

Liberals and the Boer War

Those Liberal MPs who opposed the Boer War sometimes experienced uneasy relationships with their constituencies and local parties. **Brendon Jones** examines one particular case.

John Herbert Lewis and the South African War 1899–1902

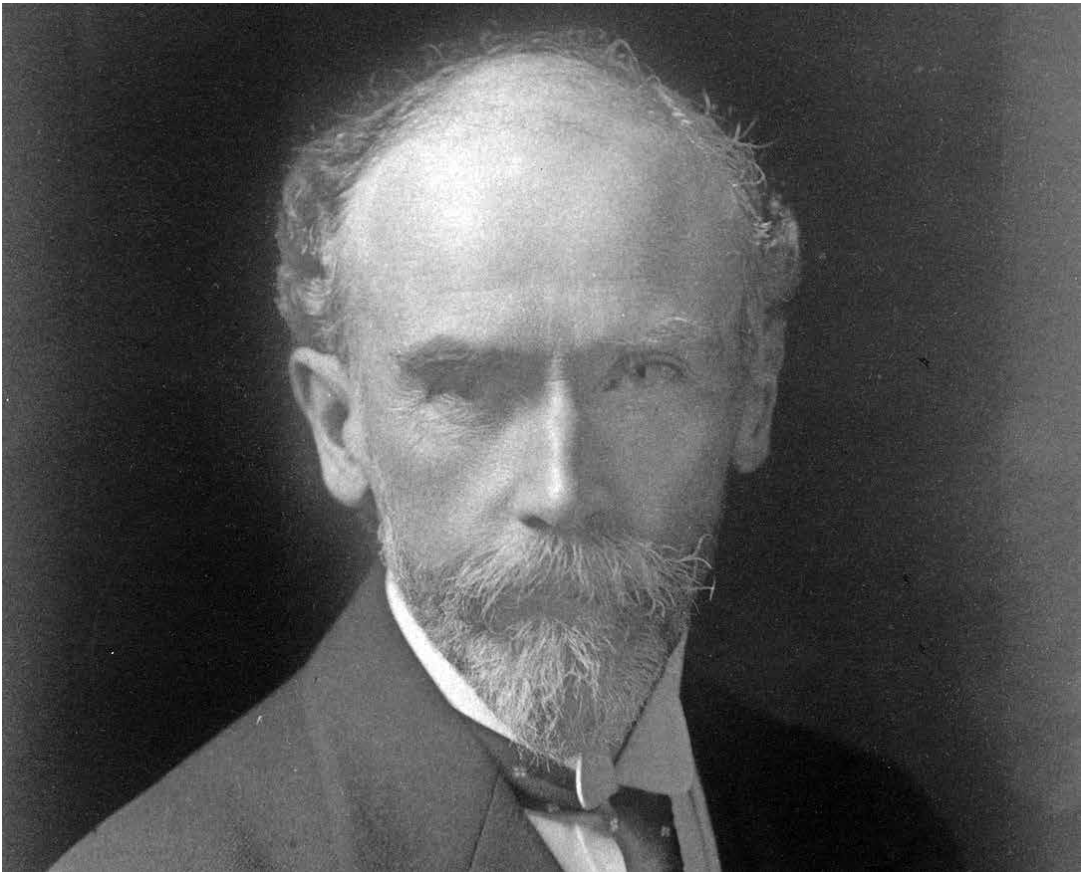
THIS ARTICLE WILL focus on the relationship between a member of parliament, his constituency and his local party. The impact that the latter have on the MP's political attitudes will receive particular attention.

In the months before the 'Khaki' election in October 1900, Herbert Lewis, the MP for Flint Boroughs, experienced strong pressure from both his constituents and his local Liberal Association owing to his early opposition to the South African War. These pressures contributed to an initial modification of his viewpoint which continued to change even after the pressures had been removed following his re-election.

Following a career in local government, including being the first chairman of Flintshire County Council from 1889 to 1893, Herbert Lewis was elected as Liberal MP for Flint Boroughs at the 1892 general election. His career in local government had brought him into close contact with Liberal politicians nationally, especially the young Welsh radicals David Lloyd George and Tom Ellis. Arriving at Westminster he firmly allied himself with the radical wing of Welsh Liberal MPs, playing a prominent role in the 'Revolt of the Four' in 1894 and the Cymru Fydd movement. This strengthened his friendship with Lloyd George

who exerted a strong influence on him.¹ Following the fall of the Rosebery government in 1895, Lewis, having retained his Flint Boroughs seat, continued to agitate on Welsh issues and remained close both politically and personally to Lloyd George which would play a key part in his opposition to the South African War.

Lewis opposed the South African War throughout. Tim Erasmus,² in an unpublished PhD on Lewis's life, discerned a distinct change in his attitude towards the South African War when it ended. This change did not suddenly manifest in June 1902: it gradually evolved during the course of the whole war. Initially Lewis concentrated his attacks on the failures of the Unionist government, which he argued had caused the hostilities. In parallel, he condemned the war in principle, stressing the cost and suffering it would produce whilst militating against social reform at home owing to its high financial cost. By focusing his criticism in this way, Lewis aroused opposition from public opinion and the Flint Boroughs Liberal Association. This prompted a major crisis in late July 1900, with Lewis threatening not to stand as the candidate at the subsequent election. Though this was resolved, he stressed that he would never fall in with the dominant view within the association that had



supported the annexation of the Boer Republics by the British. Yet during the 'Khaki' election he accepted the need for annexation, falling in line with the prevailing sentiment within the Liberal Party, whilst stressing that he believed in the Empire but wanted it to be the symbol of justice and fairness. He also criticised the poor supply of British troops in South Africa to underline his patriotism. This obvious change was the result of earlier pressure Lewis had experienced combined with the pronounced pro-war sentiments of the electorate and Unionist attacks on his unpatriotic stance. Having secured re-election, Lewis like many other Liberal opponents of the war shifted his criticism to the means that the British sanctioned to prosecute the war – notably the 'scorched earth' policy and the introduction of concentration camps. He also expressed concern at the increasing financial cost of the

Sir (John) Herbert Lewis, photographed by Walter Stoneman, 1921 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

hostilities. By the end of the conflict in June 1902, Lewis had again revised his viewpoint, asserting that, although the war had caused great cost and suffering, it had been conducted through methods which accepted the conventions of waging war with due regard for the rights of opponents and civilians.

