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Education and the Liberal Rank and File in Edwardian England: The Case of Sir George White

Barry M Doyle reviews the political career and beliefs of one of the major proponents of Liberal education policy in the Edwardian period

A contribution to Newsletter 8 (September 1995) on the roots of Liberal education policy mentioned Sir George White and the passive resistance campaign against the Balfour Education Act of 1902. This gave the impression that Liberal education policy in the Edwardian period was fundamentally negative, concerned only with religious issues and divorced from the requirements of a modern industrial nation. The aim of this paper is to redress the balance by showing that George White's ideas on education were positive, radical and *very* modern, shaped by his experience as both an employer in a rapidly modernising city and a lay educationalist with forty years experience of the state and voluntary sector.

Born in Lincolnshire in 1840, Sir George White, Liberal MP for North-West Norfolk (1900–1912) was chairman and managing director of Howlett and White, the largest firm of boot and shoe manufacturers in Norwich. A devoted Baptist, he held the Presidency of the Baptist Union in 1903, and though he never achieved ministerial rank he was knighted in 1907 and served as chairman of the Nonconformist Members of Parliament from 1907–12. Described by the *British Weekly* as 'the leader of nonconformity', White's biography would lead one to expect an orthodox nonconformist Radical and certainly his most prominent campaigning was on the sectarian issues. His famous address on the 'Nonconformist Conscience in its relation to our National Life' reiterated the canon of dissenting politics – temperance, non-sectarian education, housing, land reform, and the iniquities of the Anglican church and the House of Lords – whilst his parliamentary interventions were overwhelmingly concerned with education, licensing, and the Congo.

However, if one looks more closely at what he was saying in these speeches modernity and not morality emerges as the driving force behind his political views. He supported labour exchanges, old age pensions and unemployment insurance, criticising the government on the latter two for not being radical enough, and he was very capable of providing a modern spin on traditional issues, like education.

White was active in education for most of his life. He joined Chamberlain's National Education League in 1868, and was a member of the Norwich School Board from 1874, controlling the city's education for twenty-five years until his death in 1912. As the *Eastern Daily Press* noted, he achieved '*perhaps his best and most enduring work*' by making

'the education of the children of the working classes possible, and even popular' and was closely involved with the development of the Technical Institute, higher grade schools and the expansion of municipal secondary education. His activities in voluntary education included Sunday Schools, the YMCA and the foundation and superintendence of an Adult School with 250 members by 1900.

Sir George attained national prominence through his role in the resistance to the 1902 Education Act and is credited with first recommending the policy of passive resistance which, '*coming from a man of such sound judgement and quiet temper was at once accepted by a very large number of representative Nonconformists*'. Such was his reputation within the nonconformist community that the Rev. J. H. Shakespeare (Secretary of the Baptist Union) named him the most prominent Baptist elected in 1906, *ahead* of Lloyd George, and he was hotly tipped to succeed Birrell as Education Secretary in 1907. However, to the surprise and anger of many free churchmen, the post went to Reginald McKenna and it seems likely that, despite his insider's knowledge, both his age (he was 67 at the time) and his association with the radical nonconformists counted against him.

Yet, contrary to his diehard image, from the earliest days of the controversy White sought every opportunity to avert confrontation and secure a peaceful compromise. He took a considerable part in the negotiations leading to both the Birrell Bill of 1906 and the abortive Runciman Compromise of 1908, noting in the latter case that he had, '*risked the educational reputation of a lifetime in the belief that this compromise will bring us considerably nearer to the national ideal than we are today*'. But though he was willing to make certain compromises, he opposed the secular solution suggested in 1908, and remained a passive resister until his death.

But passive resistance was, to some extent, a distraction, diverting White from his real enthusiasm – post-elementary education. He spoke regularly on education and, whether addressing the Commons, the business community or the free churches, he consistently combined his well known criticisms of all sectarian regulation with general statements on the importance of post-elementary education in creating a flexible workforce, increasing efficiency and reducing unemployment. In his Commons maiden speech in 1901, he attacked the confused and inadequate organisation of

higher elementary, secondary, continuation and technical education, demanding, instead, a complete system, managed by a 'democratically' elected local education board 'administering the Education Acts in an enlightened spirit to the advantage of the community at large'.

White's views on vocational education were rooted in his experience as a major employer in a rapidly modernising city. The Norwich shoe trade underwent a radical transformation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, much of this modernisation being led by White's firm. With the introduction of machinery, the production process was broken down and skilled craftsmen were replaced by younger, semi-skilled and unskilled operatives working in bigger and more complex factories. Though increased demand did regularise wages and employment patterns, it did not eradicate unemployment completely, whilst the city's position as a trade and communications centre meant that the economy was characterised by a low paid, low skilled and underemployed casual labour market.

As a result, White strongly supported municipal secondary schools – with low fees and ample scholarships – as sites for the promotion of a practical, vocational education for the 'poorer children,' thousands of whom could 'be passed on to the secondary schools with great advantage to themselves; and to the nation'. Furthermore, he demanded a curriculum free of the classics, popular and 'serviceable for the boys and girls, who mainly come from elementary schools, and who otherwise would not be able to get that secondary education which they will find so valuable in after life'.

