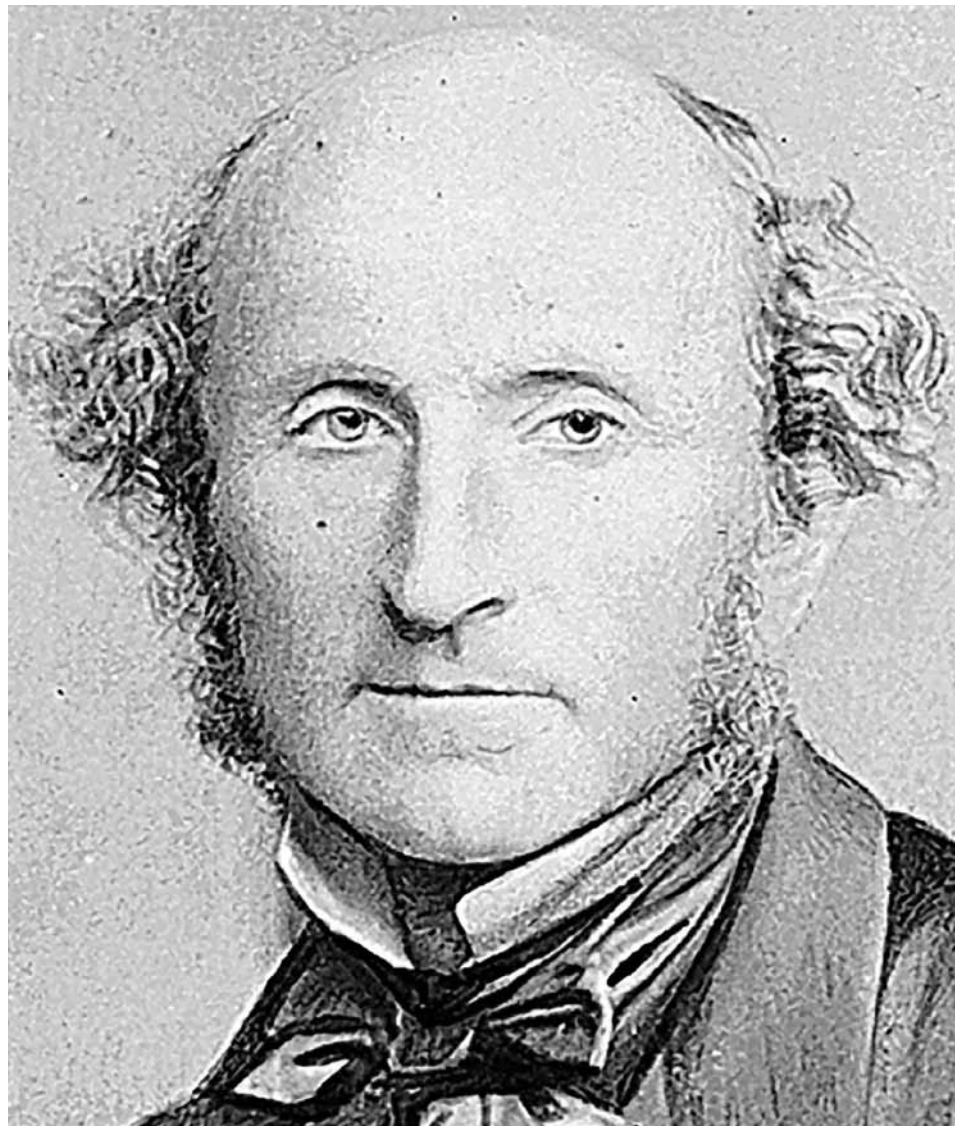


# JOHN STU AND THE LIB

When Gladstone described Mill as ‘the Saint of Rationalism’, he could also have added ‘and of Liberalism’. By the time he died, in 1873, the Victorian philosopher had acquired an almost unique status and authority, which transcended the confessional and cultural divides between ‘rationalists’ (or secularists) and the larger number of churchmen and Nonconformists, who provided the backbone of the party.  
By **Professor Eugenio Biagini**.



