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## GLADSTONE AND DISRAELI:

### "IMAGES" IN VICTORIAN POLITICS

THE ELECTORATE OF OUR AGE is naturally inclined to judge the worth of a political party from the image projected by the leader. This might be attributed largely to television, but this type of political appeal is far from being a recent phenomenon. There were, in nineteenth-century Britain, two politicians whose ability as image builders has rarely been surpassed—William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli.

It is revealing to note at the outset that recent British prime ministers have paid tribute to these two Victorian giants. Harold Macmillan carried the idea of Tory Democracy into the 1960s and regarded Disraeli as his hero. Harold Wilson, on the other hand, has looked upon Gladstone as his political model. Partisanship towards Disraeli can be detected when Macmillan is described as the last of the great Victorians, but the political dexterity of the Labour chief merely earns him the description of "Slippery Wilson".

The duel between Gladstone and Disraeli began when they emerged as the leaders of the Liberal and of the Conservative party, at the time when the Second Reform Bill was being passed, between 1866 and 1867. Democracy was slowly gaining upon a still well-entrenched aristocracy as a result of the partial enfranchisement of the working class. Both party Leaders mapped out their tactics accordingly, while having to carefully consider the characteristics of their own party. For the careers of Disraeli and Gladstone had been closely linked to the development of their parties in the previous twenty years. Since Disraeli had led the attack upon Sir Robert Peel in 1846, the Conservatives had been consistently in a minority position. Eventually, however, the fortunes of the Conservative party began to revive in 1866, principally because of Disraeli's brilliant tactical manoeuvring in parliament. Largely because Disraeli exploited a split in the Liberal party concerning the Reform Bill of 1867, the measure was carried in the name of the Conservative party. The new party platforms, following 1867, are broadly summarized by the terms Gladstonian Liberalism and Tory Paternalism. While there were differences between these

two party creeds, both parties in practice continued to adopt a Peelite stance—if by the term Peelite we mean a policy that has a tender regard for the pocket books of the middle class.

It was an earnest age when public figures professed to be influenced by moral issues. The character of a leader was held to be of paramount importance. To his followers, a leader symbolized all the positive virtues of respectability, integrity, and progress. Political passion was aroused by incidents which indicated the possession, or absence, of these personal virtues. So, while a leader presented himself to his supporters as a model of virtue he might, on the other hand, be seen by his opponents as a villainous master of deception. Thus, depending upon one's party colouring, Gladstone was either morally upright or full of humbug. Disraeli had either educated his party, or was a shameless Jewish adventurer seeking in his own words to climb "to the top of the greasy pole." The contrasting personalities of the rivals accentuated the apparent cleavage in their philosophies. Gladstone was like a white-haired patriarch leading the faithful into the promised land while thundering anathemas at the heretics he discovered on the way. Gladstone started as a Tory representing a rotten borough and moved steadily to the left, until he was a confirmed radical. In this journey he passed Disraeli moving in the opposite direction and identified him as the major heretic. It is possible to equate these political journeys to the actual physical movements of the rivals when they changed their place of residence, or their constituency. Disraeli progressed to Hughenden Manor, which is essentially on the road from Westminster to Oxford: yet more significantly Hughenden is closer to the royal residence at Windsor Castle. Undoubtedly Disraeli found it easier to approach political influence and social prestige by way of royal favour than by approaching the Tory bastion of Oxford University. Gladstone on the other hand started out from Oxford and began a political retreat that took him through Lancashire, until he arrived in the safe Liberal stronghold of Scotland.

