

REPORTS

The man who made the weather: Joseph Chamberlain – imperial standard bearer, national leader, local icon

Centenary conference, Birmingham 4–5 July 2014

Report by **Tony Little**

ABOUT 100 PEOPLE attended the special conference – held in Birmingham and partly funded by the Liberal Democrat History Group – to mark the centenary of the death of Joseph Chamberlain. Making the opening address at Newman University, Liberal Democrat MP, Sir Alan Beith, summed up Chamberlain as a man whom Birmingham should thank but the Liberal and Conservative parties probably wished they had never met. A pioneering executive mayor whose enterprise still shapes Birmingham, he was also the figurehead, and more, for the emergence of the Liberal Party as an accountable, campaigning, national, mass-membership organisation. Yet his ‘morally ambiguous’ imperialism helped split the party over devolution for Ireland, hurling him into a partnership with the Tories. His restless quest for policies that promoted working-class welfare while reinforcing the unity of the British Empire then split the Tories. As Sir Alan argued, in our own time only David Owen’s record is comparable.

Sir Alan was followed by Peter Marsh, who has written the definitive Chamberlain biography and edited for publication some of the Chamberlain family correspondence. Peter Marsh attributed Chamberlain’s municipal success to his background as an entrepreneurial businessman, a self-proclaimed ‘Screw King’, who understood the social impact of industrial businesses on the city and the importance of finance in securing the success of his renovation plans. By persuading the council to take over the gas and water utilities, he created a revenue base on which the council was able to borrow the capital for redevelopment. Chamberlain’s unusual mayoral enterprise

was compounded both by his creative vision of the post as prime ministerial rather than merely an honoured chairman, and by his unexpected partnership with Sir Richard Cross of Disraeli’s 1874–1880 government.¹

The rest of the first day was taken up with a series of papers covering Chamberlain’s interactions with the wider world: Chamberlain and his rivals; Chamberlain’s post-home-rule career; and the representation of Chamberlain in the rich visual media of Victorian and Edwardian Britain. These formed the real meat of the conference for historians.

Chamberlain and the wider world

Thomas Otte set out the community of interest between Chamberlain’s imperialism and the outlook of the Salisbury government, which cemented the alliance with the Liberal Unionists despite differences in outlook between the two men. Chamberlain and some of the younger Conservatives preferred an Anglo-Saxon alliance on social-Darwinist grounds, favouring Germany over Salisbury’s preference for France, and backed German expansion in China and Africa, at least up until the Boer War.

Jackie Grobler reminded delegates that Chamberlain was the only Victorian Colonial Secretary to visit South Africa and took them through the tangled and deceitful manoeuvres which provoked the Boer War. He suggested that, although Chamberlain worked well with Milner, he was not a comfortable ally of Rhodes. Chamberlain’s attempts at reconciliation, during his post-war visit, were unsuccessful because the Boer War leaders refused to accept his vision of



a British South Africa or recognise the British contribution to its rebuilding. There are no memorials to Chamberlain in South Africa.

Relations with New Zealand’s charismatic, radical premier, Richard Seddon, were rather more cordial, as Tom Brooking explained. Seddon was an autodidact – a self-made mechanical engineer – and Popular Liberal. He introduced workmen’s compensation and old-age pensions, causes favoured by Chamberlain in Britain, and supported Chamberlain’s Imperial Preference scheme, as he saw the advantages to a small distant colony of a pact between the component nations of Britain’s empire. He favoured an imperial council and sent troops and horses to support the British in the Boer War – and was furious when Chamberlain resigned in 1903.

Chamberlain and his rivals

Although politics is well known to be competitive, Chamberlain had a reputation for unusually sharp elbows that was both confirmed and undermined at this conference. Many think of Chamberlain as the archetypal Victorian radical, but Eleanor Tench showed that there were other, different radicals even among those who sympathised with Liberal Unionism when she compared the career of Chamberlain with that of Leonard

Courtney. Elected to parliament in the same year as Chamberlain, and like him a friend of John Morley, Courtney was associated with the Chamberlain and Dilke radicals – though Ms Tench suggested that even where they did agree it was not for the same reasons. An Anglican rather than Nonconformist, Courtney still supported temperance and disestablishment and put proportional representation ahead of ministerial office. He voted against Jesse Collings' proposals for 'Three Acres and a Cow' and against home rule but was notoriously anti-imperialist, losing his seat for his pro-Boer stance in Chamberlain's war.

