

PROFESSIONALISATION AND PARTY AGENTS

The decades after 1880 were formative ones for the evolution of mass electoral politics in Britain. **Dr Kathryn Rix** considers some of the key developments in British political culture during this crucial period, and assesses the significant effects which the emergence of an expanding network of professional constituency agents, both Liberal and Conservative, had on electioneering and political organisation in the period after the Third Reform Act of 1884.

THE SLAVE TO DUTY.



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

AND POLITICAL CULTURE 'S, 1880–1914

IN 1894 THE chairman of the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations, James Rankin MP, described the Conservative party's professional agents as 'the foundation of our present electoral system'.¹ In a similar vein, the Liberal leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, praised the Liberal agents in 1901 for their role 'as channels of communication between our supporters in the country and those who direct the headquarters of the party'.² Contemporaries were in no doubt about the significant part which the growing network of professional constituency agents played in the workings of the representative system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group, whose duties included overseeing the registration of voters, election campaigning and the day-to-day management of party organisation, formed a vital link between politics at Westminster and at grassroots level, helping to connect political parties with the electorate. They had a major impact on political culture in this period, which was a critical one for the evolution of mass electoral politics, as politicians sought to adapt to the new electoral conditions created by the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act (1883) and the Third Reform Act (1884–85). These landmark reforms had placed strict limits on election expenditure, greatly

extended the electorate, and completely redrawn the electoral map.

This article – which is based on a paper given to the conference on 'The Liberal Party, Unionism & political culture in late 19th and early 20th century Britain' organised by Dr Ian Cawood at Newman University, Birmingham, in November 2012 – draws on research on the Liberal and Conservative party agents to examine some of the key developments in political culture between 1880 and the First World War.³ It focuses firstly on the emergence of professional political agency in the period after 1880, replacing the earlier model whereby the work of registration and electioneering was undertaken on a part-time basis by solicitors. The second key theme is to explore some of the perceived differences between the Liberal and Conservative parties in terms of the prevailing cultural attitudes within those parties, looking at these from the perspective of the constituency agents. In particular, this article reassesses how the rival parties approached what contemporaries termed the 'social side' of politics, and argues that the differences between Liberalism and Conservatism in this respect were not as clear-cut as might be supposed. The article concludes by engaging with the ongoing debate among historians about how far elections during this period continued to

be influenced by local rather than national concerns. As a crucial point of interaction between the central party organisations and the constituencies, the agents provide valuable insights into the relationship between politics at the local and the national level.

The professionalisation of political agency

The decades after 1880 saw a key transition from the solicitor agents who handled registration and electioneering on a part-time basis alongside their legal practice to full-time professional agents undertaking the work of party organisation in the constituencies all year round. Keen to develop links with fellow members of the profession and to improve their status, the agents established their own professional organisations. Founded in 1882, in anticipation of the major electoral reforms of 1883–5, the Liberal Secretaries and Agents Association was subsequently renamed the National Association of Liberal Secretaries and Agents (NALSA). A rival body, the Society of Certificated Liberal Agents (SCLA), was set up in 1893 with the object of providing 'a real practical test to keep out interlopers and duffers'.⁴ Although the two organisations initially disagreed on whether agents should have to hold certificates of proficiency,

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

they overcame their differences and formally merged in 1901 as the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents.⁵ On the Conservative side, the National Society of Conservative Agents was created in 1891, although several regional Conservative agents' associations were already in existence before that date, the earliest of which had originated in 1871.⁶ Both the Liberal and Conservative agents published their own professional journals from the 1890s onwards – the *Liberal Agent*, which developed out of an earlier publication, the *SCLA Quarterly*, and *The Tory*, which was later replaced by the *Conservative Agents' Journal* – to provide information and advice to members, and held regular meetings at national and regional level, at which they discussed matters ranging from the technicalities of registration and election law to the best methods of canvassing.

Although the agents' professional bodies did allow solicitors to join their ranks, most of their members came from a diverse range of non-legal backgrounds. One of the leading Liberal agents, James Linforth, who served in turn as Liberal agent for Lichfield, Nottingham and Leeds, had previously been a cabinetmaker and joiner, and had produced much of the oak paneling for the Council House in Birmingham. He had also worked as a local correspondent for the *Birmingham Daily Post*.⁷ Among Linforth's Liberal colleagues and Conservative counterparts were several former teachers and journalists, a miner, a bank clerk, a handful of agricultural labourers, a tailor, an antiques dealer, several army officers and a carpet-weaver. Like Linforth, who first became involved in political work when he campaigned for a Liberal candidate at the 1874 general election, these individuals had typically undertaken voluntary activity for their party before making political agency their profession. The agents' ranks were filled particularly with those from lower middle-class and working-class backgrounds. There appear to have been more agents from working-class backgrounds among the Liberals than the Conservatives, although what these working-class Conservative agents lacked in numbers, they made up for by being notably active in speaking and

lecturing on their party's behalf.⁸ Michael Sykes, a former apprentice clog-maker from Yorkshire, who undertook several speaking tours in that region with the Conservative party's 'Balfour' van, provides one such case.⁹

