

## Biography

Andrew Connell analyses the political life and career of Liberal MP Sir James Whitehead (1834–1917)

# 'I feel I am placed at a ve Sir James Whitehead: the parliamen



# ‘A very great disadvantage’ The untimely travails of a Liberal meritocrat

WHAT KNOW THEY of politics who only politics know? It is received wisdom that parliament, overstocked with career politicians from privileged backgrounds, benefits from a leavening of successful entrepreneurs from outside the ‘Westminster Village’. But in practice the late entrant into politics, accustomed to instant decision-making, is apt to be frustrated by seemingly arcane procedure. When Sir James Whitehead entered the Commons in 1892 after an impressive commercial career and an outstanding term as a Liberal lord mayor of London, it was predicted that he would ‘end his career in the purple’.<sup>1</sup> Yet within two years he resigned his safe seat and, though he lived until 1917, withdrew from politics. Unlike his school friend the Rev. John Percival, another Liberal of Westmorland hill-farming stock,<sup>2</sup> he does not appear in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and mention in published history is limited to the odd textbook and monograph.<sup>3</sup> Is this another instance of meritocratic failure to cut a dash on the parliamentary stage?

Whitehead’s self-made credentials were indisputable. Born in 1834, sixth child of an owner-occupier hill farmer who retired to Appleby in Westmorland, he left the town grammar school at fourteen for the drapery trade in Appleby and Kendal and thence to boomtown Bradford as a commercial traveller. ‘On the road’ he courted a customer’s daughter, Mercy Hinde of Huntingdon, married in 1860 and moved to the City of London as agent for a Bradford worsted manufacturer. In 1870 he bankrolled the establishment of Barker & Co., drapers of Kensington High Street, for whom he pioneered mail order business. When the postal reformer Sir Rowland Hill, to whom he owed much, died in 1879, he became secretary of the committee that commissioned a statue in Hill’s memory, with surplus subscriptions invested in a benevolent fund for indigent retired postal workers.<sup>4</sup> By 1880, retaining his partnership in Barker’s, various directorships and an investment portfolio, Whitehead could afford to retire from day-to-day commerce.

He lived in a brick mansion in Catford, with twenty-four servants and *Virtute et Labore* inscribed over the door.<sup>5</sup> Though remaining a total abstainer, he shed Methodism for Anglicanism; his sons went to public school and Oxford, mostly under the austere tutelage of Percival.<sup>6</sup> He served as JP in both Westmorland and Kent and was vice-president of the newly formed International Arbitration and Peace Association:<sup>7</sup> political life beckoned. But in the general election of April 1880, although funding the campaign in unwinnable West Kent, he declined nomination on health grounds and went on a recuperative world tour with his eldest son. His entrance into public life came in 1882 with unopposed election to the City of London Common Council as representative of the companies of Fruiterers and Fanmakers and an ‘advanced Liberal’.<sup>8</sup> In 1884 Alderman Whitehead, with ‘so refined a physiognomy ... so delicate a figure ... an oval face more suggestive more of Holy than of Westmorland’,<sup>9</sup> was both elected Sheriff of London and adopted as Liberal candidate for the new single-member constituency of North Westmorland, centred on Appleby. With half the voters newly enfranchised and corrupt electoral practices outlawed, the *Daily News* considered his prospects good;<sup>10</sup> the local Liberal press hailed ‘a strong candidate sprung from the people’ destined for ‘glorious victory over the domination of Toryism’.<sup>11</sup>

He nearly achieved it. Facing William Lowther, an entrenched Tory from the county’s foremost landowning family, Whitehead added to his credentials as local boy made good the backing of Henry Tufton, first Baron Hothfield, owner of Appleby Castle and its estates, who had contested Westmorland as a Liberal in 1880 and now chaired the constituency party.<sup>12</sup> From the platforms of far-flung village institutes and chapels Whitehead vigorously proclaimed his radicalism. His manifesto encompassed one man, one vote, enhanced tenant rights, abolition of primogeniture, elected local government boards with powers to regulate licensing, free education, centrally funded reform of the House of Lords and compulsory employer

Left: Lord Mayor Whitehead (‘Bonnie Westmorland’), 1889

## Sir James Whitehead: the parliamentary travails of a Liberal meritocrat

liability; he deplored jingoism, citing the recent 'invasion of Egypt undertaken in order to carry out engagements entered into by the Tory government' as a 'discreditable chapter in our history'.<sup>13</sup> He was confident that 'the light of Liberalism had dawned' in North Westmorland and with it 'the prospect of a brilliant future'.<sup>14</sup> But with nationwide results indicating a parliamentary Liberal majority little changed from 1880, the count in Appleby on 3 December 1885 put him just ten votes behind Lowther. 'Faggot votes' had won the day,<sup>15</sup> Whitehead told supporters massed in the market place. This was 'the first time in his life he had been defeated' and 'not in a fair and honest manner'; but 'if God spares us we will win in the long run'.<sup>16</sup>

