

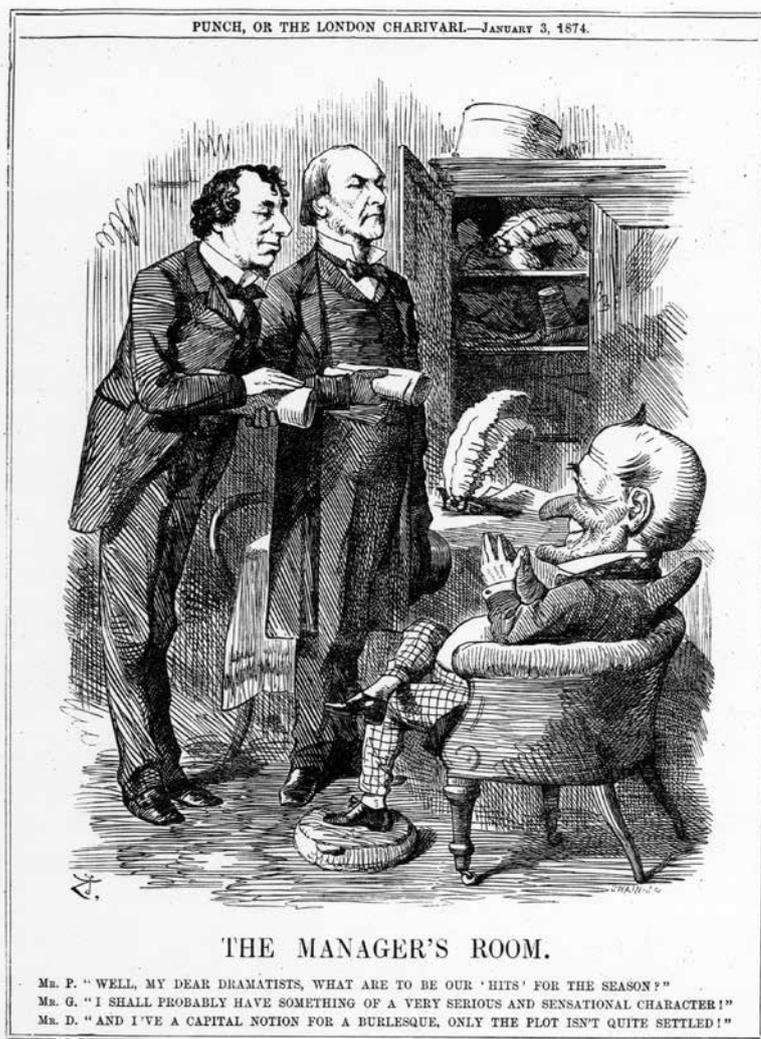
## Election analysis

David Brooks discusses the 1874 election and its outcome, which brought to an end Gladstone's first government

# The General El

ON 23 JANUARY 1874, Gladstone stunned the political world, and the country in general, by announcing the sudden dissolution of parliament, thereby precipitating a brief but highly charged contest at the polls. It would prove to be one of the more significant general elections of the nineteenth century, dramatically reversing the Liberal triumph of just over five years previously. More than most such contests, that of 1874 assumed a highly personalised character. Gladstone and Disraeli had long sparred across the floor of the House of Commons. Now their inveterate rivalry would be transferred to the hustings, with each declaiming against the other in speeches in their respective constituencies. In the opinion of the *Saturday Review*, 'if there is any one political question ... it is that suggested by the comparison between Mr. Disraeli and Mr. Gladstone, which Mr. Gladstone has done his utmost to put in the strongest light possible.'<sup>1</sup> The platform oratory of the two party leaders effectively defined the 1874 general election; and, in rhetorical terms, it has to be said that Disraeli had rather the better of the encounter.

