

# THE STRANGING LIBERAL BIRMINGHAM

While George Dangerfield's entertaining classic *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935) must be taken with a large pinch of salt, there can be no gainsaying the strange death of Liberal Birmingham. Strange, because a city which for half a century had had a plausible claim to being the most Radical in Britain became, in the aftermath of 'the great geological rift' of 1886, a principal stronghold of Unionism, and more especially of its Liberal variety. **Roger Ward** examines the strange death of Liberal Birmingham.

Right: Joseph Chamberlain speaking at Birmingham Town Hall in the 1890s, watched by his wife

**I**N 1868 JOHN BRIGHT had famously declared Birmingham to be as Liberal as the sea is salt. From 1886 until 1969 no Liberal represented any Birmingham constituency, and in the years before the outbreak of war in 1914 the Liberal Party was also struggling to maintain a minority presence on a City Council it had once so effortlessly monopolised. Birmingham's politics did not fit easily into the national trend and its political behaviour has been described as 'exceptionalism', the main feature of which was the consistent support given by an overwhelmingly working-class electorate to parties conventionally described as right wing. Birmingham therefore seemed to defy the generalisation that politics was becoming increasingly class-based. This pattern continued through successive decades and was not finally broken until 1945. The 'exceptionalism' of Birmingham and, to a lesser extent, its region had an important bearing on national politics, underpinning the hegemony of the Conservative Party in the years between 1886 and 1906 and again in the two decades between the wars.'

The interplay of personalities is one of the more intriguing dimensions of politics, the importance of which should never be underestimated. Birmingham was for a generation the power base of Joseph Chamberlain, while John Bright,

also a key actor in the great Liberal schism of 1886, represented the city in parliament from 1857 until his death in 1889. Chamberlain, singled out by the Irish Nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell as 'the man who killed Home Rule', went on to play a critical role in the making and shaping of Unionism, asserting a control over Birmingham's politics without parallel anywhere else in urban Britain. The tentacles of Chamberlain's influence reached out also into the region of which Birmingham was the heart, his hegemony in the three counties adjacent to Birmingham conceded by his fellow Unionist leaders. As the Birmingham Liberals were driven relentlessly to the sidelines, it was fatally easy for them to pin their travails on 'the cult of personality': understandable but not in itself a sufficient explanation. There were of course other factors at work, by no means all peculiar to Birmingham. Whilst the damage done to the party by the schism of 1886 is undeniable, it has been commonly argued by historians that the drift away from Liberalism was already evident a decade or so earlier. Theodor Hoppen, for instance, discerned a trend of disaffection among the middle classes in the 1870s:

Disraeli, by some imperceptible and probably passive process, was more and more successful in

# THE DEATH OF BIRMINGHAM

making the Liberal Party seem dangerous to men of property.<sup>2</sup>

In the specific case of Birmingham, Asa Briggs perceived:

... signs of resistance to the long Liberal sway, signs which can be traced in the local press, in municipal election results, in pamphlets and political squibs, and in the School Board campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

On this reading, the split over Irish home rule, however crucial, was not the sole reason for the crisis which kept the Liberal Party out of power for two decades, however much it may have accelerated trends already in train. Birmingham, England's second city, provided the most spectacular example of Liberal decline.

## Prelude

The 1870s have often been referred to as 'the Liberal Golden Age' in Birmingham's political history. In truth, this description could well be applied to the first half-century of Birmingham's existence as a parliamentary borough from 1832 and an incorporated borough from 1838. Thirteen men represented Birmingham in parliament between 1832 and 1886. All, with the single exception of Richard Spooner from 1844 to 1847, were Radical Liberals.



## THE STRANGE DEATH OF LIBERAL BIRMINGHAM

When the first borough council was elected on Boxing Day 1838, all successful candidates were Liberals, notwithstanding that Tories had contested all forty-eight seats. In 1865 the Birmingham Liberal Association (BLA) was formed. In 1868 it was reorganised to defeat the minority clause of the Second Reform Act of 1867 and ensured that all three Birmingham MPs were Liberals. The 'caucus', as Disraeli dubbed the BLA, was widely recognised then and later as the most effective political organisation of its day and was widely imitated, not least by its Tory critics. Its theory of representative government was a simple one – winner takes all – and it enforced a Liberal monopoly on all elected positions. Purging the council of opponents of reform, it provided the platform for the Joseph Chamberlain-led 'municipal revolution' of the 1870s which, together with his militant role in the National Education League, established his national reputation as 'the most outstanding mayor in English history'.<sup>3</sup> In 1876 he replaced George Dixon as Birmingham's third MP and quickly established a reputation as a leading Radical. In 1877 he founded and led the National Liberal Federation (NLF) with the intention of making it a platform for a Radical push for control of the party. In 1880 Gladstone reluctantly included him in his government as president of the Board of Trade and in campaigning strenuously for the Third Reform Act of 1884 he was placing himself firmly in the Birmingham tradition laid down by Thomas Attwood and John Bright. Thanks to his close friendship and alliance with Sir Charles Dilke at the Local Government Board, Birmingham received favourable treatment in the Redistribution of Seats Act of 1885. Its parliamentary cohort increased from three to seven, a level at which it remained until 1918.

