



Conference delegates at Gregynog.

Crime and Security Act 2001, as its after-dinner speaker on the Saturday. Lord Carlile gave a fascinating account of his time as independent reviewer and also allowed a series of interesting questions to be raised afterwards.

Of the various panels held, topics included Liberal ideology, counterfactual history, Liberal Democrats and the 2005 general election, policy, campaigning, gender and candidate selection, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and devolution and Prime Ministers, leaders and other important Liberal figures.

Gregynog is set in hundreds of acres of landscaped gardens and woodland, around ten miles from the nearest town and outside the reach of the mobile phone networks. Payphones, therefore, were the link for delegates with the outside world – something of a novelty for many mobile-phone-dependent delegates! The conference's somewhat remote location also ensured that attendance for all panels was high, not

only because of the quality of panellists but also because there were no opportunity to 'slip off'.

The BLSPG also held a short AGM at Gregynog. It was agreed that the weekend had been successful and that the 2007 conference would be held at

the University of Birmingham between the 19–21 January 2007. So please put that date in your diaries.

Dr Russell Deacon is BLPSG and Conference Convenor.

1906 remembered

Scottish Liberal Club lecture, February 2006, Edinburgh, with Willis Pickard

In a lecture to the Scottish Liberal Club a hundred years to the week after the opening of the 1906 Parliament, Willis Pickard, chairman of the club and former editor of the Times Educational Supplement Scotland, sought to identify a line of development within the Victorian Liberal Party in Scotland which contributed to the electoral triumph a century ago.

Dr Pickard took as his starting point the life of Duncan McLaren (1800–86), a wealthy Edinburgh draper, Lord Provost of the city and one of its MPs from 1865–81. Three of his sons were also Liberal MPs. McLaren has had a bad press, from his own day onwards, partly because of a humourless rasping style but more because he successfully challenged the Whig

establishment than ran post-1832 Scotland and left behind it letters and journals denouncing the upstart shopkeeper. He represented the political wing of the Voluntary church movement, Presbyterian opponents of the established Church of Scotland and the funding it received from the state and through local impositions like the annuity tax peculiar to Edinburgh by which the city's established ministers received their stipends but from paying which the leading lawyers were exempt. In the 1830s McLaren made his name opposing the tax and, as City Treasurer, leading Edinburgh out of the bankruptcy into which the pre-Reform self-perpetuating Tory council had plunged it.

Challenging the lawyer-led Whig dominance of Edinburgh and Scottish politics, McLaren and other members of the 'shopocracy' formed Radical alliances on burgh councils. Initially, it was burgh reform and not the very limited Scottish parliamentary reform that gave these new Liberals their opportunity. The period was fraught with religious controversy: after the Disruption of 1843 three Presbyterian groups vied for dominance – the Established Church, the new Free Church and the major Voluntary groups who formed the United Presbyterians in 1847. What appears as sectarian (and bigoted) wrangling over irrelevancies like the Maynooth grant was also jostling for political power. Dr Pickard argued that McLaren was among the most skilful manipulators of a religious congregation as a political power base. Many of his allies challenging the Whig lawyers were fellow Voluntaries for whom the Free Church's adherents were as much a threat as those remaining loyal to the Established Church. But to Macaulay, an Edinburgh MP until ejected at the 1847 election by McLaren and his allies, sectarianism had taken over. The Whig historian's arrogant dismissal of his electors' preoccupations, including abolition of

the Corn Laws, contributed to his downfall, but McLaren and the Radical Liberals struggled to shake off their reputation for bigotry and internecine scuffling. In 1852 the city, nationally shamed by what it had done to the great man, restored him to Parliament, defeating McLaren in the process.

The Radical leader John Bright, however, recognised McLaren as an able fellow spirit – and accepted him as brother-in-law. Priscilla Bright, McLaren's third wife, was to become a leader of the movement for women's rights in Scotland. Before entering Parliament at the age of sixty-five, McLaren had worked with Bright on Reform legislation, and the Bright-McLaren family alliance was increasingly influential in the Liberal business circles of Yorkshire and Lancashire. McLaren, through ability (especially with figures), determination and wealth, came to typify the new Liberal leadership in Scotland – urban, self-made, church-oriented. He was too old when he entered Parliament to make a ministerial career and his relationship with Gladstone was always ambivalent. McLaren resented the GOM's refusal to commit to disestablishment of the Church of Scotland, and in his last months in retirement he split with the party over Irish home rule (he didn't want it for Scotland either). But by hard work on Scottish causes McLaren threw off his earlier reputation as a canting political bruiser and gained the soubriquet of 'Member for Scotland'. His Liberalism was of the kind that gave the party its Scottish backbone until 1918. Even when, as employer of hundreds of 'hands' in his shop he opposed the trade unions' attempts to make picketing legal and there were mass rallies against him in Edinburgh, he was still re-elected with thousands of working-men's votes.

Three years after going to Westminster McLaren found

a Radical ally in another businessman turned MP. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (as he later became) was from the Glasgow 'shopocracy' although his father and brother were keen Tories. The young MP for Stirling Burghs made his maiden speech on a topic that obsessed McLaren, the future of charitable 'hospitals' that were being turned into fee-paying day schools. JB Mackie, a journalist who wrote the authorised biography of McLaren two years after he died, and much later a short sketch of CB as a local MP, said of the latter: 'His speeches and his votes proclaimed his sympathy with the Manchester School, of which the most prominent English representative was John Bright, and the most unpromising Scottish advocate was Duncan McLaren.'

As Dr Pickard pointed out, no one on the Liberal benches in the 1870s and 1880s would have predicted that the amiable, solid but stolid Campbell-Bannerman would follow Gladstone and the real rising star, Lord Rosebery, into 10 Downing Street. But perhaps there was in the Presbyterian character shared by McLaren and Campbell-Bannerman an indication of the principles that CB brought to his leadership of the Liberal Party – not just belief in self-help and free trade but a feeling for the dispossessed. McLaren did not want charitable foundations to elide into schools for the comfortable middle classes. CB was appalled by British treatment of Calvinist Boer farmers and attracted to Boer leaders with whom he created the self-governing South Africa that was to be so valuable to Britain in two world wars.

Finally, Dr Pickard pointed to the nice timing by which three of the five towns incongruously forming CB's constituency of Stirling Burghs – Dunfermline, Culross and Inverkeithing – had returned to Liberal allegiance just in time for the 1906 centenary, thanks to Willie Rennie's victory in the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election.

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