But of course much more was at work than great personal antagonism. The electoral contest amounted to a referendum on the record of Gladstone's tumultuous first administration, with its list of major and controversial reforms, involving religion, the rights of property, education, the system of voting, and national defence. Rarely, indeed, had the British establishment seemed under such sustained attack. In these circumstances the electoral verdict can with some justification be interpreted as a conservative reaction to Gladstone's radical reforms, but beyond this it was arguably also a reaction to almost half a century of sweeping legislation and organic change. To this extent it can be seen as marking the end of an era, signalling the close of a long period of Liberal hegemony, in both Britain and Ireland, and pointing, in Britain at least, to increasing Conservative strength and dominance. One political commentator put it rather well. 'The great lesson of the election of 1874', he declared, 'is that the middle classes have gone over to the enemy bag and baggage.'<sup>2</sup>



### Opening exchanges

Gladstone began proceedings with a manifesto, couched in the form of an inordinately long letter to his Greenwich constituents. Disraeli would describe it with some justice as a 'prolix narrative', in which the prime minister laboured somewhat unconvincingly to blame the Conservatives for the sudden dissolution of parliament, on the grounds that they had failed to take office ten months previously after defeating the government in the House of Commons on the Irish Universities Bill. This failure, claimed Gladstone, had

The approach to the election – Disraeli and Gladstone in front of Mr Punch (*Punch*, 3 January 1874)

# ection of 1874

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undermined the constitution, and placed both crown and country at a disadvantage. It had certainly left him in charge of what would today be described as a lame-duck administration, without sufficient authority to impose its will on either of the house of parliament.

In contrast to 1868, Gladstone now gave little indication of what he would do if he were returned to office; though he made it clear that his emphasis would be on England rather than on Ireland and the Celtic fringe. He talked in very general terms about reforming 'the institutions of this great metropolis', and, more widely, of amending the system of local government finance, with possible relief for ratepayers; and in addition he referred vaguely to the extension of household suffrage to the counties, or, as he somewhat drolly put it, 'to the populations of a number of rural districts with a central village, which may perhaps be called peasant-boroughs'. Like much else in his election programme, this raised as many questions as it answered. Thus *The Economist* considered his tentative proposal to reform London's system of government 'a subject involving the delicate adjustment of an infinity of details', adding that 'it must disturb and alarm a vast multitude of vested interests.' Furthermore Gladstone took credit for his government's record in reducing public expenditure and thereby accumulating a likely surplus of £5.5 million by the time of the next budget; and this, he claimed, would enable him to offer his one substantial, not to say startling, election promise, in the form of the abolition of income tax.<sup>3</sup> Surely, one would have thought, this would prove a clear winner with the electorate.

Disraeli's own manifesto, following a day later in the form of a letter to his Buckinghamshire constituents, was of course a very different document. Incisive and epigrammatic, in contrast to Gladstone's, it fastened effectively on a number of key themes. To begin with, it took issue with what it chose to regard as Gladstone's constitutional impropriety in dissolving parliament just a few days before it was due to come back into session. The snap dissolution, declared Disraeli, was 'essentially un-English', indeed a virtual 'coup d'état', almost worthy of Napoleon III, whether

undertaken 'as a means of avoiding the confession by the Prime Minister that he has, in a fresh violation of constitutional law, persisted in retaining for several months a seat to which he was no longer entitled, or resorted to by his government in order to postpone or evade the day of reckoning for a war carried on without communication with Parliament and the expenditure for which Parliament has not sanctioned'.<sup>4</sup> Clearly Disraeli relished taking the constitutional high ground at his old opponent's expense; and indeed Gladstone's failure to seek re-election for Greenwich in August 1873, after assuming the additional office of chancellor of the exchequer, had caused him to be served a writ of pains and penalties in the Court of Queen's Bench, significantly just three days before he had taken the decision to dissolve.<sup>5</sup>

The war against the Ashanti in West Africa, alluded to here, had been opposed by Disraeli when it broke out in 1873; and during the general election campaign he would repeatedly insist that it endangered British interests in Asia, a part of the world which of course always appealed much more than Africa to his imperial imagination. Disraeli's contention was that, in order to obtain the cession of Dutch forts along the Gold Coast in West Africa, Gladstone's government had surrendered to the Dutch control of Sumatra and the vital waterway of the Malacca Straits between that island and the Malay Peninsula. This was of course part of the central message which Disraeli promulgated at the 1874 general election, that what was needed was 'a little more energy in our foreign policy and a little less in our domestic legislation'. In his manifesto Disraeli warned, in the light of the record of the previous five years, of the fresh domestic upheavals that might be in prospect should Gladstone and the Liberals be returned to power. The Church of England, the Irish Union, the House of Lords, indeed the Crown itself: all might be in danger. In particular Disraeli very effectively exploited Gladstone's toying in his own manifesto with the possibility of further parliamentary reform.<sup>6</sup> This was of course a subject at which Disraeli had excelled at his rival's expense in 1866 and 1867; and he now took occasion to warn of all the complications