The shift away from solicitor agents towards professional agency was prompted by the growing demands of political organisation in the late nineteenth century. The restrictions on election spending and the stringent regulations imposed by the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act were an important stimulus for change, making expertise at elections and preparatory work between elections essential. The extension of the franchise under the Third Reform Act saw the number of voters in the United Kingdom rise from 3,040,050 in 1880 to 5,708,000 in 1885, and 7,264,608 in 1906.¹⁰ This increased the burden of registration work and gave a further boost to the growth of local political organisations to harness the support of a mass electorate. After these two key reforms it was, as the chairman of the National Society of Conservative Agents noted in 1895, no longer easy for solicitors 'to manage constituencies in a great rush at election times'.¹¹

Added to this, it is important to remember the growing number of local election contests taking place, with the creation of county councils in 1888 and parish and district councils in 1894. Although these elections, and those for other bodies such as school boards and municipal councils, were not always conducted on political lines, many constituency agents were keen to see that they should be. Alfred Mills, Liberal agent for Birkenhead, advised his fellow professionals in 1902 that 'local elections are capital training grounds for parliamentary elections, both for agents and canvassers, and it is only by fighting such elections that the machinery can possibly be kept up-to-date and oiled'.¹²

The increased responsibilities of the political agent are strikingly illustrated by a perusal of one of the leading election handbooks of the day, *Rogers on Elections*, which was the set textbook for candidates sitting the Conservative agents' examination. The thirteenth edition, published in 1880, consisted of one volume covering registration and

local and parliamentary elections. By the time of the seventeenth edition in 1895, the requisite material on these matters filled three volumes.¹³ The chief Conservative agent, Richard Middleton, encapsulated the transformation which had taken place when he observed in 1897 that 'the work of the political agent of to-day ... if it was to be successful, must be the work not of a few days but of a lifetime'.¹⁴

While local Liberal and Conservative associations were increasingly choosing to employ full-time professional agents, it is important to recognise that this shift away from solicitor agency was a gradual and uneven process. At one end of the spectrum, there were constituencies where professional agents had appeared even before the reforms of the 1880s, notably large boroughs where the demands of registration work were particularly onerous. In Manchester, the Conservatives employed a professional agent from 1870, and the Liberals followed suit in 1874, appointing Benjamin Green, a former publisher and bookseller.¹⁵ At the other end of the scale, some constituencies had no agents and indeed little organisation at all. Liberal organisation in London was notoriously weak, and the *Liberal Agent* in 1896 bemoaned that 'in the Metropolitan Constituencies there are hardly any skilled and paid Agents; and the number seems diminishing'.¹⁶ Other constituencies continued to rely on solicitor agents throughout this period, and even in constituencies which had professional agents, candidates often still turned to solicitors to act as their election agents, much to the professional agents' disgust. The *Liberal Agent* recorded concerns in 1900 about registration agents who were made 'mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, at election times, for solicitor agents who have done no party work, probably, for years'.¹⁷

For some candidates their decision to eschew a professional election agent reflected the fact that the election agency remained a valuable piece of patronage, which they preferred to give to a friend, relative or other leading supporter; for others, it may have stemmed from a lack of enthusiasm about the advent of professional 'machine politics'. The suspicion which had surrounded the emergence of the

The restrictions on election spending and the stringent regulations imposed by the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act were an important stimulus for change, making expertise at elections and preparatory work between elections essential.