He had not long to wait. Even before the caretaker Salisbury ministry made way for Gladstone's return to Downing Street in February 1886, the GOM's resolve to press on with Irish home rule was public knowledge, though few foresaw the scale of the internal Liberal revolt that precipitated the July general election. Tory warnings that Gladstone would 'hand over the management of Irish affairs to men who would march through rapine and plunder to the disintegration of the Empire' undoubtedly resonated in Cumberland and Westmorland.<sup>17</sup> 'I don't know what is going to happen to the Liberal Party', wrote Henry Howard, MP for Mid-Cumberland, to Whitehead. 'I hope you are not in favour of the Home Rule Bill. I cannot see my way to voting for it'.<sup>18</sup> Howard became a Liberal Unionist but refused nomination, enabling the Tory James W. Lowther to regain the seat unopposed. Would Whitehead – not unlike Joe Chamberlain in age, self-made business background and fastidious dress sense – follow suit? 'I very much regret that Anything has happened which makes you hesitate', wrote the chief whip Arnold Morley; 'Hoping that you may see your way again to support the Government in a crisis of no ordinary magnitude'.<sup>19</sup> Unwilling to follow Hothfield as a 'thorough Gladstonian',<sup>20</sup> Whitehead compromised, declaring himself an Independent Liberal: 'neither Separationist nor Liberal Unionist ... I am a Unionist in the broadest sense of the term ... a true Union can only be established by the concession of a liberal measure of self-government to the sister kingdom'.<sup>21</sup> Despite his efforts to divert voters' attention to land reform, lower railway freight charges and the liberation of North Westmorland from 'the Lowther yoke', the Conservative majority rose from 10 to 186; but with Liberals losing half their English seats, a campaign producing a negative swing of under 2 per cent probably merited the description of 'plucky and energetic' against 'fearful odds'.<sup>22</sup> In 1888 Whitehead agreed to stand again.

By then he was London's lord mayor-elect: 'a capable, courtly man, who will do honour to the high position he is called to, and will, with peculiar fitness, inaugurate a new era of City

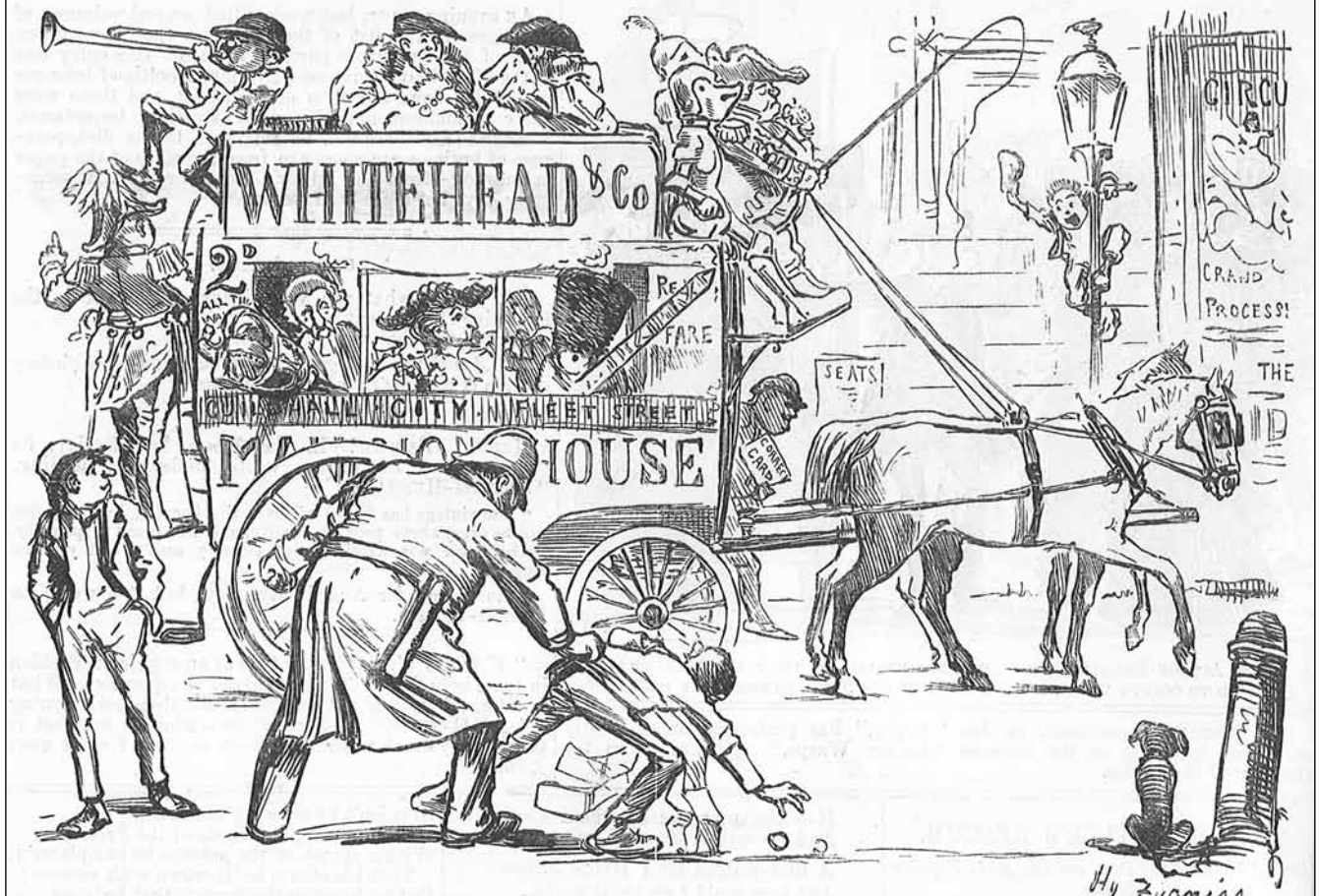
administration in conjunction with the working of a Radical Local Government Act passed by a Conservative ministry', said *Punch*.<sup>23</sup> As befitted Labouchere's description of him as an 'excellent Radical',<sup>24</sup> he made well-publicised economies in the inaugural Lord Mayor's Show and banquet – turtle soup was off the menu – while providing London's workhouse inmates with extra rations including, his teetotalism notwithstanding, a pint of porter. But if his banquets were 'dull in their ascetic moderation',<sup>25</sup> some flummery was condoned. The 700th anniversary of the lord mayoralty on May Day 1889 saw a 'Juvenile Ball' featuring sixty-four children in 'Historical Procession and Quadrille illustrative of Costumes and Characters'. Whitehead's daughters Leila and Florence were Puritan Maidens from the seventeenth century – potentially less entertaining than the pairings of Lord Nelson with the Duchess of Marlborough (eighteenth century) and the Miller with the Wife of Bath (fourteenth century).<sup>26</sup> But he seldom lost sight of serious causes. His subscription fund better to equip the Metropolitan Volunteers earned further praise from *Punch*;<sup>27</sup> an appeal to relieve famine in China raised £31,000; and after a visit to the Paris Exposition he raised subscriptions to support the work of the Pasteur Institute, paving the way for the British Institute of Preventive Medicine, founded in 1891. The last of 'highly valuable services in an eventful mayoralty', rewarded with the usual baronetcy, was successful intervention, in conjunction with Cardinal Manning, to mediate between unions and employers in the 'Dockers' Tanner' strike of August–September 1889 that had brought the Port of London to a standstill. Nearly three decades later, at a Dockers' Conference, Ben Tillet recalled his part with gratitude.<sup>28</sup>