involved. Quite apart from the fact that the recent major changes of 1867 and 1872 still had properly to be assimilated, the extension of household suffrage to the counties, which any further instalment of parliamentary reform would involve, would necessitate the wholesale redrawing of constituency boundaries, and hence the disappearance of many of the smaller parliamentary boroughs. As the outcome of the general election would largely be decided in the many small towns of England, all loath to lose their prized parliamentary status, this was to prove a particularly shrewd thrust on Disraeli's part.

Gladstone responded with a lengthy address to his Greenwich constituents, delivered from a covered wagon in Blackheath. He mocked Disraeli for finding it necessary, in his manifesto, to travel to the remote Malacca Straits, 'as far off as the Kingdom of Brobdingnag' as it were; and he suggested that his rival, with his idea of an armed neutrality, might have involved Britain in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. But on a key theme of his campaign, the abolition of income tax, Gladstone's speech raised as many questions as it answered. Indeed, by founding his calculations on what would perforce remain a hypothetical surplus until the end of the financial year in April, he seemed at risk of squandering the great reputation which he had acquired over many years for prudent and skilful management of the Exchequer. Laborious and uninspired, his speech left his audience unclear as to whether there would in fact be enough spare capacity to fund the abolition of income tax, and indeed whether such a measure would actually benefit the bulk of the community, most of whom did not pay income tax anyway.<sup>7</sup>

*The Economist* considered Gladstone's financial scheme as even more extraordinary than his precipitate dissolution of parliament. 'Many things', it declared, 'were prophesied of the new voters, but no one ever suggested that the most agreeable thing to them would be the removal of a tax which the rich pay and they do not.'<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, Joseph Chamberlain would later describe Gladstone's manifesto as 'the meanest document that has ever in like circumstances proceeded from a statesman of the first rank.'<sup>9</sup> 'Remember', *The Times* now recalled, 'with what charms Mr. Gladstone could once adorn his financial schemes.'<sup>10</sup> Clearly the flawed project of 1874 could not stand comparison with his great budgets of former years.

Disraeli, it must be said, had waited a long time to have his revenge for the defeat of his own budgetary proposals at Gladstone's hands in 1852. Now he had his chance, taking his great rival severely to task on points of principle as well as detail. Gladstone, he declared in a speech at Aylesbury, was attempting to bribe the electorate, or at least a section of it, just like a Roman emperor of old. He was presenting 'to the people of this country the most extraordinary inducements to support a minister that ever were unblushingly offered.' The whole scheme was 'inconsistent, illogical and

unjust'. In the past, and not least in 1852, Gladstone had stressed the need to maintain 'the due proportion that should subsist in our permanent financial system between direct and indirect taxation'. Now he was proposing to do exactly the opposite, with his scheme to relieve taxation on the better off without apparently doing anything for the great bulk of the community. In any case, Disraeli claimed, Gladstone had got his sums wrong. The abolition of income tax would leave a hole in the nation's finances which even Gladstone's vaunted economising would hardly fill. He would perforce have to look for new sources of revenue elsewhere. Indeed he might find himself obliged to resort to taxing articles of consumption, perhaps even – horror of horrors – returning to the very tariffs which income tax had originally been introduced to replace in 1842. At the very least he would surely have to fall back on increasing other forms of direct taxation, such as the house tax and the succession duty. Relieved of income tax, the middle classes would necessarily find themselves fleeced in other ways.<sup>11</sup>

In his campaign speeches Disraeli contrived to link the financial question with that of foreign policy, a subject by which he set especial store. Easy to expand at short notice, the income tax was a vital weapon in an emergency, an essential war levy, the continuance of which would demonstrate Britain's determination to fulfil her obligations as a great power. The lack of such determination, Disraeli asserted, had led Britain to disaster in the past, at a time indeed when Gladstone had first been chancellor of the exchequer. 'In the course of my public life', he declared in a speech at Aylesbury, 'I know no event that I more deplore, or look back on with less satisfaction, than the Crimean War ... a war that was perfectly unnecessary; it was the conduct of the cabinet of England, vacillating and ambiguous, that encouraged the Emperor of Russia to that war'. Gladstone, a key member of that cabinet, was in Disraeli's unforgiving view, 'the minister who occasioned the Crimean War'; and the conduct of his government since 1868 arguably provided further glaring examples of appeasement and neglect. Particular cases in point had been allowing Russia in 1870 to remilitarise the Black Sea (in contravention of the peace treaty of 1856), and conceding American claims for compensation concerning the Civil War, and the depredations of Confederate warships built in Britain, most prominently the *Alabama*.<sup>12</sup>