Salisbury's insistence on coupling the Redistribution Act with the Third Reform Act was rooted in the calculation that the transition from the list system to single member constituencies would advantage the Conservative Party. This system change, together with the enfranchisement of some two million new voters, made the general election of 1885 a particularly intriguing one. Chamberlain

prepared for battle in characteristic fashion by launching a series of reform proposals which George Goschen dubbed 'the unauthorised programme'. The Birmingham Conservative Association (BCA) had enormously improved its organisation in the previous few years and expectations were aroused by the patronage of Lord Randolph Churchill, who calculated that success in Birmingham would be the quickest route to political advancement. He pitched himself against John Bright in the Central Division where many businessmen were located. The 'caucus' duly went into action and the Conservatives were repelled in all seven divisions, Churchill losing to Bright by a margin of 773 votes. Though a disappointment for the BCA, it could take comfort from its combined poll of some 23,000 votes against the Liberals' 34,000, a modest improvement on 1880 and particularly on 1874 when it had failed to field a candidate. Its performance in municipal elections, however, continued to be dismal and the evidence of this led Michael Hurst to reject Briggs' contention that the Tories were making progress.<sup>5</sup>

The result of the general election of November 1885 fell short of Liberal expectations. Chamberlain believed that his proposals for the provision of allotments and smallholdings ('three acres and a cow') had had a positive effect in rural constituencies but lamented the absence of 'an urban cow'. Chamberlain attributed the comparative strength of the Tories in urban constituencies to fair trade propaganda, which was a prominent issue in a general election for the first time. All seven Tory candidates in Birmingham espoused fair trade with varying degrees of enthusiasm and the same was true in large parts of the region. 'I believe the serious cause of failure was the Fair Trade cry to which sufficient attention has not been given by the Liberal Party', wrote Chamberlain to a friend. As president of the Board of Trade in the previous government it had fallen to his lot to defend free trade, which he had done trenchantly. He was aided and abetted by the old warhorse John Bright, who accused the Tories of returning to protection 'like a dog to his vomit'.

The failure of the fair traders to come up with a coherent set

of proposals upon which all their potential supporters could agree rendered them politically impotent, but questions concerning Britain's trade policy and its relationship to Empire became part of Britain's table talk from the 1880s onwards.<sup>6</sup> Its effect on Liberal ideology should not be underestimated. For many, especially among middle-class entrepreneurs, Cobdenism ceased to be a matter of faith as Britain experienced bouts of depression in an era of intensifying economic competition.

Fair trade was, however, reduced to insignificance when compared to the issue of Ireland. Parnell had committed the strategic blunder of throwing the Irish vote behind the Tories and his eighty-six MPs were just sufficient to maintain Salisbury's government in office. It was an unstable situation which could not last, and in December Herbert Gladstone's flying of 'the Hawarden kite', informing the press that his father was contemplating the establishment of a parliament in Dublin, signalled a new and momentous departure. In January 1886 the government fell as a result of an amendment to the address composed by Chamberlain and proposed by Collings. The Liberal split began at that point, Lord Hartington and his Whig followers declining to join Gladstone's third administration.

The events that followed provide an exemplary illustration of the importance of personal relations in politics. Chamberlain, offered the Admiralty in the new administration, understandably refused and requested the Colonial Office instead. This was rejected by Gladstone, who considered the position of Secretary of State to be above Chamberlain's status and experience. The two men settled on the appropriate but junior office of the Local Government Board. Gladstone compounded his poor management by seeking to reduce the junior ministerial salaries of Chamberlain's acolytes Jesse Collings and Henry Broadhurst. Harcourt, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, stepped into the row and persuaded Gladstone to change his mind. It was a grave error to alienate Chamberlain, a good friend to those willing to subordinate themselves to his imperious will but an implacable opponent.

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Already he harboured an animus against Parnell, whom he believed to have reneged on an agreement to support his proposed reforms of Irish local government, and against Cardinal Manning and the Irish bishops who had first encouraged and then discouraged a proposed visit to Ireland. Chamberlain's feelings of antipathy towards the Gladstone–Parnell combination made his acquiescence to anything they proposed less likely. His own proposals for the reform of local government in Ireland, which would have entailed the establishment of a central board in Dublin, had been rejected in Cabinet in the previous May. Insinuations on the part of his critics that he had shown inconsistency on the question of Irish independence cannot be sustained. His proposals for reforms in Ireland had consistently stopped short of independence. To Chamberlain, Ireland was not a nation but a province which must remain subject to the imperial parliament at Westminster. He agreed to join the government since Gladstone had not yet revealed his hand. When Gladstone did so, Chamberlain drew the inference that the proposals would lead inevitably to Irish independence and on 26 March 1886 he resigned along with Sir George Trevelyan, Secretary of State for Scotland. The animus between Gladstone and Chamberlain became more overt when, on 9 April, Gladstone several times interrupted Chamberlain's resignation speech, claiming – erroneously – that Chamberlain did not have the Queen's permission to refer to a proposed Land Purchase Bill which had been discussed in Cabinet but not yet in parliament. It was, as Lord Randolph Churchill so aptly said, 'diamond cut diamond'. The Liberal split deepened as Chamberlain set about rallying Radical opposition to Gladstone's proposals.