James Dixon, the great-grandson of George Dixon, elaborated on the thesis of his recent biography of his ancestor. Both Chamberlain and Dixon had been committed, active Liberals, both had been councillors for Birmingham and both represented the city in parliament. Chamberlain and Dixon cooperated to promote free primary education in Birmingham and to win elections. Yet Chamberlain acted to undermine Dixon's leadership of the national education campaign and pressured him to allow Chamberlain to succeed him at Westminster. Despite which, Dixon stuck with Chamberlain when he split from Gladstone over home rule.

However, Roland Quinault's survey of the relationship between Chamberlain and Gladstone sought to overthrow the orthodox view that they had always been uneasy colleagues and that Chamberlain sought to be Gladstone's successor, views propounded in particular by Chamberlain's early biographer J. L. Garvin. Prior to his election to Westminster, Chamberlain had campaigned against the education policy of Gladstone's first government as insufficiently radical, but was reconciled after Gladstone's 1874 defeat. In opposition, he praised Gladstone for taking up the cause of the Bulgarians and sided with the older man over the Tories' Afghan and Zulu wars, seeing no alternative for the leadership. Gladstone recognised Chamberlain's organisational skills, seeking to harness the Birmingham-based National Liberal Federation (NLF) to the mainstream. He brought Chamberlain into his 1880 Cabinet despite his lack of experience, and the two shared

views on the expansion of suffrage and the obstructionism of the House of Lords. Gladstone backed Chamberlain's National Board scheme for Ireland when it was believed it might defuse the drive to home rule. Even when the pair parted over home rule, Chamberlain refrained from hostile comment about the Grand Old Man; and while Gladstone sought to reclaim Chamberlain through the round table talks, he could not bridge the philosophical gulf between them. While Gladstone thought Chamberlain 'the most remarkable man of his generation', Quinault did not believe that Chamberlain would ever have succeeded to the Liberal leadership, as he lacked the support to overcome Hartington and he faced a substantial obstacle in Queen Victoria's hostility.

The context of pre-war politics

Separation from the Liberals in 1886 opened a new phase in Chamberlain's career. Naomi Lloyd-Jones explored the battle for constituencies occasioned by home rule. She aimed to undermine Jonathan Parry's view that grass roots Liberal support for was for Gladstone personally rather than for Irish devolution itself. Her work, which is not yet complete, has mapped the 1,500 meetings that occurred in the aftermath of Gladstone's embrace of home rule and the resolutions that were discussed at these meetings, where they were contested within a local party and where parties competed to test local opinion. Meetings were particularly likely in areas where the MP was likely to oppose home rule, which led to criticisms that the NLF's Schnadhorst was 'wire-pulling' to coerce MPs towards the official party view. Efforts to secure a unanimous vote dictated the form of the resolution and in particular the inclusion of support for the Grand Old Man.

Cut off from much of his traditional support, Chamberlain did his best to retain the affection of Nonconformists and to bring them into sympathy with the Unionist alliance. Graham Goodlad argued that, as a Unitarian, Chamberlain was from a denomination that was a tiny minority but nevertheless one that was commercially successful and provided leadership for many campaigns – the Brahmins as

it were of Nonconformity. While Chamberlain was 'on message' over education and disestablishment, his style suggested pragmatism rather than passion, and unlike Gladstone he was unable to build confidence in his audiences by employing the language of religion. Further he had differences with the Nonconformists over temperance, and in turn they rejected his utilitarian defence of coercive measures in Ireland. While there is evidence that Methodists supported the Unionist government during the Boer War, Chamberlain lost substantial Nonconformist support over the rates funding of established faith schools in the 1902 Education Act.

His need to create or extend a base of support after the Boer War and the Education Act, argued Oliver Betts, was the cause of Chamberlain's miscalculation in embracing tariff reform. Mistaken conclusions were drawn from by-elections at Dulwich and Lewisham, which the Conservatives held on to not because of the popularity of tariffs but because of the rising gentility of the area. Chamberlain was appealing to the electorate over the heads of fellow ministers, but it was an electorate that was more concerned with immigration than the threat of imports: the Conservatives did well at Bethnal Green, for example, on an anti-Jewish immigrant ticket. Evidence from Booth's surveys of the working class showed some trades would gain from import protection but others would lose from retaliation.

A magnificent ego or just political nous?

It is hard to do justice to the final sessions of the first day, as so much of the material was pictorial, illustrating how Chamberlain was portrayed in the local and national press. Coming to fame before the development of moving pictures and sound recordings, Chamberlain's image was predominately formed in caricature and reinforced by other visual media such as post card sets and cigarette cards. While much was made of the feminising of Chamberlain in cartoons that portrayed him as Old Mother Hubbard or as a voluptuously shaped orchid, perhaps not enough was made of the way in which

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REPORT – JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN: IMPERIAL STANDARD BEARER, NATIONAL LEADER, LOCAL ICON

Chamberlain cultivated his image. Always a sharp dresser, Chamberlain's orchid in the buttonhole, changed daily, became a trademark that helped the artists give him a recognisable persona. Most of the illustrations given in the presentations came from the Chamberlain papers, which also included a sample of his correspondence with a well-known cartoonist.

