

JOHN BRIGHT – QUAKER POLITICIAN: A CENTENARY APPRECIATION

Anniversaries are always awkward affairs. They provide opportunities for rejoicing and reappraisal and the two processes do not invariably blend happily. Our meeting this evening constitutes a kind of family celebration and a biographer of Bright who is neither related to him by blood nor a member of the Society of Friends feels doubly privileged to have been entrusted with the task of composing an appreciation on the centenary of Bright's death.

It is undoubtedly appropriate, in the first instance, that Friends should have taken the energetic interest that they have done by arranging for this lecture. That John Bright was a Quaker was fact about him that all his public contemporaries knew. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that he was the best-known Friend of his time. Indeed, it is also probably the case that there has not been a Friend in twentieth-century British party political life who has equalled Bright's prominence. We all know that there have been MPs of Quaker descent or adherence who have made valuable individual contributions to public life, but I cannot think of any other Quaker who has matched Bright in the sustained vigour of his impact on his age. Historians, whether in school or university, continue to stress to their pupils that Bright was a Quaker, though alas this clue to his identity is not as meaningful to many of them as one might hope. Bright has become for many the representative Quaker and, for good or ill, the society has been linked with his life and career ever since.

However, we ought to probe more deeply, even or perhaps particularly on an occasion like this. We might have started by talking about John Bright as orator, John Bright as businessman, John Bright as parliamentarian, or John Bright as Lancastrian. He was all of these things and we shall seek to give them due weight but I think we must first of all wrestle with John Bright as Quaker. Was it the central aspect of his being from which everything else flowed or was it a badge whose significance diminished with the passage of time and the weight of his other activities? Naturally, in this sensitive area we can only speak tentatively and with some humility. There is no more difficult task

before the historian than that of seeking to unravel the inner sources of behaviour and the historian is not God.

At one level, we can confidently assert that John Bright was a Friend at birth and a Friend at death. He came of Quaker stock, regularly went to meeting in Rochdale and attended schools maintained by Friends at Ackworth, York and Newton-in-Bowland. His two wives were Friends and his children were reared in the bosom of the Society. He attended Westminster meeting when in London during the parliamentary session. However, whether at Rochdale or Westminster, he left testimony to others. A man whose facility with words was legendary sat silent as others stumbled to pray and give testimony. There are thus few clues as to his spiritual life from his own words, though we know from contemporaries that he could appear to be deeply moved, even to tears, in meeting. He appears to have felt no temptation to align himself with any other religious body and was critical of the social reasons which he supposed explained the attractions of Anglicanism for some Friends. His hostility to established religion did not abate. It had been hostility to church rates in Rochdale which had first drawn him into local political action. It was a particular pleasure that he had first entered parliament as MP for Durham City in 1843 – despite clerical influences at work there. His encounters with the Church of Rome, not least in Rome itself, reinforced a dislike and distrust of its pretensions and structure. He was not attracted by ritual or liturgical elaboration. In these respects he did not deviate from the traditions and practices of his youth. On the other hand, like many of his generation, he saw no need to insist upon the external manifestations – in speech or dress – of his allegiance. He was irritated by a certain narrowness of spirit amongst Friends though, unlike some members of his family, did not feel it so acutely as to withdraw from its affairs.¹ However, he felt no call to labour mightily in the internal affairs of the Society. He was called into the world.

Participation in political life, whether at local or national level, was not attractive to most Friends in the early decades of the century and indeed it was only as John grew to manhood that it even became a serious possibility. The objections either stemmed from a quietism which viewed the temporal goals of politics with suspicion or from a belief that there was something about political life which in itself corrupted the soul. Bright's first wife was not at all pleased, prior to marriage, about the prospect of his 'interference' in politics. John had to concede that violent political partisanship could destroy domestic harmony and, further, that politics seemed to give men 'a restless turn of mind'. Nevertheless, he endeavoured to argue that he took part in

election contests from a sense of duty rather than a love of excitement and never encouraged dissipation or drunkenness. There were injustices which could only be put right by political means.² It was possible to have a 'calling' to politics.

