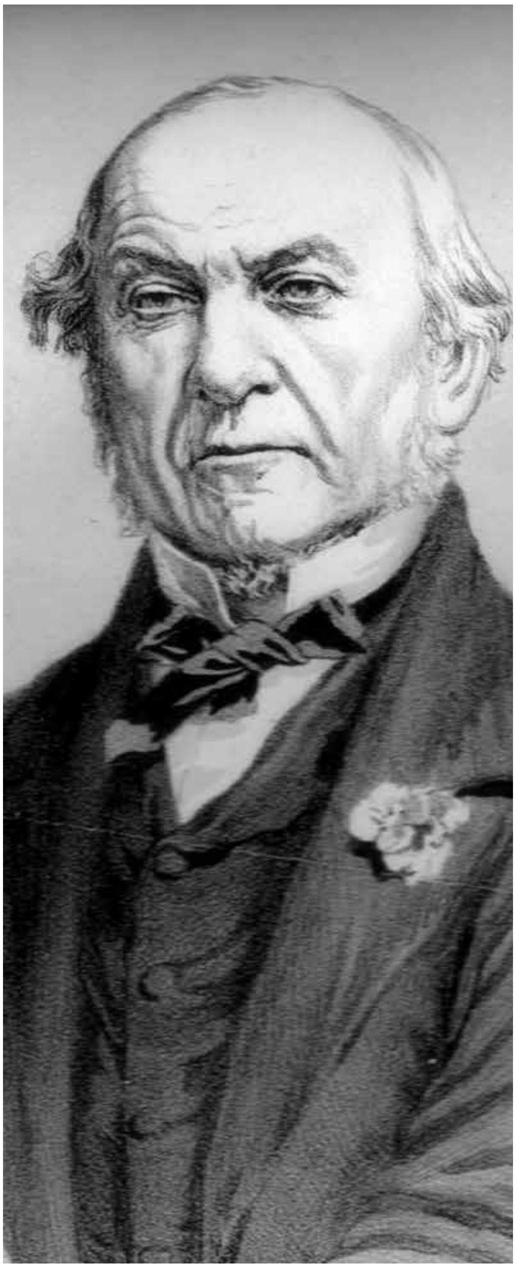
Eugenio Biagini

The ‘European Mind’ of L W. E. Gladstone and



Late Victorian Liberalism Joseph Chamberlain

Few statesmen are more closely identified with the British Liberal political tradition than William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98). His parliamentary career spanned most of the nineteenth century, and his posthumous influence stretched well into the twentieth century, affecting generations of Liberal, Labour and 'Progressive' leaders.[1] Though less unambiguously associated with liberalism, Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) was also very influential – shaping the outlook both of radical Liberals like David Lloyd George and radical Unionists.[2] Both statesmen engaged with ideas and visions of 'Europe' – of which they believed the United Kingdom was a constituent part, though one which projected European influence and values onto a global canvass through the British Empire.

Gladstone's Europe

Gladstone first took office in 1841, in a government that included the Duke of Wellington, the man who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, after a 'world war' which had lasted for over twenty years. His political career was so long that his last government (1892–4) included H. H. Asquith, who was to lead the British Empire into the First World War. Although in Gladstone's lifetime the catastrophe of another 'world war' was averted, avoiding a recurrence of such a clash of empires was the key concern in nineteenth-century international relations. Like his mentor Lord Aberdeen (1784–1860), Gladstone operated on the Vienna Congress idea that European wars were similar to civil wars, in so far as they were conflicts between 'sister' states, sharing religion, history and culture, and upholding the same system of moral obligation.[3]

His engagement with Europe was facilitated by both his command of modern languages (French, German and Italian in particular) and his frequent travels, albeit to a limited number of destinations. Like most contemporaries from his social background, his education was rooted in the study of ancient Greek and Latin and their classical culture and philosophy. Aristotle and Homer were two of his leading lights.[4] Under the Roman Empire, ancient Europe had known political and cultural unity, which was coextensive with what Victorians regarded as 'Civilisation'. Though Gladstone decried Disraeli's invocation of 'Imperium et Libertas' as a travesty of brutal imperialism, he thought that modern Europe should emulate the achievements of the ancients by exporting what he himself called 'Western and beneficent institutions'.[5]

The legacy of the Roman Empire in establishing ideas of international law and liberty had been consolidated by Christianity, which survived the fall of that empire and became the new framework for European civilisation, defining not only spiritual life, but also morality and standards of social behaviour. Gladstone felt that Christianity had created a deeper European identity, first through the rise of 'national' churches, then through the concurrent operation of congregational forms of Protestantism, which, in Britain and elsewhere, became important expressions of the popular spiritual aspirations in a democratising world. In his mature years, Gladstone was not perturbed by such diversity and felt that Christianity was articulated – rather than fragmented – through its various churches. As he saw it, denominational diversity within the overarching Christian umbrella was extended to include both Jews – as an ancestral pre-Christian, prophetic people – and post-Christian groups such as atheists and secularists. In all its variety, Western European religion was so central to Gladstone's political vision, that in some ways he may be regarded as a thinker who bridged the gap between

William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98) and Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) liberalism and what later came to be known as the ‘Christian democratic’ tradition.[6]