### The verdict of the boroughs

Polling in the general election began on 31 January 1874, just a few days after the dissolution had first been announced; and, in common with all such contests before 1918, it stretched over a fortnight and more. The initial results indicated a clear trend, even though they were not all in the same direction. On the first day, indeed, the

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Liberals gained one seat – Barnstaple – but they lost five others – Andover, Chatham, Guildford, Kidderminster, and North Lincolnshire. On the second day the Liberals gained another seat at Westbury; but they lost three more at Wakefield, Warrington and in Mid-Lincolnshire. Even at this early stage, one can detect a tide running in the Conservatives' favour in various parts of England. On the third day this became still more apparent, with the Liberals gaining eight seats, but losing eighteen. At this point in time a particular interest attached to Gladstone's own result in the two-member constituency of Greenwich. He was duly re-elected; but disappointingly he came second in the poll to a Conservative, and with several hundred votes fewer than in 1868, in part due to the intervention of a home rule candidate. As he put it, 'my own election for Greenwich after Boord the distiller is more like a defeat than a victory'.<sup>13</sup> In the circumstances, it was not surprising that he would seek a new constituency before the next general election, which of course would turn out to be Midlothian.

Two other individual contests attracted national attention at this moment, as they seemed to provide test cases of the popularity of the 1870 Education Act, one of the most controversial measures of Gladstone's first government. At Bradford, in what *The Times* described as 'the most satisfactory result up to the present time', W. E. Forster, the act's chief architect, saw off a challenge from the candidate of the 'extreme Nonconformists' by a margin of 11,945 to 8,398. *The Times* was also pleased by a similar result at Sheffield, where Chamberlain, the candidate of the 'Birmingham dissenters', was convincingly defeated by J. A. Roebuck, a supporter of the 1870 act and a representative of old-style Radicalism.<sup>14</sup> On the same day, the Liberals reversed a recent by-election loss at Stroud, and they defeated a Conservative heavyweight, Sir John Pakington, at Droitwich.

But any thoughts of a rally in Liberal fortunes were soon dispelled. On 5 February the balance of seats gained stood in the Conservatives' favour at forty-three to nineteen. On the following day it stood at sixty-one to twenty-four; and notable Liberal losses at this stage included the two-member seat of Brighton, 'long regarded as a stronghold of advanced Liberalism'. (Here one of the defeated Liberals was Henry Fawcett, seen as second only to John Bright as a Radical tribune in the House of Commons). It was at this point that Gladstone privately acknowledged overall defeat in a letter to his brother, Robertson.<sup>15</sup> For the majority of sixty-six, which his government had retained at the time of the dissolution, had now evaporated. In the words of *The Times*, it was clear that the Liberals had lost 'in every part of England, in great constituencies as in small, in commercial and manufacturing cities as well as agricultural market towns'.<sup>16</sup> As the *Saturday Review* trenchantly observed, 'the boroughs have shown that they wish for religious education in



'Joy, joy for ever! My task is done – the gates are passed, and heaven is won!' Disraeli rejoices at his electoral success in 'Paradise and the Peri' (from *Lalla Bakh* by Thomas Moore; the peri, a creature from Persian mythology, has been expelled from Paradise and strives to regain entrance) (*Punch*, 28 February 1874)

some mild and unaggressive form, no county franchise at present, and no restrictions on the trade in beer except for police purposes.'<sup>17</sup>