Disraeli's progress from radical to conservative was illustrated by the remarkable change in his style of dress. In his early career, he had dressed in green velvet trousers and a canary-coloured waistcoat; by 1847 he had adopted sombre black. When Disraeli made his brilliant attack upon Sir Robert Peel, he acquired a lifelong hostility from Peel's protégé, the youthful Gladstone, who observed that while Disraeli's doctrine was false, the man was more false than his doctrine. As Gladstone is usually acknowledged to have been a great Christian moralist, this assessment indicates the intensity of his dislike for his rival. When in turn the Conservative leader made his appraisal of his op-

ponent, he did not mince words. Disraeli wrote: "Posterity will do justice to that unprincipled maniac (Gladstone) . . . with one commanding characteristic whether praying, speechifying, or scribbling . . . never a gentleman!"<sup>1</sup> Both politicians were obviously willing to cry foul when confronted by the professed creed and manoeuvres of the other, and such an attitude could hardly fail to rub off on their supporters. In such a political climate the term "party warfare" became an appropriate description: for while that generation did not have television, the parliamentary debates were read verbatim. Everything that Gladstone and Disraeli said was carefully scrutinized, while *Punch*, the music hall, and discussion in the public bars were generally able to add a little fuel to any political conflagration.

Much of the fervour that was generated in the party ranks stemmed from nationalistic feelings. Gladstonian Liberalism was basically concerned about liberating someone. This concept had particular force when applied to the Celtic fringe, and the Irish were the main beneficiaries of this liberating process, which started by the reduction of the power of an alien church, and finished with attempts to secure Home Rule. Scotland backed Gladstone in his assault upon the institutions of the Sassenach, for he was the only political leader who could be considered Scottish.<sup>2</sup> In Wales, also, Celtic nationalism—which was equated with "chapel" religion—made a wide appeal. One may speculate on what might have happened if Disraeli had adopted the tactic of "Home Rule all round". A proposal of separate parliaments at Dublin, Edinburgh, and Cardiff would have stirred Conservative support in the Celtic fringe. Yet vanquishing the Liberals in this fashion might have split again a Conservative party that had only just gained power after twenty-eight years in the political wilderness. At the moment, Prime Minister Wilson looks as if he is going to try to tread the liberating path by proposing home rule for Scotland and Wales, but, in view of recent municipal returns, this move seems to be more of a salvage operation.

Disraeli espoused the cause of English interests, and this helps to explain his electoral appeal in the south of England. These interests naturally included defending the established church against the assaults of the Liberation Society, which was linked to the nonconformist wing of the Liberal party. The religious tolerance of Gladstone put him in a peculiar position, because it almost seemed as though he was the leader of an assault on the Anglican establishment, which was being gallantly defended by a Jew. Most of the new working-class electorate evinced little interest in the niceties of religious scuffling,

and religion was generally the preoccupation of the middle class.<sup>3</sup> What seems significant about the religious apathy of the masses is that it helps to account for the popularity of jingoism as an emotional outlet.

After Disraeli displaced Gladstone as Prime Minister the imperial programme began to add new aspects. One reason for some of the more fantastic elements was that Disraeli liked romantic, aristocratic notions. So, surprisingly, did Queen Victoria; who welcomed a remarkable conversion from a virtual recluse to the elevated position of a faerie Empress of India. As Victoria emerged as a sort of Asian mystery, the secularly minded working class had a symbol with which they could identify.

Disraeli's real achievement was in realizing that some upper-class Englishmen wanted to be recognized as the moral leaders of the world. One has only to take a trip through the cathedrals and churches of England to see evidence of this desire for leadership. On the church walls are the innumerable plaques of remembrance to the nineteenth-century figures who answered a call to serve overseas. Their deeds, proudly inscribed for posterity, provide a record of imperialism. The overwhelming proliferation of Victorian memorials in the cathedrals makes it seem at times as if they are the main element sustaining the walls. In one sense this may be quite appropriate, as they usually reflect the muscular form of Christianity preached by such men as Thomas Arnold of Rugby. Winston Churchill was moulded at Harrow into a view of Empire that he carried all his life. When it was launched in 1872, imperialism was seen by Disraeli merely as a form of assertive nationalism. He had no intention of becoming involved in costly wars; but, unfortunately, the same could not be said of prancing proconsuls in Africa and Asia, and Mr. Gladstone did not fail to point out errors in the policy of his rival.