It was after the death of his first wife in 1841, when he was 30 that Bright began to emerge from the obscurity of Rochdale and started on the course which was to make him a major national politician. The difficulties of his position were inherent from the outset. The franchise had been modestly widened after 1832 but historians have been at pains to stress how little fundamental change in the structure of politics took place over the next few decades. The House of Commons remained a largely Anglican assembly. The Society of Friends was itself such a small body that there was no prospect that it could itself provide, either locally or nationally, the kind of support which any aspiring politician would need in such circumstances. A politician is in the business of seeking to build bridges and construct interest-groups and establish a 'constituency' which would identify with him. There was no parliamentary constituency in the country, under the existing franchise – and indeed under any conceivable franchise – where Quakers would be in a majority. In this sense, Bright was never a 'Quaker politician' whose position could depend upon solid sectarian backing. He was a politician who was a Quaker. Conceivably, as the voice of religious Dissent, there might be majority support in particular constituencies and a more general 'constituency' in the country at large, but Quakers were on the fringe of organized Dissent rather than at its heart. In Rochdale Bright was accused by the Church party of being the local agent of London Dissenters. In reality, however, he was not at home among Baptists, Congregationalists and Methodists. On one occasion he expressed his indifference to the discussions about the duties and talents of preachers which he found among them. He was not interested in the differences of opinion amongst the Dissenters. He could share many of their concerns, but he could not be their leader.

The youthful MP for Durham gained his seat in rather exceptional by-election circumstances because of the reputation he had gained over the previous couple of years as a campaigner and orator on behalf of Free Trade. His Quakerism was incidental rather than crucial to that success. It was a fame gained by mastery of the spoken word. Here again is a paradox. Lacking 'insider' links with the world of 'high politics' Bright was driven to communicate directly with whosoever would listen in the manner of a travelling evangelist. Where did his 'oratory' come from? In a sense, of course, the question is unanswerable. No doubt

great orators are born, not made, but the point about Bright is that his mode of rhetoric stemmed neither from the classically-based models of his public school and university educated contemporaries nor from a personal nurturing in an alternative tradition of pulpit oratory³ We have already noted a somewhat contemptuous indifference to talk about preachers. It appears, therefore, that one of the greatest nineteenth-century orators sprang from an environment and a religious body which was least-disposed to revel in rhetoric. Perhaps this fact helped to ensure that his speaking derived its strength from its immediacy and relative directness. He learned his trade the hard way, on the job. Late in his life Bright accepted that the fame of an orator is even more evanescent than the fame of a writer. Unfortunately, we can have no means of assessing for ourselves the impact his speeches would have made on his varied audiences. So much depends upon intonation, speed and stress and in the nature of the audience itself. In any event, it is clear that there was little decorative trimming about the early speeches against Corn Laws. They were clear, vivid and combative. Thus the young 'Quaker politician' reaches Westminster with a style and manner which was far removed from the silence and eirenic disposition more generally associated with Friends.

That was not the only problem. There was more to politics than oratory. There was a need to meet and mingle with all sorts and conditions of parliamentary men. Was it necessary, for example, to join a club? Bright initially told his mother-in-law that he did not think it would be needful. He had a great distaste for the mode of life often led in such great houses of assembly. By such statements Bright appears to have thought that he could detach himself from the social conventions, indeed the social life of the classes whose *mores* still prevailed in parliament. The fact that he was a widower insulated himself from some of these pressures in the short term.