### The reaction in Birmingham

Retaining support in his stronghold in Birmingham was vital to Chamberlain. Even here, where his support was greatest, it was a high-risk strategy to set himself against the GOM, whose charisma and authority was so much greater than his own. Already supporters warned him of currents of criticism, which he came especially to associate with

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Frank Schnadhorst, secretary of both the BLA and the NLF. On 21 April, Chamberlain made his case to a crowded and excited meeting of the Liberal '2000'. Whatever his inner feelings he dared not attack Irish home rule in principle and centred his criticism on Gladstone's proposals and especially on non-retention of Irish MPs at Westminster, a test of whether or not Ireland would remain a part of Great Britain. By expressing its continued confidence in Chamberlain, the meeting endorsed his demand for amendments to the bill but Dr Robert Dale, the chairman, made it clear that Gladstone's leadership of the party was not in question. Dale, a Congregational minister and chairman of the Central Nonconformist Committee, was a highly influential figure in Birmingham politics, sympathetic to Chamberlain but anxious to protect the unity of the Liberal Party. Chamberlain had surmounted one hurdle but suffered a sharp setback in May when, at a meeting of the NLF in London, Gladstone was given an enthusiastic vote of confidence and Chamberlain came under sharp and very personal attack. The Birmingham delegates all resigned and the headquarters of the NLF was moved from Birmingham to London. Gladstone was plainly winning the contest for Radical hearts and minds. The loss of the NLF entailed the loss of Frank Schnadhorst who moved to London where he became a close adviser to the Prime Minister. Chamberlain was bitterly offended by the actions of the NLF, upset too by the growing gulf between himself and erstwhile friends and allies, especially John Morley and Sir Charles Dilke.

Among those seeking to console Chamberlain was John Bright:

Jealousy is the great enemy of union and Birmingham has been too large and too earnest to please those affected by envy.<sup>7</sup>

Bright's own opposition to Gladstone's Home Rule Bill was a huge asset to the Unionists, the doubts and suspicions many Liberals felt about Chamberlain's conduct could scarcely apply to Bright, a great moral force – especially among Nonconformists. For much of Bright's life he had been a friend of Ireland and a consistent supporter

of reform there. But the obstructionist behaviour of Parnell's party at Westminster and the multiple acts of violence committed by nationalists both in Ireland and on the mainland had disgusted him. Bright took to calling the Irish Nationalists the 'rebel party' and suspected that they hated England more than they loved Ireland. He did not believe that they would abide by any agreement and feared for the predominantly Protestant people of Ulster. It was Bright who coined the phrase 'Home Rule is Rome Rule'.<sup>8</sup> Bright was, as always, his own man. He resisted the blandishments of Gladstone and refused to join either of the Unionist factions but he did send a letter to Chamberlain stating his intention to vote against the second reading of the bill, a letter Chamberlain used to stiffen the backbones of potential refuseniks. Bright's known opposition was also, of course, a great asset in Birmingham where he was trusted, even revered. Shannon is not alone in believing that the 'most damaging blow struck at Gladstone was by Bright'.<sup>9</sup>

The alienation felt by Bright was no doubt widespread. Many people were shocked by the violence which seemed inseparable from the Irish nationalist cause. The attitude expressed by a Birmingham journal, *The Gridiron*, was widely replicated:

Whilst Birmingham leads the van in every struggle for freedom, she has no sympathy for the cut-throats who mutilate women and maim cattle, and call that a struggle for freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Any animus felt towards the Irish cannot be explained by reference to large-scale immigration. Pelling estimates the Irish population of Birmingham to have been no more than 1 per cent and considers them to have been well integrated into the community.<sup>11</sup>

The view expressed by Salisbury that the Irish were no more fit for self-government than the Hottentots was dismissive and contemptuous but may have struck a chord.<sup>12</sup> In nailing the Liberal Party's colours to the mast of Irish home rule and choosing partnership with Parnell as opposed to seeking compromise with the Unionists in his party

## THE STRANGE DEATH OF LIBERAL BIRMINGHAM



Gladstone was, as it proved, courting electoral disaster.

On 7 June 1886 the second reading of the Irish Home Rule Bill was defeated by 343 to 313. Of the ninety-three Liberals who voted against, at least two-thirds looked to Hartington for leadership, but most of the obloquy fell on Chamberlain. Cries of 'Judas' and 'Traitor' pursued him as he left the chamber and Parnell famously muttered 'There goes the man who killed Home Rule'. Again Bright sought to console him. In a letter dated 28 August 1886 he wrote:

I look on this chaos with something like disgust – and wonder that anyone should place the blame anywhere but on Mr. Gladstone, at whose door lies the confusion which prevails.<sup>13</sup>

