

## THE GRAND OLD MAN (GOM)

### GLADSTONE

#### BORN 1809, RODNEY STREET LIVERPOOL

**The threat of social fracking is now very great. It will help to remember and re-visit Gladstone. And if you have an interest in education he may be an undiscovered reference point. I start with a story you may not have heard.**

In 1992 The Independent newspaper, borrowing from reports one hundred years earlier, posted the following anniversary piece about Gladstone on Mount Snowdon (Eryri).

‘William Gladstone, recently returned as Prime Minister for a fourth time at 83, stood on a rock with other Liberal MPs including David Lloyd George, to address a crowd estimated at 2,500 by the Times reporter and 1,500 by the North Wales Observer.

“There were all sorts and conditions of us from sturdy, stubborn, uncompromising Welsh radicals, to the flippant, lisping, insipid English tourist,” wrote the North Wales Observer’s somewhat partisan columnist.

‘A plaque on the rock states that he “addressed the people of Eryri upon justice to Wales. The multitude sang Cymric hymns and ‘The Land of My Fathers’.” The GOM said he was happier to listen. He spoke briefly in support of disestablishment of the Church in Wales, promised the Government would deal with crippling agricultural rents and praised the Welsh for returning so many Liberal MPs.’

The next day he and others tried to get to the summit of Snowdon but the weather was too bad. It is reported, however, that the two women in the party reached the top. And should you think that the crowd was not vast it takes quite a bit of puff to walk up to that rock.

I have just read Peter Clarke’s book, ***THE LOCOMOTIVE OF WAR, Money, Empire, Power and Guilt (2017)***. After a Prologue clarifying the ideas among which Gladstone’s thinking developed the book takes us from 1914 to the post 1945 era and reminds us of Gladstone’s huge and lasting international influence. Liberal values may have helped lead us to war in defence of Belgium in 1914 with consequences that were as unforeseen as they were undesirable (The phrase ‘Locomotive of War’ is Trotsky’s). They also, however, underpinned the attempts to create a stable peace and provided a moral foundation for a post-1945 world of relative fairness, equality and an

international sense of justice. And via Maynard Keynes they gave us a language of economics that for a long time held at bay the most nasty form of selfish capitalism<sup>i</sup>.

Gladstonian liberalism gave us the 1870 Education Act (often known as the Forster Act) making schooling both free and compulsory. Imagine its impact not only upon learning but also upon our expectations of the state in terms of social welfare. After his death Gladstone's Liberal Party gave us National Insurance (a German idea) and the curtailment of the power of the unelected House of Lords in order to make it happen. During WWI his party gave us efficient government by creating the Cabinet Office (by-passed by Blair). In 1928 during a period when Maynard Keynes and Lloyd George found it easy to collaborate (they did not always get on) it provided us with a brilliant economic and social blueprint<sup>ii</sup> that, unfortunately, failed to convince enough voters. Had it done so our nineteen thirties would have seen less unemployment and greater productivity.

Today we like to celebrate the Welfare State, the NHS and Beveridge. Who remembers that Beveridge was a member of the Liberal Party? Later, in the form of Liberal Democrats, that party propped up David Cameron. For me that killed off Liberalism in the Party. It was not merely self-harming: it was suicide. The LibDems de-Gladstonised themselves.

For us to find an expression of Gladstonian liberalism today a good start is the recent Labour Party Manifesto<sup>iii</sup>. The combination of Trump and Brexit as perceived by the UKIP wing of the Tory Party is so deadly that we shall need documents and declarations of intent such as this not only for the defence of decency but also as a necessary plan of attack upon the social frackers. If only the Manifesto had also rejected Brexit.

Harold Wilson had been a member of the Liberal Party. As a Labour prime minister he kept a picture of Gladstone on his wall and when setting up the Open University believed that he was completing the educational work of the GOM<sup>iv</sup>.

1979 (Thatcher) and 1980 (Reagan), however, saw the start of social and political fracking and accelerated damage to the capacity of the planet to tolerate humanity. The gaps between rich and poor, privileged and unprivileged began to widen. They have not stopped doing so<sup>v</sup>.

In 1997 Tony Blair could have countered all the social fracking of Thatcher. So many of the people who voted Labour were expecting him to do just that. Instead he assumed that activity would be mistaken for progress and that sound bites were a substitute for philosophy. When he deformed education he had the temerity to call it 'reform'. So did his self-proclaimed follower Michael Gove. In the time of Gladstone the word 'reform' signified greater fairness, inclusivity and equality.

