The South African War of 1899–1902, commonly known as the Boer War, brought to a head long-standing divisions in the Liberal Party over its attitude to empire and foreign policy and very nearly led to a permanent split along the lines of the 1886 Liberal Unionist secession. The 1900 general election saw the party reach the nadir of its pre-1914 electoral fortunes, when it suffered an unprecedented second successive landslide defeat. Internal feuding between supporters and opponents of the war threatened to lead a permanent division in the Liberal ranks, along the lines of the Liberal Unionist secession of 1886. Yet, within four years of the war’s end the Liberals were back in power, having themselves won a landslide majority. Paradoxically, although the war led to the Liberal defeat in 1900, its legacy contributed to the 1906 victory.

Empire and the Liberal Party

The divisions in the Liberal Party that the war accentuated had their origins in differing views on how the party should cope with the growing enthusiasm for empire among the electorate during the 1880s and 1890s. On these issues the party divided into three camps. Many Liberals believed the party should follow in the footsteps of Cobden, Bright and Gladstone in supporting ‘peace, retrenchment and reform’. They opposed overseas expansion and entanglements as wrong in themselves and as drains on the exchequer. Many backbench Liberal MPs felt that it was a fundamental purpose of the party to maintain what they saw as the ‘Liberal tradition’ of a pacific foreign and imperial policy. Some leading figures in the party such as Sir William Harcourt (leader in the House of Commons from 1894 to 1898) and John Morley, Gladstone’s biographer, were inclined to sympathise with these views. However, some Liberals (dubbed ‘Liberal Imperialists’) believed that a policy of opposition to imperial expansion was an electoral albatross for the Liberal Party. Lord Rosebery, Gladstone’s successor as Prime Minister, and rising stars such as Sir Edward Grey, R. B. Haldane and H. H. Asquith felt that the party was in danger of being portrayed as unpatriotic – willing to countenance the dismantling of empire and thus the decline of British power. Rosebery wanted the party to shake off the Gladstonian legacy and positively embrace empire. Although he resigned from the Liberal leadership in 1896, a year after his government was defeated in a general election, he remained a ‘king over the water’ for many Liberals who sympathised with his views.

The third strand of opinion was represented by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal leader from 1899. Campbell-Bannerman belonged to the centre of the party, describing himself as ‘a Liberal and an imperialist enough for any decent man’.

He and many mainstream Liberals broadly supported the Cobden/Gladstone tradition, but saw the need for the party to be pragmatic. They recognised that hostility to empire was not electorally popular, but equally they rejected the views of the Liberal Imperialists who seemed prepared to abandon Liberal principles altogether in the cause of electoral expediency. Campbell-Bannerman’s views were shared by a substantial section of the party but, as is often the case when parties suffer debilitating splits, those at either extreme were unwilling to unite around a compromise policy for the sake of party unity. Given
the nature of these divisions, an impe-
rial war was guaranteed to highlight
and widen the faultlines within the
Liberal Party.

Britain and South Africa
1877–1899
The war in South Africa was the culmi-
nation of a quarter of a century’s efforts
by British governments to establish su-
premacy in the region, which was seen
as a vital British strategic interest as a
key point on the route to India. South
Africa consisted of the two British
colonies of the Cape and Natal and two
independent Dutch republics, Transvaal
and Orange Free State. In 1877
Disraeli’s government annexed the
Transvaal, but after an uprising by
Transvaalers and the defeat of a British
army at the battle of Majuba Hill in
1881, the new Liberal government ef-
effectively restored its independence un-
der British suzerainty. The discovery of
gold in the Transvaal in 1886 made
matters more pressing as it meant that
the Transvaal could be in an economi-
cally dominant position within South
Africa. Over the following decade
Britain tried to force the Transvaal into
accepting a British-dominated South
African federation.