# JOURNAL OF LIBERAL HISTORY

# JOHN STUART MILL

# AND THE LIBERAL PARTY

**T**AKE, FOR example, his celebrated essay *On Liberty*: although it was ultimately a consistent expression of the author's religious agnosticism, the book could equally well be read as a reassertion of attitudes and convictions which were deeply rooted in the country's Puritan tradition, particularly through its emphasis on the moral sovereignty of the individual conscience and on dissent as something intrinsically good.<sup>1</sup>

He was such a great Victorian that it is surprising that his appeal has remained strong – and perhaps grown even stronger – with the passing of time. As the late Conrad Russell noted, Mill's continuing relevance to British Liberalism was publicly acknowledged in 1988, when *On Liberty* was adopted as the party's 'book of office' (replacing John Milton's *Areopagitica*).<sup>2</sup> Twenty years later, in the winter 2007–08, Mill was voted 'the greatest Liberal' by the readers of this journal. How can we explain such extraordinary and long-lasting success? In the present article I shall try to answer this question by focusing on the last part of the philosopher's career, examining first his impact on the party from 1859 and then those aspects of his thought which offered a particularly significant contribution to the later Liberal tradition.

## An unusual backbencher

The connection between Mill and the Victorian Liberal party has not escaped historians' attention. To mention but a few, John Vincent, Stefan Collini, Bruce Kinzer and that redoubtable academic couple, Ann and John Robson – the editors of Mill's *Collected Works* – have all written extensively on this topic.

As an MP for Westminster (1865–68), Mill was a loyal backbencher and, although a Radical, in the run up to 1868 he drew closer to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, W. E. Gladstone. On the one hand, this is surprising, given the significant differences in religious outlook and political background. Indeed, in 1873 Gladstone was deeply embarrassed to discover that Mill, as a young man, had publicly advocated birth control and the use of contraceptives. On the other hand, the Grand Old Man was a reader and admirer of Mill's economic writings, and his first government implemented legislation which reflected Mill's influence, including votes for women in local elections (from 1869), proportional representation for school board elections, and the Married Women's Property Act, 1870. By the same token, as Collini, Kinzer and the Robsons have argued, Mill felt a sort of 'elective affinity' for Gladstone, based on the shared conviction that Liberal

politics ought to be guided by moral energy and express itself through fervent campaigning.<sup>3</sup> Like Gladstone, Mill believed that he had a 'call' to politics – that his mission was to radicalise the Liberal Party, which at the time meant moving the party to the left of the political spectrum. Thus Mill was very active in the struggle for parliamentary reform, in the hope that, once the electoral system was purified from corrupt practices and democratised, 'progressive' candidates and labour leaders would stand a better chance of being returned, and their presence in the House of Commons would in turn provide the impetus for further reform.

A further area of convergence between Mill and Gladstone was in their sensitivity to minorities within multinational empires. Indeed Mill's support for the cause of Jamaicans in the 1860s presents affinities with Gladstone's later stance over Bulgaria, Zululand and Armenia between 1876 and 1896. Moreover, both men consistently adopted a 'European' perspective to international problems, detesting unilateralism as a dangerous superstition. Not surprisingly, in 1865–70 Mill saw in Gladstone the leader who would further the cause of 'advanced liberalism'. Although by 1873 he was to an extent disillusioned, his assessment of the GOM

John Stuart Mill  
(1806–73)

was basically accurate, and would be vindicated in due course. It is significant that one of Gladstone's most enthusiastic collaborators and his greatest biographer was John Morley, who was so closely associated with the legacy of the great philosopher that he earned the sobriquet of 'Mr Mill's representative on earth'.

