

RELIGION AND

THE IMPACT OF THE BRADLAUGH CASE ON THE BERWICK-UPON-TWEED BY-ELECTIONS OF 1880 AND 1881



Bradlaugh being ejected from Parliament in 1880.

During the nineteenth century religion and politics were so inextricably linked that a religious controversy could sometimes influence the outcome of an election.

Michael Wickham examines the effect of a religious controversy on voting behaviour in two nineteenth-century Berwick elections.

Nowhere is this linkage of politics and religion better illustrated than in the case of Charles Bradlaugh, whose election to Parliament was to have serious repercussions for the Liberal Party in constituencies across the country. However, it is possible to emphasise the importance of one issue to the detriment of others in electoral politics, as the example of Berwick-upon-Tweed shows.

At the general election in 1880 the borough of Northampton returned the Radical candidate Charles Bradlaugh as one of its two Members of Parliament. Bradlaugh was an avowed atheist and an advocate of birth control, and his unorthodox beliefs so outraged Members on both sides of

the House that he was prevented from taking his seat, on the ground that an atheist could not be bound by the statutory religious oath of allegiance. In order to solve the problem, the Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, introduced a measure that would allow Bradlaugh to affirm allegiance, instead of offering the customary religious oath – however, a hostile cross-party majority rejected this. During the course of the 1880 Parliament, therefore, Bradlaugh had to make repeated attempts to take his seat.

The Bradlaugh case was a constitutional issue which aroused men's passions both inside and outside Parliament. On the one hand, there were those who felt a genuine revulsion against Bradlaugh on account of his atheism,

ND POLITICS

and were determined to secure his exclusion from the legislature; on the other hand, there were those who, while disapproving of his unorthodox views, believed sufficiently in the concepts of religious and political tolerance to argue for his admission. During the early 1880s these opposing viewpoints found expression in a number of by-elections, two of which were at Berwick, a rural, two-member borough with a population of 14,000 and an electorate of 1,820.

As was often the case in matters of a religious nature, it was the Conservatives who made the Bradlaugh controversy a major election issue.¹ At the 1880 Berwick by-election, which was brought about by the succession of the Liberal Member Henry Strutt to the peerage, the Conservative candidate, David Milne Home, addressing a meeting of the electors at the Town Hall, said that, during the three months that Mr Gladstone had been in power, the Government had made a succession of mistakes. The greatest of these was the attempt to allow Mr Bradlaugh to take his seat after making an affirmation, instead of taking the oath like other members of the House of Commons. Milne Home pointed out that Britain was a Christian country and that the House of Commons was a representative assembly of that Christian country. The affirmation that he had spoken of was introduced by the House of Commons for the purpose of giving in to those who had some religion, whether they were Wesleyan, or Jewish, or Catholic. It was in deference to their religious scruples. Yet Mr Bradlaugh boasted he had

For Gladstone the issue was not simply about whether or not atheism was permissible in the Commons. It was about who decides on the acceptability of a Member of Parliament: his constituents, or the Commons?

no religion. Therefore it was in defiance of the constitution that he was permitted to make this affirmation. And the Government gave their full support to enable him to make this affirmation, and in doing so they said that atheism was permissible in the House of Commons.²

Of course, Gladstone took a broader view than this. For him the issue was not simply about whether or not atheism was permissible in the Commons. It was about who decides on the acceptability of a Member of Parliament: his constituents, or the Commons? Drawing a parallel between the Bradlaugh case and the Wilkes affair of 1763–74, where the Member for Middlesex was excluded from the House of Commons against the wishes of the electors, Gladstone warned the House on 22 June 1880 that subverting the electorate's rights was a very serious matter and should be given very careful consideration.³ However, Gladstone, a deeply religious man himself, also argued in favour of Bradlaugh on theological grounds, suggesting that there was more danger of irreverence and impiety in the theory that it does not matter which God you worship, provided you worship some God or other, than there was in any candid acknowledgment of the complete separation that had been drawn between civil duty and religious belief.⁴

Although the Liberal candidate, John McLaren, did not allude to the Bradlaugh case during his campaign, his membership of the Government (as Lord Advocate for Scotland) would have left the electors in no doubt about his

position on the issue. Indeed, his tacit support for Bradlaugh may have been his undoing, both at the Wigton by-election in May, where he was seeking re-election on taking office, and at the Berwick by-election two months later. While a number of other factors (such as Milne Home's local connections, the ill-feeling generated by the Liberal committee's choice of candidate, the conscientious electioneering of the Conservatives and, arguably, bribery) influenced the outcome at Berwick, one cannot discount the relevance of the Bradlaugh issue. This was definitely the view of the local Conservative newspaper, the *Berwick Warder*, when it sought to explain the sudden and dramatic shift in Berwick politics between the general election in April, when the Liberals had returned two candidates with 56 per cent of the vote, and the by-election in July, when the Conservative candidate won by three votes:

We are inclined to think that these considerations [i.e., the admission of an atheist into the House of Commons and the disrespect shown to religion by Liberalism] have been the main cause of the defeat of the Lord Advocate and of the Government which he represents. A good many Liberals have not voted at all, while others have given their votes to the Conservatives. Even among those who voted for the Lord Advocate, many have expressed their satisfaction at the result of the election, and their hope that the Government will take to heart the lesson it teaches, for no

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Government can long withstand the offended religious feelings of a Christian people.⁵

The *Warder's* contention that some Liberals switched their allegiance because of the Bradlaugh affair is certainly sustainable. First, there is the report in the local Liberal newspaper, the *Berwick Advertiser*, that the Catholics, who generally supported the Liberals, 'voted almost in a body for Captain Milne Home'.⁶ This was probably because they had taken umbrage at the Liberal committee's decision to select McLaren as their candidate, instead of Hubert Jerningham, who was a fellow Catholic. But it is possible that their voting behaviour was also influenced by two other factors, namely, the Conservatives' espousal of denominational education and Gladstone's championship of Bradlaugh.

Second, there is the letter which appeared in the *Warder* and was addressed to the 'ELECTORS OF THE TOWN OF BERWICK!' from a 'LIBERAL CONSERVATIVE', confessing his change of heart and expressing his hope that others might do the same:

I was once a great admirer of Mr Gladstone, but since his favouring the public recognition of an atheist in the House of Commons, I have changed my mind. The British Nation as a whole believes in God, and its representatives should do so also. I hope you all think the same, and that for once both Liberals and Conservatives in Berwick will put their shoulders to the wheel and do their utmost to return a member of sound religious principles. Mr McLaren may be [a] very good man but he cannot vote against his party, while, you are well assured of Capt. Home. Electors, since the ballot has been introduced your fellow townsmen cannot know how you vote; but let every believer in God remember when he approaches the ballot box, that there is an Eye that sees him, and

a God who will reward him, if he advances His cause.⁷

Doubtless, there were other voters who shared these sentiments. Indeed, if the experience of other constituencies is anything to go by, then the Bradlaugh case unquestionably had a detrimental effect upon Liberal support at this time. For instance, at Scarborough in July 1880 the Conservatives flooded the constituency with blue cards carrying the inscription, 'Fathers of Scarborough. Do you want your children to be defiled by Bradlaugh's filth? If not, vote for DUNSCOMBE.' Although the Liberals retained the seat, their majority of 595 in April was reduced to 222. At North Berwick and at Wigton, where McLaren had sought re-election before trying his luck at Berwick, Bradlaugh's name was also widely used, and in both towns the Liberals lost the seats they had won at the general election three months earlier.⁸ Perhaps the most prominent casualty was Sir William Harcourt, the Home Secretary, who was defeated at the Oxford by-election in 1880 by a Conservative who tarred him with the Bradlaugh brush.⁹

Similarly, in the North Riding of Yorkshire in January 1882, the Conservative candidate, Guy Dawnay, reported that no issue generated so much interest among the electors as the Bradlaugh case; and even a last-minute repudiation of his pro-Bradlaugh stand by the Liberal candidate failed to prevent his defeat. Two months later, Sir Thomas Dyke Acland complained to Gladstone that the issue was being used effectively against his son who was contesting East Cornwall. Even though the Liberals eventually retained the seat, their share of the vote dropped from 60 per cent in 1880 to 51 per cent in 1882.¹⁰ W. L. Arnstein has shown that the Liberals suffered a net loss of five seats in by-elections in 1880 and five more in 1881; and, although they did not, on balance, lose any additional seats in 1882, their share of the vote declined in



Charles Bradlaugh
(1833–91)

seven out of that year's eight contests. Even though it was normal for the winning party at a general election to experience some decline in strength in subsequent years, and even though the Bradlaugh case was not the only issue at stake at these by-elections, it would seem that wherever Bradlaugh became an issue the Liberals lost votes.¹¹

However, there was a limit to the benefits that could be gained from the Bradlaugh case. At the 1881 Berwick by-election, which was occasioned by the elevation to the peerage of Liberal MP D. C. Marjoribanks, the Liberal candidate Hubert Jerningham, when asked whether it was true that he had pledged himself to support any measure to admit a professed atheist into the House of Commons, responded by saying that the question was wrongly put. 'He did not pledge himself to admit an atheist into the House. He had said that Mr Bradlaugh, of whose opinions he did not wish to know anything, had a right to sit in the House of Commons,

Bibliography

Primary sources

Berwick Advertiser

Berwick Warder

Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series

Secondary sources

Arnstein, W. L. *The Bradlaugh Case: A Study in Late Victorian Opinion and Politics* (Oxford, 1965)

