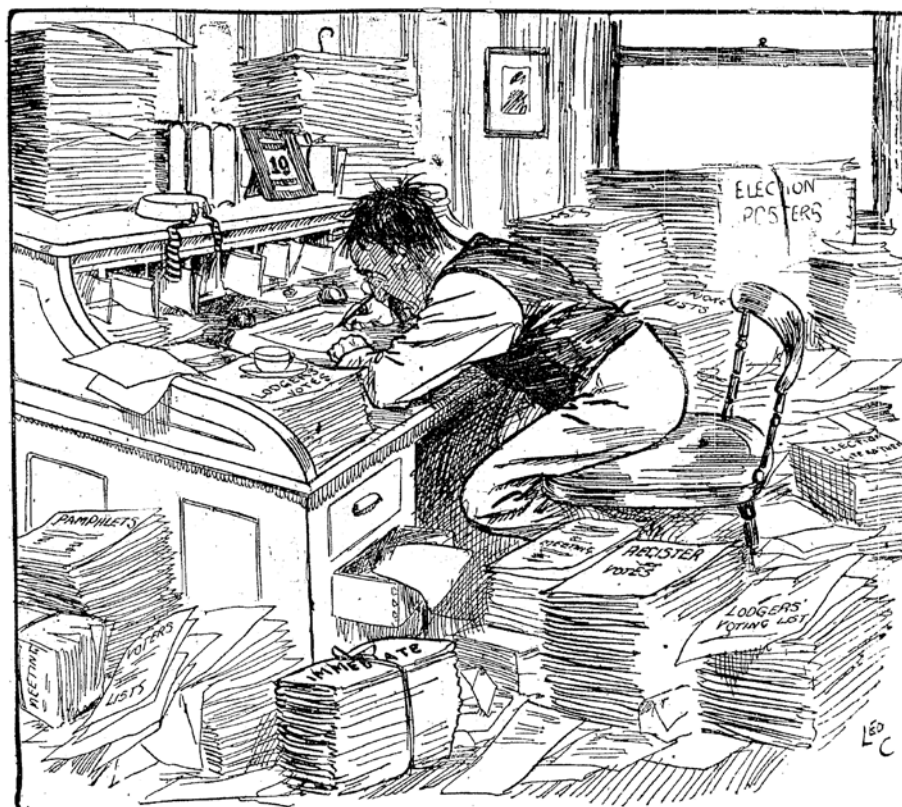


HIDDEN WORKER

THE PROFESSIONAL LIBERAL

THE SLAVE TO DUTY.

Described by the chief Liberal agent in 1909 as the 'hidden workers' of the party, the Liberal constituency agents have generally been overlooked by historians. The years after 1885 were significant ones for the agents, as they sought to respond to the effects of major electoral reforms and to establish themselves as a profession. **Kathryn Rix** examines the activities of this crucial element of the party organisation during this formative period, which included the Liberals' landslide victory in 1906.



POLITICAL PARTY AGENT: 'Wish I could get a holiday like the M.P.'s—and people call this a "lull in politics"!'

'The slave to duty'
(*Manchester Evening News*, 19 August 1910)

Speaking as guest of honour at a dinner held at the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Liberal Club in 1909, Sir Robert Hudson, the chief Liberal agent, declared that he was there 'as a representative of

Liberal organisation and of Liberal Agents. If you go for a sea-voyage, you will find a number of charming gold-braided officers, who walk the bridge, navigate the ship, and determine its course – always with the hidden assistance of certain rather grimy

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FEDERAL AGENTS, 1885 – 1910

engineers down below. It is on behalf of those hidden workers of the Liberal Party that I thank you for the honour done to me this evening.’

These ‘hidden workers’ – the constituency agents – have received remarkably little attention from historians, despite the vital role which they played in party organisation. Within a constituency, the agent not only managed local and parliamentary election contests for Liberal candidates, he also attended to the registration of voters, and served as secretary to the local Liberal association, making arrangements for its political and social activities. This article considers these key party workers during the period between 1885 and 1910.

The year 1885 saw the first general election to be held under the revised electoral conditions created by the passing of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act (1883) and the Third Reform Act (1884–85). Candidates now faced an enlarged electorate, the 1885 election being the first at which the majority of adult males had the vote. The electoral map was completely redrawn, with redistribution into largely single-

member constituencies. For the first time, limits were placed on how much candidates could spend during an election, and the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act also provided strict guidelines on how this money could be spent. The year 1910 saw the last general election before the electoral system again underwent major revision, with the 1918 Representation of the People Act.