The phased repeal of the Corn Laws, announced by Peel in January 1846, seemed a triumph for the Anti-Corn Law League, or was at least so represented by its leaders. The success raised fresh issues for Bright himself. He could withdraw from politics altogether, remarry and devote himself to business and family responsibilities, or he could carry on. There was strong pressures on him to take the former course, but he resisted them. There were other issues of concern besides the Corn Laws which needed to be addressed. Besides, he rather liked the House of Commons, and he liked even more the prospect of representing Manchester at Westminster. Mid-century Manchester, despite all its problems, stood for the future. It symbolized the dynamism and energy

of the North, with its commerce and industry, over against the stagnant and conservative south.⁴ Bright understood the problems and opportunities of the cotton industry at first hand. His other commitments prevented him from playing a leading role in his own family business but its welfare was always important to him, not least for financial reasons. Relations between masters and men in Rochdale were more harmonious than in some nearby towns and districts.⁵ So far as can be judged, the Brights were humane employers by the standards of their time, but in his attitude John fully shared the predominant values of local capitalists. Naturally, he became vulnerable to charges that it was commercial capitalism rather than Quakerism which provided his basic values. Bright refused to see a contradiction. He saw his kind of middle class as progressive and humanitarian. "The entire country would benefit if its ethos preponderated. The dominant nexus of church, army, university and the Foreign Office sought to preserve an archaic order which preserved their interests but threatened the possibility of war. Britain needed a truly 'middle-class' party which was neither Whig nor Tory. Bright aspired to be its leader.

From this perspective, the ensuing decade from 1847 (when Bright began to represent Manchester at Westminster) proved a disappointment. It was easier to talk about the need for a middle class party than to bring one into being.⁷ In a year like 1848 men of commerce were not in a mood to undermine the existing political structure. It proved difficult to identify issues on which 'Radicals' could effectively unite. This was not only a matter of politics. Bright was rather appalled to discover that the commercial elite of Manchester liked to ape the aristocracy and was not content merely to amass money. There were Manchester merchants of considerably greater wealth than Bright himself who began to wonder whether they had made a mistake in allowing their noted city to be represented by a man who seemed relatively indifferent to display and had few of the cultural attributes they at least professed to admire. Plain speaking was all very well, but one could have too much of it. In addition, at Westminster, it began to emerge that Bright also seemed indifferent to the need to cultivate 'group-identity' amongst Radicals of somewhat disparate provenance. Bright was too much his own man.

There were occasional strains even in his dealings with Richard Cobden, and this is the point to say a little more about their relationship. It is extremely rare in British politics to find an effective and enduring political partnership and the fact that we do so often speak of 'Cobden and Bright' is extremely significant. The two men were not from the same stable. Cobden was an Anglican and came originally from the

South of England. He was a rather unsuccessful businessman but he also had a mind that was generally more wide-ranging than Bright's, though it would be wrong to convey the simple impression that Bright was entirely dependent upon Cobden's ideas for the content of his own speeches. In short, their backgrounds and temperament were different, but for a considerable period they were more effective as a pair than either could have been individually. The relationship, however, served to obscure the extent to which Bright was still *au fond* a Quaker.

The difficulty before both men in the early 1850s, when British party politics as a whole were in a state of more than usual confusion, was to discover an appealing platform. Bright interested himself both in Irish and Indian affairs and, in the light of the 1851 religious census, continued to expostulate on the subject of 'that overgrown & monstrous abuse', the Church of England, but the impact of his efforts seemed minimal. It seemed that Britain remained a country where accident of birth was supreme over almost every description and degree of merit, as he put it. Bright tried to develop a campaign for a further measure of electoral reform, but it got nowhere.

Then, in 1854, came the Crimean War. Bright denounced British intervention as unnecessary and calamitous. He despised anyone who spoke a word in favour of the war merely because the press and a portion of the people urged the government to enter into it. The war would have grave consequences for commerce, the economy and the prosperity of the people. Here was the 'Broad-brimmed hawker of holy things' in action, or, alternatively, here was the authentic voice of a Quaker politician re-emerging from the constraining meshes of party. We need not question that Bright preferred peace but in his initial speech in the Commons he claimed to be subjecting intervention not to the scrutiny of a 'peace at any price' advocate but to the kind of tests which would be applied generally throughout the House. Around this date Bright was being distinctly grumpy when approached for a subscription to the Peace Society and it was only with reluctance that he spoke at the Edinburgh Peace Congress in October 1853. His attacks on the 'war machine;' were not explicitly rooted in the peace testimony of the Society of Friends. Of course, he may have considered it redundant to make clear the ultimate source of his convictions, but there may also have been an element of calculation. He was already in difficulties enough with some Manchester men, particularly those who were angry at his refusal to contribute to a Patriotic Fund set up by the supporters of war. He did not want the breach to become any wider and he did not campaign actively against the war. He restricted himself to a small