Jenkins, R. *Gladstone* (London, 2002; first published 1995)

McCord, N. *British History 1815–1906* (Oxford, 1991)

Royle, E. *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester, 1974)

Royle, E. *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular free thought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester, 1980)

Wright, D. G. *Democracy and Reform 1815–1885* (London 1979; first published 1970)

but he was glad of the opportunity to say that he abhorred Mr Bradlaugh's doctrines.¹²

Notwithstanding his denunciation of atheism, Jerningham still found himself under attack for upholding Bradlaugh's right to enter Parliament. The *Warder* led the way by expressing its surprise that a Roman Catholic, of all classes of Christians, should be prepared to assist in such an unholy work, pointing out that Jerningham did not have the sanction of the leaders of his Church. The newspaper concluded that if Jerningham persisted in maintaining that it was possible to overlook a total and absolute negation of all religion, it could only warn the electors that he would be a most dangerous and unfit parliamentary representative.¹³ It was not only Jerningham's *political* opponents who rebuked him for supporting an atheist. The *Advertiser* reported that the Roman Catholic priest at Wooler and a certain Mr Gorham from Tonbridge had also become involved in the Bradlaugh controversy. While disclaiming any connection with the Conservative candidate, Henry Trotter, they had done their utmost to influence the electors against Jerningham by the use of 'strong placards' and by circulating extracts from Bradlaugh's writings.¹⁴

Yet despite these attempts to discredit Jerningham by invoking the Bradlaugh issue, the Conservatives were unable to repeat their success of the previous year. Indeed, the Liberal majority at the by-election of 1881 (517) was the largest in the borough's history so far,¹⁵ suggesting that, in Berwick at least, the name of Bradlaugh was no longer capable of arousing religious passions to the extent that it could significantly affect voting behaviour. When confronted by other factors, most notably the personal popularity of a local candidate, the Bradlaugh case lost its impact as an election issue. Indeed, the *Advertiser* even maintained that amongst the reasons for Jerningham's success were the persistent attacks made upon him because of his Catholicism and his promise to vote for the admission of Charles Bradlaugh to the House of Commons.¹⁶

Michael Wickham is a Lecturer in History at North Tyneside College.

- 1 Religious issues, such as church rates, the Maynooth Grant, the disestablishment of the Irish Church and Sunday closing, were frequently seized upon by the Conservatives as a means of diverting the electors' attention from issues such as parliamentary reform and free trade, which were associated with the Liberals and opposed by the Conservatives.
- 2 *Berwick Warder*, 13 July 1880, p. 2.
- 3 Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. CCLIII, 1880, 569.
- 4 Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. CCLIII, 1880, 572.
- 5 *Berwick Warder*, 20 July 1880, p. 3.
- 6 *Berwick Advertiser*, 23 July 1880, p. 4.
- 7 *Berwick Warder*, 13 July 1880, p. 3.
- 8 W. L. Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case*, p. 143.
- 9 E. Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*, p. 269.
- 10 Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case*, p. 144.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 12 *Berwick Advertiser*, 7 October 1881, p. 2.
- 13 *Berwick Warder*, 7 October 1881, p. 2.
- 14 *Berwick Advertiser*, 28 October 1881, pp. 2 and 3.
- 15 The result of the poll in 1881 was: Jerningham (Lib) 1,046; Trotter (Con) 529.
- 16 *Berwick Advertiser*, 28 October 1881, p. 2.

Lloyd George Society Weekend

19 – 21 February 2005

Book your place now!

In 1986 the Welsh Liberal Weekend Schools became the Lloyd George Society Weekend School. Since then it has been holding annually one of the most prominent events in the Welsh Liberal Democrat political calendar, bringing together leading Liberal Democrats and non-Liberals from across Britain to the heart for Wales.

Next year's weekend will take place at the Abernant Lake Hotel, Llanwrtyd Wells, between 19th and 21st February 2005. It is a must of all of those who enjoy listening to and taking part in discussions of both politics and topical issues. It brings together some of the most prominent writers, academics and practitioners from Britain and Europe for a weekend of enlivened debate.

The 2005 weekend school will include contributions from, among others:

- Stephen Lewis, chief economist at broker Monument Derivatives
- Mr Winston Roddick CF, LLM, former Counsel General of the National Assembly of Wales
- Political commentator and journalist Anthony Howard
- Welsh People's Peer Baroness Finley
- Tatiana Zobnina

The Saturday evening consists of a dinner with guest speaker. The cost of the weekend is £78, with various options available for those only able to attend parts of the weekend. For the first ten new members wishing to attend there is a £30 reduction in the overall cost.

To book a place contact Bill Barritt on 01746 765142 or email bill@fordthorne.co.uk. You can also write to: The Lloyd George Society, The Leasowes, Wenlock Road, Tasleey, Bridgnorth, Shropshire, WV16 5LZ