THE ORIGINS OF DELIBERATIVE LIBERALISM IN MODERN BRITAIN: 
THE NEW AGENCIES OF AUTHORITY

William C. Lubenow
The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through 
which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still, 
we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road, we shall be dashed to pieces. We 
do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? “Be strong and 
of a good courage.” Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. Above all, 
let us dream no dreams, and tell no lies, but go our way, wherever it may lead, with our 
eyes open and our heads erect. If death ends all, we cannot meet it better. If not, let us 
enter whatever may be the next scene like honest men, with no sophistry in our mouths 
and no masks on our faces.

James Fitzjames Stephen

1

The story of Bletchley Park and enigma has been often and well told. The 
characteristics and values necessary for success there were judgment, discretion, tact, 
ingenuity, and daring. The people who were there had unconventional and eccentric 
personalities. Maynard Keynes described Dillwyn Knox, who was one of them, as 
having one of the “most gifted, subtle, intricate brains of this generation.” Knox was 
especially gifted in “the obscurer region of classical scholarship, as an inspired player 
(and deviser) of card games, [and] in the official work requiring special qualifications, 
which he first undertook during the last war and continued for the Admiralty and the 
Foreign Office for nearly 30 years to the end of his life.” And old friend said that Knox 
“was sceptical of most things, except for those which chiefly matter, that is affection and 
reason.” Keynes concluded, “it is a sad thought to his old intimates of Eton and King’s

that we shall never see our beloved Dilly again.”  David Fairweather Foxon, the student of eighteenth century poetry and pornography (who died on June 5, 2001), was also at Bletchley where he applied “the habit of looking for minute but tell-tale traces of evidence and unexpected connections between them.” Such characteristics, as Sir Paul Duke observed, emerged in school and university life, on the cricket and football grounds, “in a thoughtful approach to the problems of the day that beset mankind, in studious observations of your fellows, and above all in your study of yourself.” The Bletchley qualities were the qualities of deliberative liberalism. Not a program, a doctrine, a philosophy, or a policy, deliberative liberalism was a process, a way of life and an approach to thinking that emerged after 1815 and especially after 1828, as the confessional-fiscal-military state of the eighteenth century was ditched and a club culture, as Paul Langford has put it so tellingly, replaced a court culture. Imaginative skill replaced physical ostentation. Clear words became more important than mysterious symbols. One kind of word was detached from the world, and another kind of word had to be reattached to the world. Clear words, in a culture shaped by literature and letters, opened opportunities for new and different meanings. It was a political world and culture where the dim horizons of frontiers replaced the sharp outlines of borders.

---

3 [John Maynard Keynes] to the editor of The Times, 10 March 1943, p. 7.
2.

If it had ever been possible to describe eighteenth-century Britain as a backward-looking static, ancien régime, it is not now. A flood of modern research has revealed eighteenth-century Britain to be changing, sophisticated, enlightened, scientific, cosmopolitan, polite, and commercial, an associational world of affective individualism. Eighteenth-Century Britain was also imperial, expensive, indebted, and animated by a military fiscal apparatus of an astonishingly baroque complexity. Driven by war, its allegiances were confessional, not national, and it was stitched together by patronage and clientage, not class. Its confessional feature is of signal interest. Religious affiliation was a natural condition not a matter of associational choice. William Wilberforce said, if a man “is born in a Christian country, of course he is a Christian; if his father was a member of the Church of England, so is he.” A modern scholar put it this way: “the spiritual and temporal estates [were] twin dimensions of an indivisible reality.” The test of office holding was allegiance to the formularies of the Anglican communion. Confessionalism, therefore, was neither a matter of doctrinal purity or of theological agreement. It was a test of political loyalty, a political piety. And, in fact, the confidence and coherence of the Church of England grew in the years of George III when earlier Jacobite political loyalties diminished and the long wars against France enhanced

religion’s power and its Protestant character. For this reason, it has been political historians, rather than social or cultural historians, who have come to stress the importance of religion in the eighteenth century.