Gladstone dissolved parliament and appealed to the electorate in what became a very confused general election. In Birmingham a middle group led by Dr Dale and J. T. Bunce, editor of the *Birmingham Daily Post* and the most influential publicist of his time in the Midlands, was highly sympathetic to Chamberlain but was above all anxious to retain the unity of the Liberal Party. This could best be done by returning all existing Liberal MPs. Five of the seven had come out for Unionism: Chamberlain, Bright, Joe's brother-in-law William Kenrick, George Dixon

Birmingham under Chamberlain: the Bull Ring in the 1880s

and Joseph Powell Williams. Both Kenrick and Powell Williams were Chamberlain acolytes, bound to him by personal loyalty. Bright, of course, was very much his own man and so too was Dixon, who by no means always saw eye to eye with Chamberlain. In his address to the electors of Edgbaston, Dixon set out his objections to home rule, making it plain that his main objection was to Gladstone's proposed Land Bill which he feared could cost the British taxpayer as much as £150 million.<sup>14</sup> Dixon, was, and remained, a very committed free trader and may have been influenced by Parnell's hints that an independent Ireland would resort to protection. On the positive side, Dixon advocated agrarian reform and a devolution of powers which would be capable of extension to other parts of the United Kingdom.

The five Unionists represented a formidable phalanx. All were successful men of business and all but Bright could boast a distinguished record of municipal service and of philanthropy. There could be little doubt that their objection to home rule would carry great weight among Birmingham's middle-class voters. These men, and especially Chamberlain and Dixon, also had great credibility with the organised working class. The Birmingham Trades Council had given firm support to their campaigns for education reform and had affiliated to the National Educational

League.<sup>15</sup> Chamberlain had been at pains to express his support for trade union principles and had cultivated leading trade unionists such as W. J. Davis, founder and leader of the Brassworkers' Society, whom he had sponsored for election to the Birmingham School Board in 1876 and the town council in 1880. When Chamberlain stood for Sheffield in 1874 it was at the invitation of the Sheffield Trades Council.<sup>16</sup> The Unionists therefore could reasonably expect to command support from across the electoral spectrum. The remaining two MPs had voted with the Gladstonians, though reluctantly. Broadhurst was a protégé of Chamberlain but saved his patron embarrassment by deserting Birmingham for Nottingham. Chamberlain seized the opportunity to bring in his friend and ally Jesse Collings, recently unseated in Ipswich for electoral fraud. Collings, a former alderman and mayor, was a popular figure in the town but nevertheless met with considerable opposition among the Liberals of Bordesley, many of whom expressed a preference for Schnadhorst, evidence of unrest among activists at the grass roots. The remaining division, East Birmingham, posed by far the greatest problem. Alderman William Cook, a pin and rivet manufacturer, was a much respected figure in the town and in 1885 had defeated Churchill's protégé Henry Matthews. Cook had voted in the Gladstonian lobby



but he subsequently declared himself ready to support amendments to the bill, making it more difficult to oppose his re-election.

Division among Liberals was by no means Chamberlain's only worry. The long persecuted Birmingham Tories were not unnaturally delighted by Liberal disarray and sought to reap electoral advantage. They were hindered, however, by Salisbury's decision not to oppose the return to parliament of Liberal Unionists. The mutual hostility of Conservatives and Liberal Unionists would be a perennial feature of Birmingham politics for years to come, manifesting itself especially in municipal elections in which the issue of Ireland appeared an irrelevancy.<sup>17</sup> Chamberlain dared not be seen openly to cooperate either with Salisbury's Tories or Hartington's faction although he was surreptitiously in contact with both. His conduit to the Tory Party was the idol of the Birmingham Conservative Association (BCA), Lord Randolph Churchill, a curious friendship springing up between them. Churchill persuaded him that the East Birmingham division was the necessary price to be paid for Tory support and Chamberlain resolved to bite the bullet. The decision to support Matthews' candidature against Cook was one that members of the middle group such as Dale found difficult to swallow, Dale himself speaking in support of Cook.<sup>18</sup> It is reasonable to surmise that many Liberal electors abstained.

As the general election approached it was the Gladstonians who fired the first shot. On 7 June 1886 the local press reported the formation of the Birmingham Home Rule Association. The initiators were two councillors, Dr Robert Lawson Tait, a distinguished surgeon and chairman of the Health Committee, and T. I. Moore a town councillor and a stockbroker. The association soon gave evidence of considerable support. At its first rally ten days later, in the town hall, its platform included a number of local notables – George Tangye, J. A. Langford, Frank Wright, the councillor son of the late John Skirrow Wright, Alderman William Cook, George Baker and several other councillors including the Labour leader Eli Bloor. The principal speaker

was an Irish nationalist MP, John Redmond. There was growing evidence, too, of Gladstonian support in the Divisional Councils – opposition to Collings in Bordesley and Kenrick in North Birmingham while even Dixon in Edgbaston was requested to support in the coming parliament 'a measure for the establishment of a legislative assembly in Ireland for the control of Irish affairs'.<sup>19</sup>

Alarmed by the drift of Liberal opinion Chamberlain responded characteristically by convening a meeting in the Birmingham and Midland Institute to form his own pressure group, the National Radical Union. The attendance was depressingly small and attendees could plainly hear the sounds of the larger gathering across Chamberlain Square.<sup>20</sup> The election that followed in July, however, brought some relief. The five sitting MPs were returned unopposed while Collings convincingly beat off the challenge of Lawson Tait in Bordesley, with a majority of over 3,000 on a low poll of 49 per cent. Somewhat surprisingly Matthews defeated Cook in East Birmingham, on a poll of 62 per cent, which can be accounted for by a combination of Tory support and Liberal abstentions. Matthews became the first Tory MP to represent Birmingham since 1847 and the first Catholic to sit in a British Cabinet. Chamberlain could once again boast 'We are seven' but this time the seven were all Unionists. The Gladstonians were denied the opportunity to rally against Matthews in the by-election made necessary by his appointment as Home Secretary, failing to put up a candidate in the face of dispiriting canvass returns.

