

LACHLAN MUNRO, ZOOM TALK TO THE CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM SOCIETY,

3 September 2026.

It is often said that Cunninghame Graham was the founder of the Labour party, and the SNP, but the reality is more complex and nuanced, but certainly **MOSTLY WRONG**.

Also, that the perceived differences between today's political parties, was not so clear cut in Graham's day, nor is it today. We think of political parties and their policies as being permanent, while, in fact, they are constantly changing to keep up with circumstances and to please the voters.

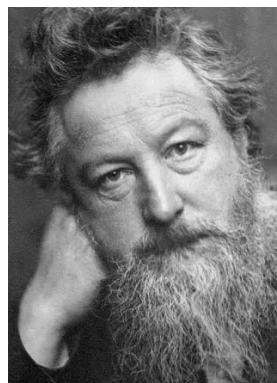
I found this quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson that I think sums up: 'Parties and ideas continually move, but not by measurable marches on a stable course; the political soil itself steals forth by imperceptible degrees, like a travelling glacier, carrying on its bosom not only political parties but their flag-posts'. (RLS, 'The Day After Tomorrow' in *Lay Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), p.117.)

ENTERS PARLIAMENT

With strong family connections to the LIBERALS, Graham entered parliament in 1886 as a LIBERAL MP determined to change things, and he believed that the Liberals considered the interests of others stating: 'If this is the case, I am proud, and you all may be proud of belonging to that party, as, what higher morality is there in the world than to do to others as you would they should unto you'.

DISAPPOINTMENT

But he was in for a great disappointment, describing his own party as 'the odious bourgeois tyranny of the Gladstonian Liberals who were just as tyrannical to the working classes, and ten times more hypocritical than the Tories', stating "Take a biscuit, ascend to the upper galleries of the House of Commons, drop it . . . it shall have bounced from the bald head of a millionaire and rolled onto the paunch of a Capitalist, no matter from which side of the House you dispatch it".



He consequently sought out this man, William Morris, and later claimed that it was Morris who converted him to Socialism.

MINING CONSTITUENTS

Meantime, while campaigning on behalf of his constituents, Graham became involved in the lives of his mining constituents and witnessed the poverty of their daily lives and began campaigning throughout Britain on their behalf, particularly for an Eight Hours' day, and improved conditions in the mines.

Consequently, his short parliamentary career was full of anger and frenetic outbursts, and he was regarded by most fellow politicians as a hothead, a madman and a nuisance. In June 1889, a reviewer in *The Observer* noted:

'He is above all things a 'misanthropic professional philanthropist', whose love for his fellow man in the abstract is compatible with a limitless capacity for making himself objectionable to individuals in the concrete . . . He is unquestionably the most unpopular man in the House of Commons'.

After being badly beaten and jailed for his leading a riot in Trafalgar Square, from prison, he published what amounted to a parliamentary SUICIDE NOTE entitled 'HAS THE LIBERAL PARTY A FUTURE?', his answer to which was NO.

WORKING CLASS MPs

His overriding aim then became to get working men elected to parliament, to change it from within, but he knew that from his landowning background that he couldn't lead them, but on touring the coalfield, he found the man he thought could - Keir Hardie, a miner cum journalist.

NOW, GRAHAM'S ROLE IN FOUNDING THE LABOUR PARTY:

Graham encouraged Hardie, who had been an avid Liberal to put himself forward as a parliamentary candidate, for a bi-election in Mid Lanark, but he was rejected because the Liberals did not understand the profound shift in voting patterns brought about by the widening of the franchise, and would not accept working-class candidates (heralding the demise of the Liberals in the 20th century). Hardie, under Graham's encouragement, stood as an Independent Labour candidate in mid Lanark, but was badly defeated. Robert Smillie, the secretary of the Larkhall Miners' Association and a close colleague of Hardie's, was the only member present who recorded what happened next.

"On the day AFTER this historic election, a number of Keir Hardie's supporters met in Hamilton to mingle their tears together. It could not be said that the gathering was a joyful one – although, looking back on it after all these years, I do not think that we were absolutely downhearted. In fact, my opinion is that the result of this election acted as a stimulus to many of us to go forward. Mr. R. B. Cunninghame Graham was present at this meeting, but he was not downcast. Instead, he took the view that we should go on with the forming of a new and independent party. The meeting adopted this view, and it was decided that we should start out on a new line independent of the other two political parties".

THIS IS THE SMOKING GUN

One of Hardie's close colleagues, 'Sandy' Haddow, said that it was only after his defeat at Mid-Lanark that Hardie 'came over to the Socialist side. He and Cunningham Graham formed the Scottish Labour Party'.