With Whitehead's achievements at Mansion House fulsomely covered by the local Liberal press, the North Westmorland party agent was confident of winning the seat by 500 at the next election.<sup>29</sup> But in March 1890 it was announced that the Liberal candidate would be Lord Hothfield's younger brother, Alfred Tufton; on medical advice Sir James Whitehead was switching to Leicester, an 'easier' seat.<sup>30</sup> The 'consistent Radicalism' of unionised boot and shoe workers had ensured that the comfortable majorities of Leicester's two Liberal members were barely affected by the party's 1886 convulsions.<sup>31</sup> Now, with the blessing of the retiring MP, sabbatarian and home ruler Alexander McArthur,<sup>32</sup> Whitehead would join James Allanson Picton, Congregationalist minister and admiring biographer of Oliver Cromwell. In the general election of July 1892 that brought Gladstone's fourth premiership they were unopposed.

The Liberal *Leicester Chronicle* enthused over the new MP, patriot and philanthropist, 'a tallish, erect, alert man, who moves with precision and looks the world straight in the face', commending both his lord mayoral achievements and his

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## ANTICIPATIONS OF NEXT LORD MAYOR'S SHOW.



The frugal Lord Mayor's Show, as satirised in *Punch*, October 1888

refusal, as Sheriff of London, to permit the press to watch the Newgate hanging of the murderer Mary Pearcey.<sup>33</sup> From a less partisan standpoint, Leicester's 'Topical, Satirical and Humorous Journal' the *Wyvern*, while disappointed that the Conservatives had failed to field a candidate, declared him 'a thorough gentleman and a good fellow to boot', a 'genial yet cute' man of business, supportive of technical and commercial education, who had shown 'pluck and grit' as lord mayor, 'not a great orator, but a good speaker'.<sup>34</sup> Though remaining – like McArthur before him – resident in Kent, Whitehead did the things a constituency MP should do: he was president of Leicestershire Rugby Football Union and patron of Leicester Sunday School Union and Leicester Commercial Travellers' Association.

The foremost issue claiming the new MP's attention was railway rates. Comprising hundreds of independent, notionally competing companies, the Victorian railway was effectively a cartel.<sup>35</sup> Under the aegis of the Board of Trade, the Railway and Canal Commission attempted to exercise a degree of supervision of charges; the companies, strongly represented in parliament, countered with the Railway Companies Association. Whitehead, his background in wholesale, commercial travel and mail order, had expatiated

on the 'injustice' of railway rates in his 1885 manifesto and presided over the Mansion House Association, established during his lord mayoralty to represent the interests of commercial customers of the railways; his son Rowland was one of the association's legal team in the course of a parliamentary enquiry that culminated in an 1,851-page report in August 1891.<sup>36</sup> Involvement with Leicester strengthened his commitment: Midlands farmers and traders protested that, with transportation of goods by sea impracticable and most canals owned by railways, they were charged discriminatorily high rates. Yet the railway companies, after two decades of struggle to cover costs as growth in freight tonnage decelerated following the mid-Victorian boom, considered existing charges inadequate;<sup>37</sup> on 1 January 1893 they published a tariff of rates raised to the legal limit.<sup>38</sup>

The 'subsequent uproar' set Whitehead's parliamentary course.<sup>39</sup> His first Commons contribution was to propose on 1 February 1893 an amendment to the 1888 Railway Rates & Charges Bill giving the Board of Trade greater powers of adjudication in disputes between railways and traders over what was 'fair and reasonable'. The prospects looked good; the railway interest was much less influential in the parliamentary Liberal Party than it had once been, and A. J. Mundella,

Whitehead's Mayoral subscription fund for equipping the Metropolitan Volunteers; *Punch*, 15 June 1889



restored to the presidency of the Board of Trade, would have introduced legislation on railway rates in 1886 had crisis not engulfed the government. But now Mundella's priority was the Regulation of Railways (Hours of Labour); he did not seek additional powers over rates: he explained that he had advised the companies to reconsider them, but there were 'several hundred millions' in over forty thick volumes and it would take time. Yet a fortnight later, after assurances that there was not the 'slightest possibility' of it coming up that day, Whitehead was suddenly called upon to move his second reading. His speech unprepared, he reluctantly withdrew his amendment: 'I feel