Liberal ‘caucus’ and its ‘wire-pullers’ in the 1870s lingered, and as late as 1910, Robert Hudson, the chief Liberal agent, felt compelled to defend the notion of professional agency, arguing that:

... it is a little odd that only in politics, in the science of governing, is the professional considered so dangerous ... We don't seek out the uncertified doctor or the unqualified lawyer. We employ a professional and we pay him ... I cannot see why in politics alone the presence should be maintained that it is only the services of the amateur which are of value.¹⁸

The low number of professional Liberal agents employed in London, where the party's electoral chances at parliamentary level were poor, suggested that there was some degree of correlation between the marginality of a constituency and the employment of an agent. There was little point in expending funds in organising a constituency which would not even be contested. However, in other areas where Liberal electoral prospects were equally bleak, such as Birmingham, an impregnable stronghold of Conservatism and Liberal Unionism after Joseph Chamberlain left the Liberal party, agents were nonetheless employed. The endeavours of William Finemore, secretary to the Birmingham Liberal Association from 1897, were lauded by the *Liberal Agent*, which recorded that ‘no agent has had a lonelier furrow to plough than he’ in this ‘politically pagan’ city.¹⁹

A discernible pattern was a degree of ebb and flow between elections with regard to professional agency, with agents being appointed when an election was imminent, aided by the presence of a candidate to contribute towards local party funds. Thus in July 1905 the Lancashire and Cheshire district of the Liberal agents' association reported that ‘qualified Agents have been appointed in almost every constituency’.²⁰ Conversely, some agents lost their posts in the wake of general elections. The *Liberal Agent* ended its reports of agents left unemployed after the party's 1906 landslide victory with the words ‘ditto, ditto, ditto’, indicating the extent of the problem,

Each summer, accompanied by his wife, child, maid, office lad and dog, French cycled around the constituency, camping overnight, and collecting the information necessary for making registration claims for party supporters qualified to be on the electoral register and objections to the enrolment of opponents.

and the Conservative agents experienced similar difficulties at this date.²¹ While it was particularly the case that organisation might be wound down after a defeated candidate (and his purse) withdrew from a constituency, even victory was no guarantee that an agent would keep his place. Indeed *The Tory* claimed in 1894 that ‘the greater the success achieved the more likely the party is to dispense with the Agents’ services’, as complacency set in.²²

The critical factor in deciding whether an agent would be appointed was local party finance, because the agent's salary, typically ranging from £150 to £300, was a major component of local party expenditure.²³ Both the Liberal and Conservative agents' associations appealed on occasion to central party headquarters to intercede to improve their status, pay and employment conditions. In 1907, for example, the annual meeting of the National Society of Conservative Agents asked Conservative Central Office to advise local associations to give preference to ‘men who have had expert training’, a plea which bore little fruit in terms of central party action.²⁴ The fact that the national party organisers, while sympathetic to the agents' claims, were unable to dictate to local party associations on such matters provides a useful reminder of the ongoing limitations of central party influence over the constituencies. It also highlights the fact that the professionalisation of political agency should not be regarded as straightforwardly synonymous with the centralisation of party organisation.

Despite these caveats, the reach of professional agency expanded significantly in this period. In 1906 the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents had 321 members in England and Wales.²⁵ These professional agents served as important representatives of their parties in the constituencies, with crucial implications for political culture. The contact which MPs and candidates had with the electorate was often sporadic, and – away from the hurly-burly of election meetings – undertaken in a rather stage-managed and controlled way, such as giving set-piece addresses at ticketed meetings. In contrast, the agents were a permanent presence in the constituency.

This allowed them to take some of the burden off MPs when it came to matters such as the ‘political education’ of voters through meetings and party literature. It also gave them the opportunity for much more direct and informal interaction with voters. The Liberal agent for the extensive rural division of Wellington in Somerset, Stanley French, described how he came into contact with those in even the most remote parts of the constituency. Each summer, accompanied by his wife, child, maid, office lad and dog, French cycled around the constituency, camping overnight, and collecting the information necessary for making registration claims for party supporters qualified to be on the electoral register and objections to the enrolment of opponents. Locals were attracted to his evening campfires, and French observed that ‘a pleasant hour can be spent in chatting with the farmer on whose ground you are pitched, or in sympathising with a disappointed applicant for small holdings, or settling the politics of the nation with the local Liberal workers’.²⁶

The ‘social side’ of politics

Alongside the work of registration and electioneering, the professional agents were involved in efforts to attract supporters for their party by adding a social dimension to their organisational activities, whether through the provision of entertainment and refreshments at meetings, or through auxiliary bodies such as cycling clubs and benefit societies. Although both parties deployed such methods, the Conservatives have generally been regarded as more proficient at exploiting what contemporaries referred to as the ‘social side’ of politics. In his survey of party organisation published in 1902, Moisei Ostrogorski lauded them as ‘the past masters in the organization of “social meetings” and in the art of making them attractive’.²⁷ Historians have also highlighted the differences between the parties in this regard. As Jon Lawrence notes, ‘where Liberalism was associated with the dry procedural debate of the branch meeting, Conservatism was associated with entertainment and spectacle’.²⁸ The Primrose League, with its tea parties and garden fêtes, provides the

most notable example of a resource which the Liberals found hard to match. Lawrence's research has also highlighted a second key element of the Conservatives' social appeal: their identification with traditional masculine pastimes such as sport and the public house, in contrast with the dull, temperance-abiding, killjoy Liberals.²⁹ This theme has been developed more recently in the work of Matthew Roberts on Leeds and Alex Windscheffel on London, among others.³⁰ The corollary of this is that the Conservatives have been seen as paying less attention to the political education of the electorate. John Ramsden, for example, has described them as 'social rather than truly political'.³¹