From the outbreak of the war Lewis was in an invidious position. Whilst there were pockets of opposition to the war in Wales, these were mainly confined to the rural Nonconformist areas, with public opinion largely supporting the war in its early stages. These pro-war sympathies were enhanced by the English language press, which elevated the contribution of Wales to the conflict. The constituency of Flint

Boroughs consisted of eight small boroughs – Caerwrlle, Flint, Holywell, Mold, Overton, Caerwys, Rhuddlan and St Asaph – situated within the anglicised county of Flintshire in north-east Wales. The majority of the population was engaged in heavy industry, mining, quarrying and chemical production. This ensured the war received strong support within the constituency, as it was the anglicised industrial parts of Wales which responded most readily to imperialism. The campaign at the ‘Khaki Election’ of October 1900 is instructive in the historical debate around the extent to which jingoism played a role in individual election campaigns.³ Henry Pelling has noted that Flint Boroughs was far from a safe seat with the social character of the constituency resulted in a small majority for the Liberals.⁴ In the light of jingoistic, pro-war public opinion Lewis moderated his viewpoint and attempted to divert attention from the war to a whole range of issues, including social reform and temperance reform. He also laid great stress on his own patriotism expressing support for annexation and criticising the poor supply of British troops in South Africa. Lewis recognised that to take what would be conceived by the electorate as a ‘Little Englander’ stance could be an electoral liability and electoral expediency produced a modification in his stance.

A further factor which pushed Lewis to moderate his stance was pressure from his Liberal association. Most local Liberal associations were dominated by imperialists who stressed the need for the war. This was the case in Flint Boroughs. It is clear from Lewis’s diary and from letters that he wrote, combined with the strong opposition which his anti-war opinion generated, that the association was controlled by an elite whose views were imperialistic and pro-war. In this context, the prominent Welsh Liberal MPs⁵ who opposed the war, including Lewis, were placed in a difficult position vis-à-vis their core Liberal supporters in their constituencies, with their pro-Boer position also placing them in the minority within the Liberal Party nationally. Whilst they found

themselves less isolated in the later stages of the war when attention focused on the conduct of the war, particularly the ‘scorched earth’ policy and the introduction of concentration camps on the Rand which provoked revulsion throughout Wales, in the period before the annexation of the Boer Republics and the ‘Khaki Election’ they faced a difficult relationship with their local Liberal associations. This placed pressure on Lewis which was a factor in him moderating his position.

From the outbreak of the war to the ‘Khaki’ election: October 1899 to September 1900

Herbert Lewis opposed the South African War from its outbreak in October 1899. This stance placed him in a difficult position in his constituency, where public opinion was jingoistic, and with his local Liberal association which was controlled by an elite whose views were imperialistic and supportive of the war. This invidious situation revealed itself at the first public meeting that Lewis addressed in the constituency after the outbreak of the war. This was held in Mold on 27 November 1899 to inaugurate a fund to aid the widows, orphans and dependents of British soldiers in South Africa. A jingoistic attitude was prevalent, with the local newspaper, the *County Herald* (a staunchly Liberal newspaper), including reference to local bands playing God Save the Queen and Rule Britannia before the meeting commenced. At the conclusion of Lewis’s speech, *Soldiers of the Queen* was played. A large Union Jack was prominently displayed on the platform with a number of smaller ones decorating the rest of the hall.

In such circumstances Lewis delivered a careful speech, ensuring that he did not condemn the war outright but concentrated on its consequences, noting in his diary: ‘Did my best to make them realise what war meant.’⁶ Clearly Lewis recognised the isolated position he was in and attempted to gain support by stressing the suffering the war would produce

rather than his personal opposition to it. Initially he criticised the level of allowances paid to families, noting, ‘the highest scale of allowance was not even sufficient to cover rent in a large town, whilst there were many others whose allowances would be much smaller.’⁷

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Without generous support from the public this would mean the workhouse or starvation for thousands of women and children. He expressed the hope that the British public would be broadminded enough to extend their sympathy to those South Africans who had been bereaved. Lewis warned against expecting the war to end quickly. Lewis, recognising the jingoism on display at the meeting, stressed that the Boers must not be successful in the long term. Lewis also made reference to the horrors of the war to emphasise the impact it would have. He feared, ‘They saw perhaps too much of one side. They heard and read about the enthusiastic crowds cheering their troops to the transports, and they heard of brilliant victories won in South Africa. There was another side to the picture as well. There was the weeping crowd in Pall Mall, enquiring after the killed and wounded, and there were ghastly scenes upon the battlefield.’⁸ He concluded by urging everyone to make a sacrifice for the cause whilst ensuring that other causes which needed their support did not suffer, citing the example of two Flintshire colliers who had recently lost their lives attempting to provide for the safety of their colleagues; this heroism was also important.

The reserved speech delivered by Lewis contrasts sharply with that of Thomas Parry, a prominent member of the Flint Boroughs Liberal Association. He stressed the virtues

and importance of the British Empire and defended the need to make sacrifice and contribute to the fund which was to be set up in strongly jingoistic terms, arguing: ‘there could be nothing nobler than the way in which the reservists had responded to the call of duty

and in many instances left comfortable situations to serve their country. ...

Their duty was to support these men and their dependents, and to provide for the wives and families

Tommy Atkins had left behind.’⁹ The expression of

such imperialistic and pro-war sentiments by a leading local Liberal indicated the potential for conflict between Lewis and the local Liberal association.