In a way that has not been fully appreciated, the repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts (1828) and the removal of Roman Catholic civil disabilities (1829) were the hinges of British history. The Test and Corporation Acts of 1661 and 1673 required office holders to subscribe to Anglican principles and take communion according to the rites of the Church of England. However, annual acts of indemnity had for some time protected Dissenters from breach of the law. Consequently, when repeal came there was no support for the Acts either in church or the universities. No bishop voted against repeal and even sixty-six Tories voted for repeal. As Lord John Russell argued, “whatever Dissenters of the day might feel toward the House of Stuart, the Dissenters of the present feel nothing by loyalty to the House of Hanover.” He continued:

For a long period these acts were maintained for fear of driving the Church into the arms of the Jacobites; there is now no fear that the clergy will look for promotion or favour through any other than the channel of his majesty’s Treasury and Chancery.

Sir Robert Inglis, Bt., that excellent man of ulta-torism, was not appeased or sanguine. “The principles of Dissenters conscientiously opposed to the Church,” he said, “can never

---

give the same undivided allegiance to the constitution church and state which a
churchman does." When the Test Acts fell in 1828 their falling was heavily symbolic,
therefore. Its symbolic nature, thereby, made its falling all the more pregnant with its
emotional power because it carried all the psychological weight of trust and loyalty.

Catholic emancipation shortly thereafter was a greater shock to the political
sensibilities of high churchmen, now joined by evangelicals. And since emancipation had
been wrought by a Tory government, they knew no party of state could prevent the
menace of disloyalty. The Tories lost their leaders and saw their principles betrayed.17

Walter Farquhar Hook thought that with the repeal of the Test Acts “the state virtually
renounced any connection with religion.”18 The Duke of Newcastle thought it produced
“liberalism, conciliation, and concession without limit.” As a result, “Jesuitical influence
triumphed [and] revolution was forcibly established.”19 Peel, who failed to resist the
repeal of the Test Acts and who in fact promoted Catholic emancipation, called
emancipation “the severest blow which it has ever been my lot to experience.” It led to
the loss of his Oxford University seat. His followers accused him of being a “rat,” an
“apostate,” and a “murderer of the constitution.”20 Mr. Gladstone, in 1869, placed the
legislation of 1828-1829 at the head of a list of eight policies that he believed had
“destroyed” the constitution.21

16 Hansard, new series, 18 (1828, cols. 714-175.
17 G.F.A. Best, “The Protestant Constitution and Its Supporters,” Transactions of the Royal Historical
18 Hook to the Hon. and Rev. A.P. Percival, 25 May 1831, in W.R. Stephens, The Life and Letters of the
20 These quotes are from Boyd Hilton, “The Ripening of Robert Peel,” in Michael Bentley, (ed.), Public and
Mr. Gladstone’s perturbations are suggestive because they show the ways in which the reshaping of political after 1829 touched the public, personal, and emotional lives of those who had to define new political identities and loyalties for themselves. The collapse of the confessional state led him to write his book on church and state, to his political crisis over the Maynooth grant, to various erotic instabilities, and to Homer.22 While no defense of the eighteenth-century church (which Gladstone believed had hated everything in religion which “lived and moved”), his The State in its Relations with the Church (1838) and Church Principles Considered in their Results (1840) were defenses of “national religion.” Drawing on Burke and Coleridge for his views of the state and on Hooker for his views on the church, Gladstone argued that religion was “directly necessary to the right employment of the energies of the state as a state.” As an enterprise, it was dead in the water. Mr. Gladstone wrote: “Scarcely had my work issued from the press when I became aware that there was no party, no section of a party, no individual person probably, in the House of Commons who was prepared to act on it. I found myself the last man on the sinking ship.”23 The Maynooth grant for public funds for Catholic education in Ireland was for Gladstone the “Serbonian bog” into which his hopes for national religion sank. Principle required its rejection; government required its acceptance. So, Gladstone being Gladstone, he resigned from Peel’s government in 1845 and then voted for the grant in the division lobbies. As Gladstone explained to Newman, the idea of the Church serving as a conscience of the state had become so “feeble as to be absolutely inappreciable.” He described the experience as a “nightmare.”