I am placed at a very great disadvantage, inasmuch as, having had myself but little parliamentary experience, I have to rely for guidance upon friends'.<sup>40</sup> Despite some piecemeal rate reductions, he remained deeply dissatisfied. The companies were 'too clever'; their 'stealthy and persistent ... combined aggressiveness' had given them effective monopolies; the concessions they had made in response to Board of Trade pressure were modest; they could still 'do exactly what they like'. By way of esoteric example, the charge for transporting 13,000 feet of timber from Ledbury to High Wycombe had on 1 January 1893 gone up from £244 18s 10d to £523 18s 8d; even after reduction

it was £390 7s 11d. Although persuaded not to carry out his threat of speaking against the second reading of the Midland Railway Bill simply to precipitate a parliamentary discussion on 'reasonable rates', Whitehead remained insistent that more legislation was essential.<sup>41</sup>

Heartened perhaps by Leicestershire Trade and Protection Society's recognition of 'the great obligations of the commercial community to Sir James Whitehead MP for his able service as president of the Mansion House Association on railway and canal traffic and also for his exertions in the House of Commons to protect the interests of traders from the unfair encroachments of railway companies',<sup>42</sup> he proposed a 'temporary bill' that would outlaw any rates that exceeding those charged on 31 December 1892.<sup>43</sup> Promised that in response to 'unprecedented numbers' of complaints there would be a new select committee, he pressed for details of its remit and membership, refusing to be fobbed off by Mundella's assurances that this would be done 'without delay', 'at an early date', or at least 'in due course'.<sup>44</sup> By 16 May 1893 Whitehead knew that he was one of its nineteen members; although he considered the railway interest 'unduly represented' and agriculture's representation 'not adequate', he hoped that 'some good would come of it'.<sup>45</sup> The Select Committee on Railway Rates comprised nine Liberal MPs, eight Conservatives and two Irish, Parnellite and anti-Parnellite. Including railway directors from both sides of the House, it did not divide on party lines: Whitehead's closest ally in demanding legislation to provide firmer regulation and recompense for traders hit by swingeing rate increases was a London Conservative, Sir Albert Rollitt. The first report, published in August, recorded twenty-three meetings in twelve weeks. Whitehead was prominent but not dominant: his courteously insistent questioning of witnesses was replete with specific detail, but the generalities enunciated in an exchange with Sir Henry Oakley, General Manager of the Great Northern and Secretary of the Railway Association are applicable to any discussion of transportation tariffs.

WHITEHEAD: The railway companies have adopted the principle of charging what they felt the traffic would bear, have they not?

OAKLEY: I have always thought that to be a very unfortunate expression because my view of the position is that we should endeavour so to fix the rates as to encourage the greatest amount of traffic being sent over the railway.<sup>46</sup>

There was a supplementary report in November 1893, but Whitehead missed the concluding meetings, laid low by recurrent flu, perhaps a consequence of another stressful political issue that had claimed his attention. In July 1892 North Westmorland had been easily held for the Conservatives by the carpetbagger Sir Joseph Savory, lord mayor of London in 1890–91. In local

post-election Liberal recriminations Whitehead was accused of having 'wilfully damaged the Liberal cause' to the benefit of his City friend.<sup>47</sup> A bitter exchange of press letters and pamphlets began in January 1893. Hothfield insisted that Whitehead had opposed home rule, deserted the constituency and undermined Alfred Tufton's candidacy by 'dirty and dishonourable methods', spreading the 'preposterous and untrue' story that Hothfield had forced him out of the seat.<sup>48</sup> These were 'Scurrilous and malignant' accusations, Whitehead riposted: he had given up North Westmorland after being 'slighted and harassed' by the Tuftons when he was 'really ill'; their failure in 1892 had been the consequence of inept campaigning. Hothfield dismissed such 'vague and florid innuendo ... commercial room vulgarity': had not Whitehead been overheard in 1892 describing Hothfield as a 'd\_\_\_d cad'?<sup>49</sup> He was sorry for the electors of Leicester, hitherto represented by 'honourable and reliable' men. This mutual abuse came to an abrupt end when Gladstone's Government of Ireland Bill was thrown out by the Lords on 8 September 1893 by 419 votes to 41. Hothfield voted with the majority, commencing a political journey that by 1911 placed him in the ranks of the ultra-Tory 'Ditchers'. The *Leicester Chronicle* explained that because the attacks on Whitehead were 'obviously the outcome of merely personal feeling ... unworthy of the smallest advertisement' it had been silent on the 'North Westmorland feud'. Now the home rule vote had shown the protagonists in their 'true colours': 'Sir James Whitehead stands abundantly justified. The hon. Baronet need pay no more attention to the Hothfields'.<sup>50</sup>

In 1894 he resumed the struggle for legislation to 'ameliorate unreasonable railway rates ... on behalf of a very large number of traders and agriculturists'. In April Mundella told him that the Railway & Canal Traffic Bill would be published 'very shortly', but without the desired provision to make canals again 'independent competitive means of transport' by compulsory purchase from railway companies.<sup>51</sup> Enforced resignation from the cabinet a few days later was perhaps a relief. 'Alas!' Mundella replied to a 'friendly and sympathetic letter' from Whitehead, 'I know nothing about Railway rates'.<sup>52</sup> His replacement at the Board of Trade, the ascetic jurist James Bryce, had in the 1880s led parliamentary opposition to Lake District railway projects on the grounds that they would spoil the scenery; 'this appointment filled railway circles with alarm'.<sup>53</sup> But he proved little more accommodating: despite working 'double shifts in the committee rooms',<sup>54</sup> all Whitehead could get from Bryce's parliamentary secretary Tom Burt was the 'indefinite answer' that he did not know and could not say when the bill would be read a second time. Perhaps William Harcourt, Chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the government in the Commons, could arrange 'special facilities' for it? 'I am not in a position to