At few weeks later, on 29 December, Lewis addressed a Liberal meeting at Flint town hall with Lloyd George and Henry Broadhurst, the Lib-Lab MP for Leicester, who was also a strong opponent of the war. In contrast to the meeting in Mold, he attacked the war more freely, criticising the government’s failures in the months before its outbreak and attacking the government’s conduct of the war. It should be stressed that, whenever he attacked the war, Lewis was careful not to criticise the British army but rather the government and therefore defended his attacks on the war by arguing: ‘It could not be denied that the Liberal Party, even those members of it who, like many Conservatives, were most bitterly opposed to the war, had acted with patriotism. But they had a right, indeed it was their constitutional duty to criticise those points in the conduct of the war which called for criticism.’¹⁰ Lloyd George supported Lewis in his criticism of the war and its conduct – focusing on the government’s failures and not the army – which underlines how close their positions were. The approach appeared to work and despite concerns that there would be opposition at the meeting Lewis noted in his diary, ‘The meeting was very successful.’¹¹

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This approach was essential. Within Wales, support for the war flourished in its early stages with numerous attempts to stress the contribution of Wales to the war. Flint Boroughs was no exception and Lewis became increasingly aware in the early months of 1900 that public opinion within the constituency supported the war. J. Morgan, a leading Flintshire Liberal, in correspondence with Lewis described the patriotic attitude which dominated in Mold noting: 'I have never seen war fever take so strong a hold of the people, who by this time are practically unanimous on the subject. There are few of what are called "pro-boers" amongst us of course but they may be counted on one hand'.¹² The popularity of the war was also made explicitly clear to Lewis on 18 May 1900 owing to the relief of Mafeking and the celebrations that occurred, which he described in his diary as 'people in the streets wild with delight'.¹³

Opposition from the Flint Boroughs Liberal Association to Lewis's public expressions against the war and its conduct also became more apparent. In March 1900 it was decided at a meeting of Liberal councillors and aldermen from Flintshire to remain quiet on the war since 'There was yet an enormous gulf between sections of the Party as to the policy of the war'.¹⁴ In April, Lewis addressed a private meeting of the association on the subject of the war and noted after in his diary, 'Spoke my mind freely about the Transvaal War. Delegates from different boros. spoke to the strong prevalence of the feeling in favour of the war'.¹⁵ Later in the same month he attended a supper given by Samuel Smith, the Liberal MP for the Flintshire County constituency, along with twenty other prominent Liberals, and again expressed concern in his diary at their attitude towards the war noting, 'Nearly all are more or less jingo. Militarism has got hold of our people in the most outstanding way. The light of Gladstone, Bright is quenched in with the darkness'.¹⁶

In early June Lewis received a letter from Morgan which enclosed one from a local party member in Caergwrle, J. Speed, who stated,

'I have been asked by several voters about Mr Lewis's opinion on the war. I am afraid if he speaks out too much against it he will lose his seat if there is an Election this year'.¹⁷ Morgan offered his own opinion to Lewis that the advice was sound as people were supportive of the war. Consequently, it was important that Lewis played down his opposition as he was 'convinced that much of the ground won during the last seventy years is being gradually overrun by the enemy'.¹⁸ This correspondence underlines the genuine concern that existed among the rank and file Liberals in the constituency that Lewis's opposition to the war and the divisions it had produced between Lewis and the Liberal leadership in the local association could cost the party the seat at the next general election.

These various insights into public opinion, combined with the views amongst the Liberal membership and leadership, acted as the catalyst which provoked Lewis's decision not to recontest Flint Boroughs. He conveyed the reasons for his decision to Harding Roberts, the secretary of Flint Boroughs Liberal Association. He was clear that he could not fight the next general election on the lines that the local association would want, noting:

What I have heard from many quarters during the last four months, has convinced me that there is little or no hope of retaining the seat on the lines on which I could contest the constituency. It will be impossible to be silent about South Africa during the election and I cannot speak on that subject without expressing views which are, I have been assured, distasteful to a large portion of the Liberal Party in the constituency'.¹⁹

He stressed that he would not be able to fall in with pro-war sentiment as this would be against his conscience but he recognised this was necessary to hold the seat and so he had decided to stand down as the candidate for the next general election.

In response to Lewis's decision, a meeting of the association was held on 30 July. Lewis made a statement expressing his opposition to the war and his refusal to accept the prevailing views which favoured the annexation of the Transvaal and Orange Free State by the British. Despite obvious differences, it was decided to reselect him as candidate. Lewis confided to his diary that the expressions of general support, kindness and loyalty which he received made him reverse his decision not to stand, but he 'told them plainly annexation was not just'.²⁰ An insight into the views of Liberals within Flint Boroughs following the meeting is given in a letter which Lewis received from the Rev. John Owens, a Calvinistic Methodist minister in Mold. Initially Owens insisted it was imperative to the Liberal cause in Flint Boroughs that Lewis remained as candidate. Addressing the question of the problems which the war had created, he recognised, 'a real number of Liberals have a different attitude from yourself. ... No doubt the real majority think that 'annexation' is the only solution'.²¹ However, Owens assured Lewis he would receive widespread support and loyalty among Liberals whether they agreed with his views on South Africa or not.

Despite the expression of support for Lewis and his decision to recontest the constituency, it was obvious from his formal letter of acceptance to Harding Roberts that there were still serious differences on the South African War. Lewis remained clear that he could not accept annexation of the two Boer Republics by the British but was willing to modify his stance slightly, maintaining: 'I recognise annexation under the circumstances as inevitable, but I cannot agree for a moment with the general belief that the settlement will be lasting. ... I feel I would rather be taken out of Parliament

Herbert Lewis in 1894, from T. Marchant Williams, *Welsh Members of Parliament* (Daniel Owen & Co., 1894); watercolour portraits by Will Morgan (National Library of Wales, Creative Commons Public Domain 1.0)



for life than sign the death warrant of the independence of two free peoples'.²² Lewis stressed his thanks for the loyalty shown at the meeting but was concerned at how the bulk of public opinion would see his views. He recognised that, if they handled the situation carefully and avoided the topics which divided them, they could hold the seat. This was exactly what Lewis did during the 'Khaki' election, diverting attention whenever possible from the South African War whilst combining it with a changed stance which included acceptance of annexation when required.

