

HILAIRE BELLOC AND

David Boyle argues that there is a liberal tradition in Britain that has usually run independent of, yet parallel to, the Liberals or Liberal Democrats. It is recognisably Liberal in its commitment to individual freedom and local self-determination, but it has included Radicals (Cobbett), Tories (Ruskin, or so he said), Socialists (Morris) and Greens (Schumacher). And though both traditions have influenced each other in every generation, they have rarely come together in Parliament. The exception – and it was a brief exception – was in the political career of the writer, poet and historian Hilaire Belloc, Liberal MP for South Salford, 1906 to 1910.



‘I think we can explain how to make a small shop or a small farm a common feature of our society better than Matthew Arnold explained how to make the State the organ of Our Best Self.’

G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*

‘And never a ploughman under the sun.
Never a ploughman. Never a one.’

Hilaire Belloc, ‘Ha’nacker Mill’

Belloc has inspired at least two major biographies in the last twenty years, but – considering the influence he cast in his lifetime – he is little remembered today, except perhaps for the occasional ‘Cautionary Tale about Matilda’ or ‘Lord Lundy’s tears’. A century ago, it was very different.

Belloc had a French father, an English mother and an American wife. His grandfather was a friend of John Stuart Mill and his mother moved in Liberal Party literary circles. He was born in 1870, served briefly in the French

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artillery and took Oxford by storm as an eloquent conversationalist, speaker and debater in the generation of Liberals like John Simon and J. L. Hammond. He joined these two as a contributor to the 1897 book *Essays in Liberalism* – Belloc's contribution concentrated on land reform and singled out Cobbett rather than Cobden as the great Liberal pioneer. One reviewer claimed that the ideas of none of the six contributors 'correspond to those of any recognised section of the Liberal Party'.¹ This was prophetic: Belloc's strident Catholicism and drinking habits made him rather stand out in a party of determined nonconformists and temperance reformers.

He managed the temperance problem by siding with the reformers against the big brewers, arguing that 'the vast majority of publicans throughout England are the servants, and probably the debtors also, of a small and very wealthy clique whose power it is our business to destroy.'² The Catholic aspect was more difficult. He lost the Liberal nomination for Dover in 1903 when the local Catholic priest leapt forward at his adoption selection meeting and embraced him – or so he attributed his failure. But in South Salford in 1904 he was unanimously adopted, and he moved the vote of confidence in the party that year at their conference in Manchester, predicting victory at the next election so that 'the ancient soul of Britain, a thing in some peril, would thereby be delivered'.³

South Salford was a marginal seat and the Conservatives adopted the unsophisticated slogan 'Don't vote for a Frenchman and a Catholic'. Belloc ignored the advice of his constituency campaigners in the 1905/06 election campaign and confronted the religion issue head-on at a packed public meeting. 'Gentlemen, I am a Catholic,' he told them, taking his rosary out of his pocket. 'As far as possible, I go to Mass every day. This is a rosary: as far as possible, I kneel down and tell these beads every day. If you reject me on account of my religion, I shall thank God that he has spared me the indignity of being your representative.'⁴ There was silence for a few moments, then thunderous applause. He took the seat by 852 votes.

He was never taken entirely seriously in Parliament and, from the start, he was a thorn in the side of his own government. His campaign against importing cheap Chinese labourers into South Africa – a form of slavery, he said – thoroughly embarrassed Campbell-Bannerman, who had promised to stop it. His campaign for pure beer offended the nonconformists. 'There are very few nights when I do not go to bed after drinking a pint or two of beer,' he told the Commons, admitting that his speech had offended the teetotallers in his constituency – adding offensively 'there are eight of them'.⁵

His campaign to have all secret party funds audited – even his own – infuriated Liberal Party managers. His satirical novels *Mr*

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Clutterbuck's Election (1908) and *A Change in the Cabinet* (1909) – both dictated at great speed during Holy Week – offended his own side as well as the others. He also became increasingly disillusioned with Parliament: 'I can see little object in the House of Commons,' he said less than a year after the election. 'It does not govern; it does not even discuss. It is completely futile.'⁶ His opposition to female suffrage stemmed from his sense of the superiority of women over parliamentary politics. It wasn't an argument that cut much ice with either side.