Gladstone laboured under two disadvantages in combatting Beaconsfieldism after 1876. While he was not a teetotaler, Gladstone led a Liberal party that had a strong temperance element symbolized by the United Kingdom Alliance. This inclined many of the publicans to support the Conservative party. Publicans were in a rather strategic position in their frequent contact with many working men who sought solace in licensed premises. It would not be too difficult for a jovial host to pose a hypothetical choice at a future election. Disraeli had national aims intended for the good of the whole country, while Gladstone might threaten Merrie England with disaster by restricting the flow of beer. Secondly, the Lord's Day Observance Society was watching the sanctity of a Christian Sunday, which prevented a workman from enjoying a continental-style day of relaxation. This was again associated with

the Nonconformist wing of the Liberal party. So it would seem reasonable to conclude that Disraeli was more tolerant and understanding than Gladstone. Yet this was really a travesty of the actual situation. Dizzy was more at home in the great salons of the aristocracy and did not associate with the worker, while Gladstone did not hesitate to drink beer with one of the proletariat. The Lord's Day Observance Society and the United Kingdom Alliance were crosses that Gladstone had to bear when soliciting working-class support. The English public has never shown any real enthusiasm for sober-sides.

Gladstone was, however, a man of remarkable stature who overcame many defects in his heterogeneous Liberal party. His enormous will-power and torrent of oratory place him among the greatest of statesmen, with a wide appeal to men of many denominations. Religious tolerance appealed to Irish Roman Catholics, Scotch Presbyterians, and English Nonconformists, as well as to liberal Anglicans. Free trade promised peace and prosperity and attracted the support of commercial interests, as well as that of workers who remembered the arguments in favour of the big loaf. While it is true that these various groups probably had little in common, Gladstone had a personality which could keep this heterogeneous mass under the Liberal banner. His flights of rhetoric were a great asset to his party, particularly when Gladstonian explanations concerning ambiguities tended to make issues still fuzzier. But he was much more than a pied piper leading his motley assortment of followers in an attack on privilege and Beaconsfieldism. For one thing, his passionate belief in "the people" lifted the moral tone of politics. By his Midlothian campaign of 1879, Gladstone electrified the country by his stump oratory concerning the need for morality in foreign policy. In the short run, this new form of political attack outside parliament helped to unseat Disraeli's ministry in 1880. Yet the implications were deeper than mere restoration of a Liberal majority. Gladstone was protesting against the use of force against minorities whether in Turkey, Africa, or Afghanistan. As the new imperialism gathered momentum, it was a good omen that one leader reminded the country of a liberal tradition.

Gladstone introduced a new political technique for party leaders when he stumped the country. He directed a series of speeches upon a single theme, which gave the "cry" to his supporters. By moving around the country-side he could present his case directly to the people. The content of the speeches played variations on the idea that iniquity and injustice must be abolished. It was not necessary for a listener to follow the involved thread of discussion in order to appreciate the vehemence and sincerity of the speaker. In addition to his powers of oratory, Gladstone exhibited two characteristics that made him

particularly attractive to a powerful middle class. He was eminently respectable, with a Christian devoutness that set a high moral standard. Gladstone's regular attendance at communion contrasted with that of his sovereign, who took the Anglican sacrament only at Christmas and Easter.<sup>4</sup> Any serious student of this period knows that the high moral tone of late nineteenth-century politics should rightly be attributed to a Gladstonian era; not to a Victorian age. In the second place, Gladstone would not permit financial sloth in government circles. His financial manipulations were aimed basically at abolishing income tax—an attractive idea, which had, and still has, a wide appeal. As the most successful Chancellor of the Exchequer of the nineteenth century, he brought the fervour of an evangelist to the science of penny pinching. Prosperous men liked treasury efficiency which promised a minimal demand on their pocket books. The power that the rite of balancing the budget acquired over men's minds was well exhibited years later. In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, Chancellor Philip Snowden preferred to force a far-reaching break-up of the Labour government, rather than surrender a Gladstonian principle of maintaining a balanced budget.