They called their new party **THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY LABOUR PARTY**, but it was beset with challenges from the start. Firstly, it had no support among trade unions, and Graham and Hardie were denounced at the TUC Conference in Dundee in 1889 because they were SOCIALISTS. The Fabian, **BEATRICE WEBB**, who was present noted the antagonism, almost hatred among the TUC leadership who were trying to keep out 'wolves in sheep's clothing'.



HOWEVER, *IT HAD NOT BEEN SET UP AS A SOCIALIST PARTY, BUT A PARTY THAT LOOKED AFTER THE INTERESTS OF LABOUR.*

SECTARIANISM

Secondly, while Graham was **PRO-IRISH**, Hardie was not, regarding the Irish immigrant workers as **BLACKLEGS**, and he wrote in his column in *The Ardrrossan & Saltcoats Herald*. **THAT ALL THE IRISH IMMIGRANT COALMINER NEEDED WAS A BIG SHOVEL, A STRONG BACK, AND A WEAK BRAIN, SAID FELLOW HAVING BEEN BUSY A FEW WEEKS AGO IN A PEAT BOG OR TATTIE FIELD'.**

Hardie's close colleague, Bruce Glasier, mourned the death of John Kensit, founder of The Protestant Truth Society, stating: 'I esteem him a martyr ... I feel honest sympathy for his anti-Romanist crusade'. This anti Irish and anti-Catholic stance would seriously weaken the new party.

Hardie then became the MP for WEST HAM in 1892 and the ILP was established in Bradford in 1893, and the relationship with Graham cooled. Also, with the growth of the

ILP, things changed dramatically. Not only had the spotlight swung away from Scotland, the socialist commentator James Leatham wrote: **‘THE POLITICAL FASHION CHANGED SO COMPLETELY IN THE MINING AREAS THAT THE NEW ‘LABOUR’ LABEL COUNTED FOR EVERYTHING, AND PAST SERVICES, ABILITY, AND ACTUAL POLITICAL PRINCIPLES DID NOT SEEM TO MATTER’.**

Hugh MacDiarmid named some men with whom Graham might have worked: ‘But the future of the Labour and Socialist Movement lay with a very different type with whom he could not have worked, and from whom he could not have disguised his contempt’.

There may also have been a consensus among Labour’s new adherents that they wished to achieve success on their own terms, without the help of a class renegade like Graham. Moreover, an early Labour pioneer, David Lowe, wrote that Graham, ‘who had stood aloof from the cabals and dissensions, pettiness, and arguments that plagued Scottish Labour, had **FINALLY RESIGNED HIS PRESIDENCY AND MEMBERSHIP BECAUSE HARDIE REFUSED TO SUPPORT HIS DEMAND FOR AN APOLOGY FROM TWO PARTY OFFICIALS WHO HAD GROSSLY INSULTED HIM’.**

DISILLUSIONED

Graham became very disillusioned with Labour and wrote in December 1919 that he had hoped that socialism would have produced the demise of selfishness and a better feeling between men, adding, rather forlornly: **“You will admit, I think, that my ambition was not a low ambition. That I was deceived, and that all the golden dreams of William Morris have vanished in nine bestial and inarticulate years . . . has not been my fault”.**

Consequently, despite becoming more radical, subsequent to the First World War, he made no statements on workers’ rights or on mass unemployment and the strikes and hunger marches of the 1920s and ‘30s.

SOCIALISM

MacDiarmid said of Graham, his socialism was not based on an adequate theory of social causation: ‘He was “one of these damned aristos who had embraced “the cause of the people” – and as a consequence fell between two stools’.

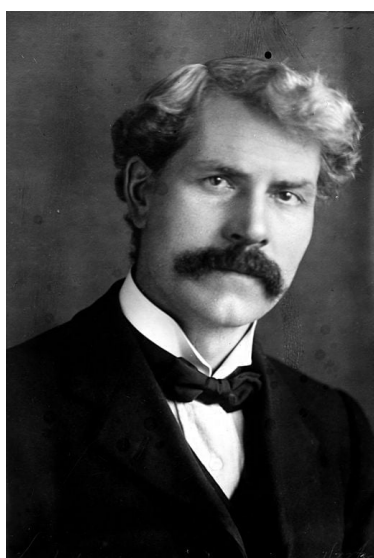
At the unveiling of Graham’s memorial at Castlehill, Dumbarton, his friend, the Swiss horseman A. F. Tschiffely said: “Cunninghame Graham was never a Socialist; a Social Reformer if you like, but never a Socialist’.