A great admirer of Dante Alighieri, Gladstone was familiar with the poet’s vision of a ‘universal monarchy’ as a community of free peoples, a commonwealth.[7] Dante’s idea of empires as a rational, and indeed divinely ordained, way of organising social life was not only still relevant, but also even more so than it had ever been. For in the second half of the nineteenth century the European empires – the British, the French and those of the Romanovs, Habsburgs, and Hohenzollern – dominated the world and were set to become more and more powerful through technological advances, industrialisation and commercial liberalism. With Dante, Gladstone argued that empires and liberty were not incompatible, provided imperial government became the conduit of civil liberty and regional autonomy. He thought that the British Empire justified its existence precisely because of its emancipatory and civilising power – a view that at the time, and for a generation or two after him, was widely shared even by humanitarian liberals like the young Irish diplomat Roger Casement and the English scholar Gilbert Murray, as well as by Indian patriots, including Mohandas Gandhi.[8]

Thus, in trying to understand what ‘Europe’ meant to Gladstone, we must first consider that the Europe he knew was *not* primarily based on nation states, but on multi-ethnic or – as Gladstone came to think in later life – multi-national states. It was a Europe in which legitimate government relied not on the ‘popular will’, but on the dynastic principle. Liberalism stood out from conservatism and absolute monarchism in that it argued that dynastic legitimacy should seek the consensus and support of the people, as represented by the electors, and that good government was about good stewardship. And the UK stood out from other empires because there sovereignty was encapsulated in the notion of ‘Queen in Parliament’, which reflected both Edmund Burke’s idea of dynastic continuity married to popular consent, and his insistence that a good constitution should be able to grow organically through gradual adaptation to changing circumstances.[9] This was a vision that Gladstone fully shared.

Though he was familiar with contemporary developments in the natural sciences, and engaged with evolutionary theory and contemporary scientific developments – which he tried to reconcile with Biblical revelation[10] – he did not see their relevance to politics and especially to international relations. Instead, as already noted above, Gladstone believed that what brought people together was neither race, nor a common language, but rather shared beliefs, which ought to engender brotherly feelings among the powers (again a vision inherited from the tradition of the Vienna Congress). On such spiritual sorority depended the Concert of Europe.[11] Like a gentlemen’s club, the Concert had its rules, the most important of which was to avoid unilateralism in foreign policy.[12] The depth of Gladstone’s well-known disapproval of Benjamin Disraeli can only be understood if we bear in mind that the latter was perceived to regard ‘the European concert … [as] a delusion … the Powers being all selfish and all contemptuous of humanity’.[13] Gladstone believed this doctrine to be false, immoral and unwise. Moreover, the British Empire was based on commerce and as such was vulnerable both to war and the financial and commercial unrest periodically generated in world markets by rumours of war and unilateral action.

These considerations were important for him, for a key dimension of his Christian, imperial and liberal vision was commerce. The latter was not only about trade and material advantages, but also about building bridges between peoples, a view popularised by another Victorian Liberal – Richard Cobden (1804–65). In the speech Gladstone delivered to the Political Economy Club in 1876, on the centenary of the publication of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, he said, among other things, that ‘[t]he operations of commerce are not confined to the material ends … there is no more powerful agent in consolidating and knitting together the amity of the nations’, arguing that free trade served ‘the great moral purpose of the repression of human passions, and those lusts and appetites which are the great cause of war’.[14] Thus he advocated ‘a view of international society which had both an economic and political dimension – free trade the regulator of the one, the Concert of the other’.[15]

While the views expressed above were partly derived from Richard Cobden, Gladstone did not share the latter’s optimism and was not an ‘idealist’ in terms of international relations. His view was ultimately rooted in the hard-nosed calculations of the Treasury and the Board of Trade. If he was a ‘cosmopolitan patriot’, his understanding of the best course in foreign policy amalgamated realpolitik with Christian humanitarianism.[16] He regarded such a combination of ‘realism’ and moral responsibility as not only good for statesmen, but also essential to the message that they ought to address to their electors, in order to socialise the masses into democratic politics. The danger for a powerful and successful empire like Britain was not a working-class revolution, but the blind chauvinism that displayed itself in periodical outbursts of ‘jingoism’ (a term coined in 1878). As the franchise was extended to the working classes, Gladstone felt that they too had to be educated to behave like ‘club members’, and that foreign policy and free trade finance were the two essential disciplines in this school of citizenship whose teachers were statesmen like himself. As pedagogues of liberty, Liberal statesmen should become mediators of a higher understanding of the people’s true interest.[17]

In trying to understand what ‘Europe’ meant to Gladstone, we must first consider that the Europe he knew was *not* primarily based on nation states, but on multi-ethnic or – as Gladstone came to think in later life – multi-national states. It was a Europe in which legitimate government relied not on the ‘popular will’, but on the dynastic principle.

Nations and nationalism

Authority always ought to be restrained by a sense of the rulers' paternal obligation towards their subjects. Whether liberal or not, empires had a special responsibility to the subject nationalities that they dominated. Hence Gladstone's outrage when some of these powers – like the Austrians in Italy in 1848–9, the Ottomans in Bulgaria in 1876 and British Empire in 1879 in both Afghanistan and Zululand – did not live up to the relevant ethical standards of imperial behaviour. His denunciations of these governments have much in common. Gladstone's rousing attack on Ottoman misrule in Bulgaria was fired not by disdain for the religiously different Turks, but by indignation about their abandonment of the common human (and imperial) standards of decency.[18] About what he regarded as unnecessary British imperialist wars in 1879, he said that, in judging the deeds of the Conservative government, the electors should:

> Remember the rights of the savage, as we call him. Remember that the happiness of his humble home, remember that the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan … are as sacred in the eye of Almighty God as are your own. Remember that He who has united you together as human beings in the same flesh and blood, has bound you by the law of mutual love, that that mutual love is not limited by the shores of this island, is not limited by the boundaries of Christian civilisation, that it passes over the whole surface of the earth, and embraces the meanest along with the greatest in its wide scope.[19]

For the purpose of the state was not to articulate what we now call 'identity politics' or to represent national aspirations, but to address within a territorial setting specific economic and social needs, defined by history and tradition. It was functional, not metaphysical. The state was 'ordained by God' to restrain evil – not to flatter collective pride.