number of set speeches. The 'Angel of Death' speech of 23 February 1855 remains the best-known to this day. The appointment of Palmerston as Prime Minister appalled him but he continued to urge the merits of a diplomatic solution to the war. He believed that the press gave him considerable space, despite general hostility to his views, because he put more earnestness and originality into what he had to say than the old Party talkers. His stance was ineffective but he had attained a distinctive position as a 'Quaker politician' in special circumstances.

There was, however, a price to pay for this status. In January 1856 he had a breakdown which prevented him speaking for many months and compelled him to undergo various treatments in the hope of restoring his vitality. It would be rash to pick on any single fact to explain this event but we certainly cannot rule out the strain brought on by his rather lonely stand over the previous couple of years. He believed that he had been true to his conscience but he had to suffer in consequence. Even more, in 1857 he returned to England from a continental tour no longer an MP. The men of Manchester had elected another in the General Election which had taken place in his absence. Naturally, in all the circumstances, he was under pressure from his wife to give up politics and help her in raising their increasingly large family. Bright himself commented after his defeat that it was far better to fall against than rise with the wretched cry that had lately been raised in Manchester. Perhaps that meant that it was not possible to be a 'Quaker Politician'.

However, in the summer of the same year, 1857, while pleasantly enjoying a picnic in a Scottish glen, he received an invitation to stand for Birmingham at an impending by-election. He was to represent the constituency for over 30 years. The terms of the relationship were made clear from the outset. Bright would keep his home in Rochdale and would make only occasional visits to Birmingham. He had no wish to involve himself in local politics to the extent that had been unavoidable in Manchester. He was a national figure who had found a new home. The electors of Birmingham should feel proud to have this talisman of radical politics as their member. At the same time, Bright distanced himself somewhat from those Birmingham Quakers who assumed that he would give full voice to their concerns. Now that he had decided to return to parliament he wanted to stay. He had no wish to go through the painful Manchester experience all over again. At least that is my interpretation of correspondence between Bright, Sturge and Southall around this date. With regard to the Indian Mutiny, he made it clear that he would never have conquered India and believed that its government would have to be reformed but he accepted that the British on the spot

had now no alternative but to put down the rebellion. He told Sturge bluntly that he had no intention of attending a possible Peace Conference in Manchester. All the activities of the Peace Society in late years had been of no use, indeed they might even have been of positive harm. He disliked working for an impossible cause and he had come to the conclusion that nothing could be done in the direction in which he wanted his fellow countrymen to travel. He indicated that he could only preserve himself from a debilitating misery by becoming callous about crimes and follies which he could not prevent. He also shocked Sturge by distancing himself from the temperance movement, a cause of his early manhood. He confessed that he took a little beer and wine, on medical advice, and did not want to be paraded as urging others to abstain totally when he did not do so himself.¹⁰ He believed he was the better for taking a little claret. The Birmingham Bright therefore appeared to be more pragmatic and worldly-wise. A Quaker politician has no right to assume that his constituents would defer to his views and he, in turn, had to accept that there were certain political facts which would not change.

