

Gladstone & 21st Century Liberalism

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Abstract

William Gladstone was not only a symbol of the Victorian era, but also a proponent of a philosophy that has long reaching effects. Yes, he was a potent symbol of Victorianism, including his contradictory personal life and rather unconventional professional career. However, his impact is more than what his mark on British society is. Regarding the ideas of European nationalism and self-determination, his influence is undeniably felt within not only liberalism and accepted liberal principles, but within recent adaptations of liberalism known as the Third Way. In fact, William Gladstone's *ideal* of liberalism is felt today in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

William Gladstone, as Chancellor of the Exchequer and later as Prime Minister, introduced and adopted policies that loosened the political and economic restraints in Great Britain in an effort to improve individual liberty. This can be observed in the numerous bills submitted to the House of Commons, speeches given, and causes supported.

As an active legislator and reformer, Gladstone was responsible for the attempt to bring peace to Ireland in the proposed disestablishment of the Church of Ireland (1869); and the Irish Land Act (1870), that provided compensation for improvements to tenant farmers evicted by landowners. Furthermore, Gladstone championed the idea of education for young children. Elementary education was made available to Welsh and English children between the ages of five and thirteen by the passage of the Forster's Education Act (1870). Politically,

William Gladstone was responsible for the introduction of universal male suffrage (1867) and the successful passage of the Ballot Act (1872) that instituted secret ballots for local and general elections. This was a culmination of efforts that began almost a decade prior. It was the idea of Irish Home Rule (1886 & 1893) that proved much more difficult for political success, and ultimately doomed Gladstone's reform efforts. However, this idea was not completely dead and would remain an option for British and Irish politicians throughout the coming century. Gladstone's socio-economic ideas have heirs in modern liberal thought as expressed in the late 20th century philosophy known as Third Way.

If Third Way proponents stress technological development, education, and competitive mechanisms to pursue economic progress and governmental objectives [1], they are only following the precedent set by William Gladstone in the various socio-economic schemes during his tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister. Moreover, recent elections in Australia and the United States of America not only are proof positive of liberalism's success and continuation of Third Way principles [2], but a validation of Gladstone's ideas and governmental policies during the later Victorian era.

Finally, Gladstone is arguably the first politician who was influenced by social commentary, which effected not only personal decisions, but helped him craft the language of his political speeches and provided tangible guideposts to his legislative efforts as Liberal leader and Prime Minister. Furthermore, it was the necessity of innovative policies for electoral vitality that drove Gladstone's efforts, just as much as social criticism by the Reverend Andrew Mearns, W.T. Stead and the fiction author Willkie Collins, among others, gave William Gladstone intellectual substance and the atmosphere for constructive commentary on government's role to its citizens; the twenty-first Century equivalent to Anthony Giddens and Robert Cialdini's impact on Third Way opinion and ideas.

The Lion

The Victorian era that William Gladstone lived and worked in was truly a defining age in British economic, military, and political history. For the latter, it

was the period of time that produced the great reforms that extended the right of suffrage from landowners to the working-class male population, and great debates on the repeal of the Corn Laws, the “Irish question”, and free trade.

The tides of change began with the 1867 Reform Act that gave the right to vote to every male adult householder living in a borough constituency. This right was also extended to men paying £10 for unfurnished rooms. To the modern observer, the idea of male suffrage may seem strange, but in class conscience England, such a right had long been held for the select few, namely the aristocracy and landed merchants. As such, the idea of extending the voting right to working-class men, roughly 1,500,000, would have been originally perceived as inappropriate as voting rights for women was in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, the Reform Act reshaped the political map of Britain by what happened to constituencies and boroughs with less than 10,000 inhabitants. In brief, said constituencies and boroughs lost a seat in the House of Commons. The remaining forty-five seats were distributed giving towns which had never had a Member of Parliament (MP) before a seat, assigning an additional seat to larger towns, such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, and Manchester, and most importantly, distributing twenty-five seats to counties whose population had increased since 1832. The most immediate effect was felt electorally, as working class males now formed the majority of voters in most borough constituencies. If this was a legislative achievement for William Gladstone, it also heralded a new idea in politics, a voting constituency.