As a broad interpretation this contrast between the more rational, sober-minded Liberal approach and the convivial and sociable Conservatives has considerable merit, and does much to explain the differing appeals of the parties to voters in this period. A shared political culture could be as important as political beliefs in binding parties together. The divergent attitudes of the two parties were nicely captured in the memoirs of John Bridges, chairman of the East Worcestershire Conservative Association. This was a constituency in which Conservatives and Liberal Unionists found themselves having to work together after 1886. Yet their mutual opposition to home rule did not prove sufficient to overcome the cultural divide between them. As Bridges reflected:

... our ways were not their ways. Smoking concerts ... which we frequently found so serviceable, were, I feel sure, an abomination to the Liberal Unionists. I have seen a few of them there, but if not always like skeletons at a feast, they never seemed comfortable. They gave the idea of condescending to what they considered a regrettable waste of their valuable time. We, on the other hand, thought their political tea parties... jejune affairs. It appears that there is something in the professing of Liberal politics that makes a man averse to joviality.³²

Approaching this question from the agents' point of view, a more

This contrast between the more rational, sober-minded Liberal approach and the convivial and sociable Conservatives has considerable merit, and does much to explain the differing appeals of the parties to voters in this period.

nuanced picture emerges. When it came to the practicalities of party organisation, there are strong indications that agents were aware of the dangers of conforming to the cultural stereotypes associated with their parties, and tried to overcome these by modifying their organisational activities. The agents' professional journals confirm the Conservatives' adeptness at adding a social component to their meetings. One Conservative agent recommended 'Music, Mirth, and Mimicry' as 'the popular and proper line to take with just enough politics to make meetings political'.³³ However, at the same time, concerns were creeping in about the need for the Conservatives to pay sufficient attention to the vital work of political education, which was in danger of being lost among their social activities. James Bottomley, Conservative agent for Lancaster, complained in 1899 that some Primrose League habitations in the North of England 'had recently degenerated into mere entertainment caterers'.³⁴ Bottomley, one of the small but significant number of Conservative agents from a working-class background, was notably active in the work of political education on his party's behalf, having addressed political meetings in every county in England by 1895.³⁵ The Primrose League itself took steps to tackle the perceived imbalance between the social and political aspects of its activities: its Grand Council decided in 1891 that it would not provide speakers unless they were given at least thirty minutes to speak, arguing that 'it is impossible for any one (except perhaps Mr. Gladstone out of a railway carriage window) to do more than "say a few words" in fifteen minutes'.³⁶

Conversely on the Liberal side, the professional agents periodically discussed how best to counter the Conservatives' social appeal by providing their own social activities. In 1896, under the heading 'How to Make Politics Popular', the *Liberal Agent* reprinted the programme of a Liberal fête at East Grinstead, with attractions including sports, minstrels and dancing alongside the political speeches.³⁷ Following the Liberal election defeats of 1895 and 1900, the Home Counties Liberal Federation enlisted the advice of agents on how the Liberals could

extend their social activities, asking them to supply information on local efforts, with 'an estimate of their value to the Party', and in 1901 it formed a Central Committee, assisted by representatives from the National Liberal Club and from women's Liberal organisations, to encourage 'the social side of Liberal work'.³⁸ The need for the Liberals to counteract accusations that they were 'a dry lot' was recognised by Fred Harrison, agent for the Wirral, who urged that 'in addition to being serious politicians we must also be sociable beings, and occasionally drop down from our exalted position and take a real part in their social life'.³⁹ However, underlying this, there were some genuine qualms that when engaging in such activities, the Liberals must take care not to 'degrade' political life. James Martin, Liberal agent for Woodbridge in Suffolk, acknowledged that the Liberals 'must recognise that there is a social side to human nature which has its needs', but he disdained the acrobats, Punch and Judy performances and tea parties offered at Primrose League gatherings. His suggested social activities were more high-minded, including debates, a 'political question box', lantern lectures, music, singing, and informal discussion meetings in people's homes, where the host would read an original paper or an article from a Liberal publication.⁴⁰ Despite the keenness of some of his colleagues to broaden the Liberals' social appeal, Martin's proposed social programme demonstrated the influence which the Liberals' more sober and rational approach to politics continued to have on the party's organisational efforts.