An evening at Highbury

Those conference goers who paid the necessary supplement had the pleasure of dinner at Chamberlain's home, Highbury, followed by a talk from Stephen Roberts. Highbury is a large, but by no means grand, Ruskin-influenced house which served as much as a political headquarters as domestic residence. In Chamberlain's time, the house had twelve bedrooms and thirty-four staff, of whom twenty were gardeners. The staff were mostly in their twenties and the policy was to recruit strangers to Birmingham to minimise the passing on of gossip. Annual garden parties for the party faithful could lead to speeches to (a tightly packed) crowd of six hundred in the hall if it rained. Intimate dinners were given to small groups of political allies and rivals, while private meetings in a smoke-wreathed library plotted progress. Highbury was so much identified with Joe that after his death the family moved away, and the building has now come into the keeping of Birmingham Council, though minus the extensive greenhouses that furnished those orchids for the Chamberlain image. Currently used as a wedding venue, the council plans a closer association between the home and its former owner.

A fanfare for Birmingham

The second day's proceedings opened with a newly composed *Fanfare for Birmingham* played in the theatre of the city's recently opened central library and a speech from the council leader, Albert Bore.² He was followed by Greg Clark, the Cities Minister, a post unheard of in Gladstone's time when cities were largely left to govern themselves.

The focus of the day was much more on the local context and current relevance. Michael Meadowcroft, Gisela Stuart MP and Lord

Carrington, as representatives of the three main political parties, each claimed some of Chamberlain's legacy for their own and all argued for a return to greater initiative, autonomy and responsibility for local authorities. After a century of increasing Whitehall centralisation, patience may be required, though the Scottish referendum has opened a window of opportunity.

Chamberlain's duchy

Even so, time was found for the social culture of Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham. Andrew Vail spoke of Chamberlain's relationships with the leading Nonconformist ministers, Dawson, Dale and Vince. The anti-Catholic Murphy riots of 1868 were exceptional; much more usual was the cooperation between the different denominations. Not only did the Unitarians and Quakers (such as Cadbury) exert influence out of proportion to their number but, in addition, over the course of the century, Nonconformists became a majority of church goers. Their political influence came from their development of the 'Civic Gospel', which preached the care of the poor not just through charity but also through the utilisation of municipal authority. The Civic Gospel was enthusiastically embraced by disciples such as Chamberlain. In addition, the involvement of budding leaders such as Chamberlain in Sunday school teaching strengthened and informed their participation in the campaign for state education.

Andrew Reekes revisited the exceptionalism of Birmingham in the 1906 general election. In that landslide, Liberals gained forty seats in Lancashire and similarly recovered ground in London, but Birmingham remained true to Chamberlain and, unlike the rest of the country, true to his fair trade vision. Only Sheffield and Liverpool showed comparable, though patchier, Unionist strength. Reekes argued that Birmingham had sympathised with fair trade since the mid-1880s and this was reinforced in a 1902 working men's petition. Chamberlain understood the nature of Birmingham businesses; its small-scale, craft-based organisations with weak



Conference speakers: Alan Beith MP, Michael Meadowcroft (photos © Graham Copekoga)

union representation were those most threatened by an increasingly competitive world trade and the imposition of tariffs in Germany and America. Birmingham had long been renowned for its political organisation and this was not neglected by Chamberlain, who maintained trusted allies in key positions and ensured that loyalty was rewarded. Labour was politically poorly organised and Chamberlain even refused to share his duchy with his Tory allies. He understood the needs of the media, did not hesitate to employ female canvassers and dominated the public space by intimidation if necessary, as the riot occasioned by Lloyd George's visit in 1901 demonstrated. Again the lessons of Chamberlain's business life were reinforced. This was an executive who never forgot his home market, fostering good relations with his party workers and working-class voters.

The final academic paper, by Peter Bounous, drew attention to the construction dates of the various monuments to Chamberlain in the city and asked the question why they were all erected during his lifetime rather than in his memory.

Was such ‘pre-membering’ public adoration, politics or ego? While Bounous conceded that there may have been an element of personal vanity, for example in the corner stone of the Council House, the timing of the monuments was much more suggestive of politically motivated public demonstration. The clock tower in the Jewellery Quarter was timed in relation to his resignation from government and renewed his links to small businessmen. ‘Old Joe’, the tower at the university of which Chamberlain was a principal sponsor, served to distract from the Boer War but also reminded the community of his commitment to promoting education. There are more – and more prominent – monuments to Chamberlain than to John Bright or Tory hero Colonel Burnaby, each popular in his time.