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answer these questions at present' was his brusque response.<sup>55</sup> Filibustering by the eccentric Irish Unionist lawyer James Alexander Rentoul caused further frustration before the bill got through its second reading on 22 June 1894. Having 'borne the brunt of this controversy for five years on behalf of traders', Whitehead now claimed the 'right to say a word': he 'accepted' it as better than nothing, but was 'somewhat disappointed'.<sup>56</sup>

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It was his last speech in the Commons. By the time – after last-minute haggling on the rates chargeable when long-distance freight was handled by multiple companies – the Railway & Canal Traffic Bill had emerged from the committee stage and made its final express journey to royal assent on 25 August, 1894,<sup>60</sup> Sir James Whitehead was recuperating in Pontresina, Switzerland. He had effected his parliamentary resignation by being appointed Steward of the Manor of Northstead on 17 August; on the same day, in an unprecedented double resignation, Allanson Picton had taken the Chiltern Hundreds. Attributing his ill-health in part to the behavior of opposition members, 'an irresponsible body whose sole cause seems to be to secure class privilege', Whitehead told his constituency party: 'I am not, in these days of deliberate and systematic obstruction, equal to the strain of Parliamentary life'. 'A few years ago the day was never too long'; now 'excessive labour' had brought 'the usual penalty'.<sup>61</sup> His 'present prostration', said the *Leicester Chronicle*, was a consequence of 'constant efforts' on railway rates: 'overwork and zeal in the interests of the people has claimed another victim'.<sup>62</sup> The *Wyvern* felt that Sir James had been a 'very useful parliamentary man' who had accomplished 'a great many good things', but had

'never seemed to get really in touch with Leicester electorate' because of 'a suspicion that the ex-Lord Mayor was thrust upon them from headquarters'.<sup>63</sup> The Conservative *Leicester Express* portrayed him as imposed by Leicester's Liberal Caucus: 'we hope that the hon. baronet's parliamentary services have been properly appreciated, but we cannot forget that he was the choice of the Bishop-street party managers and not of the electors as a body'.<sup>64</sup>

Picton suffered from gout, and his desire to leave the House was well known; the nature of Whitehead's recurrent illnesses is a mystery. From August to December 1893 he had 'severe influenza',<sup>65</sup> but by January 1894 was sufficiently recovered to speak at the Leicester mayoral banquet. On 31 July he was reported to have been 'very ill with colic', but 'out of danger'.<sup>66</sup> When Francis Channing, Liberal MP for East Northants and an ally on railway rates, read of the resignation 'in the papers' on 14 August, he wrote to Whitehead, 'I cannot understand why you suffer so – when you have been in the House you always seem so fit and well'. After recommending various doctors, he concluded, 'I hope you will go on at Leicester. Do not be in such a hurry to get out of what may in a year or two hence seem most attractive'.<sup>67</sup> The *Chronicle* said there had been 'the greatest reluctance to entertain the idea that his illness was of such a permanent nature'; but 'the worst has happened'. The *Wyvern* had thought Whitehead 'too deeply enamoured of parliamentary life to throw it up', and wondered why the secretary of the Leicester Liberal executive had kept the resignation letter 'in his pocket for a week' before 'he sprung a political mine on the town'. The *Express* too hinted that things were not quite as they seemed, remarking that Whitehead's constituents, 'irrespective of politics', would hope that 'the results of his sojourn in Switzerland will be the ultimate falsification of these alarming reports and that, when relieved of his Parliamentary duties, Sir James will be able to speedily return to London, and again render valuable service to the commercial, if not the political world'.

The Leicester by-election took place just a fortnight later, with four candidates for the two seats, indicating that local parties were not completely surprised.<sup>68</sup> But there is no evidence that the dual resignation signified the departing members' rejection of – or by – the parliamentary Liberal Party, shaky though its morale had been since Gladstone gave way to Rosebery and Harcourt in March 1894. Picton's subsequent retirement in the GOM's resort of choice, Penmaenmawr, might attest to his reverence for his former leader, but Whitehead had at the height of the public spat with Hothfield been criticised for his 'persistent refusal' to declare himself a loyal Gladstonian;<sup>69</sup> with Rosebery, who had been the first chairman of the London County Council, inaugurated during his lord mayoralty, he was on friendly terms,<sup>70</sup> as he was with the Lib-Lab Henry Broadhurst,

who returned to the Commons after topping the by-election poll. 'There is no one whom I would rather help than your son or yourself', Broadhurst wrote in September 1900,<sup>71</sup> referring to Rowland Whitehead's forthcoming parliamentary candidacy, but hinting that Sir James might yet return.