### Active citizenship and the Liberal party organisation

One area in which Mill informed practical Liberal politics was in his concept of participatory citizenship and, indirectly, in his attitudes to the early ideas about the role and function of the party's 'mass' organisation. The latter became an issue from 1877, with the foundation of the National Liberal Federation (NLF) by another of Mill's admirers – Joseph Chamberlain. By contrast with the intellectual debate later generated by the NLF, there was little theoretical preparation for its establishment: no blueprint had been drawn up by any of those many intellectuals and journalists which Harvie has described as 'the lights of liberalism'.<sup>4</sup> Mill in particular had little to say about mass party organisation.<sup>5</sup> This omission is somewhat surprising when we consider that during his lifetime there flourished well-organised pressure groups similar to parties, including the National Education League, with which he was well acquainted, and the Land Tenure Reform Association, of which he was a leading member. The NLF, launched only four years after Mill's death, drew heavily on the experience of such leagues and associations, some of which it tried to coordinate. It has sometimes been suggested that, for all his intellectual prestige, Mill was actually unable to understand either the reality or the needs of 'party'. This suspicion is strengthened by the fact that even in his last major works on representative government he gave no account of the role of parties. Yet, he was not in principle hostile to them, and, as we have seen, in 1865–8, as a parliamentarian, he generally behaved like a disciplined and loyal party man.

In my view, the situation was actually more complicated and interesting. It was not that Mill

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was *unable* to grasp the reality of party democracy and the need for an electoral and canvassing 'machine'. It was rather that he championed a *different and distinctively Liberal* understanding of what such an organisation ought to comprise. The first thing to observe is that Mill's ideal of democracy was inspired more by *classical* than by modern models. He waxed lyrical about Athens in the days of Pericles, a time which he regarded almost as a sort of Liberal paradise, where each citizen was continually appointed to some form of public magistracy, and participation and debate arose spontaneously from the awareness of common interests rooted in the feeling of belonging to a socio-cultural entity to which one felt a positive emotional commitment.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, and crucially, such a perpetually deliberating *demos* allowed 'public moralists' to emerge as the guides of public opinion because '[t]he multitude have often a true instinct for distinguishing an able man, when he has the means for displaying his ability in a fair field before them.'<sup>7</sup> Hence the apparent paradox that ancient direct democracy was the cradle of philosopher-statesmen of the calibre of Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles and Demosthenes, leaders and not followers of popular opinion, who acted in a pedagogic rather than a demagogic way. Thus, the two dimensions which were so important for Mill – namely, meritocratic elitism and participatory democracy – converged in the context of the *polis*.<sup>8</sup> What linked them together was charismatic rhetoric – which in a free society provided 'able men' with 'the means for displaying their ability' before 'the multitude'.

At the time, these views were not unusual in Liberal and Radical circles. A good example is provided by Joseph Cowen, himself the embodiment of many of the values championed by Mill, including civic pride, social activism and an elitist resolve to provide guidance and leadership for a local democracy. On one occasion he told his constituents that that '[t]here is nothing incongruous in the union of [classical] democratic doctrines with representative institutions. Ancient order and modern progress are not incompatible.'<sup>9</sup>

However, how could the practice of direct democracy be reconciled with the needs of large-scale modern democracies? There were two main strategies: first, local government and decentralisation, to empower local political life; and second, strong, representative party organisations, which would mediate local aspirations and national aims by means of public debate. Thus the party 'mass' organisation, sometimes dismissively described as 'the caucus', was to act as a link between local and national democracy. As the *Fortnightly Review* put it, '[the caucus] appears to be a necessary outcome of democracy. In a small community, such as the Canton of Uri, all the freemen may meet in a meadow to pass laws. In larger societies direct government by the people gives place to representative government; and when constituencies consist of thousands, associations which aid the birth of popular opinion and give it strength, stability and homogeneity seem indispensable.'<sup>10</sup>

'Giving strength and stability to popular opinion' was, however, more easily said than done, but the apparent anarchy and intractable internal conflicts which plagued the NLF from the start make more sense once we bear in mind the context in which it operated: it was not supposed to be a caucus in the American sense of the word, but the *ekklesia* (general assembly) of the Liberal *demos*, or 'a Liberal parliament outside the Imperial Parliament'.<sup>11</sup> Its avowed aim was not primarily to become a canvassing organisation and win elections, but rather to provide a forum, a deliberating agora, within which ideas could be thrashed out, programmes formed 'from below' and opinion so 'rationally' informed eventually coordinated in electoral campaigns.