Gladstone’s crisis over church and state coincided with a personal crisis when his friends James Hope and Henry Manning went over to Rome. Gladstone struck Hope off as executor of his will. Isolated and barred from further intimacy with them, Gladstone described himself as “unmanned and unnerved.” He entered into a time of spiritual crisis that had a sexual aspect in which he described his trusts as “carnal.” Gladstone began his Homeric studies at that very time and continued in them, in and out of Government, for the rest of his life. He published his three volume *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* in 1858. He followed with *Juventus Mundi* (1869) and *Homeric Synchronism* (1876). Gladstone held to a kind of double revelation. Jewish religion might be true, but it did nothing to direct human beings to the truths of government or politics. To supply these wants Gladstone turned to Homer. For Gladstone, the Christian gentleman had to be filled with the civic virtues and the charismatic power of the Homeric world. In 1888, meeting Mrs. Humphrey Ward at Keble College, Oxford, Gladstone allowed that he had yet two things to accomplish: Irish home rule and “to prove the intimate connection between the Hebrew and Olympian revelations.”24 In his books on church and state, in the crises of the Maynooth grants and in the loss of his friends to Rome, and in his Homeric studies Gladstone reflected the ambivalent and indeterminate elements of the modern world as it emerged from the turning of the hinge of British history in 1828-1829. As one scholar has put it, Gladstone came to “seek the conscience of the state not in creeds but in the fellowship of individual members of society as they struggled against worldly temptation.”25


Gladstone’s is only one, if a remarkable, example of those lives that reflected the ambivalence and indeterminate characteristics of the modern world. Disraeli was another.\footnote{J.P. Parry, “Disraeli and England,” \textit{Historical Journal}, 43, 3 (2000), pp. 705-706.} In fact, those Victorians who seem most markedly Victorian—Gladstone, Disraeli, Henry Sidgwick—were born before the reign of Her Late Majesty began and came to consciousness in the period of the political rubble and confusion after 1828-1829.\footnote{Richard Jenkyns, \textit{The Victorians and Ancient Greece}, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press: 1980), p. 30.}

Naturally, this hinge of British history did not swing open completely and at once. Political, social, economic, and even scientific discourse was shaped by religion,\footnote{Boyd Hilton, \textit{The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865}, (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1988), “The Politics of Anatomy and the Anatomy of Politics,” in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young, (eds.), \textit{History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950}, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2000), pp. 179-197.} but now religion was released from political fetters. In 1833 the Government proposed to secularize a portion of the revenues of Irish bishoprics. Keble responded with his famous sermon “National Apostasy.” F.D. Maurice did not take a Cambridge degree (though he took one at Oxford later) because he would not subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles. William Bodham Donne also refused to subscribe, and, though he went on to a literary career as the editor of Bacon, he always felt hindered as he tried to make his way in the world. Even after the relaxation of confessional requirements in the universities, C.J. Monro, with tremendous scientific promise and a Trinity fellowship, could not take the MA degree because of his objections to doctrinal requirements. In 1850 the judicial committee of the Privy Council determined G.C. Gorman’s views on the effect of baptism on the baptised person were not contrary to the doctrines of the Church of England. In 1862 the judicial committee of the Privy Council overturned the Arches
Court of Canterbury’s judgement against Rowland Williams’ contribution to Essays and Reviews (1860) on Baron Bunsen’s biblical researches. It was Henry Sidgwick resignation from his Trinity fellowship in 1869 that electrified and galvanized his colleagues on behalf of anti-confessionalism. Sidgwick wrote: “We are growing year by year…more sceptical in the proper sense of the word: we suspend our judgment much more than our predecessors.”

Religion remained a part of politics but now they were reattached in new and different ways. After 1828-1829 constitutional religion replaced confessional constitutionalism. Lay constitutional authorities, parliament and the law, guarded against threats to liberty from the sentimental communities of authoritarian religion. To put the matter yet another way, before 1828-1829 confessionalism marked political identities. After 1828-1829 religion marked cultural identities.