Whitehead had completed his withdrawal from political life in May 1896, however, when he resigned from the City Council. His letter to the lord mayor sounded familiar notes: after 'recent serious illness' and 'frequent attacks', medical advice was that 'restoration to even comparative health will require several months rest'.<sup>72</sup> Yet he remained active in such charitable work as the Rowland Hill Trust and Board of Borstal Visitors,<sup>73</sup> and had more than twenty years to live; he was evidently not as ill as he so often thought he was. Potential commercial scandal may have been a consideration. In 1893 – the year he terminated his partnership with Barker & Co. – the General Phosphate Corporation, of which he was a director, was subject to a winding-up petition less than three years since its flotation, after heavy losses in its Canadian mines.<sup>74</sup> There followed public allegations of insider trading by his fellow Fanmaker Henry George Smallman. Whitehead's solicitors wrote to the press rebutting them,<sup>75</sup> but Smallman – whose subsequent City aldermanate, London sheriffdom and knighthood show that he was not without influence – persisted, although the case never came to court. Whatever the reasons, from 1897 Whitehead reduced his public role to that of village seigneur; he moved his household to Wilmington Manor, near Dartford, installing his eldest son George in Wilmington Hall. He converted the Mission Hall into a Temperance Centre, with a Total Abstiners Football Club, Boy Scout troop and Band of Hope, built a Working Men's Institute and set up a District Benefit Society. He did not forget his old school at Appleby, endowing it with funding for entrance scholarships and science teaching, to which in 1911 he added a leaving scholarship in memory of his saintly wife Mercy. Not until shortly before his death in October 1917 did his health confine him: his former secretary wrote in May, 'I am glad to hear you have thrown off the effects of your latest illness. I think you are quite a marvellous young man!'<sup>76</sup>

He did not abandon Liberalism. His barrister son Rowland, after unsuccessfully contesting South East Essex in 1900, took the seat in 1906. PPS first to Herbert Samuel, then to the attorney general William Robson, Rowland attended the House more assiduously than had Sir James,<sup>77</sup> and asked questions on such constituency concerns as the market for Leigh-on-Sea cockles and the low pay of telegraph boys at Tilbury Post Office. His longest speech was in March 1907, moving the rejection of the Women's Enfranchisement Bill. Limited though its provisions were, he argued it would be a prelude to universal adult suffrage, which would be 'disastrous to the Empire' because

there would be 'the serious risk of having legislation passed by a majority of women'. Uninterested in politics and lacking a sense of proportion and judgement, women were 'unfitted for the exercise of administrative powers' because of their 'nervous and emotional natures' and susceptibility to 'priestly influence'. In saying this he was 'upholding the highest and best ideal of womanhood, not only in the interests of women themselves, but in the interests of the community as a whole'.<sup>78</sup> Although introduced by Willoughby Dickenson, a Liberal in a Liberal-dominated house, the bill was defeated at its second reading. Rowland's views were widely held within the party. When Reginald McKenna came to speak in his support in November 1909, he urged him, unless there were 'local reasons to have some women in', to 'keep the suffragettes out. Men only make the best meeting'.<sup>79</sup> It seems probable that Rowland Whitehead's view of woman's place reflected the values with which he had been brought up. He and his brothers pursued careers, married and had children; his sisters – whether through choice or parental design – lived out their Juvenile Ball roles of puritan maids. Leila studied at Girton, but then came home to join her younger sister Florence. One Miss Whitehead acted as her father's secretary and managed the estate, the other ran the household. Following their parents' deaths they devoted their remaining four decades to such local good works as Wilmington Sunday School and Young Women's Bible Class. Leila followed her father in becoming a magistrate – the first female on the Dartford bench. Neither they nor their brothers played any active part in politics following Rowland's loss of his seat in January 1910; as the Liberal Party unravelled during and after the First World War, the Whiteheads drifted into passive Conservatism.

The sixth baronet takes pride in the lord mayoral record of the founder of the Whitehead family fortunes but feels that a man who 'led from the front by example', with his eye 'always on fairness for the common man, technology and thinking outside the box' would have achieved much more had he been elected, as he so nearly was, for North Westmorland in 1885.<sup>80</sup> Whitehead was fifty-eight before he entered the House in 1892 to join a parliamentary Liberal Party that despite being in government was not at ease with itself; he lasted only two years before concluding that he was too ill to continue. But, despite his expressed disappointment and precipitate exit in 1894, he achieved more in retrospect than perhaps he realised. A few days after what was to be his last appearance in the House, John Crombie, Bryce's PPS, wrote to say he was sorry to hear Sir James was ill but could assure him that the railway companies were willing to concede 'all amendments of any importance', apart from the proposal that the Commissioners be empowered to deal with complaints relating to rates as they were in 1892; if that were insisted on the bill might yet fail.<sup>81</sup> It

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was not, and eleven days after Whitehead's resignation the Railway & Canal Traffic Act became law. If freight rates were raised above the levels of December 1892 the customer could take the case to Railway & Canal Commissioners who could decide whether or not the increase was reasonable. Although traders complained that the onus was on them to appeal, with attendant legal costs and no guarantee of a finding in their favour, a landmark judgement in 1899 made it extremely difficult for railway companies to raise rates any further. Differential rates did remain, but the law was on balance disliked more by the companies than by the customers. It remained substantially unaltered until 1913.<sup>82</sup> If not on the heroic scale to which he aspired, by sheer persistence Sir James Whitehead achieved his parliamentary objective.

In 1904, a decade after his sudden departure from the House, the Liberal who succeeded where he had failed by gaining North Westmorland in 1900, likewise resigned his seat in mid-term. Richard Rigg was over forty years younger, his Westmorland background was more privileged, and the circumstances of his going were very different. But Whitehead and Rigg had much in common: handsome features, popular appeal, total abstinence, self-conscious rectitude, devotion to good works, City success; and in the parliamentary context promise unfulfilled.<sup>83</sup> One can only speculate on how significant might have been their contribution to Liberal politics had they stayed the course.