It should not be understated how significant this political development was. Until that time, eligible voters were given candidate choices and informed by wealthy landowners, who the preferred choice was. Though not illegal it was not entirely democratic either. With the Reform Act, the ‘establishment’ of aristocracy and landowners followed this progression with unease, and soon exploited the weakness in the law’s open system of voting whereby the choice of candidate was recorded in a poll book, viewed by employers and local landlords. Thereby, the working classes were able to still be intimidated or worse punished, if the worker did not support the preferred candidate. Gladstone addressed this discrepancy in the 1872 Ballot Act, which introduced the practice of private or

secret voting, thereby removing the intimidation of the landlords and employers. Through these early trials as a senior legislator, he showed an ability to hone his message of reform and influence his fellow parliamentary colleagues, showing his strength to the broader public, becoming a celebrated person amongst the working classes. The Reform Act and Ballot Act paid electoral dividends for Gladstone as working-class males voted for the Liberal Party and assured its victory in the general election contests of 1874 and 1880.

Moreover, the working class, defined by Victorian era standards of the middle class, remained the core supporters ideologically for Liberals. In the evolving social structures and income distribution of the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first support has broadened to include more diverse groups. This is particularly true as far-Left political parties have collapsed since the end of Communism. An effort therefore was made in the last twenty years to find a new political philosophy focused on adapting economies and societies to the pressures and demands of globalization. The success has been the popularized 'Third Way.' As such, the Third Way has taken Liberal ideas championed by William Gladstone; balance the energy of capitalism with the need to foster social solidarity and civic values. Bill Clinton and his 'new' Democrats, promised welfare reform, a middle class tax cut, and a promise to expand a tax credit for the working poor, known as the Earned Income Tax Credit (1993), [3] that nicely fit the Third Way philosophy. With these simple ideas to work from, Clinton was able to unite his usual fractious and ideologically diverse party. The geographical division that would dominate electoral politics throughout the coming decades emerged in 1992 as Democratic dominance of the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast took hold, solidified in the 1996 election and remained in the 2008 election.

Indeed, social democrats from Europe and the United States have in the last three decades made a concerted effort to combine social solidarity of working classes with a dynamic economy. Endorsing free market positions and welfare reform for example and for relatively new adherents a stated commitment to the cause as was made by American President Obama who labeled himself a New Democrat in a recent meeting to Democrats. This was in part, formality based, since he has been courting congressional Democrats in advance of the debate on

his proposed \$3.6 trillion budget, but nonetheless significant for a consciously label-free politician. [4] The accepted principles of modern day liberals owe much to Gladstone's efforts, but especially in the outcomes from his rivalry with Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli.

The Lion and The Unicorn

Great rivalries always fascinate. Moreover, the pivotal rivalry of the nineteenth century between William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli has proven long lasting, as its variations have developed over the centuries producing questions for Great Britain, such as the relationship it has to the world and its role within it; the extent of its military force; interaction with Europe; relationship within other parts of the United Kingdom; the role of the monarchy; Church of England; and House of Lords. And for Party ideologues in North America and on the Continent, the questions have produced answers to labor, social solidarity and the Free Market.

For Gladstone and Disraeli, intelligent, skillful and thoughtful politicians, there is no better example of rivalry from circumstance and opportunity. Both men were fascinating characters; living in the Victorian era, with views formed before that time. Indeed, through their personality and individual qualities every much the characters created by illustrator Sir John Tenniel published in *Punch*. The decades-long political fighting between the Lion and the Unicorn (Disraeli); two absolute opposites culturally, psychologically, and politically, changed the face of politics during a high point of the British Empire.

Both men loathed each other and it was through this loathing that each achieved something beneficial individually, such as the coalescence of the Liberal Party, and the Conservative's redefinition. For their country and democracy, their rivalry resulted in the emergence of the party machine. And for Gladstone, arguable the first true party politician, success, taking a loose coalition of diverse groups including Whigs and free-trade Conservatives, so called Peelites, and turning them into a modern party.