### 'A fruitful relation between thought and politics'

Both Vincent and Collini have seen Mill as the quintessential 'public moralist' of late-Victorian liberalism, the man who spoke as the movement's moral, intellectual and philosophical conscience. For Vincent, Mill came to play such a leading role because he lived and wrote at a key stage in the development of Liberalism: in the 1850s

'the educated classes received a new education [through the reformed, meritocratic public schools], the middle classes a new Press [thanks to the repeal of the stamp and paper duties, which made newspapers much cheaper, boosting their circulation;] and the working classes new institutions [with the growth of the cooperative movements and the 'new model' trade unions]'. And '[f]rom Mill the "thinking men" of all classes could learn a liberalism far more agreeable to their feelings than that taught by men of property in the Great Towns. Mill made it possible for young Oxford and for the labour aristocracy to be liberal without injury to their class feelings, and indeed with some flattery to them'.<sup>12</sup>

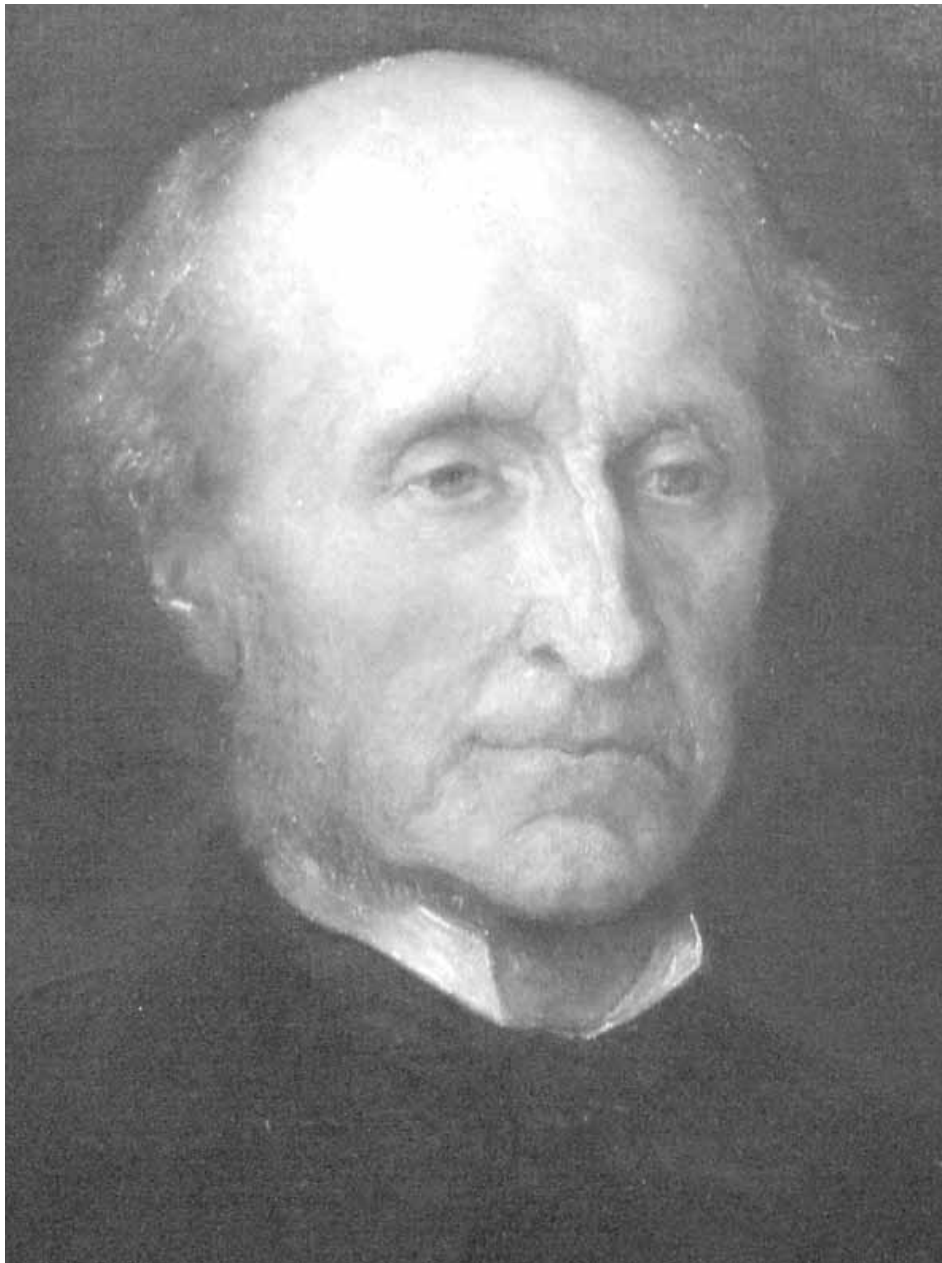
However, rather inconsistently, Vincent goes on to criticise what he describes as 'the failure of the Liberal intellectuals to make a fruitful relation between thought and politics'.<sup>13</sup> What he means by this is not clear, but it is difficult to see how such an assessment could be applicable at all to J. S. Mill,