Historians have interpreted the result of the July 1886 general election not merely in terms of a reaction against Irish home rule but as a reaction, on the part of more affluent sections of society, to growing working-class unrest and the emergence of socialist organisations such as the SDF and later the ILP, as well as growing concerns about the state of the economy. The shift was particularly marked among intellectuals such as A. V. Dicey, who came out in force in support of Liberal Unionism. With their seventy-eight MPs the Liberal Unionists held the balance of power

between the 316 Conservatives and the 191 Liberals and their 86 Irish Nationalist allies. The majority, the followers of Hartington, found cooperation with the Tories congenial. Not so the Radical Unionists, who found themselves aligned with groups they had previously regarded as enemies and rivals. Their discomfort was reflected in defections and a number of by-election defeats. Chamberlain's personal support was estimated by observers to be no more than a dozen, a 'family and friends' faction. The situation of the Radical Unionists was precarious and many people believed that it was only a matter of time before they returned to the Liberal fold or faced oblivion.

Reunion, however, depended on a willingness to compromise. Personal factors intruded. Gladstone and Chamberlain's ex-friend John Morley believed that Chamberlain, battered by both Gladstonian Liberals and resentful Tories on his home patch, had no choice but to surrender to their terms. They mistook their man. A crucial step towards permanent severance was the failure of the Round Table Conference of January and February 1887, a conference held at Harcourt's and Trevelyan's houses in London. John Morley, Gladstone's mouthpiece, rejected any moves towards Chamberlain's formula for local government and land reform in Ireland set out in his 'Unionist Plan for Ireland' published by Bunce in the *Birmingham Post*. At the end of February Chamberlain effectively broke off negotiations by publishing a defiant letter in *The Baptist*: 'poor little Wales', Scottish crofters and English agricultural labourers were all being sacrificed because of Irish disloyalty. The resulting recriminations ended the last serious attempt at Liberal reunion.<sup>21</sup>

Chamberlain was engaged in a high-risk strategy. In the spring all the town's wards held their annual meetings to elect representatives to the Liberal '2000'. In several it was apparent that the Gladstonians had gained the upper hand. Nechells ward passed a vote of confidence in Gladstone, St Thomas's a motion condemning coercion in Ireland. Four of the five vice-presidents elected in Harborne ward were Gladstonians and Unionists conceded defeat by walking out of the

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## THE STRANGE DEATH OF LIBERAL BIRMINGHAM

meeting. When the '2000' met on 15 April, with George Dixon in the chair, the Gladstonian A. C. Osler, a glass manufacturer, was elected president. Alderman Hart, seconded by Frank Wright, proposed a motion condemning coercion in Ireland and when Powell Williams and William Kenrick tried to speak against the motion they were met with 'offensive chaff' and denied a hearing. *The Gazette* commented gleefully on the proceedings:

for continuous and outrageous tumult, disorder, personal recrimination, general turbulence, and indeed everything short of physical violence, there was nothing for years to equal the meeting of the Birmingham Liberal Association, the '2000' on Saturday night.<sup>22</sup>

When the NRU held its second annual meeting shortly afterwards Chamberlain admitted that the schism in the party was 'complete and irretrievable' and indicated that he saw closer cooperation with the Tory Party as the only way forward.

We shall be taunted I suppose with alliance with the Tories. At least, ladies and gentlemen, our allies will be English gentlemen and not the subsidised agents of a foreign conspiracy.

However, he stopped short of advocating a complete withdrawal from the Liberal Party and the NRU was enjoined to continue to battle for the hearts and minds of Liberal Party members.

In October 'the English gentlemen' offered him relief, Salisbury appointing him head of a delegation to negotiate a fisheries agreement with the United States. He left in October 1887 and did not return until the following March. Although the agreement reached was not ratified by the Senate, Chamberlain impressed all parties with his acumen and his energy. The visit recharged his batteries, as did his engagement to Mary Endicott, daughter of the Secretary for War, who shortly became his third wife. He returned to England to be given a rousing reception, the Birmingham Town Council honouring him with the freedom of the borough.