However, that did not mean that he relapsed into a supine acceptance of the status quo. Indeed, he embarked on a considerable public campaign designed to achieve franchise reform. It would be up to the body of the nation to decide and no one should be frightened by that monstrous body, the House of Lords. It was a 'miserable delusion' that the 300,000 inhabitants of Birmingham should only have two members. However, it was not only to the people of Birmingham that he appealed in a majestic series of speeches up and down the country. Queen Victoria was amongst those not to be amused by his tone. After the 1858 election Palmerston suggested that Bright be made a Privy Counsellor but she would not agree. It would be interpreted as a reward for his systematic attacks upon the institutions of the country. There had also been the possibility of some kind of appointment under Palmerston but he was rather relieved that it came to nothing since Bright believed that he would be miserable in Court dress and official fetters. So, he continued to agitate for parliamentary reform and worry about his business affairs and his family. He also firmly committed himself to the cause of the North in the American Civil War. It was an unusual experience for him to have supported a winning side and it was with renewed confidence that he embarked upon another franchise crusade. After all, Palmerston could not go on for ever.

It is generally agreed that Bright was at his mature best as a speaker for parliamentary reform in the mid-1860s. This time, at last, he did

appear to be generating substantial support in the country, though its scale remains a matter of dispute. So does the relationship between the campaign in the country and the parliamentary manoeuvres of both Whig/Liberal and Tory politicians on how a particular measure might be turned to their own best advantage. On all sides it was recognized that Bright was a force in the land and he had to be treated with some deference. However, Bright's in-House position was not such that he could dominate these complex moves. As always, Bright could not seem to bring his public role into line with party arithmetic in the Commons. Of course, while it was sometimes convenient to paint Bright as a wild man, it was recognized that he had no intention of advocating one man one vote. There would remain a substantial 'residue' who were simply not capable of exercising the responsibility which possession of the franchise gave. Such restraint can no doubt be interpreted as bourgeois conceit or mere prudence. Perhaps it also reflected the conviction that the 'residue' was likely to harbour xenophobic sentiments at odds with the internationalist preferences of a Quaker politician. In a general sense, Bright can take a certain credit for the 1867 Reform Act, though of course it was not his measure, and when the Liberals won the 1868 General Election, Gladstone had little option but to offer Bright a post in this first properly Liberal administration. In letters to his family, John claimed that he resisted appointment more than any other man ever did, but agreed because that was what his friends in the country appeared to want. It was indeed the case that the balance of the new Liberalism required the presence of Bright.

He became President of the Board of Trade, an office he accepted in preference to the India Office. The Queen intimated that he could do as he liked about kneeling before her. She would not make difficulties for her first Quaker Cabinet Minister. Superficially, the Board of Trade was the ideal appointment. Here was the embodiment of provincial and commercial England at the helm. Quaker capitalism was commanding at the height. Even from the outset, however, there were presentiments of disaster and by 1869 Bright was again confessing that he was weak and unable to read or work. He found the additional attendance at the House, required of a minister, very exhausting. He did not find it easy to work as a member of a Cabinet team. Hitherto, throughout his political life, he had been an individual; now he had to accept responsibility for decisions he either did not like or had not participated in. Perhaps, also, the stress occasioned by long separation from wife and family became too much for him. He had to undergo a long convalescence and was not able to make much of a contribution to other issues – education and

Ireland in particular. He was, therefore prostrate and helpless, to use his own words, for most of the life of the Liberal government. Practically the only thing which caused him to become animated was the issue of female suffrage. Bright wrote that he had little sympathy with the score or two of women who were miserable because they were not men. 'My gardener' he concluded, 'says that there is nothing he dislikes so much in his poultry yard as a 'crowing hen' and men-women are not a pleasant addition to our social arrangements'.¹¹ It was not an attitude which commended itself to his own sister and separated him sharply from his own brother Jacob.