The evil of empires arose not as a result of their violating some basic principle of self-determination, but from their tendency to base rule on state violence rather than popular consent. This was the main flaw of the Ottoman 'race', who 'represented everywhere government by force as opposed to government by law'.[20] Despite the frequent references to 'race' in his speeches, Gladstone did not associate with the term any biological overtones. A 'race' was a historical creation with distinctive cultural and political connotations. So, the Turks were a violent race because for centuries they had been socialised into believing that power depended ultimately on ruthless war. By contrast, what he described as the 'mild Mohammedans of India, the chivalrous Saladins of Syria' and 'the cultured Moors of Spain' were shaped by respect for civilisation and its standards.

When empires completely failed to provide a protected environment for rational (and 'national') liberty, then Gladstone championed reform. This could take the shape of 'home rule' or devolution within empires, which he recommended for both Bulgaria in 1876 and Ireland in 1886. If empires failed altogether, Gladstone envisaged the creation of new pan-national states. These were like empires, in that they brought together people over a vast territory along models of integration that combined ethnicity, language and culture with a political tradition. For Gladstone the 'nation' was a non-politically-normative concept. Far from being the revolutionary principle that it represented and was to represent for both Giuseppe Mazzini and Woodrow Wilson, it was little more than a notion that ought to evoke a sense of 'common good' or wider collective interest than the region or the locality. Moreover, under 'normal' circumstances, it was fully compatible, and indeed complementary with empire (something best illustrated by position of the Scots within the British Empire). 'Nation' was thus different from 'nationalism', which Gladstone – like Bismarck – came to regard as the most powerful source of mass political motivation and mobilisation of his time.

There was no reason why 'a people rightly struggling to be free' – whether the Irish, the Sudanese or the Canadians – should not remain subject to an empire and find the right amount of freedom within the constraints of multinational imperial entities. For the purpose of the state was not to articulate what we now call 'identity politics' or to represent national aspirations, but to address within a territorial setting specific economic and social needs, defined by history and tradition. It was functional, not metaphysical. The state was 'ordained by God' to restrain evil – not to flatter collective pride.

Thus, Gladstone was both a statesman who 'understood' nationalism, and one of the longest serving and most energetic defenders of the British Empire. As such, he was interested in identifying the factors preventing territorial amalgamation, more than in those promoting national identity. His main concern was to understand why empires fall, not why nation states rise.

Ireland was the most difficult challenge the British Empire faced in the late nineteenth century. Like John Stuart Mill,[21] from as early as 1868 Gladstone had discerned his 'mission' in the 'pacification' of Ireland. He believed that the best opportunity for integrating Ireland into the United Kingdom had been lost in 1800. Then the Irish Catholic elite had supported the Act of Union in the expectation that this would come with political rights for them. But they were bitterly disappointed when George III vetoed their desire for 'Emancipation'. They then started to campaign for reform, under the inspired leadership of a country gentleman, Daniel O'Connell, and secured their goal by 1829. For Gladstone, O'Connell was a great liberal, almost the equivalent of what Cavour was to Italy.[22] While the latter was the prime minister of an independent and ancient state – the Kingdom of Sardinia – and was faced by an uncompromising and 'irresponsible' empire, Austria, O'Connell was the leader of a nation which had long operated in tandem with Britain and was now part of a parliamentary

United Kingdom within which it was fully represented by its own MPs. Unlike the Italian regions under Austria and her satellite principalities, even before Emancipation Ireland had enjoyed all the liberal freedoms (of the press, religion and public meeting). In all these differences between the two cases one could find the explanation as to why Italy had to rise up in arms and fight for its independence, while Ireland managed to secure what she needed by peaceful agitation and election campaigns.

What Ireland did not yet have by the time Gladstone acceded to the premiership in 1868 was equality under the law. The latter was the aim of Gladstonian reforms from 1869 (with the disestablishment of the Irish Protestant Episcopal Church, which represented only a minority of the population) to 1881 (with the Land Acts, which initiated the transfer of land ownership from the landed gentry to the farmers) and the three electoral reforms of 1883–5 (ending electoral 'corruption', extending the franchise to all householders and introducing more equal electoral districts). By 1885 Gladstone had established a uniform electoral system throughout the British Isles, with most areas being represented through first-past-the-post, single-member constituencies under a residential household franchise but without property qualification.

However, it soon appeared that 'equality' within a unitary state was not enough for Ireland. Instead of 'pacifying' the Irish, these reforms unleashed a further wave of democratic nationalism. Consequently, at the 1885 general election, the Liberals were squeezed out of Ireland, where most of the southern and western constituencies went to Charles S. Parnell's National Party, while a majority of those in the north-east went to the anti-Catholic Conservative Party. On a much smaller scale, a parallel rise of democratic nationalism took place both in Scotland – where a new organisation, the Crofters' Party, secured a group of seats in the north – and in Wales, where the nationalist Cymru Fydd made inroads into the traditional two-party system, demanding both land reform and the disestablishment of the Church of England.

