

resolved fairly amicably. NHS reform was of course a major headache, but, in contrast to Cameron, Letwin does not blame this on the Lib Dems, but on the failure of the reform package to address the issue of integrating health and social care for elderly people; he thinks it did a decent job for the rest of the NHS.

He identifies just two episodes where the basic harmony of the coalition broke down, and they're exactly the same as in Cameron's assessment: the Leveson reforms and the row over House of Lords reform and the constituency boundary review. On the former, Letwin blames pressure from Hacked Off and the Labour Party more than anything else, and in the end a compromise is reached. On the latter, unlike Cameron, Letwin clearly understands the Lib Dem position; though, like Cameron, he is exasperated with the degree of opposition to Lords reform among Tory backbenchers. 'The coalition dynamics had come into conflict with the dynamics (or rather, the statics) of the Conservative parliamentary party and the result was ... nothing' (p. 220). (As David Laws observed in his *Coalition Diaries*, 'In coalition, "no" is a far more powerful word than "yes".') A single-party government could probably have resolved 'such big ideological bust-ups' because of its 'underlying bonds of loyalty' (p. 221); but the coalition, based on a transactional arrangement, could not do so.

These are the exceptions rather than the rule. For the rest of the time, coalition 'felt like a functional rather than a dysfunctional operation. What is more, it felt like a sane and stable administration' (p. 221). (In sharp contrast, one might observe, to the Johnson government which, two years after *Hearts and Minds* was published, expelled Letwin from the Conservative parliamentary party.) Letwin clearly enjoyed working in coalition and admits that he found himself as often allied with as opposed to Lib Dem ministers; he appreciated the opportunity to sideline Tory hardliners: 'I certainly had more in common with some of my closest Liberal Democrat coalition colleagues than I did with some of my most ideologically distant fellow Conservatives'

(p. 213). No wonder he helped make the coalition work.

All these books reinforce what I think is the generally accepted conclusion that, in terms of delivering what it set out to do, the coalition worked well, and better than the governments that preceded and followed it. But I believe that they also suggest that what the coalition delivered could have been better for the Liberal Democrats as a party: that Lib Dem ministers, and particularly Nick Clegg, were too responsible in delivering effective government, and missed too many chances to dig their heels in and demand something – anything – that would have more obviously rewarded their own supporters and shored up

their collapsing support in the electorate. To be fair, they were beginning to behave more in this way by the latter years of the coalition, but by then it was too late.

And perhaps the biggest lesson to draw from these accounts is that when your own coalition partners, with nothing to gain, warn you about the consequences of your own decisions – on tuition fees and even, implicitly, on the AV referendum – you really need to pay attention.

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## Whitley and the Whitley Councils

John A. Hargreaves, Keith Laybourn and Richard Toye (eds.), *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations: J. H. Whitley (1866–1935) – Halifax Radical and Speaker of the House of Commons* (Routledge, 2018)

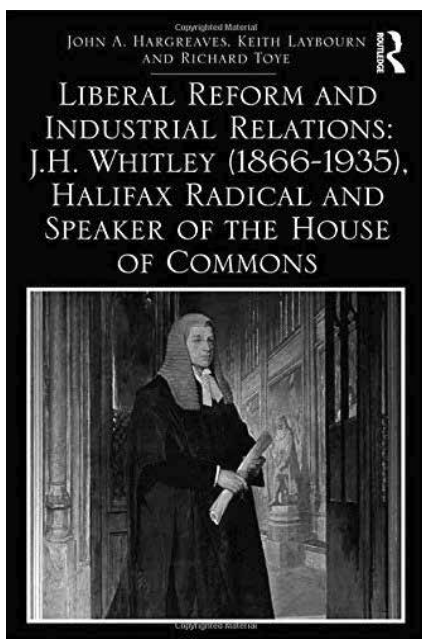
Review by **Michael Meadowcroft**

**S**TUDIES IN LIBERAL history have burgeoned over the past twenty-five years but a number of lacunae have remained. One such was a study of J. H. Whitley, eponymous link with the Whitley Councils and the last Liberal Speaker of the House of Commons. Whitley's family are now rectifying the omission. Dr Chris Cook, the doyen of searchers and publishers of political sources, noted that Whitley's papers 'relating mainly to his ... period as Speaker' were in the hands of his son and that '[I]t is believed that no other private papers exist.'<sup>1</sup> Happily this proved to be wrong, and in October 2011 Whitley's grandson, John Whitley, deposited the whole archive with the University of Huddersfield as the nearest academic institution to Whitley's home and political base in Halifax.<sup>2</sup> Following on from the establishment of the Whitley archive, an annual J. H. Whitley lecture was established in 2012. The 2014 lecturer was John Bercow, the then Speaker and a

very different personality to Whitley.<sup>3</sup> Now a book of essays on Whitley has been published as a forerunner to a full biography.