Undoubtedly one of the most difficult subjects for Liberal organisers was the drink question. Reflecting their party more generally, the Liberal agents' ranks contained several temperance activists.⁴¹ However, scrutiny of their professional journals also reveals a degree of recognition among the agents of the problematic nature of the temperance issue for their party, particularly if they wished to win support beyond the Nonconformist faithful. The *Liberal Agent's* editors in 1898 argued for the importance of representing Liberal clubs – a significant number of which did sell alcoholic drink – on the executive

committees of local Liberal associations. They were worried that these committees too often comprised:

... the puritan section of the party, in an altogether overwhelming proportion; the consequence is that the Liberal party has in many cases associated itself with attacks on the pleasures of the people, which were certainly not endorsed by the Liberal electors at large. There are plenty of Liberal electors who like their “pint of mild”, their “three of scotch”... if by any means this section can be represented on the councils of the party, some serious mistakes may be avoided.⁴²

The views of one veteran Liberal agent in 1909 echoed this concern that the party’s stance on the evils of drink diminished its ability to win broader electoral support. He argued that an agent could not possibly get to know the different elements of the electorate if he divided his time between his office, home and church, encountering only those who drank ‘lemonade and soda-water’.⁴³ The agents’ day-to-day contact with ordinary voters gave them a different take on matters from that of party leaders, MPs, candidates and other prominent partisans. There was an evident tension between high-minded party idealism and the realities of politics on the ground, and agents of both parties realised the importance of trying to move beyond the party stereotypes to appeal to a wider section of the electorate. This prompted something of a juggling act, particularly for Liberal agents, as they sought to balance the ingrained cultural attitudes of the party faithful with the desire to reach beyond their established constituency.

Electoral politics: local or national?

The agents can also help to shed light on another question which has attracted considerable attention from historians: when did the national rather than the local arena become the primary focus in election campaigns? Among those who have identified the 1880s as the formative decade in which British electoral politics acquired a more

national focus are H. J. Hanham and Martin Pugh.⁴⁴ Others have dated the critical turning point much later. Peter Clarke’s work sees the ambit of politics switching from the local to the national during the Edwardian period.⁴⁵ Jon Lawrence has pushed the timing of change later still, for while he sees the First World War as marking a new phase in the nationalisation of political debate, he also emphasises the continued significance of ‘the politics of locality’ in the inter-war period.⁴⁶ Lawrence’s work suggests the importance of understanding the interactions between the national and the local dimensions of electoral politics, a process in which the agents played a key part as intermediaries between the central party organisations and the constituencies.

As noted above, this period saw the agents of each party coalesce into a professional group by means of their national and regional organisations. The agents’ professional network was an invaluable conduit for the exchange of information between party organisers. There were several areas in which this contributed to a greater uniformity of practice across the constituencies. Comparing notes in 1892, the Conservative agents realised that in some constituencies postmasters were charging a penny postage for polling cards, while elsewhere only a halfpenny was charged. A deputation from the National Society of Conservative Agents saw the Postmaster-General, who ruled that the lower rate applied.⁴⁷ While this might seem trivial, it represented a significant and welcome saving, especially in view of the strict limits on election spending imposed by the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act. On other practical questions, such as the format of inquiry cards on ‘outvoters’ – those who lived in one constituency but had a vote in another, an issue on which agents had to cooperate – both Liberal and Conservative agents realised the benefits of uniformity. Indeed they sometimes seemed more willing to encourage it than did the central party organisers. In 1895 when the Council of the National Society of Conservative Agents asked the chief agent, Richard Middleton, to issue central party guidelines on outvoter inquiries, he responded that he

would ‘hesitate, to do more than “suggest”’ to local agents how they should act. In the absence of action by Conservative Central Office, the agents’ organisation issued its own guidelines, which Middleton three years later incorporated into headquarters advice.⁴⁸