His brother Arthur meanwhile had been warning him to expect bad news. On St Patrick's Day, 17 March, the Home Rule Association held a well-attended rally, the main speakers being Richard Tangye and the Irish Nationalist MP William O'Brien, denounced by Bunce in the *Post* as 'an intemperate and unscrupulous fanatic'.<sup>23</sup> Shortly afterwards the Gladstonians mounted their expected assault on the ward committees, achieving clear majorities in ten out of eighteen. The *Post* declared the result to be 'absolutely decisive as to the future control of the association'. On 5 April the long awaited breach in the BLA was finalised. At a meeting in the town hall, Chamberlain launched the Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association (BLUA), in effect throwing in his lot with Hartington. The BLUA duplicated the BLA in every respect save one – its members were required to make a declaration in support of the Union. Under the leadership of Powell Williams the BLUA set out to organise in every division and reported a ready response. Encouraged by enthusiastic reports of canvass returns by Powell Williams, his chief of staff, Chamberlain wrote ebulliently to his fiancée in the US:

My new organisation is going like wildfire. I will give my opponents a taste of my quality and teach them not to tread on my tails again ... I will see if I cannot kick every single Gladstonian out of the Council, and replace them with good Unionists.<sup>24</sup>

### Defeat and decline

The first electoral test of the respective strengths of the BLA and the BLUA came as a result of the death of John Bright on 28 March 1889. It became the occasion of a major row between Chamberlain and the BCA, whose leaders Sir James Sawyer and Joseph Rowlands claimed that they had been promised the reversion of the central Birmingham seat. This Chamberlain denied and at every stage the Liberal Unionist claim to the seat was backed by Balfour and Salisbury. Shrewdly, the choice of candidate fell on John Bright's eldest son, Albert Bright, thus retaining

some residue of the Bright magic. The BLA chose as their candidate Phipson Beale, a member of an elite family related to the Chamberlains. In this, the most important by-election in Birmingham history, Bright was victorious, polling 5,621 votes to Beale's 2,561.<sup>25</sup> This surprisingly large margin came as a devastating blow to the BLA, a portent of a bleak future. The BLUA victory came after a sequence of lost by-elections nationally and vindicated Salisbury's and Balfour's belief that Chamberlain was an electoral asset well worth nurturing. Chamberlain now felt safe in cooperating more openly with the Tories. At a meeting in Birmingham of the National Union of Conservative Associations in November 1891, he appeared on the same platform as Salisbury and declared 'I neither look for nor desire re-union'. Joint Unionist committees were formed to prepare for a coming general election in 1892.

The general election of July 1892 came as a severe blow to the BLA. Liberals contested all Birmingham constituencies except George Dixon's seat in Edgbaston. All the Unionist candidates were successful, the smallest majority (2209) that of Matthews. Of the 46,000 votes cast in the six constituencies the Liberals received some 13,000 – less than one-third of the poll. In Aston Manor Grice-Hutchinson defeated a Labour opponent by a margin of over 4,000. Not surprisingly tributes to Chamberlain's talents as an electioneer poured in, Churchill describing the victories as 'Napoleonic'. Balfour was equally complimentary. What emerges clearly from the 1892 results is that Liberal Unionism had attracted support from all sections of the Birmingham community as well as tipping the balance throughout 'the Duchy', where thirty-three of the thirty-nine constituencies returned Unionists.

The decision of the Tory leadership to sustain and support Chamberlain and their conviction of his usefulness as 'an electoral fairy godfather' entailed an acceptance, however grudging, that they must accede to some at least of his demands for social reform. His organisational flair, his insistence on measures of social reform and his growing espousal of imperialism found increasing support in the

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Tory Party, especially among urban Tories who tended to identify Chamberlain as the heir to Churchill's 'Tory Democracy.' There were also those of course who feared and resented Chamberlain's influence and, as it proved in 1903, not without cause.

One very noticeable feature of the election was the failure of the Liberal grandees – the Cadburys, the Tangyes, the Oslers and other elite families who had remained faithful to the Liberal cause – to stand against the experienced and battle-hardened Unionists. In their desperate search for suitable candidates the BLA turned more and more to organised labour among whom sympathies largely lay with Liberalism. In 1892 Liberal candidates included two of Birmingham's most influential trade union leaders, W. J. Davis of the Brassworkers' and Eli Bloor of the Glassworkers', both city councillors. The era of 'Lib-Labism' had begun. The strategy of partnership with organised labour, however, had a number of drawbacks. In Birmingham, with its great diversity of trades, trade unionism tended to be fragmented and the Trades Council to be ideologically torn between securing representation in conjunction with the Liberal Party and pressing for independent representation. The choice of labour leaders as Liberal candidates may also have accelerated the middle-class drift to Unionism in an increasingly class-based political system. A failing of the BLA was its oligarchic nature and it did not always appear hospitable to its working-class allies, in spite of George Cadbury's generosity in providing finance on numerous occasions. The BLA was reluctant to incorporate 'Lib-Labs' into its management structures, which remained heavily dependent on a small circle of mainly wealthy men. Social distance was thus maintained. Finally, the Liberals had to contend with Chamberlain's tactic of launching 'unauthorised programmes', challenging their status as the party of social reform. In their brief spell of office from 1892 to 1895 Gladstone once again pursued the Irish issue to the exclusion of the social reforms promised in the Newcastle programme.