In fact, when one observes the central tenant of those politicians (Peelites) who left the Conservative Party in 1846 and formed the Liberal Party then under the leadership of Sir Robert Peel, one finds a direct link to modern liberalism and Third Way philosophy, since Peelites were committed to free trade and an approach to government that was managerial, to the fault of being technocratic. It was this similar commitment that reshaped the Democratic Party in the United States, during the 1990s, drove the reform efforts of Labour leaders Kinnock, Smith, and finally Blair in Great Britain, not to mention those efforts by Gerhard Schröder and the Social Democrats in Germany.

During the forty-four year rivalry between Gladstone and Disraeli a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues were debated and decided upon. If the latter was to be portrayed as a dandy the former had more electoral clout. This was first observed in the general election of 1868 as the Liberals had a majority of 100 over Disraeli's Conservatives. More importantly, the so called 'Midlothian Campaign' of 1880 marked not only the final showdown between these two political titans, but also the culmination of personality politics; the 1874 campaign perhaps being the first one waged solely as a public battle between two rivals rather than on specific issues or Party preference. As one observes political campaigns today, the process of popularity politics is still alive. Indeed, those politicians who subscribe to Third Way politics can trace their popularity birth to the two men of the nineteenth century.

The political campaigns of Bill Clinton (1992), Tony Blair (1997) and Gerhard Schröder (1998), respectfully, show the finely tuned political campaigning of twentieth century politics and each party machine. However, it is in fact those two facets of those campaigns that owe allegiance to the Gladstone-Disraeli contest of 1874 and 1880. Clinton was able to negatively portray President George H.W. Bush after the latter's budget compromise with Congress raised taxes against Bush's express campaign pledge not to. As such, Clinton condemned the raise on its merits and the president's honesty not unlike Gladstone's admonition of Disraeli's failure to address Turkish policy in the Balkans in the 1880 campaign and failure on the national budget in their 1874 contest. [5]

The Labour Party underwent a centrist shift under the leadership of Neil Kinnock and solidified under Tony Blair. In the general election campaign of 1997, the Labour Party shrewdly chose to concentrate on the image of its dynamic and energetic young leader, while the Conservatives were seen as disunited and beset with infighting, especially between Chancellor Kenneth Clarke and Home Secretary Michael Howard. The landslide Labour victory can be directly accredited to Blair's charisma and smooth Labour public relations machine by Alastair Campbell similar in style to the 1874 election that saw Gladstone's liberals win the majority of votes cast. On a separate topic, but equally important, the one issue that dominated Gladstone's third (1886) and fourth (1892-1894) terms as prime minister was Ireland. It is this issue that has a direct link to the policy achievement of the first Labour government of Tony Blair. The Belfast Agreement, popularly known as the Good Friday Accord, brought peace to over a century-long violent conflict and justified the original idea of Irish Home Rule brought forth by Gladstone.

The 1998 German election was historic in many ways. For example, it was this election that saw the dramatic swing of votes from a centre-right government to a centre-left government in postwar German history, bringing to an end the sixteen-year rule of Helmut Kohl. The conservative coalition failed to win the public regardless of its intensely personal appeal to Chancellor Kohl's experience and reputation. [6] It is here that the greatest comparison between the Gladstone and Disraeli contest is found. In 1998 as in 1874 and 1880, experience and reputation was used as the wedge to secure either victory or separate the old coalitions. For the German Social Democrat Party (SDP) under the energetic leadership of Gerhard Schröder, the party formed a coalition with the Greens; first centre-left absolute majority in post World War Two Germany after conducting a campaign inspired by American President Bill Clinton and focused on the message of the Neue Mitte or 'new center' that has a direct correlation with the Third Way ideas of Blair and Clinton. [7] Blair, Clinton, and Schröder were not the first reform minded liberals, but they had the intellect and personality to remake their respectful parties and electorates on more than liberal philosophy's

merits. It was a challenge, but a necessary one to mold liberal principles with the times.