### Metropolitan and county constituencies

Results published a day later, on 7 February 1874, showed that the Conservatives had extended their range of successes still further, notably in the nation's capital, which had once been a Liberal preserve. Thus they gained three of the four City of London seats, perhaps in reaction to Gladstone's tentative plans for reforming city government; and, strikingly, they also gained the metropolitan boroughs of Chelsea, Marylebone, Tower Hamlets and Westminster. In addition the Conservatives gained three adjoining county seats – Middlesex, East Surrey and South Essex – where the extension of suburbia, or what was called 'villadom', was thought to be a factor. During the last week of polling, the Conservative tide even reached into the Celtic fringe, with nine gains in Scotland and three in Wales, most of them in county constituencies; while in the counties of England the Conservatives added further to their already strong position, with nineteen gains and only two losses. *The Spectator* indeed noted 'the extraordinary completeness of Liberal defeat in the English counties'.<sup>18</sup> Only mining seats in Cornwall and Durham, or those under the territorial influence of a Liberal magnate such as the Duke of Devonshire, seemed

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able to resist the tide. The one other exception to the Liberals' tale of woe was in Ulster, where there was talk of the rout of 'Orange Toryism' by a 'Presbyterian democracy'.<sup>19</sup> Aided perhaps by the tenant-right legislation of 1870, the Liberals here gained a number of seats: Down, Londonderry, Cavan, Dungannon and Coleraine. In the final tally, in mid-February, across the whole of the United Kingdom, the balance of gains in the Conservatives' favour stood at ninety-eight to thirty-eight, leaving them with an overall majority of fifty-four.<sup>20</sup>

Almost the last result to be announced had been in Disraeli's own three-member seat of Buckinghamshire, where he had headed the poll with 3,004 votes, as against his main Liberal challenger with 1,720. This was in many ways a fitting conclusion to the national campaign. Disraeli had cultivated a close relationship with his constituency for over a quarter of a century; indeed rather more securely than Gladstone had been able to do during his own long, electoral association with the University of Oxford. Disraeli liked to flatter his constituents as belonging to 'that sacred land', that historic county in which, so he claimed, the parliamentary constitution of England had been established by half a dozen families. Not least, with matters of taxation in mind, he purported to be the heir of John Hampden, who had famously opposed the arbitrary levy of ship money by the government of Charles I before the Civil War; and he berated Gladstone for toying with ideas about income tax when he should really be addressing the much more pressing problem of agricultural rates.<sup>21</sup> Buckinghamshire indeed provided in 1874 a more suitable platform for Disraeli than did Greenwich for Gladstone. The prime minister had only represented the seat since 1868, and seemed ill at ease in a metropolitan constituency. And certainly his campaign in 1874 did little to avert a notable decline in Liberal strength in London and its adjacent counties.

### A swing of the pendulum

Disraeli's indictment of Gladstone in 1874 bore distinct similarities to his assault on Peel in 1846. *The Times* indeed considered that his Aylesbury speech, accusing Gladstone of behaving like a corrupt Roman emperor of old, recalled 'the worst passages in Mr. Disraeli's career', adding that 'what could be pardoned in a rising politician is not to be excused in a veteran statesman'.<sup>22</sup> But Disraeli, it must be admitted, did succeed in making a key issue in the general election one of confidence in the prime minister. In his view, Gladstone could be as high-handed as Peel had once been. Indeed the *Saturday Review* would detect in the country generally 'a personal reaction against the Prime Minister and against the impulsiveness and disregard of constitutional usage which had prompted him to dissolve parliament "on a sudden", just as he had abolished purchase by royal prerogative'.<sup>23</sup> Now, instead of

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Disraeli, it was Gladstone who could plausibly be likened to Napoleon III, with his constitutional malpractice, with his calling of what was in effect a plebiscite, and even with his own version of the Mexican expedition in the form of the Ashanti war.<sup>24</sup> Where, it was asked, would Gladstone's restless and innovating spirit take the country next? In the pithy view of *The Spectator*, the prime minister had 'come to seem more dangerous in charge of a majority government than Disraeli in charge of a minority one'.<sup>25</sup> The *Saturday Review* took a similar line, and pointed to the alienation of swing voters belonging to the middle classes. Among them it identified 'the dwellers in those happy hideous homes which line the great roads out of towns', arguing pointedly that 'they were not harassed; their incomes had not been cut down by a retrenching government; they had not the slightest wish to go to a public-house after eleven at night; but they thought that Mr. Gladstone, having done some very good things, had lost his head and was at the mercy of any clique of violent, foolish men'.<sup>26</sup>