The 1892 result in Birmingham and in neighbouring constituencies occurred in a year of overall

**Joe's formula of 'a vote for the Liberals is a vote for the Boers' was bitterly resented by Liberals and earned a magisterial rebuke from Campbell-Bannerman who accused him of 'plumbing the depths of infamy and party malice'.**

Liberal victory, underlining Chamberlain's organisational efficiency. Gladstone's final attempt at passing a Home Rule Bill gained a majority of thirty-four in the Commons but was contemptuously dismissed in the House of Lords by 419 votes to 41. Gladstone resigned in March 1894 to be replaced by Rosebery and a new phase of division and internal strife followed. Gratefully Rosebery took the opportunity to resign following a trivial defeat in the Commons in June 1895. Salisbury's third administration included not only Chamberlain as Colonial Secretary but Powell Williams, Jesse Collings, and Austen Chamberlain in junior posts. Chamberlain also secured a generous share of honours for his supporters, underlining his role as 'the Great Elector' and the political boss of his West Midlands 'Duchy'.

Further electoral humiliation for the Liberals followed in 1895 and again in 1900. In July 1895 the BLA contested four of Birmingham's seats but only Alderman Cook polled more than 2,000 votes, losing heavily to Collings. The combined Liberal vote amounted to barely one-fifth of the total poll, a worse performance than in 1892. Large Unionist gains were made in the 'Duchy', no Liberal being returned in either Warwickshire or Worcestershire. One Liberal gain was recorded in the Staffordshire constituency of Lichfield but H. C. Fulford, a wealthy brewer and the main financial mainstay of the BLA at that time, was unseated on appeal.

In Salisbury's words the decade-long struggle over Ireland had 'awakened the slumbering genius of British imperialism' and imperial issues, especially the future of South Africa, dominated this era in British politics with Ireland relegated to the margins. The election of 1900 was called at a moment when it appeared that the Boer War had ended in victory. The election was widely regarded as 'Joe's election', just as the war had frequently been depicted as 'Joe's War'.

The results largely replicated those of 1895 and in this election the BLA touched rock bottom. Joe's formula of 'a vote for the Liberals is a vote for the Boers' was bitterly resented by Liberals and earned a magisterial rebuke from Campbell-Bannerman who accused him of

'plumbing the depths of infamy and party malice'.<sup>26</sup> Six Unionist MPs were returned unopposed together with Evelyn Cecil in Aston. Only in East Birmingham, the most industrialised constituency in the city, were the Liberals able to field a candidate, the 'Lib-Lab' J. V. Stevens of the Tinplate Workers' Union. Stevens had earned fame by defeating Austen Chamberlain in a municipal election in 1889 and would go on to become a stalwart of the nascent Birmingham Labour Party. The sitting MP, Sir Benjamin Stone, was considered vulnerable, having neglected his parliamentary duties to pursue his obsession for photography. Nevertheless Stone's majority comfortably exceeded 2,000.

An issue on which Liberal Unionists and Liberals were accustomed to see eye to eye was education. Protests against the abortive Education Bill of 1896 had been led by George Dixon, chief spokesman of the Midland Education League, and Chamberlain had been threatened at the time with defections even in his own constituency.<sup>27</sup> The issue returned to haunt him in 1902 with the introduction by Balfour of a new Education Bill. Attempts by Chamberlain and other Birmingham MPs to amend the bill were unavailing, leaving Chamberlain angry and fearing the electoral consequences. Writing to the Duke of Devonshire he expostulated:

I told you that the Education Bill would destroy your own party. It has done so. Our best friends are leaving us by scores and hundreds, and they will not come back.<sup>28</sup>

The bill passed into law in December 1902 and the resulting disaffection among Liberal Unionists together with public disillusionment with the conduct and aftermath of the Boer War formed a favourable backdrop for the next electoral opportunity for the BLA, occasioned by the death of Powell Williams in February 1904. To capitalise on Nonconformist opinion the BLA chose as its candidate Hirst-Hollowell, secretary of the Northern Counties Education League. In spite of the *Post* reporting 'a remarkable revival' in Liberal support,<sup>29</sup> the result followed the same depressing pattern,



Lord Morpeth, son of the Earl of Carlisle who had seen service in South Africa, being returned with a majority of over 3,000.

By the time of the South Birmingham by-election the political scene had been transformed. On 15 May 1903, after instructing his chief agent, Charles Vince, to assess the likely reaction in his 'Duchy', Chamberlain launched his attack on free trade. Having resigned from Balfour's Cabinet in September, he set out his programme in a speech in Glasgow in October. The pressure group he created, the Tariff Reform League, attracted the support of powerful business interests and an influential section of the press and has been described as 'the most powerful propaganda machine that British peacetime history has seen'.<sup>30</sup> Characteristically Chamberlain set up a related but separate organisation in his 'Duchy', the Imperial Tariff Reform League. Opposition to tariff reform on the part of Birmingham Unionists was not insignificant, even affecting his own family, but it was dealt with ruthlessly.<sup>31</sup> Chamberlain, however, was unable to assert comparable control over the Unionist Party as a whole and it became increasingly factionalised and demoralised. A remarkable Liberal revival was soon under way, leading to the landslide victory of January 1906.