At the end of 1895 the Cape Prime
Minister, Cecil Rhodes, engineered the
‘Jameson Raid’, an invasion of the
Transvaal in support of a planned ris-
ing by the Uitlanders – British citizens
living in the Transvaal who dominated
the gold mining industry there. The
rising did not take place and the raid
ended in fiasco with the invading force
being captured by Transvaal command-
ors. The embarrassment of the raid’s
failure was compounded by a wide-
spread suspicion that the Unionist Co-
lonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain,
was complicit in its planning. How-
ever, when a House of Commons com-
mitee of inquiry into the raid made no
criticism of the government the Liberal
leader, Sir William Harcourt, who
served on the committee, was widely
felt to have let Chamberlain off the
hook. Yet, since the inquiry took place
at a time when delicate negotiations
were taking place with the Transvaal
and in the middle of Queen Victoria’s
Diamond Jubilee year, Harcourt’s room
for manoeuvre was constrained by the
need to avoid appearing unpatriotic.
The Jameson Raid episode highlighted
the dilemma the Liberals faced in op-
posing the government on matters that
appeared to involve Britain’s vital na-
tional interests – a dilemma which was
to recur during the war.6

To recover Britain’s position after the
raid, the government appointed Sir
Alfred Milner as High Commissioner
to the Cape Colony in 1897. Milner, a
committed imperialist who described
himself as a ‘British race patriot’, was
a highly-regarded administrator and
had close links with the Liberal Im-
perialists, sharing a Balliol back-
ground with Asquith and Grey. He
was determined to bring matters to a
head and assert British supremacy in
South Africa. After abortive negotia-
tions during the summer of 1899, Brit-
ain despatched troops to South Af-
rica in September and in response
the Transvaal and the Orange Free
State launched a pre-emptive inva-
sion of Natal.

The outbreak of war
From the start Campbell-Bannerman
as Liberal leader tried to resolve the
problem of how to lead an opposition
during wartime, without appear-
ing unpatriotic. His position was made
more difficult by the fact that British
territory had been invaded and, in the
early part of the war, was under enemy
occupation, so opposition to the war
was not a realistic political option.7
Campbell-Bannerman pursued a mid-
cle course, agreeing to vote supplies
for the war, but criticising the govern-
ment’s aggressive diplomacy in dealing
with the Transvaal. But while many
Liberal MPs could support this posi-
tion, there were many on either wing
of the party who would not rally
round it.

Splits in the party became apparent
almost immediately after the outbreak
of war. An amendment to the Queen’s
Speech in October criticising the gov-
ernment’s diplomacy, moved by Liberal
MP Philip Stanhope, won the support
of fifty-five Liberal MPs even though
the leadership abstained.8 Liberals who
opposed the war saw it as the party’s
duty to follow in the tradition of
Gladstone’s 1879–80 Midlothian cam-
paign and defend the rights of small na-
tions. However, Liberal MPs who were
involved in anti-war agitation were
mostly obscure and eccentric back-
benchers, while their sympathisers at
the higher levels of the party remained
circumspect.9 Thus anti-war Liberals
were unable to impose their policy on
the party leadership. Many Liberal op-
opponents of the war became involved
in non-party organisations such as the
South Africa Conciliation Committee
and the more extreme Stop-the-War
Committee. In February 1900 some of
them set up the League of Liberals
Against Militarism and Aggression as a
pressure group for anti-war Liberals.

Opponents of the war were dubbed
‘pro-Boers’ by their opponents, and
often adopted the label themselves as a
badge of defiance.10 In response to the
creation of the League of Liberals
Against Militarism and Aggression,
Liberal Imperialists founded the Im-
perial Liberal Council in the spring of
1900, although the most famous Lib-
eral Imperialists such as Rosebery,
Asquith, Haldane and Grey held aloof
from the Council as it was inconsistent
with their previously expressed criti-
cisms of the factionalism of the pro-
Boers. For Liberal Imperialists the war
offered an opportunity to restore the
party’s patriotic credentials by putting
party differences aside and supporting
the government.11 In June 1900 the
Imperial Liberal Council scored a
propaganda victory when it managed
to get thirty-eight Liberal MPs to vote
with the government on a pro-Boer
motion on the defence estimates, while
only thirty Liberal MPs voted for the
motion itself.12

The initial months of the war saw a
series of humiliating setbacks for the
British forces, but from early 1900 for-
tunes changed. The news of the relief
of the siege of Mafeking arrived on 18
May, and led to spontaneous patriotic
demonstrations in major towns and
cities and attacks on the homes of
prominent pro-Boers. In Battersea, the
future cabinet minister John Burns had
his windows smashed by a jingoistic
mob.13 In June Campbell-Bannerman
gave his support to the principle of annexing the two republics, while calling for a swift granting of self-government. With the war apparently won, it was widely expected that the government would call a general election to capitalise on the wave of patriotic feeling that followed British military success. On 25 September Parliament was dissolved and a general election called.