A historian of these events described the collapse of the confessional regime as a “redefinition of categories and a shift in values.” Which is true, so far as it goes. But a description is not an explanation. An explanation requires an analysis of the understanding the British political elite had of the nature of the French wars and the foreign and domestic threats to the state. The conceptual shift in 1828-1829 was not so much a criticism of social power as it was a criticism of the inelasticities of state power whose justification rested on confessional loyalties. The Jacobite threat was over. Dissent was less of a threat to the Church of England than the enthusiasm of Methodism and the austerities of the ideas of the Enlightenment were. The French were defeated. The Catholic menace was lessened when the overwhelming Catholic majority in Ireland was

---

30 J.P. Parry, “Conventional Ideas of Liberty,” a paper presented to the Locating the Victorians Conference at Imperial College, the University of London, 15 July 2001.
diluted by incorporating it into the overwhelming Protestant majority of the United Kingdom in the Act of Union. It was, of course, a Trojan horse out of which, in due season, Irish nationalism would spring. Lord Cornwallis, the lord lieutenant in 1800, summarized the position. “We have united ourselves to a people whom we ought in policy to have destroyed.”

The civil disabilities of Dissenters and Roman Catholics could be removed because they were no longer necessary for the security of the state. In addition, their removal would open to public service a body of talent necessary in a civil society seeking to retrench itself from the expenses and debts of the eighteenth-century wars.

Such speculations, for that is what they are, naturally, throw up difficult thoughts about the relations between structure and agency. Such relations are, by no means, easy to understand and some have sought simply to evade them. Some intellectual traction can be got by estimating the effects of economic and social changes as well as war and revolution in the eighteenth century might produce what one scholar has called new cognitive styles. It is these changes, rather than transcendental ideas or the economic and social interests of various groups, which account for the emergence of new sensibilities. Different cognitive styles, whether new or not, emerge as larger patterns of change, economic, social, and in this case political, created new moral universes which altered the sense of conventional limits within which people felt competent and confident to intervene in experience and to act. Two large-scale trends illustrate the institutional

---

31 Clark, English Society, 1660-1832, p. 25.
environment within which the generation after 1828-1829 reconfigured social and political action. In 1815 there had been 24,598 people employed in the metropolitan and provincial departments of the general government. The census of 1851 recorded some 53,678 persons employed in “government situations.” Of those, two-thirds were occupied in the civil, as opposed to the military, departments of executive government. The growth in the scale of government and the redeployment of office holders into civil functions created new opportunities for social and political role and new cognitive styles, new ways of thinking about those role and opportunities. These new, or different, cognitive styles constituted deliberative liberalism.

3.

So much for the politics of the origins of deliberative liberalism. Deliberative liberalism also had social and intellectual characteristics. It was part of a reconstitution of society. It called forth those families Noel Annan famously described as an “intellectual aristocracy.” These families, such as the Venns, the Stracheys, and the Trevelyans, defined new forms of social identity and authority. No longer distinguished by the law, by birth, or by wealth, they came to command positions in the professions, in politics, and in the civil service on the basis of a talent which was literary. Burke’s *Landed Gentry* and *Peerage and Baronetage* swelled in the nineteenth century, but these were the old guidebooks to honor and social authority. The matriculation lists of the public schools and Oxford and Cambridge colleges, Foster’s *Men at the Bar*, Crockford’s *Clerical Directory*, and, especially, the *Dictionary of National Biography* were the new. These were the people of the new professions, a “forgotten middle class,” as their historian has

---

called them, which does not fit the neat categories of class analysis. Fragmented and lacking a common interest, these families were a motley that cannot be considered a single class. They were incapable of common action. If they had a trajectory, it was not toward some sort of social or cultural hegemony, it was lateral and tended toward dissolution and collapse.38

The elaborate proliferation of honors at home and in the empire at the end of the nineteenth century was new wine into old wine-skins. It was not something old and traditional. It was new and it was modern. These honors marked achievement in the public world for those who were masters of deliberative liberalism. And it also reconstituted the landed aristocracy. When the 3rd Marquess of Bute was named to the Order of the Thistle he did not regard it as a tribute to his estates, his wealth, or his distinguished pedigree, the sort of thing which previously might have come to a nobleman as a matter of course. The Thistle was for him a recognition of his service to education, to learning, and to civic life.40

So it was for the aristocracy of business. Without rejecting competitiveness and profit-seeking values, in reaching beyond their local and provincial roots, businessmen formed literary and cultural associations, through travel and in clubs, which, in fact, advanced late Victorian and Edwardian capitalism. Sir Robert Fowler Bt., was a banker who became MP for the City of London. He had been educated at the University of London where he was successful in both classics and mathematics. He traveled