Blair has never stood on a rock. He has no foundations; and, because of him, neither do millions in the Middle East<sup>vi</sup>.

## And now we have Trump, the antithesis of Gladstone.

Naomi Klein's book, ***NO IS NOT ENOUGH, Defeating the New Shock Politics (2017)***<sup>vii</sup> should be what we used to refer to as a 'set book' for those opposed to social and physical fracking. Not only does it provide a frighteningly accurate description and analysis of Trump and Trumpism but it also offers hope and a plan for how to respond. Klein is dismissive of pseudo-liberals such as Justin Trudeau and directs our attention to what can be done by groups working inclusively to expand participation in decision-making.

I believe politics to be about deciding public values<sup>viii</sup>. The fewer people involved in discussing and deciding those values the more government becomes something done *to us*: we receive policies and our participation is limited to implementation. If we do not like that what shall we do? Moan? I happen to disagree with Jeremy Corbyn on some issues and find it puzzling that he regards Brexit as based upon a democratic decision. Democracy requires truth to out weigh falsehood and even an imperfect truth is better than a perfect lie. But look at what he has achieved by awakening a latent humanity in so many people. Perhaps as I write he is reading Klein's book. I hope so because it could help to propel the recent Labour Party Manifesto further, faster and wider. I am sure the Green Party is reading it<sup>ix</sup>.

## What would the GOM think about all this?

Gladstone began as a High Anglican Tory. For a long time his rival Disraeli hoped that he could be drawn back to his political roots. He was not. In terms of public values, including international behaviour, he believed that not only should injustice be tackled but that it was the state that had the power and the duty to do so. The injustices of his day may not be the injustices of today or the injustices of tomorrow but his belief that it is the duty of government to right wrongs has never been extinguished.

We have to keep in mind the inherent danger of allowing too few people to control the definition of injustice and remember that keeping our word to Belgium in 1914 came at a terrifying cost. Nevertheless, the value of his values remains high and I am confident that he and Lloyd George and Maynard Keynes and other Liberals would have approved of the Labour Manifesto and devoured Naomi Klein's book in a single sitting.

**In order to critique what I have written above the following link may be of interest.**

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.pdf>

**Cliff Jones 12<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

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## Endnotes

i

The reviewer of *The Selfish Capitalist (2008)* by Oliver James might have preferred the role of consulting editor but, nevertheless, makes clear both the erudition of the author and the relevance of what he has to say. I found the book both interesting and useful.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jan/05/scienceandnature.society>

ii

If you screamed 'YES THERE IS' at the television when Margaret Thatcher elocuted her mantra, 'There is no alternative' and if you repeated the performance when George Osborne said the same about austerity then you might find interesting this account of 1928/29. I would argue against the point that unemployment was then still a consequence of the First World War because it does not acknowledge the incompetence of Churchill as Chancellor of the Exchequer, particularly in 1925 when he created the conditions for the General Strike of 1926.

<http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/history/the-1929-general-election/>

iii

I believe that this manifesto came as something of a shock to commentators who had so carelessly labelled Jeremy Corbyn as 'hard left' (I have never been sure what that means) and as a Trotskyite. Not only does it echo the Labour Party of 1945 but also the Liberals of 1928/29. Its only revolutionary aspect is that it seeks to restore decency to public life after forty-seven years of nastiness (thanks are due to Theresa May for the phrase 'Nasty Party').

<http://www.labour.org.uk/page/-/Images/manifesto-2017/Labour%20Manifesto%202017.pdf>

iv

For the story about the picture of Gladstone and Wilson's belief that by establishing the Open University he was completing the work of the GOM I am grateful to my late brother Trevor (a Liberal) who asked why Wilson left the Liberal Party. 'I still am a Liberal,' was the response.

v

The following is a link to the work of Pickett and Wilkinson who show that when societies are more equal everyone benefits. They are not the only ones that have done work like this.

<https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/the-spirit-level>

vi

The title of my review of Tony Blair's book is *From Illusion to Delusion*. It has been suggested that I need not have written more than that.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/bookReviewBlair.pdf>

vii

Here is a review of Naomi Klein's book.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/22/no-is-not-enough-naomi-klein-donald-trump>

viii

This is an attempt to clarify my understanding of politics.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/ConceptsOrDustbins.pdf>

ix

**P.S.** <https://theintercept.com/2017/07/13/video-naomi-klein-and-jeremy-corbyn-discuss-how-to-get-the-world-we-want/>