The 'khaki election'

Unionist victory was a foregone conclusion. By the summer of 1899 the Liberal Chief Whip Herbert Gladstone admitted that the party was not up to fighting a general election and shortly before the dissolution he wrote to his party leader 'I have had some disgusting rebuffs in my appeals for money... a disgusting number of candidates have skied off'. The Liberals allowed the Unionists 143 unopposed returns – an all-time high since the 1867 Reform Act. In its manifesto, the party tried to salvage its patriotic reputation by praising the 'genius' of Lord Roberts, the Commander in Chief in South Africa, as well as criticising both the diplomacy that had led to the war and the government's opportunism in trying to cash in electorally on military success. The Unionists attempted to tar all Liberals with the pro-Boer brush, Joseph Chamberlain notoriously claiming that 'a vote for the Liberal is a vote for the Boer'. The result was a landslide defeat for the Liberals – the first time since before the 1832 Reform Act that they had lost two general elections in a row. John Auld, in his study of the Liberal pro-Boers, has calculated that on average pro-Boer candidates performed around three per cent worse than the average Liberal, although mainstream and imperialist Liberals were not immune from the tide flowing in favour of the Unionists.

This election has been dubbed the first 'khaki election', anticipating that of 1918. However, the view that the election result demonstrated the electorate's support for war and empire has been challenged, particularly by Richard Price and Henry Pelling. Price has argued that to the working classes the war was less important than questions of social reform and that local issues had a significant impact on individual results. But while such factors may have made a difference in some constituencies, it remains the case that the war was the dominant issue. The cases cited by Pelling and Price only show that there were a few minor deviations in some constituencies from the broader electoral trend against the Liberals. Until the summer of 1899 the Liberals had been making steady gains at by-elections, to the extent that they might have hoped to win the next general election with a small majority. Their electoral fortunes changed with the outbreak of war. Every by-election fought between the outbreak of war in October 1899 and the summer of 1900 showed a swing to the Unionists as voters rallied to the government's patriotic call.

There can be little doubt, therefore, that the war was the decisive factor in the Liberal defeat.

Electoral adversity was not enough to bring the party together. The Imperial Liberal Council continued to scheme against the Campbell-Bannerman leadership. The election result seemed to justify its analysis of the Liberal Party’s weaknesses and in October it issued a manifesto that repudiated Campbell-Bannerman and demanded that the party:
… distinguish Liberals in whose policy with regard to Imperial questions patriotic voters may justly repose confidence from those whose opinions naturally disqualify them from controlling the action of the Imperial Parliament. Sir Edward Grey threatened to disown Campbell-Bannerman’s leadership and even the Chief Whip Herbert Gladstone wobbled, calling on Campbell-Bannerman to support Rosebery and Milner.

However, neither the pro-Boers nor the Liberal Imperialists were able to influence the party decisively in their direction. Neither group wanted to split from the party, but each wished that their opponents would either leave or keep quiet. The Liberal Imperialists wanted to see a re-launched Liberal Party, shed of its unpopular ideological baggage – a project that bears similarities to the re-branding of the Labour Party as ‘New Labour’ nearly a century later. However, the Liberal Imperialists lacked a Tony Blair – a leader with the determination to fight and win the internal battles that would have to take place before the party could be reformed. Instead they looked to Rosebery, who continued to remain aloof from politics while tantalising his supporters with speeches that hinted at a return. Lacking clear and decisive leadership, the various Liberal Imperialist attempts to win control of the party were indecisive and unfocused.

The pro-Boers had their problems too, having had their numbers depleted at the general election and experiencing too, having had their numbers depleted at the general election and experiencing the other outbreak of warfare within the party. This was precipitated by the Liberal Imperialists’ lionising of Milner when he returned home on leave in May. For many Liberals, Milner’s intransigence was the reason for war breaking out and for the Boers’ refusal to surrender even when their territory had formally been annexed. But the party leadership had to be sensitive about attacking him because Asquith, Grey and Haldane supported him.