Lewis was also aware of organisational problems within the local party. The Rev. John Owens, in his letter following the Flint Boroughs Liberal Association's meeting on 30 July, had referred to 'matters besides the war which militate against our success'.²³ He emphasised the lack of organisation in Flint Boroughs maintaining, 'I would not have touched upon this matter, but I feel it a duty. The Liberals are not well officered, in fact things are in a bad state. The representation yesterday was a comparatively weak one as regards personnel equal in this respect to our M. meeting'.²⁴ He suggested Lewis visit each district and address the local Liberals at meetings not made up of just officers but a more wide-ranging representation. He was sure that there were men not currently officials who were equal to those who were and consequently changes could be

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made. Whilst he assured Lewis that Mold was sound, he expressed concern about Caergwrle, Holywell and Bagillt concluding, 'If we lose the Boroughs next time we shall do so because there is no life in our organisation'.²⁵ This was not a problem confined to Flint Boroughs: 'All over Wales the structure of local Liberalism in the constituencies after 1895 shows a consistent

picture of disintegration of organisation and morale'.²⁶

These organisational difficulties, combined with his awareness of support for the annexation of the Transvaal and Orange Free State amongst Liberal activists in the constituency, meant he still lacked enthusiasm for standing as candidate again. In reply to a letter from Frederick Llewelyn-Jones, a leading Holywell Liberal, who had written both to thank Lewis for consenting to stand and to pledge his own support, Lewis stated he was standing out of a sense of duty and would be willing to stand aside for a more suitable candidate if one could be found.²⁷ Lewis wrote to Herbert Gladstone, the Liberal chief whip, in similar terms a few days later making the plea that Liberal Headquarters help to find a new candidate for the seat. The party nationally would not accept the plea, with R. H. Davies replying that it was impossible to consider another candidate for Flint Boroughs who could be successful. It appears the comments he received from the Liberal Party nationally, combined with the loyalty and support which the Flint Boroughs Liberal Association had pledged to him, convinced Lewis of the necessity of him standing again.

By the late summer of 1900 an early general election appeared increasingly likely. In such a contest in Flint Boroughs, the Unionists would undoubtedly exploit the South African question in an attempt to weaken the Liberals by exposing the internal divisions that existed within their ranks on the issue. As Lewis had assured Harding Roberts when formally agreeing to stand once more, 'You may take it for granted that our opponents will compel us to fight on that issue and from their point of view they will be perfectly right'.²⁸ This, combined with weak Liberal organisation, ensured that the prospects for Lewis and the Liberal Party in Flint Boroughs were far from good.

The 'Khaki' Election: September–October 1900

During the 'Khaki' election campaign, Lewis expressed views about the South African War that indicate a clear change had occurred in his position. Although he attempted to divert attention from the war, the Unionists concentrated on the issue, insisting that Lewis had acted unpatriotically. In the light of this, Lewis combined a defensive position, stressing his belief in the Empire and concern for the British troops in South Africa, with an offensive one, attacking the failures of the Unionist government around the conflict. Despite his earlier statements, he accepted the need for the annexation of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. By modifying his stance for electoral expediency, Lewis secured re-election with a substantially increased majority.

A joint meeting of the Flintshire and Flint Boroughs Liberal Association was held in Mold on 22 September 1900 to formally adopt Samuel Smith and Lewis as candidates for the respective constituencies. In their acceptance speeches, both candidates attempted to play down the differences which existed between Liberals on the conflict. Smith tried to dispel rumours which were circulating about differences between himself and Lewis and expressed the hope 'that if they returned him to Parliament they would not leave out his younger colleague, Mr Lewis. His views and Mr Lewis' were identical upon all substantial questions.'²⁹ Lewis also stressed that Liberals would not be divided on the war, noting: 'All sections of the Party were absolutely united on this question, and for all practical purposes they must be united, because now the war was over the issue was really a dead issue.'³⁰ He emphasised that the Unionists were utilising the issue to try to secure electoral victory. From the outset of the campaign Lewis expressed views which diverged from the statements he had made when agreeing to recontest the seat. Not only did he argue that there was no value in discussing the war, but he also accepted the annexation of the two Boer Republics.

He maintained this in his election address. Initially he addressed the question of annexation insisting that since, 'The South African War is virtually over – the annexation – once and for all – of the two Republics to the British Empire is now an accomplished fact from which there must, and can be no going back'.³¹ In what was probably an attempt to stress his own patriotism by criticising the government whilst praising British troops, he stated that: 'The deplorable want of knowledge, foresight and judgement displayed by the government in connection with that War has resulted in needless loss of life, suffering and expense. Their ungrateful treatment of our brave, untiring and uncomplaining soldiers, who have returned home "broken in our wars" is not worthy of a great nation.'³² He also criticised the government for using the war which was now practically over to gain electoral victory. He limited his discussion of the war in his election address whilst addressing domestic issues at length. In particular he stressed his support for social reform, notably the introduction of Old Age Pensions, Workingmen's Compensation and temperance reform. Lewis clearly intended to divert attention from the war.