Disraeli stressed "popular" principles that were shared by all classes, which implied that it was not only in their patriotic outlook that a worker and an aristocrat were brothers under the skin. Tory Democracy may well involve a contradiction in terms; but there was nothing ambiguous about the appeal that Disraeli made in 1872. At Manchester he declared: "The first consideration of a Minister should be the people's health. . . . Pure air, pure water, the inspection of unhealthy habitations, the adulteration of food, these and other kindred matters may be . . . dealt with by legislation."<sup>5</sup>

Two years later, when the Conservatives had won a clear majority for the first time in thirty-three years, Richard Cross was appointed Home Secretary. Cross endeavoured between 1874-1876 to carry measures of social reform into the statute book. There were parliamentary acts dealing with air and water pollution, housing, food adulteration, and other social issues. All of this was commendable. It was, moreover, a gesture that helped to foster the illusion that a Tory and a worker were brothers under the skin. Liberal critics, who dubbed this legislation "the sewage policy", failed to see the national significance of this type of programme. As with much nineteenth-century legislation there was an obvious weakness in the permissive character of the various Acts. Yet when all of this has been said, there was still an element of genuine concern about the worker, which he retained. As Home Secretary, Richard Cross left a lasting impression by his efforts to secure houses for



artisans. In the twentieth century, two Conservative prime ministers were helped to power by their achievements in building houses. Neville Chamberlain's record of accomplishment in the pre-war 1930s was matched by the post-war achievements of Harold Macmillan in the 1950s.

Gladstone's moral influence left a permanent impression on British political life. There was a magnificence about a Grand Old Man, aged eighty-three, battling against odds for the cause of Home Rule. In the broader field of foreign relations, moreover, there had been a most significant shift of emphasis from Palmerstonian gunboat tactics to a belief in arbitration. This search for an international morality continued into the twentieth century through President Woodrow Wilson and Arthur Henderson. Even while admitting the imperfections of the League of Nations, and its successor, the United Nations, it is still possible to appreciate the basic goal of striving to maintain peace. In our age, dominated by the possibility of nuclear annihilation, can we honestly deny that Gladstonian thinking is wrong? Not that Gladstone is to be set on a pedestal: like his rival, he was a working politician, and politicians are rarely consistent in their actions because they have to be opportunists and adopt expedients. Labouchere made a famous observation that, while he did not mind Mr. Gladstone having the ace of trumps up his sleeve, he did object to the assumption that God had put it there. Similarly, when, at Alexandria in 1882, Gladstone merged Christian bombardment with Imperialism, some of his supporters were horrified. His main nonconformist lieutenant, John Bright, not only resigned from Gladstone's cabinet but uttered the worst possible condemnation in saying "Dizzy had never done anything worse, or as bad". Yet, surely, Gladstone's action illustrated a trait that he shared with Disraeli. Neither of them shrank from actions that required political courage.

In its involvement in Vietnam, the United States has been torn apart by the contrasting outlook on international affairs that is symbolized by Disraeli and Gladstone. Unilateral action on the one hand: international co-operation as the alternative. It is interesting, moreover, to note other items of the political platforms that have crossed the Atlantic. Disraeli's "sewage policy" is now a priority item in North American cities, states, and provinces, and at the national and even the international level. Gladstone's emphasis on the rights of minorities certainly has relevance to the inmates of negro ghettos. Even the concept of leadership in the twentieth century may owe something to the contrasting interpretations given to the aristocratic principle. Disraeli adapted himself to the Victorian milieu in that he defended the paternalistic prin-

principle while rising socially to become Lord Beaconsfield. Mr. Gladstone, on the other hand, said that he believed in an aristocratic principle that ensured the rule of the best—what today is called meritocracy. The dramatic rise of Winston Churchill, in 1940, possibly illustrated that both concepts of the Victorian aristocratic tradition have some validity. It is noteworthy, moreover, that even in the democratic United States, starting with Theodore Roosevelt, the President has often dispensed a kind of Presidential paternalism.