The methods used by the British Army to defeat the Boers were strongly opposed by both pro-Boers and mainstream Liberals. In response to the guerrilla tactics used by the Boer commandos, the British army tried to cut off Boer supplies by rounding up civilians and putting them into concentration camps, and by burning Boer farms. The aim was to starve the Boers into submission. The death rate in the camps was very high: by the end of the war around 28,000 Boers had died in the camps – more than the number of troops on both sides killed in the war.

Emily Hobhouse (sister of the writer L.T. Hobhouse) visited the camps on behalf of the South African Women and Children Distress Fund. On her return to England in 1901, she attempted to publicise her findings, which were very critical of the conditions she had witnessed. She met Campbell-Bannerman who agreed to speak out against the concentration camp policies, which he did at a dinner on 14 June, saying:

A phrase often used is that ‘war is war’, but when one comes to ask about it one is told that no war is going on, that it is not war. When is a war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa.

Although Campbell-Bannerman’s denunciation of ‘methods of barbarism’ has been a source of pride to Liberals of later eras, at the time it was considered a blunder, even by many of his own supporters, because it was seen as an attack on British troops. Campbell-Bannerman felt the need to clarify his remarks, saying ‘I never said a word, which would imply cruelty… on the part of officers or men in the British Army’. The Liberal Imperialists immediately denounced Campbell-Bannerman as he seemed to them to have joined the Pro-Boer camp.

H. C. G. Matthew has pointed out that the crisis over the ‘methods of barbarism’ speech was in part based on a misunderstanding. Campbell-Bannerman intended to make a specific denunciation of the concentration camps. However, the Liberal Imperialists took it as a move to drive them out of the party. As Haldane put it ‘The party must be rescued from getting wholly and uselessly out of relation to the national sense’. Even Asquith, who had until this point remained aloof from the internal dispute, was highly and publicly critical of C a m p b e l l – B a n n e r m a n. Asquith’s Liberal Imperialist supporters organised a dinner for him (a standard method of the time of showing support for a politician), which was widely seen as a direct challenge to C a m p b e l l – Bannerman’s leadership. The conflict in the Liberal Party was parodied by the Parliamentary sketchwriter Henry Lucy as ‘war to the knife – and fork’.

In the event, the Asquith dinner was a damp squib. A party meeting at the Reform Club ten days earlier resulted in a vote of confidence for Campbell-Bannerman to which the Liberal Imperialists assented. In addition, Rosebery, having declined to preside at the Asquith dinner, upstaged his potential
ally by speaking at the City Liberal Club on the same day as Asquith’s dinner in a speech in which he famously announced his intention to ‘plough my furrow alone’ – an apparent snub to Asquith. Rosebery wanted to see a decisive split in the Liberal Party, but Grey, Asquith and Haldane were unwilling to break away without a commitment from Rosebery to make a political comeback. Given the show of unity at the Reform Club, Asquith could hardly raise the standard of rebellion now and so played down the divisions over South Africa, saying ‘I have never called myself a Liberal Imperialist. The name of Liberal is good enough for me.’

In September the breach widened further when Campbell-Bannerman repudiated the Liberal Imperialist candidate selected by the local Liberal association in the North-East Lanark by-election. He unofficially supported the Independent Labour Party candidate and the Unionists gained the seat with a split Liberal vote. This increased the Liberal Imperialists’ sense that they were being driven out of the party. They were losing the battle to control the structures of the Liberal Party – in December the National Liberal Federation passed a resolution broadly in line with Campbell-Bannerman’s position on the concentration camps. It was becoming clear that the party leader, rather than the Liberal Imperialists, could command the support of party organisations at regional and constituency level.

Rosebery’s speech at Chesterfield

In order to revive their flagging fortunes, the Liberal Imperialists needed Rosebery who, as an ex-prime minister, had a wider public appeal than Asquith, Haldane or Grey. Rosebery announced his intention to address a meeting at Chesterfield on 16 December, and the Liberal Imperialists hoped this would mark his political comeback. Rosebery again demonstrated his flair for brilliant but enigmatic platform oratory. On the war he appeared conciliatory to both wings of the party. He defended Milner and criticised the expression ‘methods of barbarism’ but accepted the National Liberal Federation resolution which criticised the camps and urged the government to make peace rather than insist on unconditional surrender.