As well as exchanging ideas at meetings and through their professional journals, the agents could spread more uniform methods of working when they moved between constituencies. Whereas solicitor agents had tended to stay in one locality, the new professional agents showed a surprising degree of mobility: a study of almost 200 Liberal and Conservative agents reveals that more than 70 per cent of agents from non-legal backgrounds appear to have moved between constituencies at some point during this period. Nor were these moves confined to a particular area: more than half of those who moved transferred to a completely different region.⁴⁹ James Bottomley, the Conservative agent for Lancaster mentioned above, had previously been agent for Doncaster, but was offered a higher salary to persuade him to move.⁵⁰ Fred Nash, one of the leading Liberal agents, first became an agent for the Handsworth constituency in 1882, moved to Ipswich in 1884, Norwich in 1886, and finally held the Liberal agency at Colchester from 1893 until his death in 1906.⁵¹ In addition to transferring their professional knowledge when they moved between constituencies, agents brought their expertise to bear elsewhere on other occasions, notably when they went to assist at by-elections, where professional organisers were increasingly being deployed.⁵²

While this mobility between constituencies and the desire for uniformity in the practical methods of political work might suggest that an increasingly nationalised political and electoral culture was developing, the agents’ experiences also demonstrated that local forces continued to carry significant weight. As noted above, it was local party associations which exercised the greatest influence over whether a professional agent would be appointed, so while they were an increasingly mobile group, the professional agents should not be regarded as party functionaries

Whereas solicitor agents had tended to stay in one locality, the new professional agents showed a surprising degree of mobility: a study of almost 200 Liberal and Conservative agents reveals that more than 70 per cent of agents from non-legal backgrounds appear to have moved between constituencies at some point during this period.

sent to impose on the localities. It is clear that agents put down strong local roots in their constituencies, engaging with voters through a variety of social, religious, educational, sporting and philanthropic activities. William Beardsley, who became Liberal agent for Wallisall in 1892, was involved with the town's adult school movement and also served as a Wesleyan local preacher.⁵³

Their involvement in such activities helped agents to gain a greater understanding of the appeals which would resonate with their constituency's voters at elections. Platform speeches, reported at length in the national, regional and local press, remained a central part of the election campaign, and agents spent much time and effort organising election meetings. However, the most costly component of electioneering was the printing and distribution of election literature: at the 1906 general election, 45 per cent of total expenditure by candidates in England and Wales came under this heading.⁵⁴ Candidates and their agents were offered an increasingly wide choice of material from central party headquarters. At the 1906 election, the Liberal Publication Department (LPD) supplied 26,000,000 leaflets and pamphlets, 700,000 coloured posters and 2,600,000 cartoons, many of them from the pen of the noted political cartoonist, Francis Carruthers Gould. Even more was provided by the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations (NUCCA), which issued 34,000,000 leaflets and pamphlets, 250,000 posters and 150,000 cartoons in 1906.⁵⁵ This material was extensively used and appreciated by the professional agents: following the Liberals' decisive victory in 1906, Liberal agents in Yorkshire passed a resolution thanking the LPD for its 'invaluable aid', especially 'the liberal grant of effective posters, which so materially influenced the result of the elections'.⁵⁶

However, the LPD and the NUCCA were not the only central bodies to provide election literature. On the Liberal side, the Home Rule Union, the National Reform Union, the Cobden Club, the Liberation Society, the Free Trade Union and the Budget League were just some of the plethora of organisations which produced

election leaflets, pamphlets and posters during this period. The dominance of particular election issues such as home rule in 1886 or free trade versus tariff reform in 1906 arguably contributed towards giving elections a more uniform national focus. Frank Trentmann has asserted that in the Edwardian period 'Free Trade was political life. It was ubiquitous. Even tourists and day-trippers at seaside resorts became engulfed by Free Trade ideas, demonstrations, and entertainment'.⁵⁷

Yet despite the increasing central output of election literature, whether from party headquarters or auxiliary bodies such as the Free Trade Union, local input remained paramount.⁵⁸ Where centrally produced material was used, it was often given a local spin. Sometimes this was done in a fairly superficial way, over-printing a poster with the local candidate's name, or adding his portrait to the cover of a headquarters pamphlet. However, despite its attractions – not least that it was supplied to constituencies at cost price and offered material such as Gould's cartoons which could not be matched locally – the agents did not solely rely on headquarters provision. A wide and inventive range of election material was produced at local level, enabling national issues to be viewed through a local prism. To take just one example, on the morning of the poll at Sheffield Brightside in 1906, the Liberals distributed handbills at the factory gates of the Cammell engineering works, a major employer in the constituency. These reproduced the views of Cammell Laird's chairman in support of free trade, urging that 'Cammell's chairman says No Protection. Follow his lead'.⁵⁹ Likewise, Trentmann has shown how the free trade campaign's 'attempts to centralize and streamline political activities' could be ignored or adapted by local activists.⁶⁰ The central party headquarters themselves realised the need to target particular local industries or interest groups in their literature. In 1910, for example, the NUCCA offered several extremely specific leaflets on the benefits of Tariff Reform, among them one aimed at piano-makers and another addressed to Londoners who spent their holiday time picking hops in

the fields of Kent.⁶¹ Thus even the growing central provision of election literature did not preclude continued diversity in the appeals made locally to electors.