In contrast, his Unionist opponent, Lloyd-Price, devoted the vast part of his address to the war, maintaining that it had been forced on Britain and that annexation was the only possible solution to avoid further war later. In a veiled attack on Lewis he insisted that, 'The duty of every true Briton during the war was to show a bold and united front for his Country and we can only deplore the presence of that spirit which unhappily has manifested itself of wishing success to our enemies and confusion to his own country'.³³ The Unionists intended to exploit the pro-war sympathies within the electorate by concentrating on the war and Lewis's previous opposition to it. This was made clear early in the campaign at Holywell on 24 September when Lloyd-Price delivered a major attack on Lewis's lack of patriotism. He observed: 'I may say that Mr. Lewis has not shown himself quite

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as loyal to his country as he might have been. He has shown a disposition to sympathise with the enemies of his country.³⁴ He insisted that Lewis was wrong to oppose the war as this merely encouraged the enemy and caused more bloodshed in South Africa. MPs such as Lewis should feel ashamed and apologise. The campaign run by Lloyd-Price is instructive vis-à-vis the debate that has raged about how far the Unionists exploited patriotism, jingoism and the war in their election campaigns.³⁵ The Unionists certainly played on it in Flint Boroughs and Lewis was forced to address it as part of his campaigning.

Lewis answered the charges made the following day at a meeting in Holywell. He began his speech with a statement which stressed his belief in the Empire in strongly patriotic terms:

I know something about this great Empire of which we are proud to form a part. I have visited different parts of the Empire. I have travelled in them and I have studied in them. I have been in distant parts when it has stirred my blood with pride to see the old Union Jack flying – but I want that flag to fly above justice and liberty everywhere. I want that flag to be a symbol of freedom and of hatred of oppression in every part of the world.³⁶

As these were his views, he dismissed the attack of disloyalty, particularly as he knew the electors would not allow their minds to be instilled with such poison. Unionist pressure had forced Lewis to address the war and to express strongly jingoistic sentiments. Despite Lewis's claims, Lloyd-Price returned to the attack on 27 September. He reiterated his previous claims, although he did accept that he had offended Lewis by his comments and would apologise if Lewis could 'explain away the fact of his writing a letter sympathising with a pro-Boer meeting in Liverpool on the 30th of May last'.³⁷ As a consequence of this further attack, throughout the rest of the

campaign, when addressing the war, Lewis incorporated a defensive stance with an offensive one. Initially he would dismiss the charge that he was unpatriotic, before attacking the Unionist government's failures. He would refer to the future in South Africa by stressing the need for annexation followed by a settlement based upon conciliation.

Lewis cited examples of his own concern for the welfare of British soldiers in contrast to the government's indifference. At Bagillt on 29 September, he criticised the poor supply of troops, mentioning evidence which he had heard as a result of his work on the House of Commons Army Contracts Committee arguing that, 'If they sent their young men to fight they were in honour bound to supply them with all necessary comforts and clothe and feed them well'.³⁸ Lewis was attempting to stress his own patriotism by taking up issues which concerned those fighting the war and their families. Moreover, Lewis charged the government with using the army to secure political victory at home. At Flint on 1 October, he argued that parliament had been dissolved to allow the government to capitalise on recent success in South Africa to secure a further term in office.

Throughout the campaign Lewis stressed that it had been right to annex the Boer Republics to the British Empire, a course of action he had insisted he would never be able to support previously. He supported annexation at a speech in Holywell on 25 September and again two days later in a speech in Mold arguing, 'The two republics must be incorporated with and annexed to the British Empire'.³⁹ Whilst he accepted annexation as the logical conclusion of the war, Lewis was careful to maintain that it was necessary to treat the Boers in a conciliatory manner to ensure a lasting peace. At Mold, when he accepted the need for annexation, he also argued that: 'everything that was possible should be done to heal those cruel wounds which the war had caused on both sides ... he could only hope ... that they would see South Africa at peace not only because it was dominated by force of arms,

but also because there was brotherly sympathy between race and race'.⁴⁰ He returned to this theme at a meeting in Holywell on 29 September. Lewis's support for annexation with caveats was undoubtedly the consequence of the earlier pressure he had experienced, combined with electoral pressure and the need to minimise the differences that existed between himself and Liberals in the constituency.

Although Lewis addressed the South African issue in terms that were likely to gain him electoral support, the major part of his campaign speeches focused on domestic and local issues, in an obvious attempt to divert the electorate's attention from the war. He addressed the war at the beginning of his speeches. Beyond this he argued that, since the war was practically over and annexation an accepted fact, there was little value in concentrating on the conflict during the campaign; attention should be devoted to the issues which would dominate in the future. He stressed support for social reform, particularly the introduction of Old Age Pensions and Workingmen's Compensation. He also emphasised Welsh issues, notably temperance reform, disestablishment and the removal of educational bars from Non-conformists. In addition, Lewis concentrated on local matters, alluding to his attempts during his eight years in parliament to promote local industry and help all constituents.

Throughout the war, Lewis's position mirrored that of Lloyd George, and the 'Khaki' election campaign was no exception. In his campaign in Carnarvon Boroughs, Lloyd George also stressed social reform, Welsh issues and what he had gained for North Wales, whilst attempting to avoid the question of the war. Lloyd George would dispose of the issue of the war at the outset of his speeches, expressing concern for the British troops who suffered owing to Unionist neglect, and then attack the Unionists' attempt to use the army and the war to win the election. Lloyd George regularly stressed that the government was using the war to cover for a lack of constructive policy at home and, given the war was nearly over, it was

important that the electorate concentrated on the issues that would forge the peace.

Prominent Liberals in Flint Boroughs expressed their support for Lewis and echoed his views in regard to the war in an attempt to show that the party was united on the issue after previous divisions. At Bagillt on 29 September, Samuel Davies JP underlined the strong support which Lewis could rely on from party members. He attacked Lloyd-Price for the statements he had made maintaining:

There was a great deal made of the war as an election cry. They were all spoken of as pro-Boer, but they all honoured the soldiers who so manfully fought and sacrificed their valuable lives in the Transvaal, and no one felt more than Mr. Lewis for his fellow countrymen there.⁴¹

Thomas Parry, whose views on the war had contrasted sharply with those of Lewis earlier in the conflict attended a meeting in Flint on 1 October to express his allegiance to Lewis.⁴² The impression of unity which these statements created was particularly important in the light of Unionist attacks on Lewis and the pro-war sympathies of the electorate.