As we have seen, Gladstone was keenly aware of the power of nationalism and what nowadays we would describe as 'identity politics'. He believed that the only way to handle these forces was to harness them to the chariot of the imperial state, an aim which could best be achieved through parliamentary devolution and land redistribution. The latter, he thought, would satisfy the nationalists' demands and also create a new institutional mechanism which, in turn, would articulate the Irish 'national interest' – in so far as it was distinct from the wider UK interest – within the wider British Empire. This strategy was based on the one adopted for Canada in 1867 and ultimately on the 1840 Durham report, which, as Osterhammel has noted,[23] made democracy 'harmless' for the establishment and contributed to its dissemination throughout the world. When applied to the UK itself, devolution was an integrationist strategy with an explicit pluralist agenda. The UK was to be a partnership of four nations – England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales – involving the regional elites in the redefinition of both the character and interest of both the UK and British Empire. Each of the four nations had something to offer and each could be relied upon by the imperial government, provided their cultural distinctiveness was fully recognised and their self-government established through the system of home rule.

However, it soon appeared that 'equality' within a unitary state was not enough for Ireland. Instead of 'pacifying' the Irish, these reforms unleashed a further wave of democratic nationalism.

Joseph Chamberlain, separatist nationalism and imperial federation

Driven by the logic of competition under a two-party system, the Conservatives adopted the opposite strategy, which involved an assimilationist approach. Under Lord Salisbury, the Tories opposed home rule, denouncing it as the first step towards the disintegration of the empire, and argued that the way forward demanded not constitutional, but merely social reform within a centralised UK. In international relations they were 'realists' and rejected Gladstone's constructivism and multilateralism. Their espousal of a social-imperialist stance helped to split the Liberals, with an anti-home-rule wing abandoning Gladstone's party and, under the guidance of the nationalist Radical leader Joseph Chamberlain, entering into a permanent 'Liberal Unionist' alliance with the Tory Party.

Chamberlain's eventual rise to the position and role of chief instigator of new radical Conservative Party policies was as extraordinary as Gladstone's trajectory from 'rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories' (which is how Lord Macaulay dubbed him in the 1839) to the standard-bearer of Liberalism. Chamberlain had liberalism in his blood as much as Gladstone might have appeared to have had Toryism in his. Hailing from a prominent London Unitarian family, like many other upper-middle-class Nonconformists, Joseph was educated at University College School. In 1852, at the age of 16 he was taken out of school to enter the family business. Two years later he was sent by his father to Birmingham to run a screw manufacturing company in partnership with other Unitarian businessmen. Driven by religious zeal, from the start he found time to be involved in attempts to 'improve' the poor – teaching literature, history, French and arithmetic to slum children in Sunday school classes. Under the influence of the radical Nonconformist minister George Dawson (1821–76), he developed a keen interest in the social question.

Both his business and political career prospered. By 1874 he had accumulated a fortune which enabled him to retire and become fully involved in local politics, serving as mayor of Birmingham between 1874 and 1876. This was a crucial period for his career, during which he developed both his confidence in the power of government to ameliorate society by direct intervention, and a solid base of electoral support. His celebrated 'municipal socialist' schemes were part of a general shift in British local authority 'governmentality' towards interventionism, and in this respect not totally original, but their success in Birmingham stimulated a national debate on the subject. The press was already familiar with Chamberlain as an influential campaigner for free secular schooling, through the National Education League (1869–77). Together with his regional reputation and support, his skills in organising pressure groups propelled him to the forefront of national debates about liberalism and democracy, especially after he became one of the architects and a leading light of the National Liberal Federation (whose opening meeting was held at Birmingham in May 1877).

An MP from 1876, within four years he found himself in the cabinet, to which he was promoted by Gladstone. Chamberlain's work on the organisation of the National Education League (1869–77) and the National Liberal Federation (from 1877) had brought him to the forefront of national debates, and his municipal socialist schemes – whereby public services were established by local authorities and run like profit-making concerns but for public benefit – had been immensely successful.

At the time, Gladsome was preaching and practicing strict economies at the Treasury, but the reduction of central government expenditure was perfectly compatible with the increase of local government expenditure – in fact municipal socialism was largely complementary to Gladstonian retrenchment at the centre.[24] It was only from 1885 that the two Liberal statesmen began to diverge. In the aftermath of the extension of the franchise and the reforms of 1883–5, Chamberlain issued a Radical manifesto in which he embarked on what he regarded as the updating of liberalism for the new democratic age. He claimed that 'Government of the people and by the people' now meant 'Socialism', though the term was at that time very vague and he simply meant that in future, Liberalism would be about addressing the social question.[25] However, social reform – which until then had been a largely technical and bipartisan aspect of government – would now be politicised, for the government could not continue to be 'neutral' in these matters. The methods of 'Municipal Socialism' were to be adopted by Whitehall.

Besides being intrinsically novel, this approach had important implications for both the impending debate on Irish home rule and the wider discussion about the relationship between state and society. One implication was that, if poverty was to be reduced by state intervention, then what Britain required was not devolution, but the rational reconstruction and empowering of the imperial executive at its centre.[26]

One implication was that, if poverty was to be reduced by state intervention, then what Britain required was not devolution, but the rational reconstruction and empowering of the imperial executive at its centre.