A comparison with Canada also suggests certain parallels. Certainly John A. Macdonald was a Canadian Disraeli with the same droll wit, the outstanding parliamentary skill, and the eloquent espousal of the cause of national unity. The most successful Canadian Prime Minister, W. L. Mackenzie King, kept Gladstonian liberalism alive in a Canadian context. While Gladstone had fought for the Irish to have freedom from Westminster, King was not quite so emphatic about the right of the French Canadians to remove themselves from the watchful eye of Ottawa. Only a Gladstonian could have produced a wartime declaration as adroit as "conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription". Unfortunately for them, the Progressive Conservative party seem to have had some difficulty locating another Dizzy. Finally, at long last, John Diefenbaker's star resuscitated the fortunes of his party; but, like Disraeli, he did not have all the answers for reconciling "The Two Nations". Gladstonian opposition then loomed in the form of Lester B. Pearson. Mr. Pearson expounded, quixotically, how the acceptance of nuclear warheads would be a contribution towards the maintenance of world peace. This combination of Liberal peace and militarism reminds one of Gladstone's experiences with Bismarck. On one occasion Gladstone proposed a joint intervention in international affairs: Bismarck declined to co-operate, but offered to send his prayers with Mr. Gladstone's expedition. Naturally, some Conservative partisans did not fail to point out that Bismarck warmly approved Disraelian diplomacy at Berlin in 1878.

Disraeli may have appeared to be a rather eccentric figure, with his ringlet of dyed hair in the middle of his forehead and his small beard. Yet as with the flamboyant clothing of his early years in politics, there was probably an awareness that the English electorate rather likes signs of individuality. Disraeli fitted into a line of descent that encompasses Lord Palmerston's proverbial straw in his mouth, Joseph Chamberlain's monocle and spats, Neville Chamberlain's umbrella, and Winston Churchill's cigar and siren suit. He was not really a platform orator, but rather a witty parliamentarian who could be quoted in the public-house bar. He was "a card", a "caution" and no mis-



take; a century too early to be a television star.<sup>7</sup> Disraeli rarely used popular platform oratory but he did speak in Manchester in 1872, and then used a simile which still retains its celebrity. Disraeli was describing the declining reforming zeal of Gladstone's ministry and said:

As time advanced it was not difficult to perceive that extravagance was being substituted for energy by the Government. The unnatural stimulus was subsiding. Their paroxysms ended in prostration. Some took refuge in melancholy, and their eminent chief alternated between a menace and a sigh. As I sat opposite the Treasury Bench the Ministers reminded me of one of those marine landscapes not unusual on the coasts of South America. You behold a range of exhausted volcanoes. Not a flame flickers on a single pallid crest. But the situation is still dangerous. There are occasional earthquakes, and ever and anon the dark rumbling of the sea.<sup>8</sup>

Only an artist could have produced such a withering indictment of his opponents. Within parliament Disraeli was the only figure who could effectively parry the thrust of Gladstone's reforming crusade. Furthermore the Conservative ministry that took office in 1874 clearly demonstrated that the Liberals did not have a monopoly of the reform spirit. Social reform, enacted principally between 1874-1876, made a lasting impression in the minds of some of the leaders of the rising labour movement. In the 1880s, Ben Tillet, the docker's leader, remarked "I would be a hypocrite were I not to say that the Conservatives had done more for the working classes than the Liberals."<sup>9</sup>