Constituency activities: registration

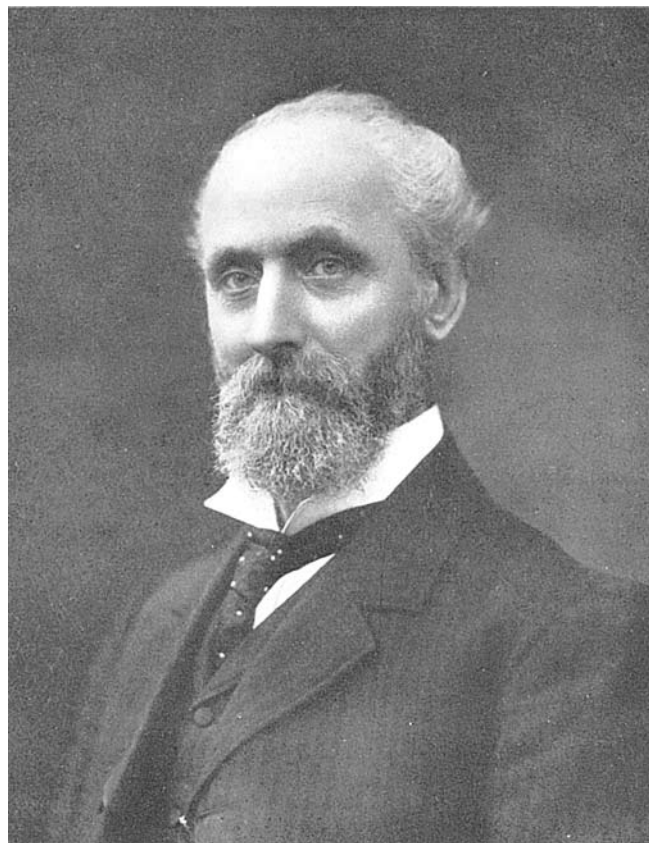
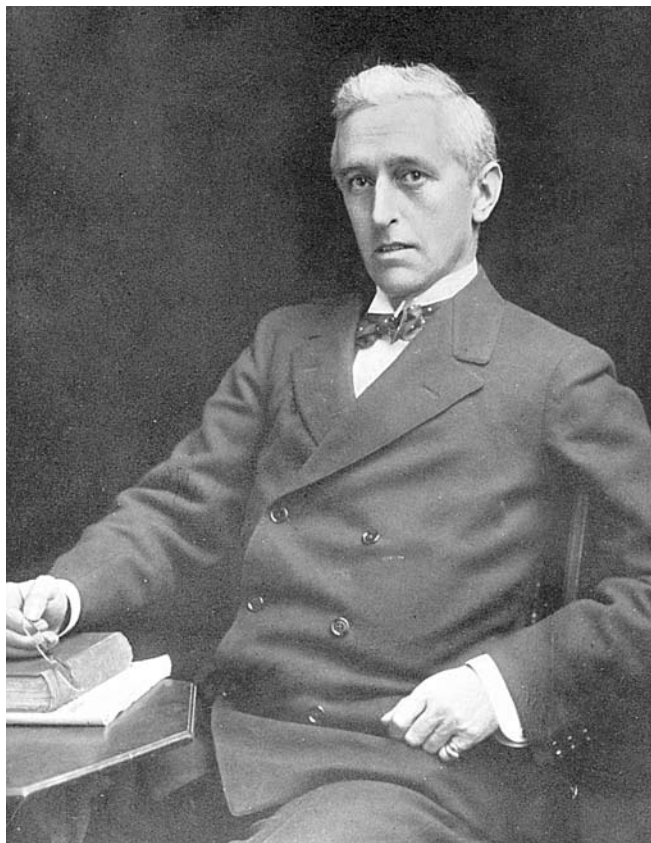
The wide variety of political work undertaken by agents in the constituencies was outlined in 1903 by Bertram Furniss, agent for Liverpool, when he produced an account of his previous year’s work. Furniss superintended a permanent staff of ten, with up to one hundred extra clerks employed at election time, and up to fifty extra workers for registration. A great deal of effort was put into registration work, marking up the new electoral registers in January, making two surveys of the constituency in June and July to collect information on those eligible to be registered, and defending registration claims and objections in the revision

In 1902, almost a quarter of a million letters were dispatched from the offices of the Liverpool Liberal Federal Council.

courts held in September. Local election contests also occupied much of Furniss’s time, with elections to the Board of Guardians and the municipal council. At the start of the year, Furniss made arrangements for the annual ward meetings, sending a personally addressed circular to every known Liberal in Liverpool. A total of 108 ward meetings were held in January and February. At the end of the year, Furniss turned his attention to collecting subscription arrears. In 1902, almost a quarter of a million letters were dispatched from the offices of the Liverpool Liberal Federal Council.²

Although the large-scale organisation managed by Furniss was found only in major cities such as Liverpool, the annual routine he described was typical of the agent’s work in many other constituencies. As Furniss’s account made clear, registration work was central to the agent’s endeavours. Although lists of voters were drawn up before 1832, it was the First Reform Act (1832) which introduced the principle of the electoral register. The parish overseers had the annual task of compiling the register, which was then scrutinised by the revising barrister.

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The political parties realised that it was in their interest to get involved in this process, lodging claims for votes on behalf of supporters, and objecting to claims made by opponents. The Second Reform Act (1867) greatly extended the work of registration. With the creation of the household and lodger franchises in borough constituencies, it produced a substantial increase in the numbers eligible to vote. By 1869, the UK electorate stood at over 2.4 million, almost three times what it had been in the immediate aftermath of the 1832 Reform Act. The Third Reform Act (1884–85) extended the household and lodger franchises to county constituencies, with the result that by 1886 there were over 5.6 million voters – roughly two in every three adult males.³

While the Reform Acts marked the most significant changes to the franchise, there were by the close of the nineteenth century well over 100 different Acts of Parliament and 660 appeal cases governing the franchise and registration process.⁴ The complexities of registration

Left: Sir Robert Hudson, chief Liberal agent. Right: J.H. Linforth, Liberal agent for Leeds, and one of the founders of the SCLA.

required an immense amount of knowledge on the part of the agent, as well as considerable financial outlay by the political parties. Not until the 1918 Representation of the People Act – which simplified the franchise and provided for more efficient compiling of the register by public officials – was this burden on party organisers relieved.