38 Haskell, Objectivity In Not Neutrality, pp. 81-82.
39 David Cannadine, Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire.
extensively and wrote *A Visit to Japan, China, and India* (1877), a book which, if not particularly distinguished for its learnedness was sufficient to qualify Fowler for election to the Athenaeum.\(^41\) Businessmen became hunters and gatherers of letters and art, in part as a demonstration of their aggressive individualism and in part as a demonstration of their social worth and identity.\(^42\) Landed gentlemen and businessmen, whether they had been to university or not, whether they had professional connections or not, accepted and profited by the values of deliberative liberalism.

Deliberative liberalism is the language of modernity. What is modern, of course, has many names: capitalism, urbanization, industrialization, or more simply what is new and novel. And, in its own way this is all true enough. But only partially. Such characterizations capture the tangible, physical, and material elements of the modern world but they miss the more psychological truths of the quest for identity and identification. They may represent modernity, but they do not expose modernity’s agencies. Modernity is multiple, as one writer has put it.\(^43\) It is that multiplicity which deliberative liberalism expresses. It was a project which gained additional urgency after 1828-1829 when the questions of authority and self became more pressing. The collapse of confessional garrison states opened an undefined, uncertain, ambiguous public space which deliberative liberalism filled. Deliberative liberalism expressed that fragmented, asymmetrical world where there are gaps between experiences and perceptions of those experiences. It is, in fact, the tragedy of the modern world that ambiguity is structured

\(^43\) S.N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus*, (Winter, 2000), p. 2. He continues, modernity is “the story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs.”
into meaning. Meaning, value, and psychological orientation dissolved as people living in the post 1828-1829 world realized that their experiences could not be contained in their own conceptions of the world.\textsuperscript{44} Such a modernity raised questions about the self, divided and self-contradictory, searching for remedies for brokenness and fragmentation, which remedies were themselves divided, incomplete, and inadequate. Power in such a modern world was not unified or coherent; it was dispersed into multiple centers of authority.\textsuperscript{45} In such a decentered political world, charismatic language enabled some people to articulate power and to direct energy and to change the structure of systems.\textsuperscript{46} Newman said that Pusey was able to give a name, a power, and a personality to what was without him a mob. Such people took what one writer has called “modernity’s wager”\textsuperscript{47}; having lost the authority which springs from the law, birth, wealth, and confessional loyalties, they formed new kinds of authority and identity, heroically and alone.

4.

At the end of \textit{Liberty, Equality, Fraternity} (1873), Fitzjames Stephen describes an indeterminate, polymorphous liberalism. Not much concerned with the franchise or free trade or the market, it was heroic and triumphant, a liberalism of ideas, of morality, of \textit{bildung}, and of manliness. Of all human talents, Stephen wrote, the most important is to be able to judge right based on “imperfect materials;” “to see things as they are, without exaggeration or passion;” to make “a wise choice between several possible views.” At the


end of the day the important questions are: “What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world? Are you a mere machine, and is your consciousness...a mere resultant?” These, he said, are the “riddles of the Sphinx.” They have to answered in some way. To leave them unanswered or to waver in answering are choices, “but whatever choice we make, we make at our peril.” We stand on a mountain pass in whirling snow and blinding mist. To stand in place is to be frozen to death. To take the wrong path is to be dashed to pieces. He quoted Deuteronomy: “Be strong and of a good courage.” “Dream no dreams and tell no lies...with our eyes open and our heads erect. If death ends all, we cannot meet it better.”48 Neither oppositional nor negative, it was a liberalism that filled the public space evacuated by the hegemon of confessional politics after the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the relief of Catholic civil disabilities in 1829. It was a liberalism that defied the illusion of the Enlightenment that authority can be created from expertise and information about a stable external world. It was a liberalism that pitched a concept of charismatic authority against a concept of utilitarian authority. That is why deliberative liberalism was the language of the modern world.

This paper was prepared for a meeting of the Western Conference on British Studies, Houston, Texas, October 12-13, 2001.

---