Polling took place in Flint Boroughs on Saturday 6 October. Lewis secured 55.5 per cent of the votes cast, on a turnout of 88.6 per cent, polling 1,760 votes to Lloyd Price's 1,413. Not only had he won, but he had also more than doubled his previously precarious majority to 347. This result was the consequence of several factors: Lewis's previous record as MP; the modifications he had made in his stance towards the war; the statements he made concerning the future development of the Empire and the position of British troops in South Africa in contrast to Unionist failures; and the important role he devoted to domestic and local issues. Undoubtedly Lewis's previous constituency record was a particularly significant factor in his re-election. This, along with the fact that Lewis had modified his stance on the war, were highlighted in an editorial in the *County*

Herald.⁴³ The ‘Khaki’ election had marked a significant shift in Lewis’s position on the war driven by party and electoral pressure.

From the ‘Khaki’ election to the end of the war: October 1900–June 1902

Having secured re-election, Lewis continued to oppose the war. He increasingly concentrated his attacks on the financial cost of the war and the means by which it was conducted. This changed stance is underlined in Lewis’s parliamentary contributions during the 1900–01 session. He delivered several informed, intuitive and humane speeches asking the government numerous questions about expenditure on the war and its conduct. These brought Lewis into the mainstream opinion of the Liberal Party which, under Campbell-Bannerman’s leadership, opposed the means by which the war was conducted, notably the scorched earth policy and the introduction of concentration camps in the period from the election through to the conclusion of the war. By the ending of the war in June 1902, Lewis expressed views that indicate a further revision in his position. Although he emphasised the cost and suffering the war had produced, he maintained that it had been waged through humane methods.

Lewis articulated his concern about the growing expense of the war at a Liberal soirée held at Flint town hall on 14 November 1900 to celebrate his election victory, noting in his diary that he ‘spoke chiefly on South Africa’.⁴⁴ He criticised the government’s failure to recognise the gravity and probable length of the war, referring to the recent announcement that parliament would meet early in December to provide further supplies for operations in South Africa. During the general election campaign, the public had been assured by the government that the war was practically at an end. However, as with previous official estimates on the cost and duration of the war and the number of troops needed, events had proved them false. Lewis observed that,

‘estimates on the probable cost of the war cast curious reflection on the want of knowledge, foresight and judgement displayed throughout by the government.’⁴⁵ Owing to the government’s inadequate preparations, estimates had increased until the House of Commons had voted a total of £66 million, which was expected to rise to £100 million, although the ultimate cost was unknown. Between 10,000 and 15,000 Boers were still in the field fighting and showing no sign of yielding. Consequently the war was likely to continue for several more months, which would demand even greater financial commitment. Lewis’s concern at the expenditure of £2 million a week on the war, which he stressed was ‘on average five shillings a week per family in the United Kingdom’,⁴⁶ was linked to his support for social reform.

Turning his attention to who should bear the cost of the war, Lewis forcefully attacked the mine owners and financiers of South Africa. He argued that, since Rhodes and his friends shared a considerable portion of the blame for the war, they should bear some of the cost. He cited the case of a prominent mineowner who had threatened trouble if the mines were taxed to cover the cost of the war. He feared that the South African financiers around Rhodes possessed such vast influence over the government and public opinion that they might prevent the taxation of the mines. However he expressed the hope ‘that the taxpayers of this country would let it be known, with no uncertain voice, that a war which had cost Great Britain ten thousand lives, wounds and sickness to forty thousand men ... was not going to result merely in the addition of another storey to the palaces in Park Lane’.⁴⁷

In his first speech of the new parliamentary session, during a debate concerning the Consolidated Fund (Appropriation) Bill, Lewis condemned the ‘scorched earth’ policy which had been adopted to defeat those Boers who remained fighting. Initially he referred to the Proclamation which had been issued on 14 December by Lord Roberts, the commander in chief in South Africa. Roberts had noted

that it was only in the area occupied by the Boer army under the command of Botha that war was still being prosecuted. In all other areas it was degenerating into operations carried out by small and insignificant numbers of men. Roberts intended to end this by laying waste to large areas of the country by burning farms and breaking dams. It was argued that, by placing great suffering on the burghers and their families, this would ensure that the guerrilla warfare being practised would end. Lewis questioned this policy asking, 'Is the burning of farms, the breaking of dams and the devastation of the country to be continued until at last we shall be able to call it a peace when we mean a desert?'⁴⁸

In a broader attack on the large financial cost of the war Lewis criticised the intransigent position of the British. He cited examples of letters exchanged between Botha and Lord Roberts which revealed that the British would only contemplate the unconditional surrender of the Boers. With regard to the Boer leaders, he referred to a despatch of 28 September which had maintained that the concession allowed to those burghers who surrendered voluntarily – that they would be sent out of the country – would not extend to those who had taken a prominent political or military role in the war. Lewis recognised that there could be no hope of a negotiated settlement if the British did not adopt a less intractable stance noting, 'Under circumstances of that kind, and if the

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terms of these proclamations are to be adhered to, it is practically impossible to hope to deal with the leaders at all'.⁴⁹ He attacked several aspects of the war's conduct before concluding with a general plea of a humanitarian nature: 'We gain absolutely nothing by enforcing such

provisions as these, and I trust for the sake of the honour and credit and the good name of this old country the government will carry on the war in future as it should be carried on between civilised powers, and that women and children, as far as possible and consistent with the cruel necessity of war, be spared all this lamentable suffering of which our eyes have been witness within recent months'.⁵⁰