The agent's key task was to ensure that as many Liberal supporters as possible were on the electoral register. Throughout the year, information was collected on those eligible to vote, with names being sent to the parish overseers for inclusion on the voters' lists. As well as lodging claims on behalf of eligible Liberal voters, the agent would make checks on the validity of Conservative voters' claims, so that objections could be lodged where possible. The annual revision courts in September, when the revising barrister decided on the merits of the claims and objections lodged, marked the culmination of the agent's efforts. While Furniss had a considerable staff to assist

him with registration work in Liverpool, other agents were much more reliant on their own efforts. Stanley French, Liberal agent for Wellington in Somerset, described in 1910 how he toured this rural constituency each summer by bicycle. Accompanied by his wife, child, maid, office lad and dog, he camped overnight, and collected the necessary information for registration purposes from local inhabitants.⁵

While the nature of registration work was to some extent dictated by the type of constituency – urban Liverpool, with its more mobile population, requiring greater efforts than rural Somerset – another crucial factor was the funds available for registration work. The Liberal Party's weaker financial position meant that in some constituencies the Liberals went unrepresented in the revision courts, or relied on volunteer effort rather than the assistance of a qualified professional agent. When the Liberals did turn their attention to registration in previously neglected areas, the results could be strik-

ing – in 1905, the Liberals made a gain of 2,000 on the register at Wimbledon. With the Liberals unrepresented in the Wimbledon revision courts for the previous eleven years, ‘the Tories had done what they liked and had stuffed the register’, but now the Liberals ‘turned a microscope on it’.⁶ Increased Liberal effort at registration prior to 1906 was one factor contributing to their landslide election victory, showing the vital importance of the agent’s work.

Constituency activities: party organisation and political education

The agent’s activities between elections were not, however, solely concerned with the technicalities of registration, essential though this was. The agent also played a significant part in arranging the social and political activities of the local Liberal organisation, which it was hoped would help to secure and maintain support for Liberalism. Both Liberals and Conservatives were keen to provide ‘political education’ for the ever-growing number of voters. It was felt that efforts at education between elections could reap greater rewards than activity during the election itself: recommending ‘a vigorous Educational Campaign’ of public meetings and distribution of literature in the constituencies, the agents’ journal, the *SCLA Quarterly*, suggested that ‘to send out loads of literature during the excitement of an election when the electors are not in a frame of mind for reading and studying it, cannot surely be considered the most effective method of educating an electorate’.⁷ The distribution of leaflets and pamphlets was one means of political education; political lectures, meetings and debates formed another important element.

The agent’s role in this work was sometimes confined to practicalities: booking rooms

for meetings, getting posters printed, hiring men to distribute leaflets. However, some agents were more directly involved in spreading the political message. James Martin, a Liberal agent in Warwickshire and later in Suffolk, gave hundreds of lectures using the ‘magic lantern’ to provide illustrations. Drawing on his own background as a former agricultural labourer, F. C. Rivers used ‘labourers’ language’ to write letters on political topics to the local press in the rural constituencies where he served as agent, sometimes using the pseudonym ‘Tom Ploughman’. Rivers also undertook lecture tours for the Home Counties Liberal Federation. Other agents wrote political pamphlets or served as editors of local Liberal publications: Birkenhead’s agent in 1897 edited *The Free Lance*, while Frome’s agent produced *The Beacon*.⁸ The greater effort devoted to such activities illustrates how the agent’s duties were expanding during this period, and helps to explain why political agency was no longer dominated by those from legal backgrounds, a development explored further below. The *Liberal Agent*’s list of the agent’s essential attributes in 1900 included not only ‘1. Knowledge of Election Law and Practice (including Registration)’, but also ‘2. General political knowledge; 3. A fair all-round education; 4. Tact; 5. Adaptability; 6. Readiness of speech.’⁹

Constituency activities: electioneering

The culmination of the agent’s work came with the election contest. While in some cases, candidates chose to appoint a local solicitor as their election agent, by the end of this period it was more usual for the constituency agent to manage the election campaign. The agent had overall responsibility for the candidate’s election accounts and the employment of elec-

tion workers. The election agent had to ensure that the laws with regard to bribery and other corrupt and illegal practices were strictly observed. In his memoirs, J. H. Linforth recounted how in 1885, while agent for Nottingham, he stopped a local councillor who wanted to hire the traditional election ‘lambs’ (gangs of rowdies), pointing out that this would constitute illegal employment.¹⁰

Articles in the *Liberal Agent* in the run-up to elections showed that no detail was too small for the agent to consider. In 1910, W. J. Arnold advised his fellow agents to prepare a booklet of political songs for use at election meetings: ‘set to catchy tunes, they fill up an interval of waiting, and keep the audience in good humour’. While modern technology such as the motor car could provide valuable assistance in the essential work of canvassing voters and getting them to the poll, the agent needed to ensure that it was used to best effect: ‘it too frequently occurs that motor cars are aimlessly taken about by members of committees who are more desirous of having a motor ride themselves than fetching voters’.¹¹ The election agent also needed to ensure that suitable election speakers, posters and pamphlets were selected. After the establishment of the Liberal Publication Department in 1887, the central party headquarters supplied an increasing amount of election literature: at the 1906 election, 118 tons of literature were sent out, wrapped with three tons of brown paper and ten hundredweight of string.¹² However, locally produced election material – sometimes with the agent as author – remained essential.