Inevitably in a book of twelve separate essays there is a certain amount of repetition; but essentially it gives a sympathetic picture of a little known Liberal figure and is a useful contribution to the history of a traumatic period in Liberal history.

It is evident that John Henry Whitley, known always as Harry Whitley, would have fitted very easily into the present-day party. His was a practical local Liberalism built on local voluntary action and a seven-year apprenticeship on the Halifax County Borough Council, continuing his final term of office whilst MP for the town. He established a seaside camp at Filey for poor boys from Halifax and often took charge of the camps himself. The camps continued long after his death and were taken over by later members of the Whitley family. Also, together



with other family members, Harry Whitley established the Halifax Guild of Help, an early coordinating body for the voluntary sector, out of which eventually developed the Councils of Voluntary Service of today. He was reluctant to become an MP, refusing the nomination on a number of occasions until finally accepting it for the 1900 'Khaki' general election. Such was his local popularity that, in the two member constituency, with the pro-Boer war Conservative topping the poll, Whitley took the second seat displacing the sitting Liberal MP. The whole Whitley family was involved in Liberal politics and in municipal and voluntary service, and one gathers that it was a sense of duty that impelled him into taking on the Liberal nomination and what appears to have been to him the distasteful task of spending months in London rather than in Halifax.<sup>4</sup> Also investing Whitley's Liberalism was his strong Non-conformist religion, being a lifelong Congregationalist, a denomination one of whose key tenets was the independence of each local church. I recall that the late Donald Wade, a former deputy leader of the Liberal Party, was a leading Congregationalist.

The Whitley family were mill owners but, unusually for Halifax where wool was the dominant textile, they were cotton mills. Harry Whitley gave his responsibilities to the family business as the reason for being unable to

accept the Liberal association's nomination at the 1895 election.

The one apparently discordant note in the Whitley family's otherwise consistent life was the despatch of Harry Whitley, and, one by one, his younger brothers to the relatively new public school, Clifton College, in Bristol. Harry's father chose the school because, 'differences of opinion were tolerated and a boy had to make his way by character and industry.' John Hargreaves points out that another practical reason was perhaps that Harry's mother had died when he was three and the lack of a maternal presence in a busy household could perhaps in part be substituted by going away to a public school that proclaimed a Christian heritage.<sup>5</sup> As a student and sportsman, as in many other spheres, Harry Whitley was capable though not outstanding, but in the school's debating society he was a confident and articulate advocate of radical causes, few of which, however, secured a majority in the final vote! He retained a lifelong affection for the school and supported a number of fundraising initiatives whilst Speaker.

As a back bench MP, Whitley pursued positive Liberal policies to alleviate poverty and poor housing conditions. To deal with the latter he proposed the taxation of land values which, he argued, would inhibit land hoarding and encourage building. He supported home rule for Ireland and backed women's suffrage. His first step on the path of promotion was his appointment as a whip in 1907 – a relatively relaxed task one would assume, given a Liberal majority of almost 130. In 1920 he made a big change, moving from the Whips Office – the heart of the political battle – to become deputy chairman of Ways and Means, distant from political partisanship. Unfortunately, in dealing with this period, Clyde Binfield gives no indication of how or why he made this shift or how a year later he became deputy Speaker and chairman of Ways and Means.<sup>6</sup> In this latter post he had to deputise for Mr Speaker Lowther who was often absent.

Whilst in the latter post an unexpected crisis arrived for the Liberal

Party. In January 1915, in the middle of the First World War, the chief whip, Percy Illingworth, another Yorkshire MP and from all reports a superb occupant of the post, died suddenly from typhoid fever as a result, it was said, of eating a bad oyster. Asquith turned to Whitley to take over but he refused; some reports say that he felt that his health was not up to the demands of the job, but John Hargreaves states that Whitley told Oliver, his youngest son, that he did not feel himself sufficiently partisan to take on the role of disciplinarian.<sup>7</sup> It is also possible that he saw his future as succeeding to the Speakership rather than in party politics. His refusal led indirectly to the Liberals' poor parliamentary performance during the first Labour government in 1924 as Asquith was unable to find a long-term occupant as chief whip until his close colleague Vivian Phillips accepted. However, Phillips' antipathy to Lloyd George made it difficult for the party to present a united front. The poor performances of the Liberal and Labour whips led to the collapse of the Labour government and the Liberal Party never regained its parliamentary strength.<sup>8</sup>