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- 1 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 16 Jul. 1892
- 2 Percival (1834–1918) went from Appleby to Oxford, the church and schoolmastering. He was headmaster of Clifton, master of Trinity and head of Rugby before Rosebery made him bishop Hereford in 1895.
- 3 R. Rhodes James, *The British Revolution*, I (1976), p. 128; G. Alderman, *The Railway Interest* (1973), pp. 127, 148, 151–2, 156. Unpublished typescript accounts of the life of JW: R. Walker, *Sir James Whitehead, Lord Mayor Extraordinary* (1987); J. Radford, *Sir James Whitehead, Gentleman of Wilmington* (2012).
- 4 JW named his second son Rowland. This statue, the first of several, was in Hill's native town, Kidderminster.
- 5 'By pluck and endeavour' is a Victorian translation of this over-used motto.
- 6 See note 2. Two sons went to Clifton, the youngest to Rugby. Two were at Trinity, Oxford, a third at Univ.
- 7 For a comprehensive list of JW's offices and honours, see W. Stenton & J. Lees, *Who's Who of British MPs, II, 1886–1918* (1978).
- 8 For JW in City and Westmorland politics see pp. 304–312

of A. N. Connell, 'The Domination of Lowtherism and Toryism in Westmorland Parliamentary Elections 1818–1895', *Northern History* XLV (2) (2008).

- 9 *The Citizen*, 11 Nov. 1882. Whitehead owned this City weekly.
- 10 *Daily News*, 30 Apr. 1884.
- 11 *Kendal Mercury*, 22 Aug. 1884.
- 12 A.N. Connell, "'Ice in the centre of a glowing fire": the Westmorland Election of 1880', *Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series VIII, (2008), pp. 219–39. Tufton was ennobled as by Gladstone in 1882; both had been to Eton and Christ Church, but not contemporarily.
- 13 James Whitehead, *To the Electors of the Northern or Appleby Division of the County of Westmorland*, 25 Nov. 1885.
- 14 *Kendal Mercury*, 13 Nov. 1885, speech in Ambleside.
- 15 Faggot votes, often held by non-residents of a constituency, attached to nominal title to artificial sub-divisions of a large estate with a single beneficial owner. The Earl of Lonsdale was the largest landowner in Westmorland.
- 16 *Westmorland Gazette*, 12 Dec. 1885, *Kendal Mercury*, 11 Dec. 1884.
- 17 *Westmorland Gazette*, 6, 13 Jul. 1886
- 18 Parliamentary Archive WHD/1, Howard to Whitehead, 22 Apr. 1886.
- 19 WHD/1, Morley to Whitehead, 2 Jun. 1886.
- 20 *Penrith Observer*, 15 Jun. 1885
- 21 *Mid-Cumberland & North Westmorland Herald*, 13 Jul. 1895.
- 22 *Kendal Mercury*, 16 Jul. 1886.
- 23 *Punch*, 29 Sep. 1888. The 'new era of City administration' was the London County Council, inaugurated in 1889, with its meetings at the Guildhall. Lord Rosebery was its first chairman.
- 24 WHD/1, H. Labouchere to JW, 6 Oct. 1888.
- 25 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 16 Jul. 1892
- 26 The programme is reproduced in Radford, *Sir James Whitehead*.
- 27 *Punch*, 15 Jun. 1889. These were part-time soldiers, fore-runners of the Territorial Army.
- 28 WHD/2, William Soulsby to JW, 31 May 1917.
- 29 *Penrith Observer*, 6 Jun., 4 Jul. 1893, quoting a letter of March 1890.
- 30 *Mid-Cumberland & North Westmorland Herald*, 22 Mar. 1890.
- 31 H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* (1967), p. 210.
- 32 WHD/2, Alexander McArthur to JW, 2 Jan. 1890.
- 33 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 16 Jul. 1892.
- 34 *Wyvern*, 8 Jul. 1892.
- 35 H. Pollins, *Britain's Railways and Industrial History* (1974), pp. 91–99.
- 36 *Report from the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons on the Railway Rates and Charges Provisional Order Bills*, 1 Aug. 1891.
- 37 B. R. Mitchell, D. Chambers, N. Crafts, 'How good was the Profitability of British Railways, 1870–1912?', *Warwick Economic Research paper 859* (Jun. 2008); Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics* (1981), Table G2, p. 622.
- 38 Alderman, *Railway Interest* (1973), pp. 95–160 outlines the fluctuating parliamentary influence of late Victorian railways.
- 39 All Whitehead's parliamentary contributions are to be found in Parliamentary Reports, 4<sup>th</sup> series (*Hansard*),