The rise of the professional agent

The years between 1885 and 1910 were significant ones for the Liberal agents, for it was during this

Linforth recounted how in 1885, while agent for Nottingham, he stopped a local councillor who wanted to hire the traditional election ‘lambs’ (gangs of rowdies), pointing out that this would constitute illegal employment.

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period that they made concerted efforts to establish themselves as a profession. Before 1885, the typical agent was a solicitor, who handled the work of registration and electioneering on a part-time basis alongside his legal practice. After 1885, these solicitor agents were increasingly being replaced by professional agents, who undertook the work of party organisation full time. There were a variety of factors underlying this transition. With the enlarged electorate after 1885, registration work was a growing burden, making it less easy for solicitors to undertake this on a part-time basis. By placing limits on the amounts which candidates could spend at elections, the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act also boosted the importance of organisational work between elections. Candidates could now employ only a limited number of paid election workers, and paid canvassers were prohibited. Instead candidates would have to rely on volunteer election workers. Local party associations became increasingly important as a vehicle for recruiting and retaining the support of these volunteers. The expansion of local government during this period – county councils were established in 1888 and parish and district councils in 1894 – also meant a growing number of local election contests, at which the agent could provide valuable assistance to candidates. As the work of local party organisation expanded, the employment of a full-time professional agent rather than a part-time solicitor agent was desirable.

The pace of change varied from constituency to constituency. While some constituencies employed full-time non-solicitor agents even before 1885 – the Manchester Liberal Association appointed Benjamin Green, a former publisher and bookseller, as its agent in 1874 – others were still relying on the part-time services of solicitors as late as 1910. It was unsurprising that

major towns such as Manchester and Birmingham were the pioneers of professional organisation after 1867, for the Second Reform Act greatly increased the demands of registration and organisation in these large boroughs. The Manchester Liberals' decision to appoint Green may have been influenced by the Conservatives' appointment of a professional agent in 1870. The organisational activities and electoral position of opponents were certainly important factors in deciding how much effort should be put into Liberal organisation. In 1890, the Stretford Liberal Association announced its decision to devote more resources to registration work in response to renewed Conservative activity: 'either they must work on such a scale as affords hope of beating their opponents in the battle of revision, or cease operations of this nature altogether. Any intermediate course can only lead to a waste of money and effort.'¹³

Financial considerations were often paramount in deciding whether to employ a full-time agent. In London in particular, the Liberals were outstripped by their wealthier Conservative rivals when it came to party organisation. In 1893, the Metropolitan Conservative Agents' Association could muster thirty-four members, heavily outnumbering the mere handful of Liberal agents in London. Even by July 1905, with significant efforts from party headquarters to improve organisation in preparation for the 1906 election, there were only fifteen members of the Liberal agents' association covering London's sixty-two seats.¹⁴ Yet while some Conservative strongholds were left unchallenged by the Liberals, elsewhere agents helped to keep the party flag flying. 'No agent has a lonelier furrow to plough than he' was the *Liberal Agent's* verdict on William Finnemore, working in 'politically pagan' Birmingham.¹⁵ Conversely, some areas of Liberal strength lacked

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professional organisers – a Welsh branch of the Liberal agents' association was not established until 1903, but here Conservative organisation was similarly weak. While large urban constituencies were among the first to appoint full-time agents, rural county seats where traditional landed influences remained strong were slower to adopt professional organisation. However, there were signs of change even here: in Mid-Northamptonshire, influenced by the Spencer interest, a professional agent was appointed in 1903 to replace the local solicitor who had previously handled Liberal affairs.¹⁶

In addition to these regional variations, the employment of agents fluctuated with the party's electoral fortunes. Liberal agents were said to have been 'plunged into a sea of difficulty' following the party split over Home Rule in 1886: 'many Agents disappeared as such – with their Associations; and others held their positions practically as Honorary Agents, unwilling to abandon the cause'.¹⁷ The ebb and flow of political activity between elections also influenced the appointment of agents, not least because the presence of a candidate within a constituency could have a significant effect on local party funds. Following defeat in 1900, some associations economised by dispensing with their agents. Conversely, there was a flurry of appointments in anticipation of the 1906 election: the Lancashire and Cheshire Liberal agents reported in July 1905 that 'qualified Agents have been appointed in almost every constituency'.¹⁸ The growth of the Labour Party presented another potential influence on Liberal activity. Barnard Castle found itself without a Liberal agent in 1903 when Arthur Henderson resigned after seven years' service to contest, successfully, the seat for Labour. However, the embryonic nature of Labour organisation in most constituencies meant that this was not yet a major concern for the Liberals.

