their second vote for Carter, there were marked differences in their platform. Whereas Carter spoke of the need to equalise the county and borough franchises (effectively extending the provisions of the 1867 Reform Act to the countryside), Lees was in favour of manhood (and even female) suffrage. While Carter took the view that the advanced section of the Liberal Party was the Radical Party, and thus urged Radicals to cooperate with, and work through the nominees of, the Liberal Party, Lees told the Radicals that 'they had for forty years lost their way through fear of dividing the Liberal ranks' and that their 'sacrifices for the Liberal cause ... had met with no reward'. Lees concluded by calling for political independence: the 'time had arrived when they (the Radicals) ought to be directly represented in Parliament, and not indirectly represented as in the past. (Cheers.)'<sup>39</sup> The effect of Lees' candidature was to divide the Liberal ranks, with many voting for Lees and Carter as instructed by the Leeds Trades Council, and not for Baines and Carter as instructed by the Leeds

Liberal Association. While Carter was returned at the head of the poll the Tories captured the second and third seat, thus defeating a humiliated Baines.

Six years later, at the 1880 general election, the Leeds Liberal Association was so divided and unable to agree on a candidate that they nominated Mr Gladstone – in absentia – as one of their candidates. Despite playing no part in his Leeds candidature, which led the Tories to dub him as the 'phantom candidate', Gladstone topped the poll. A small group of ultra-Radicals led by the well-known commons rights agitator, John De Morgan, objected to the dictatorial actions of the association in nominating Gladstone, whom they regarded as an unsuitable candidate on the grounds that he would not be able to devote much attention to the interests of an important borough like Leeds. De Morgan had been nominated by the Radicals as their candidate in 1878 at a meeting attended by some 8,000 people,<sup>40</sup> but his republican sympathies and clashes with the law over commons rights had not endeared him to the Leeds Liberal Association and so he was passed over. Thus, De Morgan took the decision to stand as an independent candidate. He was eventually forced to abandon his candidature due to the smear campaign unleashed against him by the Liberal Association, who accused him of being in the pay of the Tories, with some of his key supporters defecting, but not before he used the public platform to put forward a 'definite programme of Radical principles': reform of land and labour laws, manhood suffrage, shorter parliaments, free education, abolition of capital punishment, and repeal of the Vaccination and Contagious Diseases Acts. This was far more advanced than the platform of the second official Liberal candidate John Barran (he had succeeded Carter after his retirement in 1876), who devoted most of his speeches to attacking Disraeli's profligate foreign and imperial policies.<sup>41</sup>

There remained a powerful radical current of suspicion, and even outright opposition, to dictatorial Liberal elites, a situation made worse from the 1870s

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when many local Liberal Associations reconstituted themselves broadly along the lines of the Birmingham Liberal Association – the infamous 'Caucus'. As critics noted at the time, despite its professed aim of democratising party organisation by opening up membership, power in the Caucus was deeply hierarchical. As such it could be unpopular amongst Radicals who resented the formalised chains of command, hence the survival of independent Radical clubs and organisations. It was the dictatorial actions of the Leeds Liberal Association in bringing forward candidates without consulting the wider body of Liberal and Radical popular opinion that so outraged Lees, De Morgan and their supporters. In bringing forward Lees, the Leeds Trades Council complained that the 'working men had been treated by the leaders of the Liberal Party in Leeds as mere tools in their hands'.<sup>42</sup> It was with pride and a sense of conferred legitimacy that Lees was able to withstand official Liberalism's opposition to him by pointing out that he had been nominated at an open meeting of some 6,000 men. De Morgan's supporters made a last stand against the dictatorial actions of the Liberal Association by opposing the decision of the latter to nominate Herbert Gladstone for the seat that his father had declined. The following account of Herbert Gladstone's nomination meeting is taken from the diary of Katherine Conder – daughter of E. R. Conder, a Congregational minister – an example *par excellence* of late-Victorian Liberal Nonconformity and its private view of popular Radicalism:

Then Mr. Kitson asked whether any one wished to propose any other candidate, whereupon, amidst tremendous hooting and howling and roars of laughter, a dirty, toothless, disreputable-looking workman mounted the platform, and (after daring to drink out of Herbert's glass of water!) proposed John De Morgan! ... The man declared 'he was a good Liberal and' (waving his hand in Mr. Gladstone's face)

'I've nothing to say against this'ere yoong mon!' ... No one was forthcoming to second the amendment ...<sup>43</sup>

If outbreaks of independent radicalism represented the exception rather than the norm after the fall of Chartism, this was because the Liberal Party was finally taking the Radical agenda more seriously. Nonetheless, for all that Liberals and Radicals could cooperate and make common cause in the mid-Victorian decades, when one bears in mind the strategic reasons why Liberals and Radicals often emphasised their affinity and the persistence of a Chartist-style radicalism into the 1870s (and not just in London) this does seem to call into question Biagini's argument that: 'In the popular mind, Chartism, Liberalism and democracy seemed to have become completely identified.'<sup>44</sup> This article has done little more than scratch at the surface to reveal the tensions within the Liberal coalition. As historians dig deeper into Liberal–Radical relations in mid-Victorian Britain, we will surely come to further appreciate that, although a broad church, popular Liberalism was not immune to schisms even in the halcyon days of Mr Gladstone.

Matthew Roberts is Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at Sheffield Hallam University. He works on Victorian popular politics and parliamentary reform. He is the author of *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832–1914* (Palgrave, 2009).

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