Liberalism To The Third Way

The liberalism that developed throughout the early twentieth century entered the final three decades of that century bloodied and bruised from the economic and political dramas of preceding decades. Liberals searching for innovative policies that had substance in addition to electoral vitality coalesced on the need to move away from the traditional left versus right debate. Anthony Giddens addresses in his book, “The Third Way” that said proposals and policies are not only for middle class appeal; rather, the philosophy’s fundamentals provide a blueprint for governance, and amongst European liberals, cross-national cooperation. The fundamentals of [8]:

1. an acceptance that Left and Right no longer apply to all politics;
2. constraints on government;
3. an economy and communities of civil society;
4. the creation of a new social contract in which there are responsibilities as well as rights;
5. an extensive social investment in education, communications and infrastructure;
6. fostering a diversified society based on egalitarian principles;
7. participation in global change

Such fundamentals point to how enduring progressive values have been adapted to the challenges of the information age. More to the point, there are three cornerstones in the philosophy’s approach to economic opportunity and security. By promoting equal opportunity, an ethic has arisen of mutual responsibility and a new approach to governing, citizens are empowered to act independent of government attempts to change entitlement schemes or worse feel socially abandoned.

Liberalism in the 21st Century fastens the Third Way approach to opportunity

by stressing technological innovation and competitive enterprise, but also education, rather than traditional top-down redistribution or *laissez faire*. In an assent to those Victorian values that Gladstone adhered too personally and attempted to influence socially, Third Way “embraces ‘tolerant traditionalism,’ honoring traditional moral and family values while resisting attempts to impose them on others. It favors an enabling rather than a bureaucratic government, expanding choices for citizens, using market means to achieve public ends and encouraging civic and community institutions to play a larger role in public life. Within the scope of social democracy, Third Way attempts to build inclusive, multiethnic societies based on this common allegiance.” [9] This ideal is seen in reform attempts in the field of education and local democratization.

For liberals, as the twentieth century came to a close the importance of education reform became more than electoral “talk”. In a nod to Gladstone’s own idea of education, by the late 1990s public schools in the United States and Germany underwent cosmetic as well as substance reform as public monies were invested to connect schools to the Internet and elevate the standards of quality and performance, reaping the rewards of the ongoing technological revolution.

In regards to local democratization the torch of Irish Home Rule, as championed by Gladstone, was passed to Tony Blair. The Republic of Ireland had existed since 1922, but the persistent question of Northern Ireland remained. As such, in early 1998 the issue of devolution for not only Northern Ireland, but Wales and Scotland too was raised. True to the spirit behind Gladstone’s effort to give the Irish more control of their domestic affairs, Blair took this idea as a model for returning more direct control to the peoples of the British Isles.

There is a valid argument that the philosophy of the Third Way is, in fact, nothing more than neoliberalism. The label, however, does not fully fit the times. With the fall of communism and various economic crises, the attempt by Bill Clinton in the United States, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder in Europe was to offer a new path between socialism and neoliberalism; utopia of “ands”: patriotism *and* internationalism, robust free market *and* social safety net; competitive tax rates *and* quality public, [10] to name a few. To this goal they succeeded since the vitality of New Labour in Britain, the New Centre in

Germany, and New Democrats in the United States have three qualities in common and hold a tangible link to the Gladstone liberals of the Victorian age.

1. Discipline, a shared purpose
2. Intellectual Confidence
3. Winning

The Liberal Party of William Gladstone was disciplined. In addition to its electoral vitality, Gladstone was able to have loyal Party members and fellow politicians support his various reform efforts while in government and in opposition for close to three decades. This is amazing when one thinks about the enticement of money and fame that make some politicians break from their party leadership. A similar theme is observed in the Democratic Party in the United States, the Labour Party under Tony Blair and German Social Democrats. Bill Clinton had the ability to keep a typically fractious political party united through two general elections and two by-elections. Currently, President Obama retains the support of his party, which holds a majority in the American Congress. As opposition leader, Blair maintained the shared purpose of *New Labour* throughout the 1997 general election and into government. This is a worthy accomplishment considering how the old Labour Party was perceived for almost two decades as too radical, unruly and unelectable. Gerhard Schröder also had the not too easy task of keeping the often bad-tempered German Social Democrats together; first as a party and once in government as a desired coalition partner. In these instances the various legislation voted into law would not have occurred if not for parliamentary discipline, but most of all Party loyalty.