who was the most eminent and influential of such intellectuals. On the contrary, his work established an intimate relation between thought and politics. For example, the rule of personal freedom presented in *On Liberty* was a recurrent concern with legislators, from the framing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1871 (which sought to prevent violence and intimidation during strikes) to the debate about the Contagious Diseases Acts (which allowed for compulsory medical tests for women suspected of being prostitutes). In fact, it took until 1886 for a Liberal government to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts. But this was in itself partly a reflection of Mill's influence, for he had been struggling with the aims and implications of such legislation when it was introduced, between 1864 and 1869: as Jeremy Waldron has shown, the Victorian philosopher saw a Liberal case for the Acts (prevention of harm to the families of the prostitutes' clients), although he opposed them 'on principle'.<sup>14</sup>

Let us now consider Mill's influence as an economist. The late H. C. G. Matthew once observed that the *Principles of Political Economy* (first published in 1848, and subsequently revised many times until 1873) became 'the bible' of mid-Victorian Liberals in all matters pertaining to commerce, industry and social reform. There was in particular Mill's constructive and original approach to the notion of laissez faire, which he conceived as a general 'rule' of good government, but one requiring many 'exceptions'. He listed some of these in the *Principles* and examined others in later writings, for example the essay about land reform in Ireland (1868). In particular, he thought that natural monopolies (such as water supplies and potentially land) should be publicly owned. Likewise, the state or local authorities had a duty to create those infrastructures which private enterprise would not develop because they were too expensive, or because the prospect of any return from the necessary investments was remote. Further

Cartoon mocking Mill's attempt to replace the term 'man' with 'person' in the second Reform Bill of 1867. (*Punch*, 30 March 1867.)





Portrait of Mill by G F Watts

examples were the provision of medical care and education – which Mill thought should be universal and compulsory, although best provided by competing public and private structures, between which citizens could choose.