As public opinion turned decisively against tariff reform, the BLA seemed to have the best chance for twenty years to win back popular support and to claw back seats in Birmingham and the 'Duchy'. Unfortunately for the Liberal cause, a Liberal revival did not occur. In 1904 the new President of the BLA, Frank Wright, inherited an organisation which was now widely written off as moribund. Although in the general election of 1906, in contrast to 1900, the BLA was able to field candidates in all seven Birmingham constituencies, they were a disparate bunch, consisting of Liberals motivated principally by Nonconformist anger over Balfour's Education Act, 'Lib-Labs', Socialists and even renegade Unionists. All were heavily defeated with only James Holmes of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants coming within touching distance of breaking the Unionist monopoly, losing to Sir

**Birmingham's 'astonishing transformation', the near total eclipse of Liberalism, can be explained on a number of levels: the failures of Liberals themselves both at the grass roots and in the higher echelons of the party; the Irish obsession; the decline of Nonconformity; a loss of faith in free trade; and the charisma and the organising power of Chamberlain.**

Benjamin Stone in East Birmingham by the comparatively narrow margin of 585 votes. In constituencies bordering on Birmingham the picture was similar, with the single exception of North Worcestershire where the Cadbury influence prevailed and the Liberal candidate, J. W. Wilson, a former Liberal Unionist who had crossed the floor of the House in protest against the Education Act, was returned to Westminster. The 'exceptionalism' of Birmingham and its neighbouring constituencies could not have been more clearly demonstrated. In all the fifteen regions into which Pelling divides Britain, excluding Ireland, the Liberals secured the majority of seats in all but one – the West Midlands.

In July 1906, following the remarkable celebrations in Birmingham to mark his seventieth birthday, Chamberlain was removed from active politics by a disabling stroke, the leadership of Birmingham Unionism passing into the somewhat querulous hands of his elder son Austen. In the two elections of 1910, however, there was no significant change. In January 1910 the BLA fought but lost in five constituencies while a Labour candidate, Fred Hughes, was defeated by Collings in Bordesley. The window of vulnerability in East Birmingham was closed by Arthur Steel-Maitland's comfortable victory over J. J. Stephenson, a trade union official. The Liberal effort receded in the December 1910 election, a challenge being mounted in only three of the Birmingham constituencies.

In municipal elections the BLA benefitted from the residual loyalty of many who had otherwise gone over to the Unionists and Chamberlain was never able to implement his promise to purge the council of all Gladstonians. The BLA retained a significant, if minority, presence and it was not until 1894 that Conservatives began to outnumber Liberals on the city council. In 1911 Birmingham was transformed by the Greater Birmingham Act and a new council of 120 councillors and aldermen was put in place in 'a mini general election' in November. The results showed that it was the BCA which now commanded the greatest support, forty-five Conservatives outnumbering the forty-one Liberal Unionists in the new council. The

Liberals retained a not insignificant representation of twenty-eight councillors, while Labour obtained a foothold for the first time with six representatives.<sup>32</sup> Only in the municipal field, it seemed, could the once mighty BLA hope to retain a meaningful presence, thanks largely to the continuing loyalty of sections of the Nonconformist community. From 1910 to 1928 the president of the BLA was Arthur Brampton, a cycle manufacturer and, like a number of his fellow Liberals, a Wesleyan Methodist. In January 1910 he stood against Ebenezer Parkes, an ironmaster, in the Central Division, losing by a margin of over 4,000 votes. As the results were announced he expressed what had become the common mantra of many in the BLA.

They only had to listen to the sounds rising from the street to find the answer to the question why they had been defeated. It consisted of one word 'Joe'. To that argument the Liberals had no answer. Mr. Chamberlain had been followed faithfully for thirty years and there was no hope for anyone who dared oppose his nominee.

Birmingham's 'astonishing transformation', the near total eclipse of Liberalism, can be explained on a number of levels: the failures of Liberals themselves both at the grass roots and in the higher echelons of the party; the Irish obsession; the decline of Nonconformity; a loss of faith in free trade; and the charisma and the organising power of Chamberlain, the most professional politician of his day, with his record of assiduous service to Birmingham, his intuitive understanding of the shifting interests of the entrepreneurial middle class from which he sprang and his careful cultivation of working-class support in a city in which class divisions were less marked than elsewhere. In Birmingham he was 'Our Joe', genuinely popular and trusted in way that he was not in the wider community. He proved himself to be, in Roy Jenkins' words, 'an electoral phenomenon without parallel'.

*Roger Ward is a Visiting Professor in the Department of Law and Social Sciences in Birmingham City University, and the*

author of *City State and Nation 1830–1940 (2005)* and of numerous articles on Birmingham history and the Chamberlains. He is currently working on *The Chamberlains: an Urban Dynasty, to be published in 2015 by Fonthill* and on a chapter on the politics of Birmingham to be published by the Liverpool University Press.

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# Lloyd George's Tada

– the one father he never knew!

by Peter Rowland

Produced by PublishNation, a paperback biography of William George (1821–64), schoolteacher extraordinaire, will be available from Amazon in autumn 2014, marking the 150th anniversary of William's death.

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