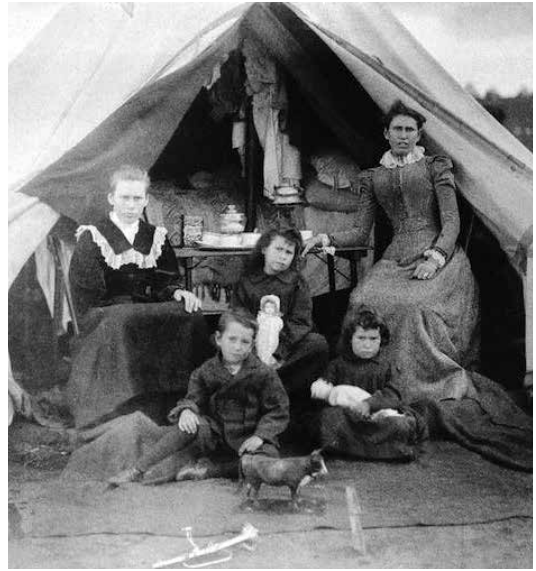
As with Lewis's comments a few weeks earlier in Flint, this speech is of importance to understanding his changed attitude to the war. It is noteworthy that his concluding statement appears to accept the necessity for war, which his views earlier in the war would not have permitted. Rather than rejecting the war entirely, this shift in viewpoint had prompted Lewis to attack the methods the government had adopted to wage the war just as he had criticised the financial cost of the war in November and the poor supply of British troops during the election campaign.

Lewis's concern about the increasing expenditure on the war was expressed on two further occasions during the 1900–01 parliamentary session. On 22 February 1901, he questioned the chancellor of the exchequer on the growing cost of the war, and in early June he delivered a speech in a debate on the Supply-Army Estimates attacking the government's contempt for the House of Commons. An allotment of £9,550,000 was under discussion when Lewis observed that, if the

Commons 'examined the Estimates for other Departments they would find the Votes properly classified under sub-heads and letters, and they would also find the amounts taken for different items definitely

stated. In this particular case they were asked to vote £9,550,000 with their eyes absolutely shut'.⁵¹ The Commons should protest and insist on more information. During the spring of 1901, Lewis also drew attention to a theme he had addressed during the election campaign:

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Left: Bloemfontein concentration camp (© National Archives UK, OGL v1.0). Right: a Boer family in a tent in a concentration camp. As many as twelve people would be kept in a tent of this type.

the supply and treatment of troops in South Africa. On 21 March, for example, he questioned whether the troops were to be supplied with a sufficient amount of flannel underclothing as winter was approaching in South Africa.

Lewis' most forceful attacks on the conduct of the war revolved around his opposition to the concentration camps which the British had set up to intern Boers from the areas which the army had cleared. Emily Hobhouse, who had visited South Africa on behalf of the South African Women and Children Fund to investigate conditions among the Boer civilians detained in the concentration camps, related to many Liberal politicians the conditions she had witnessed on her return to Britain. She was introduced to Lewis in June 1901³² and provided him with valuable first-hand evidence which allowed him to contribute several informed attacks in the Commons in June 1901 on the appalling conditions in the camps and the inhumane treatment of those interned within them. Lewis questioned the secretary of state for war on 13 June about the high mortality rate in the camps and a few days later raised the question of medical provision for the sick and sanitary

arrangements for the inmates. He also asked on 18 June that the government consider establishing new camps with good water supplies available. Lewis also highlighted the plight of women in the camps who were separated from their children, asking for them to be reunited.

Lloyd George was also prominent in the campaign against the concentration camps raising similar points to those which Lewis had stressed. He moved a motion on 17 June to allow the Commons to debate the high mortality among women and children in the camps. During the debate Lewis delivered a speech which encapsulated several of the themes he had already pursued regarding the camps. Initially he explained why the Boers would not be separated from their children and allow them to go to hospital by quoting from Emily Hobhouse's experiences. Lewis noted that in March the Commons had been informed that families in the camps were contented. These statements contrasted sharply with Emily Hobhouse's description of the camp at Kimberley: 'It is the smallest in area I have ever seen. The tents too close together, and the whole enclosed in an 8 feet high barbed wire fencing, which is

supposed to be impregnable and cost £500. Sentries at the gate and walking inside; no nurse; an empty unfurnished marquee, which might be a hospital; overcrowded tents, measles and whooping cough rife; camp dirty and smelling; an army doctor, who actually knows little of children's ailments; fuel almost none.⁵³ Lewis also stressed his concerns for children who lacked the strength to endure life in the camps and he believed that 'to keep these camps going is murder to the children'.⁵⁴

Lewis dismissed the government's argument that the camps were needed for expediency. Looking to the future he argued, 'I would venture to say, looking at these 40,000 children in the camps, that we are only sowing the seeds of discontent, and then we may reap a terrible harvest. Someday ... a nation will grow up which will remember all these inequities.'⁵⁵ He also cited two examples to show that the camps were not defensible from a financial point of view either. In one case, twenty iron rooms had been constructed costing on average of £125 each. Secondly, a number of women had asked to be moved from the camps to live with their own relatives who were willing to pay the expense. Having listed his detailed criticisms of the camps, Lewis concluded with a humanitarian appeal:

I appeal to the Government for the sake of the little children who are passing away like so many faded flowers in South Africa, for the sake of the parents who have to see them sick and dying before their eyes, to give their attention to this matter. The only effect of the present policy is to madden and exasperate the enemies of this country. They will be enemies to all eternity unless we reverse this policy.⁵⁶

These determined attacks on conditions and the treatment of internees in the concentration camps can be associated with Lewis's changed outlook towards the war. As with his condemnation of the 'scorched earth' policy, he had not questioned the necessity of the war but

rather the methods by which the British government were prosecuting it.

In the national context, by concentrating his criticism on the conduct of the war rather than its causes and principles, Lewis moved closer to the outlook of the centre of the Liberal Party and its leader Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The majority of Liberal MPs opposed the 'scorched earth' policy and the camps and accordingly supported Lloyd George's motion on 17 June. During the debate Campbell-Bannerman repeated his statement 'When is war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa'.⁵⁷ Evidence also suggests that, by focusing their attacks on the conduct of the war, Lewis and the other Welsh Liberal MPs who opposed the war mirrored the position of Welsh Liberalism and rallied revulsion amongst Nonconformists. By the summer of 1901, Lewis's views on the war clearly were no longer in the minority in respect of the Liberal Party nationally and of Welsh public opinion.