At the time, Chamberlain was beginning to move towards a more imperial understanding of liberalism, partly under the influence of his friend Sir Charles Dilke, the champion of 'Greater Britain', and Sir John Seeley, the Cambridge historian of *The Expansion of England*.[27] His enthusiasm for the settlement colonies – which 'expanded both 'England' and representative self-government – was shared by other radical figures, such as William Forster (educational reformer, Irish chief secretary and champion of 'ethical' intervention in foreign crises), the historian James Froude and – among a younger generation – Joseph Powell-Williams, Hugh Arnold-Forster and James Bryce.[28] The Imperial Federation League, founded in 1884, brought many of these figures together.[29]

Chamberlain had started to develop this new radicalism from 1882, when he proposed public works to relieve distress in Ireland. For the purpose of the present article, it is important to note that his strategy was partly inspired by contemporary French republican social reform, and particularly by Charles de Freycinet (1828–1923). The latter had much in common with Chamberlain, including a Protestant upbringing, a technical, rather than classical, education, and a strong interest in the English social question.[30] Passionate about the power of science to improve society, Freycinet had developed a major plan to renovate the French provinces through an ambitious programme of infrastructures, literally driven by the railways.[31] Freycinet was also the architect of a new imperialism which sought to modernise and transform Africa through the construction of a trans-Sahara railway line and the application of democratic *dirigisme* and energetic state intervention in the republic's overseas territories.[32] Chamberlain was impressed by what the French were able to do with their colonies. In 1895 he came up with his own version of the Freycinet 'doctrine of tropical African estates', which applied state agency to regional development.[33] In particular, like Freycinet, Chamberlain stressed the importance of the railways and the economic potential of African colonies, if properly developed by government initiative.[34]

Thus, while historians have rightly been attentive to the clash between Chamberlain's imperialism and French expansionism in Africa, culminating with the Fashoda incident in 1898,[35] it must also be said that the British statesman's conversion to radical Unionism was partly inspired by his admiration for continental European social imperialism, which he thought would empower and fulfil the potential of traditional liberalism. Rather than a 'betrayal' of his radical past, his adoption of social imperialism was, from his point of view, a natural adaptation of his old principles to a new situation. This is well illustrated by his

Chamberlain's conversion to social imperialism was one instance of a wider shift in European liberalism, one which saw many of his contemporaries on the 'left' of liberal politics … adopting similarly social-imperialist strategies as a way of responding to the rise of socialism.

attitudes towards humanitarian intervention in the Balkans.

There is both continuity and change between his Liberal and Unionist phases in Chamberlain's attitude to ethnic violence in the Ottoman Empire. In 1876 Chamberlain had supported the Bulgarian Horrors Agitation, though without sharing in the evangelical outrage felt by most other Nonconformists, and in 1882 he advocated intervention in Egypt, partly to stop anti-Christian riots.[36] In 1895–6, when pogroms broke out in the Ottoman Empire, resulting in the massacre of thousands of Armenians, Gladstone (in his last public speech) again invoked the Concert of Europe. By contrast, Chamberlain took a rather more aggressive stance. He first proposed a joint European military action against Constantinople, with Britain acting together with Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Then, in December 1895, he wrote to Lord Salisbury proposing that Britain should instead seek the cooperation of the United States, and a joint British–US naval squadron should be sent to Constantinople to demand the end of the massacres.[37] Both Salisbury and his nephew, Arthur J. Balfour, dismissed the idea as impracticable, but within months the Russians did more or less what Chamberlain had proposed. The initiative was successful: when the Russians threatened to bombard Constantinople, the Ottoman government became more cooperative.[38]

The episode suggests that Chamberlain could be a better judge of the great powers' ability to influence the situation in the Ottoman Empire than his Tory colleagues. However, his hope for a joint British–American action was ahead of its time and outstripped the contemporary US ambitions in the Mediterranean. By contrast, cooperation with Italy and Austro-Hungary – a return to European military group effort, similar to the one which resulted in the Battle of Navarino (1827) and Greek independence – would have required a consistently multilateralist foreign policy: however, both Chamberlain and Salisbury were at best opportunists in terms of their attitude to international cooperation. Yet, this episode showed that when it came to taking action in an international crisis, in the first instance he looked to other European powers – in this case, Italy and Austria-Hungary. He expected that they would intervene not only because of shared geopolitical spheres of interest, but also because of a sense of moral obligation akin to Gladstone's idea of collective responsibility for the preservation of 'decency' in imperial government. As the Armenian crisis indicated, he also looked to America, which he saw as an extension of the British Empire, an 'empire of liberty' created by people who were 'kith-and-kin' of the British. Chamberlain was interested in contemporary post-Darwinian theories of race, and – through his third wife, who was American – had developed a fascination with the racialist hope of a grand 'Anglo-Saxon' alliance, an Anglo-American, or even an Anglo-American-German entente of the 'Teutonic Peoples' (in fact, he was an enthusiastic proponent of an Anglo-German alliance).

In this he departed from the then prevalent attitude in both parties, which traditionally had been reluctant to enter into permanent international 'entanglements'. By contrast, Chamberlain – a man of vision and fertile imagination – was always ready to borrow from successful German, French or American experiments (in his previous career a as businessman, he had done precisely the same in the fields of technology, industrial production and marketing). Likewise, when it came to attitudes to settlement colonies, Chamberlain was much less pragmatic and 'insular' than most of his colleagues.[39] For him, the colonies were Britain's new constitutional, social and demographic 'frontier', a conviction which consistently inspired his policies. Thus, in 1886 he opposed Irish home rule because he believed that there should be no weakening of the imperial bond at the centre of the system: the day of small nations had passed. It was not the time to devolve powers to the periphery, but instead to tighten the existing union, assimilating provinces to the imperial *metropole*. The British Empire should become like the United States on a global scale, a great democratic empire. It was in 1903 that he launched his programme of imperial federation built on a customs union and the idea that 'we have to cement [and] … consolidate the British race' in order to meet 'the clash of competition', which was commercial, but could easily also become military.[40] An imperial *Zollverein* would be the first step towards a deeper union. As an imperial federation, the British Empire – with a 'white' population of 60,000,000 – would match the US with its population of 70,000,000).[41]