A further area in which Mill's ideas left their mark on Liberalism was on attitudes to industrial relations. Traditionally, political economists had been very dismissive of trade unions, as organisations whose attempts to influence wages and conditions of employment were at best vain and ineffective and at worst bordering on the criminal. In the earlier part of his career Mill shared such views, but then made a complete U-turn and adopted a decidedly pro-trade union line in

1862. The change came in response to a debate initiated by T. J. Dunning, a trade union leader, with his essay *Trades' Unions and Strikes* (1860), in which he argued that trade unions were a necessary component of a really free labour market. Mill promptly adopted his ideas, and in the 1862 edition of the *Principles* he abandoned the notion that the market was a self-acting mechanism which would operate most perfectly if not interfered with. Instead he argued that

demand and supply are not physical agencies, which thrust a fixed amount of wages into a labourer's hand without the participation of his own will and actions. The market rate is

not fixed for him by some self-acting instrument, but is the result of bargaining between human beings – of what Adam Smith calls 'the higgling of the market'; and those who do not 'higgle' will long continue to pay more than the market prices for the purchases. Still more might poor labourers, who have to do with rich employers, remain long without the amount of wages which the demand for their labour would justify, unless, in vernacular phrase, they stood out for it: and how can they stand out for terms without organised concert? What chance would any labourer have, who struck singly for an advance of wages? How could he even know whether the state of the market admitted of a rise, except by consultation with his fellows, naturally leading to concerted action? I do not hesitate to say that associations of labourers, of a nature similar to trade unions, far from being a hindrance to a free market of labour, are the necessary instrumentality of that free market; the indispensable means of enabling the sellers of labour to take due care of their own interests under a system of competition.<sup>15</sup>

*Pace Vincent*, this provides a further example of a Liberal intellectual establishing 'a fruitful relation between thought and politics', or at least laying the groundwork for later political developments. In fact, the trade union legislation of 1871–5 (both Liberal and Conservative) was based on Mill's new understanding of a positive and indeed necessary role for the unions. Furthermore, this illustrated a new approach to the development of ideas and concepts which Mill had adopted in the 1850s, or perhaps as early as 1848–9. The change was one of method: as Janice Carlisle has noted, in the 1820s Mill used to '[denounce] so-called "practical men" [such as Dunning] as the most "unsafe" and "bigoted", the "most obstinate and presumptuous of all theorists" because they erect their principles on the "small number of facts which come within the narrow circle of their immediate observation"'.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, by 1859 he



was operating on a radically different set of assumptions and regarded the relationship between ‘men of action’ and ‘men of thought’ as one which ought to be complementary, based on empirical analysis not abstract dogma, and defined by concrete political aims, not abstract intellectual agendas.

In practice this meant an alliance between the professional elites – with their ethic of public service and competence, so different from the entrepreneurial mindset of the industrial middle class – and organised labour. In this way, as Vincent has noted, ‘Mill ... removed, for those who were willing to listen, any intellectual difficulties that might exist about the merits of State interference in social arrangements. He thought a government might compel universal insurance, though he doubted its expediency. He spoke in favour of State aid to the sea fisheries in Ireland, explaining this was entirely justifiable on general grounds ... above all he looked to the cities as the next area for the extension of State action’, especially with reference to sanitary conditions and working-class housing.<sup>17</sup>

In an important and as yet unpublished doctoral thesis, Helen McCabe has gone beyond this social-democratic reading of Mill and has persuasively argued that by the time he suddenly died in 1873 he was working on a model of industrial development which would finally bypass the market and its possessive imperatives by focusing on cooperation and industrial democracy.<sup>18</sup> In her view the political thought of the mature Mill represented a form of ‘liberal socialism’. As another scholar, Richard Reeves, has recently argued, ‘[it] was Mill’s liberalism that shaped his response to socialism ... He was vehemently opposed to centralised state control of the economy, but was a strong supporter of socialism in the form of collective ownership of individual enterprises, competing in a market economy.’<sup>19</sup> These are radical conclusions about a radical thinker, and would require a more detailed scrutiny than I can offer in this article. However, much less controversial – and yet not much less radical – is Vincent’s conclusion that ‘[Mill] was confident that poverty, in any sense implying suffering, might be completely

**‘[Mill] was confident that poverty, in any sense implying suffering, might be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society’. It was a vision which fired the imagination and ambitions of the next generations of Liberal economists ... and sustained the Liberal Party well into the second half of the twentieth century.**

extinguished by the wisdom of society’.<sup>20</sup> It was a vision which fired the imagination and ambitions of the next generations of Liberal economists, including Alfred Marshall (a college lecturer at Cambridge in 1873), J. A. Hobson and John Maynard Keynes, and sustained the Liberal Party well into the second half of the twentieth century.