- vols. VIII–XII (Feb–May 1893) and XXII–XXVI (Mar–Jul 1894).
- 40 *Hansard*, VIII, 172, 233, 661, 1045, 1553–7, 1, 2, 7, 15 Feb. 1893.
- 41 *Hansard*, IX, 45–47, 1036, 1226, 21 Feb., 3 Mar., 7 Mar. 1893.
- 42 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 11 Mar. 1893.
- 43 *Hansard*, XI, 316, 14 Apr 1893.
- 44 *Hansard*, X, 488–9, 658, 20, 21 Mar. 1893, XI 313, 1024, 14, 24 Apr. 1893.
- 45 *Hansard*, XII, 1153, 16 May 1893. Alderman, *Railway Interest* p. 152, lists four known supporters of the railway on the Committee, and six of the traders.
- 46 *First Report of Select Committee on Railway Rates*, 22 Aug. 1893: witness statements of 21 Jul.
- 47 *Mid-Cumberland & North Westmorland Herald*, 21 Jan. 1893
- 48 *Mid-Cumberland & North Westmorland Herald*, 4 Feb. 1893
- 49 *Mid-Cumberland & North Westmorland Herald*, 4 Mar. 1893
- 50 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 25 Sep. 1893.
- 51 *Hansard* XXII, 138, 12 Mar. 1894; XXIII 225–6, 635, 12, 17 Apr. 1894.
- 52 WHD/2, A.J. Mundella to JW, 21 May 1894. His resigned because of a public enquiry into the affairs of a finance company of which he had been a director.
- 53 Alderman, *Railway Interest* (1973), p. 155.
- 54 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 28 Apr. 1894.
- 55 *Hansard* XXIV, 1273, 1285, 1535, 25, 29 May 1894.
- 56 *Hansard* XXVI, 101, 22 Jun. 1894.
- 57 *Hansard* XXII 309, 30 Mar. 1894.
- 58 *Hansard* XXIII, 1227, 1661, 24, 30 Apr. 1894.
- 59 *Hansard* XXVI, 1248, 9 Jul. 1894.
- 60 *Hansard* XXIX, 347, 25 Aug. 1894.
- 61 Quoted in *Kendal Mercury & Times*, 17 Aug. 1894, *Westmorland Gazette*, 18 Aug. 1894.
- 62 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 18 Aug. 1894
- 63 *Wyvern*, 17 Aug. 1894
- 64 *Leicester Express*, 14 Aug. 1894.
- 65 *Penrith Observer*, 8 Aug. 93, 25 Nov. 1893; *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 30 Sep. 1893.
- 66 *Penrith Observer*, 31 Jul. 1894.
- 67 WHD/2, Evans to JW, 13 Aug., Channing to JW 14 Aug., 1894.
- 68 Leicester by-election, 29 Aug. 1894: H. Broadhurst (Lib-Lab) 9464; W. Hazell (Lib) 7184; J. Rolleston (Con) 6967; J. Burgess (ILP) 4,402.
- 69 *Mid-Cumberland & North Westmorland Herald*, 2 Sep. 1893. The Whitehead boxes in the Parliamentary Archive contain no correspondence from Gladstone. There is no mention of him in the Gladstone Diaries.
- 70 WHD/2 contains a note from Rosebery on 12 Jun. 1895, responding to an invitation from Lady Whitehead to a garden party.
- 71 WHD/2, Broadhurst to JW, 19 Sep. 1900.
- 72 Quoted in Radford, *Sir James Whitehead*.
- 73 WHD/2, E. R. Brice to JW, 9 Dec. 1898 (Borstals), W. Gilbey to JW, 20 Feb. 1901 (Hill Trust).
- 74 *London Gazette*, 7 Apr. 1893. See D. G. Paterson, 'The Failure of British Business in Canada, 1890–1914', University of British Columbia Discussion paper (1974) p. 20.
- 75 *Leicester Chronicle & Mercury*, 28 Oct. 1893, quoting a letter to the *Westminster Gazette*.
- 76 WHD/2, W. J. Soulsby to JW, 31 May 1917. Soulsby was formerly secretary at Mansion House.
- 77 *Hansard*, 4<sup>th</sup> series vols. CLIII–CXCVIII (Mar. 1906–Dec 1908); 5<sup>th</sup> series III–XII (Apr.–Oct. 1909) passim.
- 78 *Hansard*, CLXX, 1112–1120, 8 Mar. 1907.
- 79 WHD/4, R. McKenna to RW, 13 Nov. 1909.
- 80 Email from Sir Philip Whitehead to the author, 8 Jan 2015.
- 81 WHD/2. J. W. Crombie to JW, 16 and 18 Jul 1894.
- 82 P. J. Cain, 'The British Railway Rates Problem, 1894–1913', *Business History* XX, 1 (1978), pp. 87–97. The landmark case was *Smith & Forrest v London & North Western and others*.
- 83 A. Connell, 'The Strange Case of Mr Rigg', *Journal of Liberal History*, 60 (Autumn 2008), pp. 14–22. Rigg was later mayor of Westminster.

# Reports

## Europe: The Liberal commitment

Evening meeting, 1 February 2016, with Sir Graham Watson and Lord William Wallace. Chair: Baroness Julie Smith.

Report by **David Cloke**

**H**OW AND WHY did the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats all end up as the strongest supporters of Britain's membership of the European Economic Community and its successor institutions? Has it helped or hindered the party's political achievements? Have developments in Europe since the EEC's founding Treaty of Rome in 1958 reflected the party's European faith? Earlier in the year, as a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU seemed increasingly on the cards, the Liberal Democrat History Group

met to discuss the historic Liberal commitment and record, with Sir Graham Watson (Liberal Democrat MEP 1994–2014) and Lord William Wallace (Liberal Democrat Foreign Office minister in the coalition government, 2010–15).

In introducing the speakers, Baroness Smith noted that they had kindly agreed to divide the subject up between them chronologically, with Sir Graham beginning with the roots of Liberalism's European outlook and Lord Wallace picking up the story from the Second World War.

Sir Graham started by warning attendees that he was not a historian, other than as a chronicler of events in which he had been involved. His contribution was as a practitioner of politics rather than an interpreter. As Baroness Smith has noted, his practice had made him very well qualified for the discussion: former leader of the ALDE group in the European Parliament and president of the ALDE Party, and now a member of its economic and social committee.

For Sir Graham the first question to be asked was how far back one could trace evidence of British Liberal ideas about the value of pooling sovereignty to unite Europe. Some, such as Piers Ludlow of the LSE, were sceptical that the idea even went back to the late nineteenth century. But, as a romantic, Sir Graham believed that it was possible to trace the idea back to the late eighteenth century and the awakening of revulsion both at the continental despots and also at the 'John Bull' style militarism that