While there was therefore a great deal of diversity in the appointment of agents, the overall trend was towards the employment of full-time professionals. By 1898, the Liberal agents' associations had a total of 243 members, representing over half of all English constituencies. By 1906, this had increased to 321 members, including some Welsh agents. Despite this increase, the Liberals were still outstripped by their Conservative rivals. In 1896, the Conservative agents' associations had an estimated membership of just over 300, while in 1902, there were said to be 400 Conservative agents in England and Wales.¹⁹

It is worth assessing how much impact the appointment of professional agents had. The agent's registration work clearly had the potential to make an important contribution to electoral success, altering the political make-up of the electorate which would go to the poll. This was particularly significant given the large number of constituencies with small majorities. Prior to the 1900 election, thirty Liberal and forty-five Unionist seats were held with majorities of under 200.²⁰ The Liberal Publication Department declared in 1896 that 'systematic neglect' of registration by the Liberals had 'repeatedly been responsible for adverse results'.²¹ Yet registration efforts alone were not necessarily enough to tip the balance. While Liberal neglect of registration for five years prior to the 1898 Gravesend by-election was clearly a significant factor in their defeat, the *Liberal Agent* estimated that even with registration work, the Conservative majority would still have been around 200.²²

As the agents were aware, organisation – whether before the election or during the contest itself – was only one possible factor in the election result. The candidate's personal appeal, the strength of the opposition and the particular issues being campaigned on all had to be

The Liberal Agent's declaration that the 1905 North Dorset by-election 'was won by Beer' need not have alarmed Liberal temperance sympathisers: Mr Beer was the Liberal agent.

taken into account. Nevertheless, it was felt that an effective agent could have a decisive influence. The *Liberal Agent's* declaration that the 1905 North Dorset by-election 'was won by Beer' need not have alarmed Liberal temperance sympathisers: Mr Beer was the Liberal agent.²³ However, the agents recognised that there were occasions when even their best endeavours would be to little avail. They wasted little time contemplating the lessons of the 'khaki' election in 1900, for as William Lord, agent for Burnley, argued, 'the tide of jingo passion had been so overwhelming that all minor issues were submerged'. Reading 'solemn homilies' on how things might be better done in future 'would be as idle as it would have been for the generation following Noah's flood to have met in solemn conclave for the purpose of discussing the merits and demerits of umbrellas and waterproofs as a precaution against another deluge'.²⁴

Whether or not the Liberals achieved electoral success at parliamentary level, the presence of a professional agent within a constituency could have a significant impact in stimulating Liberal organisational efforts between general elections, be this through registration, political education, social activities or local government election contests.

Professional organisation

Like many other occupational groups at this time, the Liberal agents established their own organisations as part of their efforts to achieve professional status. The education and training of members was a key concern. The first Liberal agents' association was established just before the major electoral reforms of 1883–85. The Liberal Secretaries and Agents Association (LSAA) was founded in 1882, at a meeting held under the auspices of the National Liberal Federation (NLF). Although its

inaugural meeting was held in London, the LSAA's membership had a northern bias, and it seems likely that it was established in response to the North of England Conservative Agents' Association, founded in 1871.²⁵ Amongst its earliest activities was the publication of guidelines for members on how to manage elections under the restrictions laid down by the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act. From 1889, agents' meetings became a regular fixture at the NLF's annual conferences, and it was around this date that their organisation adopted a new title: the National Association of Liberal Secretaries and Agents (NALSA). In addition to its national gatherings at NLF conferences, the NALSA had district branches which organised regular meetings.

In 1893, a significant development occurred, with the emergence of a rival to the NALSA. The Society of Certificated Liberal Agents (SCLA) was founded as a breakaway movement from the NALSA. The key reason for the split was the belief among the SCLA's founders that agents should hold certificates of proficiency. Agents would have to qualify for these certificates either through experience or by passing an examination. The SCLA's honorary secretary, Fred Nash, observed that 'it was the necessity for a real practical test to keep out interlopers and duffers that compelled the formation of a new society'.²⁶ In February 1894, the SCLA held its first examination, with two separate papers, Registration, and Elections. In addition to technical questions on registration and election law, candidates were asked more wide-ranging questions on electioneering. The following question provides one example:

A Bye-Election is announced in a constituency where there is little or no organisation and a heavy majority against the Liberal Party. You are the nearest *Certificated Agent*, and you

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are appointed to manage the Election, and are authorised to spend any sum not exceeding the maximum. Indicate your plan of campaign.²⁷

Passing either the Registration or the Elections paper entitled an agent to become a Fellow of the SCLA. The alternative means of qualifying as a Fellow was five years' full-time experience as an agent. Those not meeting either requirement could join at the lower grade of Associate. In contrast, the NALSA neither held examinations nor issued certificates to its members. In holding examinations, the SCLA was clearly emulating the Conservative agents: the National Society of Conservative Agents had held its first examination in 1892.