The speech repudiated many of the arguments of the Liberal Imperialists, but they preferred to ignore this as they hoped that Rosebery was now going to return to politics and resume his rightful position at the head of the Liberal Party. Sir Edward Grey wrote bluntly to his party leader that ‘… if you & Rosebery work together, I have no more to say & no new departure to make; if on the other hand you & he decide that you cannot co-operate I must say this: that I go with him’. To many Liberals it seemed that the Chesterfield speech was a peace overture. Herbert Gladstone wrote to Campbell-Bannerman ‘we ought to sink differences… since there is so much that is broad, generous and wise in what he says…’.

Campbell-Bannerman, however, had a clearer understanding of Rosebery’s intentions. He had noticed that while Rosebery’s pronouncements on the war had struck a chord across a wide section of the party, other parts of the speech made demands that would be less palatable to mainstream Liberals. These included abandoning Irish Home Rule and a adopting a ‘clean slate’ in domestic policy – that is repudiating the party’s policy programme, which Rosebery saw as ‘faddist’ and likely to alienate floating voters. Campbell-Bannerman met Rosebery and confirmed that the latter was not envisaging a return to Liberal politics. Campbell-Bannerman wrote to C. P. Scott, the editor of the Manchester Guardian, which had joined in the calls for reconciliation between Campbell-Bannerman and Rosebery:

there has been no offer of help to the Party – it was to the Country. He will not join in: even on the war. There never has been… any unwillingness on our part for his return: this is absolute. The impediment is that he won’t.

Campbell-Bannerman responded publicly to the Chesterfield speech at a meeting of the London Liberal Federation in January and once again declared himself willing to see Rosebery return. In February Rosebery spoke at Liverpool, reiterating the importance of a ‘clean slate’ in domestic policy and of abandoning Home Rule. Campbell-Bannerman brought matters to a head by pronouncing against Rosebery, saying he was asking Liberals to ‘sponge out every article of our creed’. Rosebery promptly announced his complete separation from Campbell-Bannerman and the Liberal Party. The Liberal Imperialists set up a new organisation, the Liberal League, with Rosebery as president and Asquith and Grey among the vice-presidents. It appeared to herald the launch of a breakaway political movement. But events took a different course; the peace of Vereeniging on 31 May brought the Boer War to an end and removed the main source of division within the Liberal Party.

The aftermath of the war saw a swift turn of the political tide. Uncomfortable questions were now asked about the government’s conduct of a war in
which the world’s largest empire had taken two-and-a-half years to defeat two tiny republics. In addition, the war had highlighted Unionist failings in social policy, with recruitment statistics showing a very high number of volunteers unfit for service. This was embarrassing to a party that had championed the cause of empire and an imperial race. As a recent historian of the Conservative Party has written:

The Conservative Party’s problems as the party of empire reached a crisis point with the Boer War. The military weaknesses, administrative incompetence and indeed social problems which the war has revealed laid the Conservatives open to the charge that, as the party of Empire, they had not done a particularly good job.

The Unionist response to these problems made matters worse for them and helped to revive the Liberal Party. In 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, attempting to build on the imperial unity shown by the support of Britain’s dominions for the war effort, launched his campaign for tariff reform with the aim of binding the empire together economically. The Liberal Party united behind a platform of not implementing Irish Home Rule during that Parliament, thus avoiding accusations of wanting to break up the empire and, with Sir Edward Grey as Foreign Secretary, it proclaimed support for continuity with the Unionists in foreign policy. During the 1906–1915 Liberal Government the pacifist wing of the party (who had mostly been Pro-Boers) were able to exert little influence on overseas policy. By 1906, therefore, the party had taken great strides towards ridding itself of the image of being unpatriotic and it was a very different Liberal Party that won the 1906 general election from the one that lost that of 1900. The war had taught the party a lesson.

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3 Porter op. cit. p.75.
5 The government was a coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Unionists. In accordance with contemporary usage I have used the word ‘Unionist’ to describe the government throughout this article.
6 For a detailed study of Harcourt’s handling of the aftermath of the Jameson Raid see Butler, J