Still, he exhausted himself getting re-elected in 1910 (this time by just 314 votes), but was then enraged that Asquith did not push his battle with the Lords far enough to depose them entirely. When a second election loomed at the end of the year, he decided that he could not remain an official Liberal. He never stood for Parliament again. 'I think everyone will agree with me that even the most modest pen in the humblest newspaper,' he said in his final Commons speech, 'is as good as a vote in what has ceased to be a free deliberative assembly.'⁷

His collaboration with G. K. Chesterton after that – together they made up the unusual creature dubbed by Bernard Shaw as the 'Chesterbelloc' – was certainly political. Their horror at deals between the two front benches after the 1910 election was simply naïve, but he finally torpedoed any links with the

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party during the so-called Marconi scandal.

This was not, by any stretch, a high point in Liberal history, and concerned a handful of cabinet ministers – including Lloyd George – who appeared to have been involved in the insider trading of Marconi shares. It was Belloc's weekly *Eye-Witness* – selling 100,000 copies a week – which did most to bring the scandal to the public's attention, unfortunately focusing on the fact that two of the central figures were Jewish. Belloc had stood down from the editorship by then and had unwisely handed it over to Chesterton's younger brother Cecil, a swaggering anti-semite. But he stood by Chesterton when he was prosecuted for criminal libel by the brother of the attorney-general, Rufus Isaacs. (Cecil was found guilty but only fined £100, which the Chestertons claimed as a moral victory.)

And that was that for Belloc's relationship with the party – but in another more subtle respect it was just the beginning. His book *The Servile State* (1912) was an influential diatribe against big business and Fabian collectivist policies – a book now rather inappropriately kept in print by obscure American libertarians, which wouldn't have pleased him. The book formed the basis of the political movement known as Distributism that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s.

Distributism knitted together the old Catholic social doctrine of Pope Leo XIII and Cardinal Manning, which was so close to Belloc's heart. It mixed a generous dollop of land-reforming Liberalism with unworldly Gandhian simplicity, borrowing the old slogan of Joseph Chamberlain and Jesse Collings from the 1880s, 'three acres and a cow'. Its heart was the redistribution of land and property so that everyone had some – on the ground that small enterprises, smallholdings and small units were the only basis for dignity, independence and liberty.

Belloc in 1932, by Daphne Pollen. Belloc said of it: 'You have made me look like Blake, seeing a vision'.



Belloc, Chesterton (G. K., that is) and the Distributists were equally hostile to socialism and capitalism, and set out to prove they were the same thing: 'Collectivist experiment is thoroughly suited (in appearance) to capitalist society,' wrote Belloc. 'It works within the existing machinery of capitalism, appealing to just those appetites which capitalism has aroused, and ridicules as fantastic and unheard-of just those things in society the memory of which capitalism has killed among men wherever the blight of it has spread.'⁸

Distributism was anti-industrial, anti-finance, anti-corporation, anti-bureaucrat, and most of all anti-giantism, in the form of either big bureaucracy or big business – the 'Big Rot' according to Belloc. Capitalism is unable to satisfy human needs for stability, sufficiency and security, said Belloc, and is therefore only a phase. What Distributism was actually *for* was a little hazier, but it included Jeffersonian solutions of workers' co-operatives, smallholdings and land redistribution, and savings boosted by the state. One of the Distributists' earliest campaigns was in support of the small London bus companies

that were being driven out by the monopolistic London General Omnibus Company. In response, they bought a series of Distributist buses, painted them red, green and blue and called them things like 'William Morris' – and took on the big company buses.⁹

Distributism fizzled out after the Second World War. There have been Distributist gestures since then (Mrs Thatcher's sale of council houses, for example), but little more. Its proponents were disappointed that those who had taken it to heart most were not the urban poor, but craftsmen like Eric Gill or journalists like Beachcomber. Yet *The Servile State* had been enough to cast a disabling doubt over the minds of radical New Liberals as they leant towards the Fabians.¹⁰

Between the wars, there were set-piece debates between Belloc's Distributism and Shaw's Fabianism, and between Belloc's Distributism and Wells's Modernism – and from the perspective of two generations later, Belloc seems to have won both debates. The two great Liberal ideologues of the period, Keynes and Beveridge, were not necessarily well known as Liberals.