This division among the Liberal agents saw heated debates at the 1894 NLF conference, which saw the SCLA's formal launch. William Lord, agent for Burnley, echoed the thoughts of many NALSA members when he declared that 'there was an indefinable thing about an agent which you could not examine'. While agents did require knowledge of registration and election law, they needed other qualities, such as tact, adaptability, and determination. The manner in which the SCLA was founded also aroused anger. The society came about as the result of a NALSA sub-committee established to consider the question of issuing certificates of proficiency. In establishing a new organisation, the sub-committee members had clearly exceeded their remit. The NALSA's president, Benjamin Green, recently retired as agent for Manchester, complained that agents in London and the North had not been consulted about the scheme. It appears that regional loyalties fuelled the divisions on this question. While those who supported Green's attack on the SCLA came largely from the North of England,

the SCLA's seven founders all had close connections with the central party organisation. William Woodings, secretary to the NLF's Registration and Elections Department, and William Allard, secretary to the Home Counties Liberal Federation, both worked at party headquarters. The other five – Edwin Perry (Devon Liberal Federation), J. H. Linforth (Leeds), Fred Nash (Colchester), George Docwra (Coventry) and John Skinner (Sheffield) – were all experienced agents, who had served as district agents for the NLF in 1890–91.²⁸

However, once the initial acrimony surrounding the SCLA's formation had subsided, the two organisations coexisted peaceably. Indeed there was cooperation on several matters. In September 1895, the SCLA established its own professional journal, the *SCLA Quarterly*. With the fifth issue, in July 1896, this was renamed the *Liberal Agent*, and became the official organ of both societies. Green's death in January 1896 removed a key opponent of the SCLA. Analysis of the membership lists reveals that there was considerable overlap between the two bodies: in 1898, two-thirds of the SCLA's members also belonged to the NALSA, while nearly a third of the NALSA's members belonged to the SCLA. This undoubtedly facilitated the amalgamation of the two societies, a prospect first raised in December 1899, when the NALSA appointed a committee to consider the question of issuing proficiency certificates. Once concerns about safeguarding the value of certificates had been resolved, with the decision to retain strict requirements for those wishing to qualify as Fellows, the two societies formally merged in July 1901. The united body took the title of the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents (SCALA). By 1906, the SCALA could boast a total of

321 members in England and Wales.²⁹

This high membership figure reflected the society's usefulness to its members. The SCALA and its predecessors aimed to provide professional education for all members, not just new entrants to the profession. To this end, regular meetings were held at both national and regional level. The topics discussed ranged from the technicalities of registration and election law to the practicalities of election campaigning and party organisation. For example, at their meeting at the 1898 NLF conference, NALSA members considered 'Bazaars as a means of raising funds for Liberal Association Work', before debating the merits of 'The Scottish Registration System'.

Agents could give each other the benefit of their experience: in 1899, Thomas Newbould advised NALSA members who wished to use the 'magic lantern' to show slides during political lectures that they should avoid using acetylene gas in their lanterns, due to its smell and its explosive properties. Agents' meetings provided an invaluable opportunity for informal discussion with fellow professionals. Amos Whitehead, agent for Darlington, suggested that 'an hour's chat with a brother' on a legal or organisational point could be more useful than 'a day's reading up'. Links between agents were also fostered through the *Liberal Agent*, which in addition to its technical and educational content carried reports of agents' meetings and included biographies and other news about agents. Professional solidarity was given an additional boost with the establishment of an agents' benevolent fund in 1900.³⁰

The professional agents' backgrounds

One important question is who the members of the profession

William Lord, agent for Burnley, echoed the thoughts of many NALSA members when he declared that 'there was an indefinable thing about an agent which you could not examine'.

were, if agents were no longer drawn predominantly from the ranks of solicitors. The biographies published in the *Liberal Agent* revealed that agents came from a wide range of backgrounds, from agricultural labourers to journalists, from teachers to factory workers. Other previous occupations followed by Liberal agents included a draper, a jewellery manufacturer, a corn merchant, a coach-builder, a cabinet-maker, an engineer, a joiner, an auctioneer and a miner.

A common path into the agents' profession was to begin by undertaking voluntary work for the local Liberal Party – canvassing voters at elections or serving on local committees. One example is provided by David Hirst, a Halifax carpet-weaver. Born in 1851, Hirst worked in the mills from the age of eight. In 1875, he joined the Halifax Liberal Association, and subsequently played an active role, serving as a ward representative on the executive committee, speaking at meetings, and collecting subscriptions. When the Liberal agent, Mr Brook, was taken ill during the registration court proceedings in 1893, Hirst was fetched from the mill to take his place. On Brook's retirement in 1895, Hirst was appointed as agent, quitting his former occupation after thirty-five years' service. A. K. Durham, who worked in an accountant's office, assisted at the 1883 Newcastle by-election which saw John Morley elected as Liberal MP. In 1884, Durham served as secretary to the annual temperance festival held on Newcastle town moor, a three-day event attended by over 100,000 people. Following this demonstration of his organisational prowess, it was suggested that Durham apply for the Newcastle agent's post, and he was duly appointed.³¹

While the majority of agents during this period moved into political work from other professions, there were some

At the NLF's 1899 conference, the NLF President, Robert Spence Watson, declared that 'no one had rendered more services to the Liberal Party than the agents had'.