The persistent lack of uniformity in party colours across the country was a particularly striking indicator of this local variety in electioneering, with the colours in use by the Conservatives in 1894 including blue in Manchester, red in Liverpool, dark blue and primrose in East Dorset and pink in Lincolnshire. Meanwhile an article in the *Liberal Agent* in 1898 bemoaned the fact that the Liberals across the country used 'every colour of the rainbow, in various shades and mixtures'.⁶² It is evident that there was not a straightforward transition from a locally focused to a nationally based electoral culture. Instead, countervailing local and national influences continued to shape electioneering and political organisation in this period.

The expansion within the constituencies of a network of professional agents had significant ramifications for British political culture. It cannot simply be assumed that the professionalisation of party organisation, which was in itself an ongoing and uneven process, was synonymous with the modernisation and nationalisation of electoral politics. Even had the need for professional party machinery been universally accepted, financial pressures made it unfeasible to employ full-time professional agents in every constituency. Nonetheless, the growing importance of the professional agents' network as a vital conduit for communication between the central parties and the localities, and between candidates and electors, should not be underestimated. Through their mobility and their interactions with each other via their professional bodies, the agents helped to encourage greater uniformity in the practical work of registration, electioneering and party organisation across the constituencies. At the same time, their day-to-day contact with ordinary voters gave them a greater awareness of some of the challenges facing the political parties as they sought to adapt to the demands of mass politics, notably the need to appeal beyond the party faithful to a wider section of the electorate,

The expansion within the constituencies of a network of professional agents had significant ramifications for British political culture. It cannot simply be assumed that the professionalisation of party organisation, which was in itself an ongoing and uneven process, was synonymous with the modernisation and nationalisation of electoral politics.

and the need to give national political issues resonance in their constituencies by filtering them through a local lens. The experiences of the professional agents, both Liberal and Conservative, highlight the intriguing complexities of British elections in the decades after the Third Reform Act.

Dr Kathryn Rix is Assistant Editor of the House of Commons, 1832–1945 project at the History of Parliament (see www.historyofparliamentonline.org and www.victoriancommons.wordpress.com). Her book on Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England, 1880–1910 is currently in preparation.