Belloc's politics thereafter drifted in directions no Liberal would follow. He flirted with French monarchism, with Mussolini and Franco. His views about Europe's Jewish heritage were complicated enough for him to be accused of anti-semitism – and, like T. S. Eliot, his reputation has been tarred with that ever since – though he recognised Hitler for what he was from the start. In fact, he consistently warned against Europe's peril and Hitler's threat to the Jews. He died in 1953, and his reputation continues to suffer from his association with *Eye-Witness* under Cecil Chesterton, with its proto-fascist undertones. But that obscures some of the ways in which his liberal legacy remains, especially in the modern Liberal Democrats.

By the 1930s, a new generation of Liberals was having to respond to the collectivism of the dictators, especially as the Webbs were embracing Stalin on behalf of the Fabians. And these were influenced by Belloc, his passionate sense of Europe and his idea of a different kind of common ownership – by people, rather than by The People.

The party's policy, *Ownership for All*, agreed at the Liberal assembly in Bath in 1938, set out the very Distributist notion that 'the widespread ownership of property is the firmest guarantee against dictatorship' – including policies to reform inheritance laws, tackle monopolies, tax land and share profits.¹¹ The purpose of free trade is to undermine monopoly, it said – not to make the world safe for monopoly. The chair of the *Ownership for All* panel was a former editor of the *Huddersfield Examiner*, Elliott Dodds, who would be Liberal Party president in 1948–49 and was one of the key figures behind the party's intellectual revival under Jo Grimond.

The influence of Belloc on Grimond's Liberalism was almost unacknowledged – though Grimond later described the Belloc tradition as one 'to be studied and fostered'.¹² Yet the Distributist

themes were very prominent in the Liberal revival years: industrial common ownership, resistance to bureaucracy and the whole idea of a non-socialist radical alternative. Dodds was among the ginger group formed in 1953, calling itself the Unservile State Group, that remade the party's ideology along these lines – its title a tacit acceptance of the *Servile State* critique. 'Tribute must be paid to the work of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton who, though they fell foul of the Liberal Party, were such doughty fighters for Liberal values, and whose "Distributist" crusade inspired so many (including the present writer) with the ideal of ownership for all,' wrote Dodds that year.¹³

Generally speaking, the alternative Liberal tradition of Cobbett, Ruskin, Morris and Belloc – if it exists as such – has held back from the party. It was recognisably agrarian where the party was more industrial. It was recognisably high Anglican or Catholic where the party was more nonconformist. It was deeply melancholic where the party – as anybody who delivers *Focus* will confirm – was hopelessly optimistic. It was interested in the economic roots of liberty when the party was interested in the political roots. And its interest in free trade was always more flexible, and sometimes unrecognisable.

But there have been vital moments of cross-over. It's there in Keynes's call to national self-sufficiency,¹⁴ or in Beveridge's conviction that Liberals would have a further aim beyond socialists – 'not material progress but spiritual liberty'.¹⁵ And although the Roman Catholic political doctrines that so influenced Belloc seem pretty dusty in the UK these days, it was Pope Leo XIII who first coined the concept of 'subsidiarity' in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1896. It was this idea that was taken up by Belloc, turned into a political creed in Distributism, rescued from obscurity by Schumacher – only to pop up again as the central tenet of Euro-ideology, and

the one that knits Liberal Democrat European policy with its enthusiasm for decentralisation.

But for Belloc, subsidiarity always meant more than just administration. He applied it just as much to our relations with employers, with business, and with money. He would probably advise Liberal Democrats these days that applying subsidiarity to other areas of life is the best way towards a new radical Liberal critique, capable of uniting people behind the cause. And – if I might be allowed a contemporary comment in a history journal – I believe he would be right.

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- 1 Joseph Pearce, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc* (London: Harper-Collins, 2002).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 A. N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984).
- 5 Pearce, *Old Thunder*.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (London: T. N. Foulis, 1912).
- 9 A. N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc*.
- 10 Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill: Private scholars, public culture and the crisis of British Liberalism 1900–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- 11 Elliott Dodds, *Ownership for All: The Liberal Party committee's report on the distribution of property* (London: Liberal Party Organisation, 1938).
- 12 Jo Grimond, *introduction to Cobbett's Tour in Scotland*, ed. Daniel Green (Aberdeen University Press, 1984).
- 13 Elliott Dodds, *Ownership for All* (London: Radical Programme Series/Liberal Publication Department, 1953).
- 14 See for example J. M. Keynes, 'National Self-Sufficiency' in *Collected Works*, ed. Moggridge (London: Macmillan, 1982), vol 21.
- 15 Quoted in Ian Bradley, *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal Britain* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985).