The artist Will Rothenstein wrote: ‘Conrad knew that Cunninghame Graham was more cynic than idealist and was by nature an aristocrat, whose socialism was a symbol of his contempt for a feeble aristocracy and a blatant plutocracy.

SCOTTISH NATIONALISM

A central pillar of the **THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY LABOUR PARTY's** political agenda was not only Irish 'Home Rule', but **HOME RULE FOR SCOTLAND**, and the birth of the socialist movement in Scotland **was rooted in support for Home Rule**.

In 1886, both Graham and Hardie had separately joined the recently formed **SCOTTISH HOME RULE ASSOCIATION** before they met, founded by an Edinburgh stationer named Charles Waddie. Another early member was a young man, named **RAMSAY MACDONALD**, who was Secretary of London Branch. The now famous Graham was elected President.



The SHRA's main concern was lack of parliamentary time given to Scottish legislation and the financial loss suffered by Scotland as a result, the living conditions in Glasgow and Edinburgh that were beyond description, but also, that if Ireland was granted home rule, this would leave Scotland behind.

In 1889, Graham spoke in support of the first ever Scottish Home Rule Bill put before parliament, by Gavin Clark MP, but he did so on very different grounds from the proposers. Although he agreed that there had been a growing feeling in favour of HOME RULE in Scotland, in his opinion, it was not on sentimental grounds, but from the extreme misery of a certain section of the Scottish population, who demanded legislation that would relieve that misery.

THIS IS THE KEY TO GRAHAM'S 'NATIONALISM', THAT HOME RULE WOULD SPEED UP SOCIAL CHANGE, AWAY FROM THE REACTIONARY AND STULTIFYING POLITICS OF WESTMINSTER.

The Bill was defeated, but there was momentum for political change, and between 1908 and the eve of World War I, six Home-Rule bills were presented to parliament, all of which passed their first reading by large majorities, and in 1913, one Bill passed its 'second reading' by 204 votes to 159, with strong Liberal support. The omens were looking extremely positive, but it progressed no further.

By the start of World War I, Waddie's SCOTTISH HOME RULE ASSOCIATION was moribund, but after the war, it was revived by ROLAND EUGENE (R.E.) MUIRHEAD, a businessman, ILP member and passivist, who was close friends with this man, THOMAS JOHNSTON, future Labour Secretary of State for Scotland.



Together, with Muirhead's money, they founded The FORWARD PRESS and published the ILP newspaper FORWARD. They also published Johnston's scurrilous but highly influential, *Our Scots Noble Families*, and his equally influential *A History of the Working Class in Scotland*

This second SCOTTISH HOME RULE ASSOCIATION set about recruiting like-minded left-leaning members, including Graham (who was again elected President), Compton Mackenzie, Hugh MacDiarmid, and at the 1922 General Election, Scotland elected 29 Labour MPs, including Jimmy Maxton, Willie Gallagher, David Kirkwood, Geordie Buchanan, and the Reverend James Barr, ALL OF WHOM JOINED, and it had over 50 affiliated political organisations, 100 trade-union branches, and 60 Co-operative societies.

At the General Election of 1923, Labour increased its representation to 35, and expectations that MacDonald's government would enact the legislation. However, the

former Home Rule activist, MacDonald, did not consider the issue important enough to be included in the King's Speech. Fourteen Scottish Labour MPs protested this, but in vain, but in the following year, 1925, Labour had dropped Scottish Home Rule from its manifesto.

MANY PEOPLE FELT BETRAYED.

However, the LABOUR MPs still pursued HOME RULE DESPITE THEIR PARTY'S WISHES, and new Bill was put forward in 1927 by Labour's Rev James Barr,



seconded by Johnston which was laughed out by English MPs. This was the ninth occasion in 8 years on which the question had come before the House—the twenty-first since 1889. On almost every occasion since 1893, there had been a majority in the House in favour: but none of the bills had been permitted to go beyond a second reading.

It was at this juncture that we witness the beginnings of the major schism on the left of Scottish politics that continues to this day.

It was not a matter of socialists versus home-rulers - since the War, they had essentially been the same people; it now became a matter of *priorities*.

One faction continued to believe that there was a strong prospect of extending socialist policies to the whole of Britain through the ballot box, while others believed that this perception was flawed, and that the solution of Scotland's economic and social problems was only achievable in an autonomous or semi-autonomous country.

Thus, by default, it was the change of policy of the Labour Party that led to the creation of the National Party of Scotland, and later the SNP, just as Liberal resistance to the selection of working-class candidates had inadvertently given birth to the SPLP then the Labour party.