Chamberlain's conversion to social imperialism was one instance of a wider shift in European liberalism, one which saw many of his contemporaries on the 'left' of liberal politics – including Leon Gambetta (1838–82) in France, Francesco Crispi (1818–1901) in Italy and Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919) in Germany. All adopted similarly social-imperialist strategies as a way of responding to the rise of socialism.[42] Likewise, Chamberlain's economic programme and adoption of tariff reform mirrored European developments. France and Germany were less dependent on foreign imports than Britain, and therefore better able to guarantee a steady supply based on domestic production (the equivalent of which for Britain was imperial production).[43] In terms of industrial policy, Chamberlain was concerned about the steady, but apparently unstoppable, decline in British manufactured exports going to continental Europe.[44] He thought that Britain should imitate the policies adopted by France, Germany and the United States. These included, in the commercial sphere, 'reciprocity' of concessions (instead of unilateral free trade) and tariff protection of industries. The latter, he believed, were threatened by abusive labour practices no longer allowed in Britain: free trade ceased to be a positive force when it became the means whereby exploitation replaced dignified labour conditions.[45] In so far as free-trade 'globalisation' threatened the allegedly higher standards of British employment practice, he denounced it.[46] For the same reason, in a further departure from a long-tradition in British policy, he also rejected the 'free movement of people', not only because of competition, but also because of their negative cultural influence: 'They come here … and change the whole character of a district. (Cheers.) The speech, the nationality of whole streets has been altered'.[47]

In adopting such rhetoric, he was both interpreting and stoking widespread fears whose immediate motivation was a refugee crisis: the immigration of Eastern European Jews fleeing pogroms in the Russian Empire. Within months of his delivering this speech, the Conservative and Unionist government introduced, with the 1905 Aliens Act, the first example of anti-immigration legislation in modern British history.

Conclusion

Where would Gladstone and Chamberlain stand in today's debate about Europe, 'Brexit' and global free trade? This is a counterfactual question, not a historical one, but it is a question which implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – has been raised in recent public debates.[48] Moreover, even before the 2016 'Brexit' referendum, similar questions about the 'meaning' of British history have frequently been discussed.[49] And it must be noted that such debate had already started in Gladstone's day: it was Otto von Bismarck who first articulated the view that Gladstone was the champion of 'a federative Europe bound to keep the peace by a web of common sense, a Europe in which the interests of the whole would outweigh particular interests.'[50] By the same token, Chamberlain's response to immigration sounds like much of the rhetoric emanating from the Conservative and Brexit camp in 2016–17. However, his attitudes to both Europe and the Empire were the opposite of the insularism and 'Little Englandism' which dominates Theresa May's government. Inspired by French and German models, Chamberlain sought to transcend traditional British sovereignty within a wide imperial union, based not on 'free trade', but on a customs union and, eventually, a super-state, the then-equivalent of what the EU was to become in Eurosceptic nightmares.

The case with Gladstone is more complex, because here we find a multifaceted intellectual complexity and ability to engage with various aspects of the contemporary world as the latter changed. It is easy to say that he would have disapproved of various arguments about British 'exceptionalism', recently proposed by politicians, historians and political scientists in order to advance a unilateralist approach to foreign policy.[51] While Gladstone was prepared to take unilateral action when this was inevitable – his invasion of Egypt in 1882, for example, though he had initially planned it as a joint Anglo-French 'international intervention' operation – he strongly condemned and disapproved of unilateralism as a general philosophy in foreign affairs.[52] Instead, he would have agreed with the criticism that John Bruton, Ireland's former prime minister, levelled against David Cameron in February 2016, when he contrasted the Conservative government's move towards Brexit with the British tradition: 'Two hundred years ago, when European states were much less interdependent than today, [at the Vienna Congress] the then British foreign secretary, Lord Castlereagh, persuaded the European powers to make, in his words, "a systematic pledge of preserving concert among the leading powers and a refuge under which all minor states may look to find their security".'[53]

Interdependence, cooperation and free trade came with the free movement of workers in general. Not only was there no restriction on the free movement of people before 1905, but the century witnessed one of the largest-scale movements of people, with millions leaving Germany, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, the Russian Empire, as well as Britain and Ireland to settle in America, Australia, New Zealand and various African colonies.

On all of these issues, it is easy to see where Gladstone stood. However, any further comparison between 'free trade' then and 'globalisation' or EU policies now breaks down when we consider that in the late nineteenth century Britain was neither merely a 'nation', nor a multinational United Kingdom: it was instead a global empire, supported by the largest and most dynamic industrial economy in the world. Britain was the only superpower; other countries were merely regional powers. This informed both Gladstone's paternalistic humanitarianism and Chamberlain's radical imperialism. And it is in the global, imperial significance of the system which Britain controlled and championed that we must look not only for the rationale of Gladstone's and Chamberlain's engagement with ideas of Europe, but also for the profound difference between their world and ours.

Eugenio F. Biagini is a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College and Professor of Modern and Contemporary History in the University of Cambridge. His latest publication is The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland *(edited with Mary E. Daly for Cambridge University Press, 2017) and he is currently working on a study of religious minorities and civil rights in pre-EEC Ireland. The author would like to thank Ian Cawood and two anonymous readers for their comments on a previous draft of the present article.*

It is in the global, imperial significance of the system which Britain controlled and championed that we must look not only for the rationale of Gladstone's and Chamberlain's engagement with ideas of Europe, but also for the profound difference between their world and ours.