Intellectual ideas of this Third Way philosophy have been proven solid, as Third Way advocates have demonstrated commitment to macroeconomic stability either in balanced budgets or bank autonomy. Minimum wage and various welfare-to-work schemes in addition to a redistribution of wealth by tax credit have been tried, found worthy by governments in Europe and North America and continue in the new century. There is a concerted effort by the Democrats in the United States as well as British Prime Minister Gordon Brown at market-based reform after the financial meltdown of 2008 and on-going financial crisis.

Furthermore, intellectual confidence continues to bring forth new challenging ideas. In the United States, President Barack Obama and Administration officials are interested in the concepts put forth in recent books by Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University (“Influence”) and “Nudge” by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein of the University of Chicago who suggest that governments can legitimately change citizens’ automatic or default options on personal decisions like organ donation or a social policy such as pensions provision. [11] These ideas offer ways to deal with unique 21st Century challenges but are not unlike those ideas that William Gladstone was influenced by and championed.

It may be assumed Gladstone would have read Tennyson. Therefore, it is not illogical to assume he read the works of a contemporary, William Morris; translator of Icelandic sagas, author of *News from Nowhere*, and one of England’s social thinkers. Likewise, Charles Booth, ship-owner and philanthropist influenced Victorian social thought with his 1891 census drawn from data collected over the previous decade on poverty in London and the publication *In Darkest England And The Way Out* (1890). His findings supported ongoing social dialogue that began with the publication of *Bitter Cry* (1883) by Reverend Andrew Mearns. Mearns raised questions on housing for the poor, poverty, crime, and morality as perceived by middle and upper classes. Moreover, these issues were discussed in depth by another social reformer, W.T. Stead, editor of The Northern Echo and later The Pall Mall Gazette [12]. It may be inferred then from Gladstone’s own “volunteer” work and charity contributions that such books and newspapers were read throughout his political life and that he was actively engaged in the resultant social dialogue. Indeed, during this entire period, a new intellectual synthesis was taking form as political economists, modern clerisy, and social evolutionists sought a new authoritative intellectual foundation; a central theme for the political order.

In pure political terms, the philosophy of the Third Way has proven electorally solvent in establishing the political order in the twenty-first century. Tony Blair took Labour and the ideas of the Third Way and proceeded to win three consecutive elections (1997, 2001, 2005) while Gerhard Schröder was triumphant in 1998 and 2002. The ‘new’ Democrats in the United States won the

presidency in 1992, 1998, and 2008 on such ideas. And when the lens is widened to include by-elections, the victory tally is increased further. Such success when compared in parallel with William Gladstone and his Liberals, one sees similar patterns as the Liberal Party under his leadership won the general elections 1868, 1880, 1885, in addition to various by-elections from 1870 to 1890. This success says much about the Party discipline as it does about the ideas that the electorate were attracted to.

Moreover, in the early decades of the new century these qualities remain since the intellectual acknowledgement that deregulation and free market as the best way to maximize prosperity holds true, albeit within limits, as does the political recognition that new bases of working-class support need to be sought and cultivated as the traditional sources of support continue to shrink. These sentiments are direct inheritors of the genesis of the Liberal Party in the Victorian era, interpreted for a modern audience by Messrs Clinton, Blair-Brown, Schröder, and Obama.

Conclusion

William Gladstone accepted liberal principles. If Gladstone's liberalism is characterized by improved individual liberty and loose political and economic restraints, and his foreign policy was peace to promote trade, he not only succeeded in his lifetime but in our time. His reorganization of ideology in English politics and efforts at economic and social policy not only influenced generations of followers, but also within recent adaptations of liberalism within centre-left political movements known as the Third Way.

The challenge for centre-left parties in the late twentieth century, after the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s and following the fall of communism was to show that while economic and social change had destroyed traditional models, new means could serve old ends. Though it took much effort and various early leaders, the philosophy that coalesced as the "Third Way represents a historic realignment of economic and social policy, at a time when the old boundaries between economy, state and society are breaking down." [12] This is

true, but more importantly; it vindicates the liberal idea that traditional belief is not static. Moreover, in the economic and social policies of Third Way politicians, modern thought and change have proven malleable to the spirit and the very ideal of William Gladstone's liberalism.

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