individuals for whom agency was their first career. In 1906, the *Liberal Agent* proudly reported on 'A Trio of young Certificated Liberal Agents', Oliver Linforth, Norman Rivers and Walter Belcher. All three were sons of agents, and began their training by assisting in their fathers' offices from a young age: Rivers gained his first experience of by-election work aged just twelve. Rivers and Belcher then went on to train in the offices of other experienced agents, following which Rivers became agent for Mid-Northamptonshire, while Belcher, aged twenty-one, was appointed as agent for Eccles. After three years assisting his father in Leeds and Pudsey, Linforth temporarily left the profession to work in South Africa, first as the representative of a Leeds cycle manufacturer, then serving as a volunteer in the Boer War. However, on his return to England in 1903, he took up political work once more, and like Rivers and Belcher, he passed the SCALA examination.³² While these men followed in their fathers' footsteps to join the agents' profession, one leading Liberal agent, Fred Nash, urged that his own sons should not enter the agents' ranks, because 'the "plums" in that profession are too few'.³³

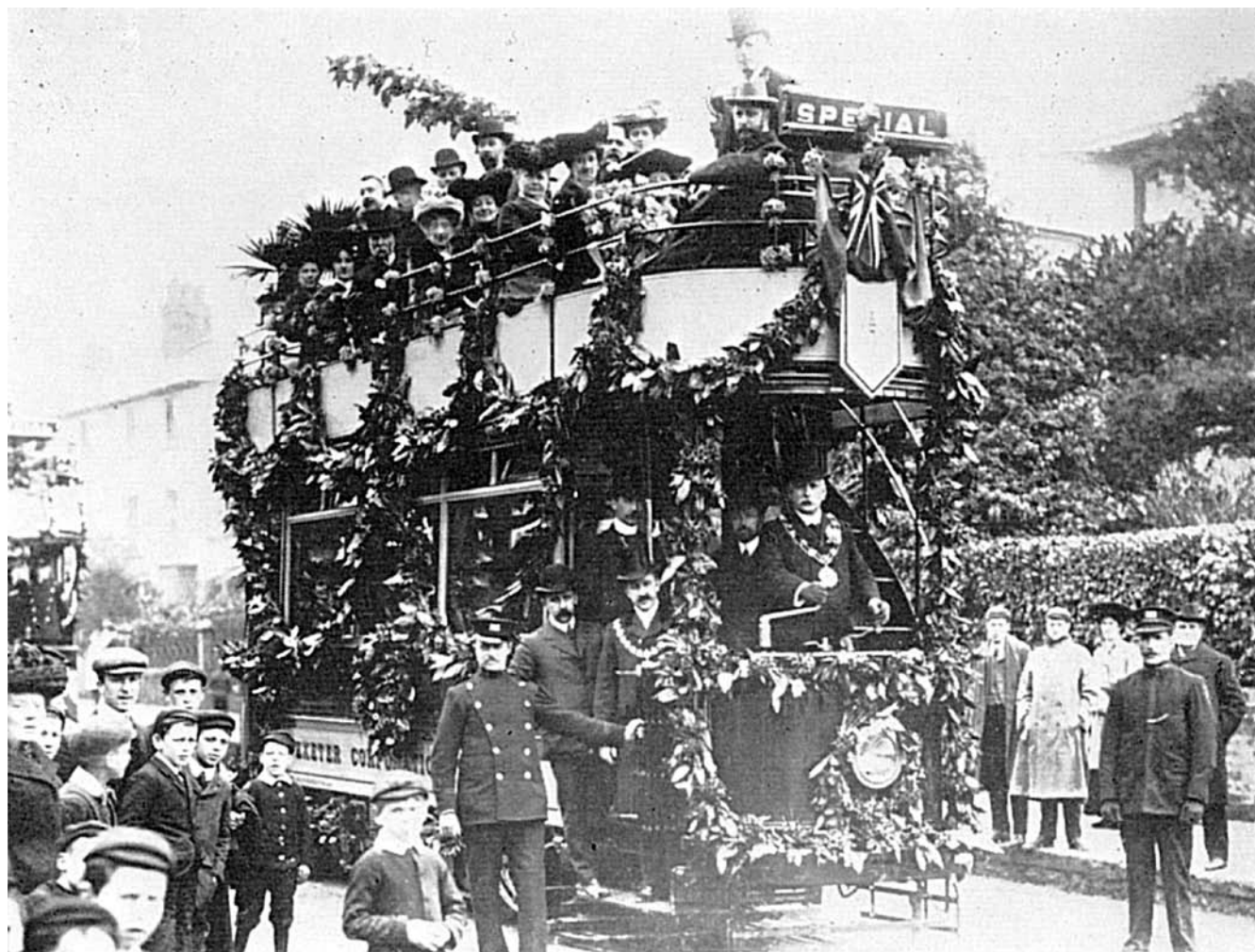
The agent's status

Nash's comments touched on an issue which was a recurrent concern for the professional agents: the agent's status. For the agents, this was closely bound up with the question of their pay and their employment conditions.