- 1 *The Tory*, 23 (Dec. 1894), p. 671 [microfilm pagination].
- 2 National Liberal Federation, *Annual reports and conference proceedings* (1901), pp. 124–5.
- 3 The themes discussed in this article are explored more fully in my book, 'Parties, Agents and Electoral Culture in England, 1880–1910', currently in preparation.
- 4 *The Tory*, 17 (June 1894), p. 407.
- 5 For a more detailed account of the development of the Liberal agents' professional bodies, see Kathryn Rix, 'Hidden workers of the party. The professional Liberal agents, 1885–1910', *Journal of Liberal History*, 52 (Autumn 2006), pp. 9–10.
- 6 Kathryn Rix, 'The party agent and English electoral culture, 1880–1906', Ph.D. diss. (University of Cambridge, 2001), pp. 117–22.
- 7 *Liberal Agent*, 8 (Apr. 1897), pp. 10–11.
- 8 For the research on which this analysis is based, see Rix, 'Party agent', pp. 76–89.
- 9 Kathryn Rix, "'Go out into the highways and the hedges": the diary of Michael Sykes, Conservative political lecturer, 1895 and 1907–8', *Parliamentary History*, 20:2 (2001), pp. 209–31.
- 10 F. W. S. Craig (ed.), *British Electoral Facts 1832–1980* (Chichester: Parliamentary Research Services, 1981), pp. 80–1.
- 11 *The Tory*, 26 (Mar. 1895), pp. 799–800.
- 12 *Liberal Agent*, 27 (Jan. 1902), p. 28.
- 13 J. C. Carter, *Rogers on Elections, registration and election agency* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1880 (13th edition)); M. Powell and S. H. Day, *Rogers on Elections* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1894 (17th edition)).
- 14 *The Tory*, 51–52 (Apr. & May 1897), p. 1490.
- 15 *The Tory*, 39 & 40 (Apr. & May 1896), p. 1183; *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Sept. 1892.
- 16 Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour. The struggle for London 1885–1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 75; *Liberal Agent*, 6 (Oct. 1896), p. 37.
- 17 *Liberal Agent*, 21 (July 1900), p. 5.
- 18 Thomas Palmer Newbould, *Pages from a life of strife* (London: Frank Palmer, 1910), pp. ix–x.
- 19 *Liberal Agent*, 46 (Oct. 1906), p. 39.
- 20 *Liberal Agent*, 41 (July 1905), pp. 40–1.
- 21 *Liberal Agent*, 43–44 (Jan.–Apr. 1906), p. 153; *Conservative Agents' Journal*, 13 (Nov. 1908), p. 4.
- 22 *The Tory*, 16 (May 1894), p. 349.
- 23 Rix, 'Party agent', p. 177.
- 24 Westminster City Archives, National Society of Conservative Agents, Minute Book, 14 Feb. 1907.
- 25 Rix, 'Party agent', p. 127.
- 26 *Liberal Agent*, 60 (Apr. 1910), p. 178.
- 27 Moisei Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the organization of political parties* (London: Macmillan, 1902), vol. 1, p. 440.
- 28 Jon Lawrence, 'Popular politics and the limitations of party: Wolverhampton, 1867–1900', in Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism. Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 76.
- 29 Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 107–8; *idem.*, 'Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880–1914', *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), pp. 634, 639–40.
- 30 Matthew Roberts, "'Villa toryism" and popular Conservatism in Leeds, 1885–1902', *Historical Journal*, 49:1 (2006), p. 241; Alex Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London, 1868–1906* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), p. 28.
- 31 John Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902–1940* (London: Longman, 1978), p. 50.
- 32 John A. Bridges, *Reminiscences of a Country Politician* (London: T.W. Laurie, 1906), p. 170.
- 33 *The Tory*, 36–37 (Jan.–Feb. 1896), p. 1103.
- 34 *Primrose League Gazette*, 2 Jan. 1899.
- 35 *The Tory*, 25 (Feb. 1895), pp. 735–6.
- 36 *Primrose League Gazette*, 14 Feb. 1891.
- 37 *Liberal Agent*, 6 (Oct. 1896), pp. 38–9.
- 38 *Liberal Agent*, 7 (Jan. 1897), p. 23; *Liberal Agent*, 22–3 (Oct. 1900–Jan. 1901), pp. 68–9; Home Counties Liberal Federation, *Annual reports* (1901), p. 5.
- 39 *Liberal Agent*, 70 (Oct. 1912), p. 20.
- 40 *Liberal Agent*, 28 (Apr. 1902), pp. 22–31.
- 41 Rix, 'Party agent', p. 103.
- 42 *Liberal Agent*, 12 (Apr. 1898), p. 53.
- 43 *Liberal Agent*, 57 (July 1909), pp. 5–6.
- 44 Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867–1939* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993 (second edition)), p. 10; H.J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978 (second edition)), p. xxx.
- 45 Peter Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 406–7.
- 46 Jon Lawrence, 'The dynamics of urban politics, 1867–1914', in Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), p. 97.
- 47 *The Tory*, 1 (June 1892), p. 4; *The Tory*, 6 (Jan. 1893), p. 148.
- 48 *The Tory*, 26 (March 1895), p. 795; National Society of Conservative Agents, Minute Book, 8 July 1898.
- 49 Rix, 'Party agent', p. 95.
- 50 *The Tory*, 25 (Feb. 1895), pp. 736–7.
- 51 *Liberal Agent*, 37 (July 1904), pp. 1–2.
- 52 Kathryn Rix, 'By-elections and the modernisation of party organisation, 1867–1914', in T. G. Otte and Paul Readman (eds.), *By-elections in British Politics, 1832–1914* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), pp. 151–75.
- 53 *Liberal Agent*, 58 (Oct. 1909), pp. 67, 70.
- 54 Rix, 'Party agent', p. 275.
- 55 Rix, 'Party agent', pp. 278–9. On Gould, see Philippe Vervaecke, "'Etching with vinegar". Francis Carruthers Gould and Joseph Chamberlain, 1895–1907', *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, vol. XVI: 2 (2011).
- 56 *Liberal Agent*, 43–4 (Jan.–Apr. 1906), p. 132.
- 57 Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.
- 58 A more detailed discussion of the balance of central and local provision in election literature can be found in Rix, 'Party agent', ch. 5.
- 59 Sheffield Local Studies Library, Newspaper cuttings relating to the Brightside elections, vol. 2 (1906), p. 79.
- 60 Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, p. 129.
- 61 National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations, *Facts for Pianomakers!* (No. 1358); *Londoners Beware!! Hopping in danger* (No. 1390).
- 62 *The Tory*, 17 (June 1894), p. 423; *Liberal Agent*, 11 (Jan. 1898), p. 39.