People now realised that they were standing before a locked door, and at a meeting of the SCOTTISH HOME RULE ASSOCIATION, **WITH NOWHERE ELSE TO GO**, a proposal was put forward to create a party of INDEPENDENCE.

Of course, the majority of SHRA members, who were also ILP members objected, but certain senior members decided that enough was enough.

In parallel with all this, other groups had already sprung up, including the pro-Sein Fein **SCOTS NATIONAL LEAGUE** in London and the **SCOTTISH NATIONAL MOVEMENT** in Edinburgh, but there was no love lost between them.

Another significant group was the GLASGOW UNIVERSITY SCOTTISH NATIONAL ASSOCIATION, all of whom had previously been UNIVERSITY LABOUR CLUB MEMBERS, led by a young law student named JOHN MacCORMICK (**SLIDE**), and on 10 May 1928, they agreed to the setting up of a **NATIONAL PARTY OF SCOTLAND**.



GRAHAM WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT *IN ABSENTIA*.

MUIRHEAD, had been keeping the peripatetic Graham up to date with all these events, wrote to him 2 April 1928:

'A particularly hopeful side of the movement which has developed during the last few months is the GLASGOW UNIVERSITY SCOTTISH NATIONAL ASSOCIATION. It is already some three hundred strong and is co-operating in the formation of a National Party . . . I understand that they have decided to

approach you to invite you to stand as a Scottish National Candidate at the forthcoming Rectorial Election. I hope that you will be able to consider the proposal favourably’.

The Glasgow students put him forward as their **RECTORIAL** candidate at the university elections, and he lost to Prime Minister Asquith by only 61 votes, causing a sensation, and this was **A MAJOR BOOST FOR THE NEW PARTY**.

Two days later, 3,000 people attended a rally in the St. Andrews Hall to hear Graham and others speak.

However, convincing the voters to support them was less easy, and at subsequent bi-elections all the candidates lost their deposits.

Graham, however, constantly encouraged by Muirhead, was a regular speaker at the National Party gatherings in Stirling and at Elderslee.



Then something extraordinary happened; pressure from **HOME-RULE** supporting right-of-centre individuals and groups began to appear, spectacularly, a breakaway section of the **CATHCART CONSERVATIVE & UNIONIST ASSOCIATION**. Eventually, these consolidated into **THE SCOTTISH PARTY**, under the leadership of Graham's kinsman, **James Graham, The Duke of Montrose**. Now there were two home rule parties competing for votes.



BOTH PARTIES made little progress at the polls, and after some minor bloodletting, including the expulsion of fundamentalists like MacDiarmid, and the disbanding of London Branch of the National Party, and despite objects and resignations, from the NPS, they amalgamated under McCormick's direction in April 1934, to form THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY, and Graham was elected **Honorary Vice President** *in absentia*.



It would not be a happy marriage, the moderates now in bed with the left of centre pro-Irish fundamentalists, and the new party only did slightly better at the polls.

It was a party of old men, Montrose rejoined the Tories in 1935, Graham died in 1936, the new Chairman ANDREW DEWAR GIBB resigned in 1940, ex-chairman SIR ALEXANDER MACEWEN died in 1941. What remained was a tough husk of hardliners, who lacked any public profile, but who were left to doggedly carry on the fight AS ANOTHER WAR APPROACHED.

Graham had taken part with COMPTON MACKENZIE in the early SNP campaigns in the HIGHLANDS, but Mackenzie wrote in Graham's obituary that Graham regretted the amalgamation, but thought it his duty to avoid the appearance of disruption within the nationalist ranks, 'and out of regard for him I abstained from denouncing what I held to be disastrous policy of reconciliation; an opinion which has been strengthened by events of the last two years'.



Mackenzie did not explain why he and Graham opposed it, but it was undoubtedly because they both felt uncomfortable that the NATIONAL PARTY, whose main promoters had formerly been members of the ILP, should merge with a centre-right party, thus losing its distinctly centre-left identity.

Graham was a visionary, perhaps a utopian, but the reality never lived up to his vision. He later said:

'Yes, I was branded in two hemispheres as a madman for propounding ideas which are now absorbed and cheered at every street corner, yet all I desired was that Britain should be a good place for its people, and not a stamping ground for the devil!'

I will leave it up to you to make your own minds as to Graham's politics. In his book *The Essential Cunninghame Graham*, Paul Bloomfield wrote:

'It is I think easy to form a just idea of his political position. He was not a politician at all'.