Generally the country appeared prosperous in early 1874. The onset of what economists have termed the Great Depression of the later nineteenth century, partly a consequence of the German financial crash of 1873, had yet to make its mark. And prosperity, in the view of *The Spectator* served as a 'political opiate', working 'against Gladstone's zeal and over-activity'.<sup>27</sup> Other influences could be seen as reinforcing a mood of conservatism, not least what was perceived as turmoil in Europe. As Disraeli put it in a speech at Newport Pagnell, warning against possible designs on Gladstone's part against the House of Lords and perhaps even the monarchy, 'we have national institutions, the value of which was never more apparent than at a moment when you find old and established Europe generally in confusion and peril'.<sup>28</sup> Here he was referring in particular to the recent horrors of the Paris Commune, the continuing crisis in Spain, and the real possibility of European war that might result from Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and consequent conflict with the pope. Halifax, a prominent Whig statesman, broadly echoed this sentiment, and stressed also the swing of the political pendulum:

As far as I can make out people are frightened – the masters were afraid of their workmen, manufacturers afraid of strikes, churchmen afraid of nonconformists, many afraid of what is going on in France and Spain, and in very unreasoning fear have all taken refuge in conservatism. Ballot enabled them to do this without apparently deserting their principles and party. Things in this country as elsewhere are apt to run for a time in opposite directions. The reaction from the quiet of Palmerston's government gave you strength to remove four or five old-standing abuses which nobody had ventured to touch for years. The feelings of those who suffer from the removal of abuses are always stronger than those of the general public

who are benefited. Gratitude for the Reform bill and its sequel of improvements hardly gave a liberal majority in 1835, and gratitude for the removal of the Irish church, purchase, etc., has not given us a majority in 1874.<sup>29</sup>

### Beer and the Bible

Two particularly controversial recent items of legislation must be considered. Gladstone notoriously referred to them in the letter to his brother Robertson, cited earlier. 'We have', he wrote, 'been borne down in a torrent of gin and beer. ... Next to that has been the action of the Education Act of 1870, and the subsequent controversies. Many of the Roman Catholics have voted against us because we are not denominational; and many of the dissenters have at least abstained because we are.'<sup>30</sup> As far as the question of drink was concerned, *The Times* was in broad agreement with Gladstone as regards the role of licensed victuallers 'a trade which is not only very rich and powerful, but able from its peculiar relations with its customers to influence great masses of popular opinion.' And, the newspaper added of Gladstone, 'probably all the disquiet occasioned by his organic reforms has not cost him so many seats as the licensing bills of Mr. Bruce.'<sup>31</sup> Almost certainly the prime minister was also right to see the 1870 Education Act as a significant factor in the Liberal defeat. As *The Economist* pertinently observed, 'the most numerous class of the present constituencies belong to the sub-dissenting population who may be acted on by the Church of England in favour of Conservatism, and at any rate are not acted upon by the dissenters against Conservatism.'<sup>32</sup> Here Disraeli could be said to have brought off a similar trick to that which he had worked over parliamentary reform in 1866–7. By endorsing the 1870 act, and with it the broad principle of non-sectarian religious instruction in the newly established board schools, he had contrived to split the Liberals and to throw their Nonconformist supporters into disarray. As he had put it, somewhat tentatively, in his speech at Buckingham, 'the only question before the country is whether national education should be founded on the sacred basis of religion, or whether it should be entirely secular. The twenty-fifth clause is the symbol of the controversy, and you must be for or against it.'<sup>33</sup> This particular clause, it will be recalled, had provided for support out of public funds for pauper children attending voluntary, in practice mainly Anglican, schools. This clause had deeply antagonised the Nonconformists; but their ranks were in any case split over another aspect of the act, the Cowper-Temple clause. This had provided for non-denominational religious instruction in the new local authority or board schools, which in practice meant readings from the Bible. Many Nonconformists could accept this, following the lead of Forster, himself a Quaker and the act's

chief architect; but others, including the rising star, Chamberlain, still saw in it the covert influence of Anglicanism. Roebuck had exploited this division in his epic contest with Chamberlain at Sheffield. Whereas the latter had favoured entirely secular, as opposed to non-sectarian, religious education, Roebuck had successfully wrapped himself in national colours, defending Bible teaching as being as much a part of England's identity as Shakespeare. 'The English language is founded upon the Bible ... our language has gone round the globe.'<sup>34</sup> Here was an argument close to Disraeli's heart. By successfully mobilising the religious residuum, as he saw it, against the dissenting denominations, he could be said to have dished the Nonconformists in 1874 much as he had claimed to dish the Whigs in 1867. Disraeli noted the erosion of Nonconformist influence in the numerous minor parliamentary boroughs, 'those small towns where sectional interests and sectarian feelings predominated.' And he celebrated 'the striking demonstration which has been offered to the country of the existence of the Conservative working man'. This could be seen:

... in the large majorities that have asserted themselves in Lancashire and Yorkshire, in the whole of Kent and the whole of Essex and Surrey ... in the City of London, the City of Westminster, the great metropolitan boroughs, in Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, in Dublin, and, I am glad to say, even in Glasgow.<sup>35</sup>

### The strange death of Liberal Ireland

One other important aspect of the 1874 general election needs emphasising. For it could plausibly be said to have sounded the death knell of Irish Liberalism. In 1868, on the promise of Gladstone's plans to transform the country, the Liberals had won 65 out of 105 seats in Ireland. In 1874, despite their gains in Ulster as noted earlier, they were reduced to a mere twelve, mostly at the expense of the newly founded Home Rule Party, which had capitalised successfully on the disappointed expectations surrounding Gladstone's once ambitious programme of reform. The new party would now return fifty-eight MPs to Westminster, having enjoyed particular success in the province of Munster. Here, for example, its leader, Isaac Butt, retained his seat at Limerick, and a former Conservative MP, Sir Joseph McKenna, won Youghal as a home ruler. In addition two former Liberals, now standing as home rulers, won County Cork, the largest agricultural constituency in Ireland. In the province of Leinster, Chichester Fortescue, who had been Irish chief secretary, lost his seat at Louth. Gladstone considered his defeat 'painful in a public view with regard to the gratitude of Irishmen', adding that 'it would be hard to name the man who has done for Ireland all that you have done.'<sup>36</sup> *The Times*, it is true, sounded a note of qualification,

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suggesting that the snap dissolution had caught the home rulers at something of a disadvantage. 'Mr. Gladstone's surprise', it declared, had 'so far operated to cripple the tactics of the Separatists that the disaffected masses of the people have been compelled to adopt as their candidates in most instances Irish Roman Catholic Liberals of the type well known for more than forty years at Westminster.'<sup>37</sup>

But it would soon become clear that what *The Times* referred to as 'these home rulers of the eleventh hour' would not return to the ranks of Liberalism. Indeed, under Parnell's subsequent ascendancy, their places would increasingly be filled by nationalists of a more extreme character. And, after the 1885 general election, the once all-powerful Liberal Party would find itself without a single seat in Ireland.

### Change of government

On 17 February 1874, Gladstone formally resigned the seals of office on behalf of himself and his ministers. In 1868 he had criticised Disraeli for doing this without observing the traditional protocol of first meeting parliament; but he now accepted the historic nature of his defeat, and followed his rival's example. As he would later put it, 'the Parliament chosen in 1868 exhibited an unexampled phenomenon ... for the first time the mind of the nation, as tested by the constituencies, had decisively altered during the course of a single Parliament.' By contrast, it had taken 'three Parliaments to overthrow the Liberal majority of Earl Grey, and three more – between 1847 and 1857 – to re-establish it in decisive numbers.'<sup>38</sup> So now, at last, Disraeli was able to obtain the overall majority which he had been seeking for so many years; and he was able to form a strong, united Conservative government. Included in its ranks were Northcote and Derby, both regarded as safe pairs of hands at the Treasury and the Foreign Office respectively; but in addition key figures in the party such as Salisbury and Carnarvon, who had resigned in protest against Disraeli's Parliamentary Reform Bill in 1867, were now lured back into office. Another leading Conservative, Gathorne Hardy, took over the War Office, a job which *The Spectator* considered the second most important in the government, given the unsettled state of Europe.<sup>39</sup> The 1874 general election would prove decisive in yet another sense. Never again, as Gladstone's biographer, Morley, was to point

out, would a government put before the country a proposal to abolish income tax.<sup>40</sup> So clearly that impost had come to stay. But, in a rather different way, the precedent of 1874 would be repeated. As was seen as recently as 2017, a prime minister can still be tempted to call a snap general election. Gladstone would try the same again in 1886, with even less success than in 1874. And, ironically, Disraeli's government, formed in the wake of Gladstone's precipitate dissolution in 1874, would itself founder in not dissimilar circumstances in 1880. In that year a government would again call a general election, seemingly with scant justification, and at what was perceived to be an untimely moment, just weeks after the state opening of parliament. Once again indeed there was a suspicion that a government was trying to avoid a subject of embarrassment, and in effect to put one over on the electorate. And once again a government was punished at the polls. As so often, it might be said, 'the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.'