Whitley became Speaker in April 1921 and held the position until June 1928. Although not a particularly long tenure he had a number of unique and difficult political events to deal with, including the Anglo-Irish Treaty which removed the Republic of Ireland MPs from the House of Commons, the first Labour government in such a minority government that it was not even the leading party in parliament, the presence of women MPs, and the General Strike of 1926. As Speaker, Whitley himself was unusual: first, he was from the North; second, he was a textile manufacturer rather than the usual lawyer or member of the landed gentry; and, as it turned out, he was the last Liberal Speaker. The general assessment of him was that if not outstanding he was certainly effective.<sup>9</sup> In particular he had decided to treat disruptive Labour MPs, particularly the 'Red Clydeside' Members with a 'long rein' and this was far from pleasing to the more respectful Members who accused him of being too easy

going. The objective fact was that his strategy worked in that for the most part the House functioned and was rarely disrupted. He was, in effect, following similar Liberal methods to the ones he had employed in the Halifax mill in dealing with labour relations and acknowledging the role of trade unions.<sup>10</sup> In the midst of the difficulties of dealing with a boisterous House, there were the particular difficulties of the initially split Liberal Party. One would have expected Whitley's politics to have placed him alongside the Asquithians rather than supporting the Lloyd George faction, but at the 1918 general election he accepted the Coalition Liberal label even though he had not received the Coalition 'coupon'.

Perhaps Whitley will be remembered chiefly for his role in the formation of the joint industrial councils that bear his name. The Whitley Councils emerged from the First World War and the Asquith government's concern about industrial disputes affecting the war effort detrimentally. Whitley was the Deputy Speaker and Asquith appointed him to chair the relevant committee. His experience in managing a large cotton mill and maintaining harmony there was valuable experience for the new committee. The committee produced five reports during 1917 and 1918, the first of which is usually thought of as the Whitley Report.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, few industrial councils survived much beyond the war, but the civil service saw the value to their work and took up the idea. Also, the unions were not enthusiastic about the Whitley concept of works committees and the response to these was somewhat disappointing.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that industrial councils and works councils survived at all has given the Whitley name a continuing resonance.

One of the conditions on which Whitley agreed to accept the Speakership in 1921 was that he would not have to take the traditional peerage on retirement. He had always been opposed to the existence of the House of Lords and he was determined to be consistent. In 1928, when the time came to retire, he personally asked the

king to be excused appointment to the Lords. A somewhat different attitude to that of John Bercow!

His expressed intention on retirement was to return to Halifax and to pick up his voluntary work there but, despite his wish for a quieter life, he took on two further onerous tasks. In 1929 he accepted appointment as chairman of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, travelling a great deal and eventually producing a report sympathetic to the need for regulation to improve working conditions and pay for Indian men and women. In 1930 his last national appointment was as chairman of the Board of Governors of the BBC. John Reith was the powerful and opinionated director general of this burgeoning corporation and was fearful of Whitley's appointment. Whitley was determined from the beginning to establish as good working relationship with Reith and he achieved that to Reith's satisfaction, arguably by being too supportive of Reith's hegemonic and somewhat narrow views on the duty of the BBC to safeguard moral values. Whitley died in office at the BBC in 1935.

This book is a useful addition to the literature on a troubled period in Liberal history and provides a valuable insight into the varied life and times of one of the lesser Liberal figures whose political life spanned the whole period from 1900 to 1928. I look forward to

the forthcoming biography of Harry Whitley.

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1. Chris Cook, *Sources in British Political History 1900–1951, Volume 4: A Guide to the Private Papers of Members of Parliament: L–Z* (Macmillan, 1977)
2. Details of the archive can be found at <http://heritagequay.org/archives/WFA/?view=item>
3. I gave the 2017 lecture on 'The myths and lessons of the 1924 Labour government'; a version of the lecture appeared in the *Journal of Liberal History*, 100 (Autumn 2018).
4. Professor Keith Laybourn chapter, *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations*, p. 68.
5. *Ibid.*, Dr J. A. Hargreaves chapter, p. 9.
6. *Ibid.*, Professor Clyde Binfield chapter, p. 53.
7. *Ibid.*, Hargreaves chapter, p. 26.
8. M. Meadowcroft, 'The 1924 Labour government and the failure of the whips', *Journal of Liberal History*, 100 (Autumn 2018).
9. Professor Richard Toye chapter, *Liberal Reform and Industrial Relations*, p. 109.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
11. *Ibid.*, Professor Greg Patmore chapter, p. 87. (Officially the Whitley Committee on Relations between Employers and the Employed.)
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–1.

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