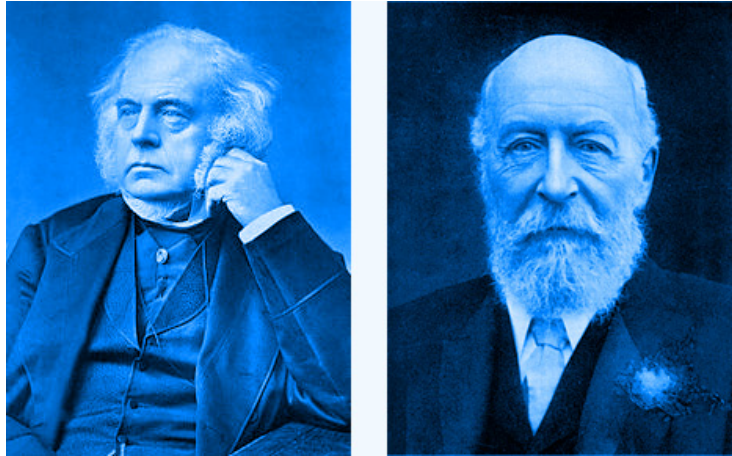


Honey I Shrunk the State

Mike King
2014



Abstract

This brief essay explores the question of whether the Quakers as a fiercely independent group of welcome or deplore big government as appropriate for furthering traditional Quaker goals. It is answered through the prominent 19th C figures of John Bright and George Cadbury, representing the libertarian and socialist wings respectively of Quaker political thought.

Keywords: John Bright, George Cadbury, big government, Quakers, Dominic Frisby, Mariana Mazzucato.

First published: [The Friend](#), 31 July 2014

I can think of no more fundamental question for social justice than this: how big should our State be? Those who argue for a small State place themselves within the right or libertarian tradition, while those whose want more State intervention place themselves within the left or social democrat tradition. I was prompted to explore this question through two recently published books, *After the State* by Dominic Frisby, which argues that the smaller the state the better, and *The Entrepreneurial State* by Mariana Mazzucato, which defends the role of government support for innovation.

First I need to define what we mean by 'big' or 'small' when it comes to the State. Only two things really matter here I think: that of government spending and that of government regulation. In most developed countries government spending amounts to something between 35% and 50% of Gross Domestic Product – a figure that strikes libertarians as too high. It is much harder to quantify government regulation of our lives, though free-market libertarians are keen to reduce it at every turn.

Quakers are a fiercely independent group of people and so it is not obvious in the first instance whether they welcome or deplore big government as appropriate for furthering traditional Quaker goals. Indeed when we take two eminent Victorian Quaker businessmen, George Cadbury and John Bright, we find them at opposite ends of the political spectrum here. Although their respective campaigning and wealth were equally at the service of the poor and disadvantaged, we can say that Cadbury's philosophy naturally leads to big government while Bright's leads to small.

Mazuccato tells us that the US founding fathers were torn between the principles of the activist Alexander Hamilton and the laissez-faire Thomas Jefferson. The latter believed that 'the government that governs least, governs best'. Mazucatto then quotes this brilliant observation: 'With time and usual American pragmatism, this rivalry has been resolved by putting the Jeffersonians in charge of the rhetoric and the Hamiltonians in charge of policy.' What this means for Americans is that laissez-faire is the populist myth, while extensive State intervention is the rather resented reality. In Britain there has been an increasing appetite for a British kind of libertarianism, as exemplified by the work of Frisby. On the other hand Mazucatto's book is a plea for us to understand that the State, far from being a drag on private enterprise, has in many cases – including Apple and Google – funded the initial research and even provided startup capital. The State can be an innovative risk-taker. Frisby's book rejects any idea that the State has such value, and argues for a drastic reduction of its role and tax take.

Who is right?

We can say that the Quaker John Bright was an instinctive Jeffersonian, believing in as little state interference in our lives as possible, while the Quaker George Cadbury was an instinctive Hamiltonian who worked quietly to initiate or support greater government regulation of industry. Interestingly it was Bright who entered Parliament – and made his reputation there – while Cadbury resisted all calls to stand for safe Liberal seats. As far as I know Bright was only the second Quaker MP – the first being Joseph Pease, son of the Quaker 'father of the railways' – and in his day Bright's political reputation was on a par with that of Gladstone and Disraeli. The distinction in outlook between George Cadbury and John Bright is well summed up by A. C. Gardiner, who said of Cadbury: 'He was a social reformer always in advance of the thought of his co-religionist John Bright, who remained constant to the strict individualism of

the Manchester School, and carried his views as to the non-interference of the State in industry so far that he even opposed legislation directed at adulteration.'

A direct comparison between Bright and Cadbury has to be tempered with the recognition that Cadbury was born 28 years after Bright, and that Bright was a skilled politician who carefully avoided arguing for causes too far in advance of their day. For example after his stunning victory with colleague Richard Cobden in the repeal of the Corn Laws he was measured and realistic in how he pursued the widening of democracy. But Disraeli, in his parliamentary speech supporting the Corn Laws, predicted that their repeal would involve the transfer of power from the aristocracy to the manufacturers. George Cadbury, one of the leading manufacturers of the later nineteenth century, was keenly aware, I would suggest, of the truth of this, and that Bright's victories for social and economic justice could not be built upon without a more interventionist approach. Industrial capitalism by itself would offer no protection to the working poor or the environment.

Bright is credited by biographer and Conservative MP Bill Cash with laying the foundations for much of modern conservatism, one which places the emphasis on freedom as the most important of human rights. But Cadbury could see that no amount of freedom and no extension of the franchise would in themselves put food on the table of the working poor. He and his brother Richard strove to progressively raise wages above subsistence for their workers, and the same was true for Rowntree in York, but, as J. S. Rowntree's famous 'Report' of that time concluded, it was low wages at the bottom that was the root cause of poverty. Cadbury's life stood for the ending, through legislation, of low wages and bad working conditions for the urban labourer.

Britain saw a surge in wages after WW2 which lifted the majority of working people out of absolute and relative poverty, but the rolling back of the interventionist State following Margaret Thatcher's policies in the 1980s saw Bright's philosophy triumph again over Cadbury's. Today we have millions of working poor whose wages are so low as to necessitate State welfare support and the kindness of charities. The philosophy of freedom has brought social justice in many new spheres, and it is entirely within the enlightened conservatism of the Bright tradition that this has been extended to gay marriage for example. But many of these freedoms are little compensation, I would suggest, to the millions of working poor. I do not want to elevate the Quaker-inspired achievements of George Cadbury over those of John Bright, but do believe that a careful look at the differences in their approach could help us find a Quaker way forward in answering the question of how big we want the State to be. In particular I would make the following points to the inheritors of the Bright legacy. Firstly that the abolition of the Corn Laws was an undoubted triumph of social justice, but what was to stop the manufacturers then lowering wages below the new starvation level? The extension of voting to all households was another of Bright's triumphs, but how would that in itself end low

wages, poor housing, and lack of education? Bright's efforts to secure tenant farmers in Ireland ownership of land was laudable, but what of the millions of urban workers in England with no productive resources other than their labour? Bright and the libertarian tradition emphasise freedom above all else. But how does freedom in itself put food on the table?

I truly believe that Cadbury saw further than Bright, and in his great social experiment at Bournville I believe he instigated answers to social questions we have been retreating from for the last thirty years.

[More papers by Mike King from Stochastic Press](#)