Nonetheless, he did acknowledge that even the municipal secondary was not entirely appropriate for all children and that some form of intermediate educational provision was necessary to provide a combination of academic and vocational study for the future worker. These schools should articulate with the technical schools 'which

were being established with such great advantage throughout the country' to provide the working class with 'practically their only chance of securing that education which was necessary to fit them to take their fair position in life'.

White felt that the winding up of the higher grade schools – which had largely satisfied this demand – had led to a marked decline in the number of children in school after the age of fourteen and that 'to complete our educational system we have got to put something in the place of these higher grade schools'. As the parents of many boys and girls could not afford secondary fees, too many children were leaving school at exactly fourteen years of age – even without a job to go to – whilst others wanted to stay on for another year but their parents were not willing or able to pay for secondary schooling. His solution was to 'make our education much more practical' by schools which would:

take the morning for literary work, and the afternoon for practical manual work or something of that kind by which the boys and the girls would have practically half their time in the last year or so spent in fitting themselves for those occupations which they intended to go to.

White developed this theme in relation to a third strand of post-elementary education – continuation schools. He often complained that, due to the early school leaving age, most of the education imparted in elementary schools was wasted, with young adults returning to adult schools when they reached 'the love letter writing age'. Thus, although 'they have the tools put in their hands they have not been induced to use them for their own self-improvement'. As the individual was clearly failing himself and society the state was called on to enforce self-improvement.

I have no hesitation in saying I strongly advocate a system of compulsion being introduced in regard to continuation

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis – or if you know anyone who can – please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.

Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.

The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.

Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. Ruth Fox, 9 Chapel Terrace, Headingley, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS6 3JA.

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;

the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.

The Lives and Political Careers of Archibald Sinclair and Clement Davies.

Ian Hunter, 62 Rothschild Road, Chiswick, London W4 5NR.

The Liberal Party 1945–56.

Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.

schools. I think it will have to apply both to employers and the young people of the country alike In my opinion it is the most important field open to the Board of Education; it is a field in which they can do the greatest possible service to the nation.

Finally his interest in technical education – the fourth site for further education – was closely influenced by his experience of seasonal unemployment in the shoe trade. As he told the Norwich Traders Association in 1904:

in certain departments there was a considerable amount of depression, and some part of that depression might be avoided if there were a more general desire on the part of the working men to adapt themselves to existing conditions. (Hear, hear.) In connection with the boot and shoe trade there were distinct seasons, and if a great number of the younger men would learn two branches of the trade instead of one they would be able to carry the work on without the slightest depression for the whole of the twelve months at the Technical School provision was made for the teaching of both the departments.

White did not just urge his ideas on government, but attempted to execute them either as chair of the Education Committee or as an employer. In the case of technical education for the shoe trade he encouraged the development of day courses for the workers and led the employers in

permitting day release to attend the classes. However, he met with less success on higher grade schools as Morant at the Board of Education set about the rationalisation and centralisation of education into the two streams which have characterised the twentieth century.

By the Edwardian period White saw education not just as a means to self-improvement, nor as a battlefield in the war against the established church, but as a key tool in the modernisation of society. Aware of the threat posed by Germany and the USA and conscious of the narrowing of the skills base following the move to mechanisation, he appreciated the need for practical and vocational further education to increase national efficiency and tackle the boy labour problem – the root cause of adult unemployment. He also saw further education as democratic – as part of the assault on privilege and as a way of building bridges between a classically educated elite and the ‘ignorant masses’. In all these ways White’s educational views were very modern, appropriate as much today, when government policy continues to perpetuate the divide between a poorly educated workforce and a privileged elite and all three parties struggle to produce an effective post-fourteen structure, as they were in the opening years of the twentieth century.

Barry M. Doyle is a lecturer at Durham University. His article comparing New Liberalism and New Labour appeared in History Today in July.

Letters to the Editor

Does anyone know who first used the term ‘liberal’ in its political sense?

Writing the chapter on the ‘Liberal Tradition’ for Don MacIver’s recently published book on the Liberal Democrats, I repeated what George Watson wrote in the *Unservile State* back in 1957, namely that Robert Southey the poet first used the word in an English text, borrowing it from French where it came into usage among constitutionalist opponents of the later, more dictatorial phase of Napoleonic rule. But he does not reference a French source, and I have never seen one elsewhere.

Whilst the chapter was going to press, David Buchan reviewed in the *Financial Times* a book (*Le Bonheur Français*) by Guy Sorman, stating explicitly: ‘According to Sorman, the term “liberalism” was invented by Jean-Baptiste Say in the early 19th century, but was popularised abroad and had to be reimported into France via the likes of Milton Friedman this century’. Eureka! I slipped in a late footnote, and set about tracking down both Sorman and Say. Fortunately my footnote never made it through the editing, proof-reading and publishing maze.

Beware reviewers using their hasty notes. When inter-library loans eventually supplied Sorman’s book, I discovered his clear statement about Say’s role in inventing a term which was exported into English and then imported back into French was about the word ‘entrepreneur’. Sorman refers to Say as a liberal (in the economic sense), but never suggests he invented the term.

So, if someone quotes Buchan’s howler in more permanent form (as I nearly did), expose the mistake.

And which French thinker did invent the political term ‘Liberal’?

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Letters to the Newsletter, relating to material contained within particular issues, or on any topic of historical interest, are very welcome. Please write to the address on the back page.