However we explain this second debilitating illness, it marks the end of Bright as a career politician. Even if the Liberals were to return to power – and they began six years of opposition in 1874 – Bright could not be entrusted with a major office of state. He was a spent force, if the ultimate goal of politics is conceived to be the exercise of power. He was a figure to be admired, cajoled, cosseted and displayed but no longer was he a man to be feared. He spoke his mind on occasion on issues of the day. His words continued to be treasured and repeated by his admirers up and down the country. He became an elder statesman in the Liberal Party without ever having been a statesman. It was inevitable that he would again be offered office when Gladstone returned in 1880. This time he would be Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a post in which there was not even the latent prospect of difficulty. He was consulted with appropriate deference, but it could not be supposed that he belonged to that inner circle where decisions were made. There was surprise, however, in 1882 when he resigned from the government in protest against the decision to bombard Alexandria. It seemed that the true Dissenting John Bright had re-emerged in old age. He had finally tired of the compromises and obfuscations of government. He knew a moral issue when he saw one and he had found the right note to end on. Yet it was not the end. He fiercely resisted and resented Gladstone's Home Rule proposals for Ireland.¹² Throughout his political life hitherto he had invariably been seen as a 'friend of Ireland' whether on land or ecclesiastical issues. He himself saw no contradiction between his previous attitudes and his opposition to Gladstone. That was not how many of his erstwhile supporters saw the position. They believed that he had finally submitted to the forces of conservatism.

In the last years of his life, therefore, Bright's stance appeared ambiguous, and perhaps that was what he wanted. Those who chose to do so could uncover the return to a pristine purity which they supposed must have existed. To be a Quaker politician was to foresake power and

to safeguard personal integrity even if such a stand could not make any difference to the political outcome. Equally, however, those who chose to do so could see in Bright's final attitudes a tired acceptance of the world as it was. He liked to be fêted and lauded in his last years. That was not how he appeared to the young Asquith, however, who praised him as a shining example of a man who had never yielded in his convictions or succumbed to the temptations of the social world in which he had come to move, though testimony from that source may not give complete comfort.¹³ We will place the emphasis where we will as we survey his life as a whole. Whatever our conclusion, reflection on the career of John Bright inevitably brings us to that troubled border country where politics, ethics and religion confusedly interact. He struggled to reconcile personal insight with collective responsibility, and to blend prophetic conviction with the requirements of party politics and representative government. The study of his career suggests that he did not find a 'solution' and perhaps, in this life, there never can be one. Even so, on the centenary of his death, it is appropriate to celebrate his life without either simple-minded adulation or unrelieved cynicism. In other words, perhaps he will allow us a glass of claret with which to toast the memory of a great Quaker-politician.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Keith Robbins, *John Bright* (London, 1979), 118.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ See H.C.G. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and Politics in Great Britain, 1860–1950' in P.J. Waller, ed., *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain* (Brighton, 1987), 34–58.

⁴ Keith Robbins, *Nineteenth-Century Britain: Integration and Diversity* (Oxford, 1988), 9–10.

⁵ Anthony Howe, *The Cotton Masters, 1830–1860* (Oxford, 1984); P.T. Phillips, *The Sectarian Spirit: Sectarianism, Society and Politics in Victorian Cotton Towns* (Toronto, 1982).

⁶ T.A.B. Corley, 'How Quakers coped with business success: Quaker industrialists 1860–1914' in D.J. Jeremy, ed., *Business and Religion in Britain* (Aldershot, 1988), 164–187.

- ⁷ Keith Robbins 'John Bright and Middle Class Politics' in J. Garrard *et al.*, eds., *The Middle Class in Politics* (Farnborough, 1978), 14–34; Angus Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855–59* (London, 1987), 158–62.
- ⁸ E.P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-century urban government* (London, 1973).
- ⁹ Quakers made up just over 1 per cent of the 'churchgoing' population of Birmingham in 1851. On this point and more generally see Dennis Smith, *Conflict and compromise: Class Formation in English Society 1830–1914: a comparative study of Birmingham and Sheffield* (London, 1982), 56.
- ¹⁰ Keith Robbins, *John Bright* (London, 1979), 131–3.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 214.
- ¹² See Keith Robbins, 'John Bright and William Gladstone' in Chris Wrigley, ed., *Warfare, Diplomacy and Politics: Essays in Honour of A.J.P. Taylor* (London, 1986), 29–41.
- ¹³ R.B. Haldane, *Autobiography* (London, 1929), 103–4.

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