1 M. Sayers, ‘Gladstone’s Irish Home Rule Legacy: Philip Kerr and the Making of the 1920 Government of Ireland Bill’, in M. E. Daly and K. T. Hoppen (eds.), *Gladstone: Ireland and beyond* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 64–76; P. Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace 1900–1924* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2009); E. F. Biagini, ‘Gladstone’s Legacy’, in R. Quinault, R. Swift and R. Clayton Windschaeffel (eds.), *William Gladstone: New Studies and Perspectives* (London, 2012), pp. 293–312; P. Clarke, *The Locomotive of War: Money, Power, Empire and Guilt* (London, 2017).

2 D. Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age: Conservative Cultures and the Challenge of Mass Politics in Early Twentieth-century England* (Manchester, 2013).

3 S. Ghervas, *Réinventer la tradition: Alexandre Stourdza et l’Europe de la Sainte-Alliance* (Paris, 2008); J. Bew, *Castlereagh* (London, 2011); M. Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon* (London, 2013).

4 D. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer and Politics* (Oxford, 2004).

5 E. F. Biagini, ‘Exporting “Western & Beneficent Institutions”: Gladstone and Britain’s Imperial Role’, in D. Bebbington and R. Swift (eds.), *Gladstone’s Centenary Essays* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 202–24; F. M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London, 1981); F. M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, 1993). For the continuing relevance of similar ideas in political science debates see the essays in N. Parker (ed.), *Empire and International Order* (Farnham, Surrey, 2013).

6 For an analysis of the latter’s ideology see J.-W. Müller, ‘Towards a New History of Christian Democracy’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 18, 2013, 2, pp. 234–45.

7 A. Isba, *Gladstone and Dante: Victorian Statesman, Medieval Poet* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2006).

8 P. Wilson, ‘Gilbert Murray and International Relations: Hellenism, Liberalism, and International Intellectual Cooperation as a Path to Peace’, *Review of International Studies* (2011), 37, pp. 881–909; M. O’Callaghan, ‘Ireland, Empire and British Foreign Policy: Roger Casement and the First World War’, BREAC, 2016; A. Desai and G. Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Stanford, 2015).

9 R. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (London, 2015); E. Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2017).

10 W. E. Gladstone, *The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture* (1890), now accessible on https://archive.org/stream/a583189400gladuoft#page/n5/mode/2up.

11 In this his view is comparable to that elaborated by a later liberal historian, H. Pirenne, in his *Histoire de l’Europe*, ed. J. P. Devroey and A. Knaepen (Bruxelles, 2014), p. 68.

12 For the normative influence of clubs in Victorian politics see S. Thevoz, *Club Government: How the Victorian World was Ruled from London Clubs* (London, 2018).

13 *The Spectator*, ‘Mr Gladstone and the Concert of Europe’, 11 Sep. 1880, p. 6.

14 *Revised Report of the Proceedings at the Dinner of the 31st May 1876, Held in Celebration of the Hundredth Year of the Publication of the ‘Wealth of Nations’* (1876), pp. 42–3.

15 H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1876–1898*, ii (Oxford, 1998), p. 20.

16 E. F. Biagini, ‘Gladstone’s Midlothian Campaign of 1879: The Realpolitik of Christian Humanitarianism’, *The Journal of Liberal History*, 42, 2004, pp. 6–12.

17 P. Pombeni, ‘La démocratie du chef en Europe: L’idéaltype du pouvoir charismatique comme moyen de gestion des transformations économiques et sociales’, in *La démocratie européenne à l’ épreuve des changements économiques et sociaux, XIXe – XXe siècle* (Bologna, 2011), pp. 39–64.

18 W. E. Gladstone, *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (London, 1876).

19 Speech at the Foresters’ Hall, Dalkeith, Scotland (26 Nov. 1879), quoted in J. Morley, *Life of Gladstone* (1903), p. 595.

20 Gladstone, *The Bulgarian Horrors.*

21 J. S. Mill, *England and Ireland* (London, 1868).

22 W. E. Gladstone, ‘Daniel O’Connell’, *The Nineteenth Century*, XXV (1889).

23 J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2014), p. 63 ff.

24 Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism*, pp. 218–9.

25 J. Chamberlain, *The Radical Programme* (London, 1885; ed. D. A. Hamer, London, 1971), pp. 12, 59.

26 Cited in J. L. Garvin, *Joseph Chamberlain* (London, 1932), vol. ii, p. 191.

27 C. Dilke, *Greater Britain* (London, 1869); J. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883).

28 Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism*, p.250 n.163; J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006), p.342; D. Bell, ‘Republican Imperialism: J. A. Froude and the Virtue of Empire’, *History of Political Thought*, xxx (2009), pp. 166–91; C. Brady, *James Anthony Froude: An Intellectual Biography of a Victorian Prophet* (Oxford, 2013).

29 H. C. G.Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Élite* (Oxford, 1973).

30 C. de Freycinet, *Souvenirs 1878–1893* (Paris, 1911).

31 R. Beck, *Der Plan Freycinet und die Provinzen: Aspekte der infrastrukturellen Entwicklung der französischen Provinzen durch die Dritte Republik* (Franfurt am Main, 1986).

32 C. W. Newbury and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, ‘French Policy and the Origins of the Scramble for West Africa’, *Journal of African History*, x, 2 (1969), pp. 253–276

33 Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 1961), pp. 395–409.

34 A. Bruckner, ‘To Develop the Colonial Estate: The Reasons for British West African Railways’ (MA diss., University of York, 2011), pp. 28–32.

35 T. L. Crosby, *Joseph Chamberlain: A Very Radical Imperialist* (London, 2011), pp. 120–2, 129–30.

36 Biagini, ‘Exporting “Western & Beneficent Institutions” ’.

37 Chamberlain to Salisbury, 24 Dec. 1895, Salisbury MSS 3M/E/Chamberlain/1887– 95/39: cit. in D. M. Bray, ‘Joseph Chamberlain and Foreign Policy, 1895–1903’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 2015), p. 68.