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- 1 M. St John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London, 1954), p. 400.
- 2 C. Russell, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Liberalism* (London, 1999), p. 83.
- 3 S. Collini, *Public Moralists. Political thought and intellectual life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 157–8; Bruce L. Kinzer, Ann P. Robson, John M. Robson *A Moralist in and out of Parliament: John Stuart Mill at Westminster, 1865–1868* (Toronto, 1992), pp. 12–3, 21, 88–9.
- 4 C. Harvie, *The Lights Of Liberalism: University liberals and the challenge of democracy 1860–86* (1976).
- 5 With the exception of a few remarks in connection with his discussion of Thomas Hare’s proportional representation scheme. Most of his criticism focused on the ‘first-past-the-post’ system. The American caucus did not attract his attention, but he wrote that ‘in America electors vote for the party ticket because the election goes by a simple majority’ (*The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* [henceforward cited CW], vol. XIX, Toronto and London, 1977, p. 464): again, the problem was with the first-past-the-post system, not with parties. However, in his *Considerations on Representative Government* he indicted the British party system of the time on the ground that candidates were selected by small cliques – ‘the attorney, the parliamentary agent, or the half-dozen party

leaders’, or even worse ‘three or four tradesmen or attorneys.’ (CW, vol. XIX, pp. 362 and 456 respectively; see also CW, vol. XXVIII, p. 12). Of course, this was precisely one of the problems which Chamberlain boasted of having solved with his broadly representative Liberal association.

- 6 Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, CW, vol. XIX (Toronto and London, 1977), p. 324.
- 7 Mill, *Considerations*, p. 458.
- 8 For Mill’s elitism see R. J. Halliday, *John Stuart Mill* (London, 1976).
- 9 ‘Political address by Mr. Cowen, M.P.’, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 18 February 1885, pp. 2–3.
- 10 J. Macdonnell, ‘Is the caucus a necessity?’, *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 44 o.s., vol. 38 n.s. (Dec. 1885), p. 790.
- 11 Cf. E. F. Biagini, ‘Liberalism and Direct Democracy. John Stuart Mill and the Model of Ancient Athens’, in Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community. Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865–1931* (Cambridge, 1996); Biagini, *Liberty*, pp. 313–5; J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870–1914* (London, 1994), p. 248; and M. Daunt, *Trusting Leviathan. The politics of taxation in Britain 1799–1914* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 256–301.
- 12 J. Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party 1857–68* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 184.
- 13 Vincent, *Formation of the Liberal Party*, p. 188.
- 14 J. Waldron, ‘Mill on Liberty and the Contagious Diseases Act’, in N. Urbinati and A. Zakaras, *J. S. Mill’s Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 11–42.
- 15 J. S. Mill, *The Principles of Political Economy*, in CW, Vol. III (London and Toronto, 1965), p. 932. On the question see E. F. Biagini, ‘Trade unions and popular political economy, 1860–1880’, *The Historical Journal* 30, 4 (1987), pp. 811–40.
- 16 J. Carlisle, *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character* (London, 1991), p. 45.
- 17 Vincent, *Formation of the Liberal Party*, p. 191.
- 18 H. McCabe “‘Under the general designation of socialist’: the mansided radicalism of John Stuart Mill’, Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2010.
- 19 Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill, Victorian Firebrand* (London, 2007), p. 7.
- 20 Vincent, *Formation of the Liberal Party*, p. 191.