An ailing Disraeli retired to the House of Lords in 1876 to take the title of Lord Beaconsfield. The duel with Gladstone was drawing to an end. In the following year an ostensibly neutral, constitutional monarch honoured her favourite minister with a visit to Hughenden Manor—a privilege which was never extended to Gladstone at Hawarden. Disraeli's success in handling Queen Victoria is well known. It resulted in an hysterical monarch claiming in 1880 that she could not accept the restoration to the premiership of the "half-mad firebrand" Gladstone. Yet the indomitable Gladstone did return and it fell to him, as Prime Minister in 1881, to propose in parliament that a national memorial be set up to honour his rival in Westminster Abbey. Gladstone's passion for sincerity made it difficult for him to eulogize his deceased opponent, whom he had long considered to be the grand corrupter of morals and a theatrical poseur. Gladstone rose to the occasion, however, by emphasizing the uncontroversial aspects of Disraeli's greatness: his far-sighted consistency of purpose, his great parliamentary courage, and the magnanimity of his dealings with his opponents.

Gladstone still had many of the finest years of his career ahead of him. The G.O.M. fought tenaciously for Home Rule and aroused political passion to a fever heat. Deserted in 1886 by his Whig colleagues and Joseph Chamberlain's radicals, he still doggedly pursued his goal. In August, 1892, Gladstone took office for the last time. In spite of increasing blindness and deafness, Gladstone gave an astonishing performance through the longest session in parliamentary history, which lasted eighty-three days. Finally the Home Rule Bill was carried in the Commons but rejected by the House of Lords. Whereupon the eighty-three-year-old leader prepared to assault the ramparts of the upper house. While he did not live to the last stage of the struggle, his young Home Secretary, Herbert Asquith, continued the mission at a later time. The end of an era came in March, 1894, when Gladstone finally stepped down as Prime Minister, resigning appropriately enough over a demand for increased military expenditure. Four years later, after an agonizing battle with cancer, the great Liberal died. Opposition spokesmen in their obituary orations delivered a judgment which seemed appropriate to their listeners. Lord Salisbury spoke of Gladstone as "a great Christian statesman", and Mr. Balfour spoke of him as "the greatest member of the greatest deliberative assembly that the world has seen".<sup>10</sup>

The partisan feelings aroused by Gladstone and Disraeli coloured British politics down to 1914. But in a larger sense these two politicians have served as models wherever parliamentary democracy flourishes. For both men spent a lifetime in public service, until old age and sickness removed them from the parliamentary struggle. To them politics was the great game and they played it for all they were worth. If Disraeli was an opportunist, so are most ambitious politicians who are efficient at their craft. Gladstone's gift of concentration also left him open to the charge of being hypocritical; yet from our vantage point in time we can see that this charge ignores the scale on which this giant was built. These statesmen have cast a long shadow into the future, and each camp of disciples has tended to assume that their prophet held all the virtues. Fortunately, now, we accept them both as statesmen in their own right, who have left political legacies to all political parties. It would be difficult to find another pair of statesmen whose names conjure up so much of political history.

## NOTES

1. D. C. Somervell, *Disraeli and Gladstone*, (New York: Garden City, 1926), p. 196.
2. H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone*, (London: Longmans, 1959), p. 157. Gladstone was a Scot by descent. No native-born Scot in the Commons sat in the cabinet between 1835-1885. Scots had a low opinion of politicians, the ablest did not go into politics, and Englishmen frequently sat for Scottish constituencies.
3. K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 49.
4. P. Magnus, *Gladstone*, (London: Murray, 1954), p. 382.
5. W. J. Wilkinson, *Tory Democracy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), p. 38.
6. O. F. Christie, *The Transition to Democracy*, (London: Routledge, 1934), p. 218-9.
7. I. Jennings, *Party Politics*, II, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 130.
8. D. C. Somervell, *Disraeli and Gladstone*, p. 174.
9. W. J. Wilkinson, *Tory Democracy*, p. 163.
10. D. C. Somervell, *Disraeli and Gladstone*, p. 283.