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- 1 'Mr. Gladstone', *Saturday Review*, 7 (7 Feb. 1874), pp. 165–6.
- 2 F. Harrison, 'The Conservative Reaction', *Fortnightly Review*, 15 (Mar. 1874), pp. 297–309. Useful secondary sources in this regard include: H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (1959); J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (1993); P. Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform* (1967).
- 3 'The Government of London', *Economist*, 32 (31 Jan. 1874), p. 127; *The Times*, 24 Jan. 1874. *The Economist* here noted the 'separation of the City from the rest of the Metropolis'. Within the City, there was 'the paraphernalia of Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council, and Livery Companies and Wardmotes.' London outside the City was the responsibility of the Metropolitan Board of Works, chosen not by the ratepayers at large, but by the vestries and the districts' boards of works.
- 4 *The Times*, 26 Jan. 1874.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 27 Jan. 1874.

- 6 *Ibid.*, 26 Jan. 1874.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 29 Jan. 1874.
- 8 'Finance and the Dissolution', *The Economist*, 32 (31 Jan. 1874), pp. 125–7.
- 9 J. L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (Macmillan, 1932), vol. i, p. 164.
- 10 *The Times*, 3 Feb. 1874.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 2 Feb. 1874.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 2 Feb. 1874.
- 13 John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (Macmillan, 1903), vol. ii, p. 490. Cuts in naval and military expenditure probably cost the Liberals votes in Greenwich, and also caused them to lose the dockyard seats of Chatham, Portsmouth, Devonport and Plymouth.
- 14 *The Times*, 5 Feb. 1874.
- 15 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 496.
- 16 *The Times*, 6 Feb. 1874.
- 17 'The Elections', *Saturday Review*, 37 (7 Feb. 1874), pp. 163–4.
- 18 *The Spectator*, 47 (21 Feb. 1874), p. 226.
- 19 *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1874.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 19 Feb. 1874.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 11 Feb. 1874.
- 22 *Ibid.* 2 February 1874.
- 23 'The Conservative Reaction', *Saturday Review*, 37 (14 Feb. 1874), pp. 195–6. Strictly speaking, the ending of the purchase of army commissions in 1871 had been effected not by royal prerogative but by royal warrant.
- 24 *The Times*, 28 Jan. 1874.
- 25 'The Inference from the Elections', *The Spectator*, 47 (14 Feb. 1874), pp. 196–7.
- 26 'The Elections', *Saturday Review*, 37 (14 Feb. 1874), pp. 193–4. Particular suspicion here attached to John Bright, who had returned to the cabinet in 1873.
- 27 'The Inference from the Elections', *The Spectator*.
- 28 *The Times*, 5 Feb. 1874.
- 29 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 494.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 496.
- 31 *The Times*, 10 Feb. 1874.
- 32 'The New Government', *The Economist*, 32 (21 Feb. 1874), pp. 221–2.
- 33 *The Times*, 11 Feb. 1874.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 30 Jan. 1874.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 11 Feb. 1874.
- 36 Morley, *Gladstone*, pp. 491–2. The former notion that the secret ballot, introduced two years earlier, was crucial to the results in 1874 in Ireland has been challenged in M. Hurst, 'Ireland and the Ballot Act of 1872', *Historical Journal*, 8 (1965), pp. 326–52. From the record of by-elections, he argues that 'Home Rule had beaten the Whigs on its own terms before the Ballot Act'.
- 37 *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1874.
- 38 'Electoral Facts', *Nineteenth Century*, 4 (Nov. 1878).
- 39 'The Tory Cabinet', *The Spectator*, 47 (21 Feb. 1874), p. 228.
- 40 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 496.