38 Bray, ‘Chamberlain and Foreign Policy’, p. 71.

39 T. Brooking, *Richard Seddon, King of God’s Own* (New York, 2014), pp. 177, 299, 300, 344–5; and id., ‘ “King Joe” and “King Dick”: Joseph Chamberlain and Richard Seddon’, in I. Cawood and C. Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain: International Statesman, National Leader, Local Icon* (Basingstoke, 2016), pp. 67–93.

40 *The Times*, Speech in Glasgow (6 Oct. 1903), 7 Oct. 1903, p. 4.

41 *The Times*, Speech in Greenock (7 Oct. 1903), 8 Oct. 1903, p. 8.

42 E. F. Biagini, ‘The Dilemmas of Liberalism 1871–1945’, in M. Pugh (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Modern European History 1871–1945* (Oxford, 1997), pp.111–132.

43 Speech in Newcastle (20 Oct. 1903), *The Times*, 21 Oct. 1903, p. 10.

44 O. Betts, ‘ “The People’s Bread”: A Social History of Joseph Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform Campaign’, in Cawood and Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain*, pp. 130–50.

45 Speech in Greenock (7 Oct. 1903), *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1903, p. 8.

46 Speech in Liverpool (27 Oct. 1903), *The Times*, 28 Oct. 1903, p. 6; speech in Liverpool (27 Oct. 1903), *The Times*, 28 Oct. 1903, p. 6.

47 Speech in Limehouse in the East End of London (15 Dec. 1904), quoted in ‘Mr. Chamberlain In The East-End.’, *The Times*, 16 Dec. 1904, p. 8.

48 Gisela Stuart, ‘Meet Joe Chamberlain, the Lost Tory Leader Whose Ideas Drive Theresa May’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 Jul. 2016 (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/12/meet-joe-chamberlain-the-lost-tory-leader-who-ideas-drive-theres/); J. O’Sullivan,

---

'Joseph Chamberlain, Theresa May's New Lodestar', *The Spectator*, 16 Jul. 2016 (https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/07/the-man-theresa-may-wants-to-be/).

[49] R. Shannon, *Gladstone. Heroic Minister, 1865–1898* (London, 1999), p. 305.

[50] O. Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, iii (Princeton, 1990), p. 86.

[51] Michael Gove, 'Soviet-style Control Freaks Are a Threat to Our Independence', *The Times*, 25 Apr. 2016, p. 8.

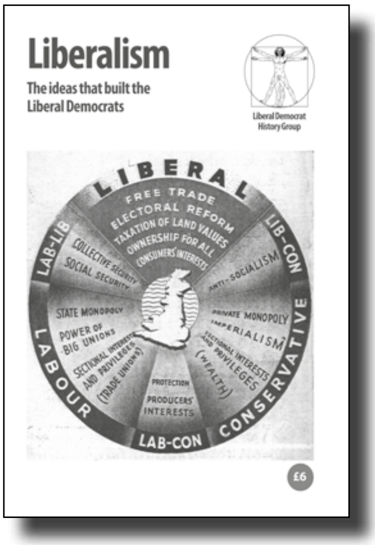
[52] W. N. Medlicott, *Bismarck, Gladstone and the Concert of Europe* (London, 1957).

[53] John Bruton, 'Cameron's Lack of Positive Vision Puts Europe at Risk', *Irish Times*, 18 Feb. 2016, p. 14.

More about Liberal thought and Liberal thinkers:

Liberalism

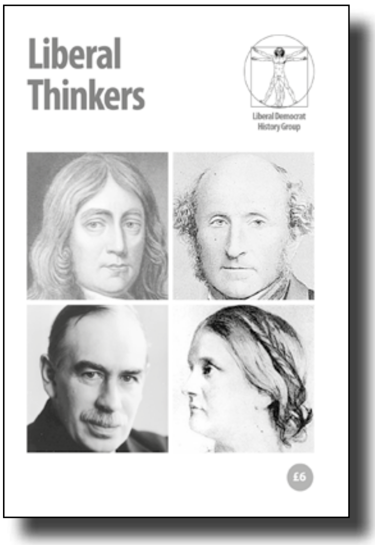
The ideas that built the Liberal Democrats



An accessible guide to the key ideas underlying Liberal Democrat beliefs, including entries on environmentalism, internationalism, the rule of law and community politics, together with contemporary and historic currents of thought, including social and economic liberalism, social democracy, Keynesianism, radicalism and more.

Essential reading for every thinking Liberal.

Available at a special discounted rate for *Journal of Liberal History* subscribers: £5 instead of the normal £6. Order via our online shop (**www.liberalhistory.org.uk/shop/**) or by sending a cheque (to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN (add £1.25 P&P).



Liberal Thinkers

Liberalism has been built on more than three centuries' work of political thinkers and writers and the aspirations of countless human beings who have fought for freedom, democracy, the rule of law and open and tolerant societies.

This History Group booklet is an accessible guide to the key thinkers associated with British Liberalism, including John Locke, Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Richard Cobden, John Stuart Mill, L. T. Hobhouse, John Maynard Keynes, William Beveridge and many more. This second edition updates some of the entries in the first (2014) edition, and adds one new entry in place of one of the previous ones.

Available at a special discounted rate for *Journal of Liberal History* subscribers: £5 instead of the normal £6. Order via our online shop (**www.liberalhistory.org.uk/shop/**) or by sending a cheque (to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN (add £1.25 P&P).