The second day also included a short film covering Chamberlain’s career and an introduction to some of the library’s Chamberlain archives, including correspondence, photographs, posters and the local architect’s original plans for Highbury. It ended with a tour of Birmingham’s magnificent Council House led by some of the leading members of the current administration who showed some of the relics and artwork associated with Chamberlain and the council chamber in which he established his reputation.

In his book of essays, *Great Contemporaries*, Winston Churchill portrayed Joseph Chamberlain as a political weather maker, a man who created the agenda with which allies and foes were forced to comply – and this was the verdict most frequently repeated during the conference. Where delegates profited was in a greater understanding of the entrepreneurial spirit he employed to achieve his ends and the political culture of Victorian Birmingham which both shaped and sustained his endeavours.

Tony Little is the Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

¹ Peter Marsh’s speech is available at <http://www.newman.ac.uk/files/w3/media-centre/pdf/Peter%20Marsh.pdf?q=95>

² Available at <http://www.newman.ac.uk/media-centre/3596/conference-joseph-chamberlain-imperial-standard-bearer-national-leader-lo>

Liberal Thinkers

Conference fringe meeting, 5 October 2014, with Alan Beith, John Pugh, Liz Barker and Mark Pack; chair: Malcolm Bruce

Report by Douglas Oliver

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT History Group met on the Sunday night of the October Federal Conference to discuss ‘Liberal Thinkers’ in an event scheduled to tie in with the pamphlet of the same name released for the first time in Glasgow.

Musing upon his long involvement with the party, the discussion’s chair Malcolm Bruce – the outgoing MP for Gordon, appearing at his last autumn conference as a Westminster representative before his scheduled 2015 retirement – remarked that he was both an aficionado of liberal history as well as a living example of it. The fact that the Great Welsh Wizard, David Lloyd George, had lived for a few months after he was born was a useful reminder to himself that the present and past ultimately always fade in to one.

The Liberal Democrat History Group is always proud to laud the august partisan history of the Whig and Liberal Party, but also seeks, more widely, to highlight the breadth of thought and ideas represented by political thinkers of a liberal or liberal-minded disposition throughout time. With this in mind, *Liberal Thinkers* was conceived as a pamphlet intended to provide an accessible introduction to writers including John Locke, Adam Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Richard Cobden, John Stuart Mill, L. T. Hobhouse, John Maynard Keynes, William Beveridge, and many more.

The four speakers introduced by Bruce were asked not only to discuss the works of the thinkers from the pamphlet that they found most impressive, but also to highlight the enduring legacy of the chosen writers’ work and to delineate their relevance to liberalism and the domestic and international political struggle of today.

Inspired by his own long service as MP for Berwick Upon Tweed, the opening speaker, Alan Beith, noted two other illustrious Liberals who had represented the constituency at Westminster within the

twentieth century: Foreign Secretary Edward Grey and the man often credited with designing the modern welfare state, Sir William Beveridge. Beith recalled that when he arrived in the area in the early 1970s, Beveridge’s ‘first-principles’ approach and reflective poise was still widely remembered by locals in their mutual corner of north-east England. Beveridge was known in the area for his sometimes philosophical village hall discursives; and whilst he did occasionally contribute to canvassing and leafletting efforts locally, he was unenthusiastic about the micro-level of politics, which likely contributed to his electoral defeat to the Conservatives in May 1945. Given his deeply academic and cerebral outlook, Beveridge was best suited to looking at the big issues of politics: Beith’s agent in the 1970s, Mrs Gregson, reported that Beveridge had confided in her, ‘If they want to know what I think, they should read my books.’

His most famous publication, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, better known as 1942’s ‘Beveridge Report’, is often considered the blueprint for the welfare state, an assessment that Beith resiled from because of its simplicity. Whilst Beveridge’s ideas had been appropriated by social democrats and socialists, the man himself was definitively a liberal, being a pragmatist with an aversion to a top-down command structures. The Beveridge version of welfare, Beith felt, included a flavour of the mixed economy, as well as provision for input from the voluntary sector and friendly societies. The late twentieth-century welfare system that the Labour government designed was less diverse in approach, and was consequently more prone to bureaucracy and sclerosis.

The key hallmark of Beveridge’s method was, according to Beith, careful study and empirical analysis. If Beveridge had reflected today on such issues as the controversial ‘Bedroom Tax’, he would have

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