At party conferences, agents were lauded by leading party figures for the vital role they played within the party organisation. At the NLF's 1899 conference, the NLF President, Robert Spence Watson, declared that 'no one had rendered more services to the Liberal Party than the agents had', while Campbell-Bannerman described the agents

as 'the skeleton – the bones on which the flesh and blood of the party are built', expressing admiration for their 'devotion and intelligence'.³⁴ However, for the agents, it appeared that there was a gap between party conference rhetoric and the day-to-day reality of their situation in the constituencies. There were regular complaints that the salaries which agents received were not in keeping with their professional skills, responsibilities and aspirations: the *Liberal Agent* protested that 'for the salary of an inferior foreman they expect a man to live and dress as a gentleman [and] ... to know all the intricacies of a most intricate branch of law'.³⁵ The fact that solicitors continued to be appointed as election agents, in some cases over the head of the local professional agent, also provoked anger. A further grievance was the lack of job security which agents faced. The trio of young agents recorded by the *Liberal Agent* in 1906 provided a case in point: Linforth had just lost his position as agent for Ashford after only fifteen months, following the Liberal candidate's defeat, while Rivers had been dismissed despite securing a large Liberal majority in his constituency, because the MP wished to give the agent's post to a relative.

It is worth noting that Conservative agents at this time were voicing similar concerns about status, pay and employment conditions. However, for Liberal agents, the problem appeared particularly acute because of the party's weakened financial position in the aftermath of the Home Rule split in 1886. Lord Rosebery himself declared at the 1896 NLF conference that 'the great want of the age is a want of funds. I do not seek to parade the poverty of the Liberal Party ... but we have lost almost entirely the great and wealthy of the earth'.³⁶ Given that the agent's salary represented a sizeable proportion of local association



expenditure, it is clear that this had significant implications for the agents.

How much then could a Liberal agent expect to earn? Annual salaries varied from constituency to constituency, with the financial position of the local association obviously affecting the sums on offer. At the top end of the scale, the Manchester Liberal Federation in 1903 offered a salary of £500 to its new agent, Fred Burn. This was, however, exceptional, with the more usual salary range being between £150 and £300. Yet even at this level, it was clear that the agents' profession provided an opportunity for advancement, particularly given the relatively humble backgrounds from which many agents came. Fred Nash provides a good example: having left school aged twelve to earn 4d. a day bird-scaring, he then went on to become an office boy, supplementing his 4s. weekly

wage by milking cows, sewing canvas bags and bookkeeping in the evenings. A move to Birmingham to enter the coal trade brought him into contact with Francis Schnadhorst of the NLF, and in 1882 he became agent for Handsworth. By the time of his death in 1906, he had risen through the ranks to become one of the leading members of the profession.³⁷

At the opposite end of the scale from Burn and Nash, however, many agents were far less well rewarded. In 1903, the Liberal agency for Holmfirth was advertised at a salary of two pounds a week (£104 annually), for which the agent was expected to work a forty-eight-hour week, with his duties including 'the collection of subscriptions, visitation of all parts of the Division, assisting in arrangements for public and committee meetings, advising local secretaries and other Liberals, circulating leaf-

Edwin Perry, secretary to the Devon Liberal Federation and one of the founders of the SCLA, presiding over the opening of the municipal tramway as Mayor of Exeter in 1905.

lets, pamphlets &c., by personal distribution or by post' [and] all necessary work in regard to the Registration of Voters'.³⁸ It was little wonder that some agents chose to leave the profession in the hopes of greater remuneration and job security. In 1897, the *Liberal Agent* reported that Doncaster's agent was leaving for the better-paid position of clerk to Worksop District Council, while Dartford's agent was quitting to become secretary to the Dartford School Board.³⁹ The varying levels of pay on offer also contributed to relatively high levels of mobility within the profession, as agents sought to secure what Nash deemed to be the 'plums' of the profession. Burn beat around eighty other applicants for the Manchester agency in 1903.⁴⁰

Despite these concerns about pay and related questions, it is clear that the agent's status was improving during this period.

Many agents became men of standing within their constituencies, involved not only with the political work for which they were employed, but with a wide range of social, philanthropic, sporting and educational activities. While agent for Colchester, Nash served as secretary to Colchester Football Club, and helped establish the Pearson Charity Cup to raise money for the local hospital. Other Liberal agents were involved with causes such as temperance and adult education. Agents also sought election to local office: Exeter's mayor in 1905, when he presided over the opening of the municipal tramway, was Councillor Edwin Perry, one of the SCLA's founders, agent for Ashburton and secretary to the Devon Liberal Federation. Perry also served as a JP, as president of Exeter's Pleasant Sunday Association, and was involved with local schools and hospitals.⁴¹ The outside activities in which agents participated in their constituencies were of service to them in their political work, bringing them into contact with a broader section of the electorate, rather than Liberal supporters alone. Agents were able to gather local knowledge which would be of use in their work of registration and electioneering.

The period between 1885 and 1910 was clearly a highly significant one for the Liberal agents. It saw the agents establish themselves as a profession, with their own professional organisation, journal and examinations. Legal dominance of political agency had given way to a new group of individuals who took on the role of constituency agent as a full-time position. The varied backgrounds from which these new agents came was indicative of the wider responsibilities which the agent's work now entailed. Knowledge of registration and election law was still essential, but agents also played a significant part in the work of political education and party organisation.

Many agents became men of standing within their constituencies.

Dr Kathryn Rix is a Fellow and College Lecturer in History at New Hall, Cambridge. She is currently preparing a book entitled Politics and Professionalisation: The Party Agent and Electoral Culture in England, 1880–1910, to be published in the Royal Historical Society's Studies in History series.

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