The culmination of Lewis's changed stance concerning the war came in a speech he delivered in June 1902 at a service in Rehobeth Chapel in Holywell to celebrate the ending of the war. Although he condemned the loss of life and the use of war as a means to settle international disputes, he endorsed the policies that the British had employed during the war. This represented a complete reversal from the position he had taken since the 'Khaki' election. He began by referring to the human costs of the war and the large loss of life, which he hoped all would learn from for the future, as war was not the means to settle disputes when arbitration was available to avoid this human cost. He then referenced the methods that had been used to prosecute the war arguing, 'this war, terrible as it has been, had been, perhaps, conducted with more humanity on both sides than any great war of which we had had experience'.⁵⁸ This viewpoint diverged sharply from the attacks he had delivered on the 'scorched earth' policy and the concentration camps. He also alluded to the government's

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generous behaviour towards the Boers noting, 'their country had been devastated but it was now to be built up again, the farms restored, the stock replaced, and that upon the earliest possible terms.'⁵⁹ This prompted him to conclude the Boers were entering as 'co-partners into an Empire which with all its faults and failings ... was perhaps the best, the justest and fairest in the world.'⁶⁰

There are a number of possible explanations for this change. He had noted in his diary on 2 June 2 that there was 'great rejoicing on the conclusion of Peace'.⁶¹ Given Lewis's strong Nonconformist Christian outlook, he was undoubtedly promoting conciliation at a service celebrating the end of the war. He also would also have wanted to move the debate forward towards other domestic priorities with the war over. His diary entries for the period were increasingly focusing on his opposition to the Education Act and his work around the promotion of temperance. That said, it is clear that a distinct change had occurred in his outlook and, whilst these views are inconsistent with Lewis's previous statements, they do not represent a sudden change but rather the culmination of a gradual development.

Conclusion

Lewis's career during the South African war demonstrates the difficult position an MP can be placed in when his views diverge from those of his local party and public opinion in his constituency. Evidence shows that Lewis's opposition to the war changed substantially during the war. Until the 'Khaki' election in October 1900, he attacked the failure of the Unionist government to avert war, whilst emphasising that the conflict would produce great cost and suffering and retard social reform owing to its cost. During the election campaign, owing to pressure from his local Liberal Association, public opinion and Unionist attacks on his previous statements, he moderated his viewpoint, stressing his patriotism by accepting the need for annexation of the Transvaal and

Orange Free State, expressing concern for the poor supply of British troops, and attacking the government for attempting to use the war to secure political victory. In the period after his re-election, the change in Lewis's position continued. He concentrated his attacks on the methods the British utilised to prosecute the war against those Boers who continued to fight, focusing on the 'scorched earth' policy and the concentration camps whilst continuing to note the financial cost of the conflict. By the end of the war, he had again revised his viewpoint and accepted the methods the British had pursued to conduct the conflict.

There is clear evidence of the pressure Lewis experienced from within the Flint Boroughs Liberal Association to modify his stance in the early months of the war, with Lewis even threatening not to recontest the seat. He received support from key activists, which undoubtedly made him reconsider his position and agree to stand again, but it also led him to modify his stance on the war to include acceptance of annexation, a course of action he previously stated he could never accept or champion, to ensure that the Liberals in the seat were united on an issue the Unionists would seek to exploit. Public opinion in Flint Boroughs also had a bearing on his change of viewpoint, as he could recognise a jingoistic electorate in a marginal seat, and the modification of his views was undoubtedly in part a result of electoral expediency. Finally, Lewis's close personal and political friendship with Lloyd George would have had a bearing. The two were closely associated during the war and it is significant that Lewis's position on the conflict mirrored that of Lloyd George and changed in a similar way. The career of Herbert Lewis during the South African War clearly shows the complex relationship between an MP, his local Liberal association, public opinion and the important influence of his friendship with Lloyd George.

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1918–1929’, under the supervision of the late Dr Peter Lowe, to whom this article is dedicated. He has also been a Liberal Democrat councillor and head of office for Andrew Stunell, the former MP for Hazel Grove.

- 1 K. O. Morgan, ‘Lloyd George’s Flintshire Loyalist: The Political Achievement of John Herbert Lewis’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 57 (Winter 2007–08).
- 2 Timothy P. Erasmus, ‘Herbert Lewis and Welsh Radicalism: A Study in the Political Career of John Herbert Lewis (1858–1933) with Special Reference to the Period 1892–1906’, PhD thesis (University of Wales, 1988).
- 3 R. Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class* (London, 1972) argues that the October 1900 ‘Khaki election’ was not largely dominated by jingoism and patriotism, which has been refuted by P. Readman, ‘The Conservative Party, Patriotism, and British Politics: The Case of the General election of 1900’, *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (1), pp. 107–145. The Flint Boroughs campaign indicates that Lewis had to modify his stance owing to support for the war from the electorate and the attempts by the Unionist candidate to emphasise the war and Lewis’s opposition to it.
- 4 H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* (London, 1967) p. 357.
- 5 The prominent Welsh Liberal MPs who opposed the war included David Lloyd George (Carnarvon Boroughs), John Herbert Lewis (Flint Boroughs), Bryn Roberts (Caernarvonshire Eifion) and Arthur Humphreys-Owen (Montgomeryshire).
- 6 Lewis’s diary, 27 Nov. 1899, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B12.
- 7 *County Herald*, 1 Dec. 1899.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *County Herald*, 5 Jan. 1900.
- 11 Lewis’s diary, 29 Dec. 1899, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B12.
- 12 J. Morgan to Lewis, 7 Mar. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/137.
- 13 Lewis’s diary, 18 May 1900, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B13.
- 14 J. Morgan to Samuel Smith, 13 Mar. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/138. Samuel Smith was Liberal MP for the Flintshire County constituency.
- 15 Lewis’s diary, 18 Apr. 1900, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B13.
- 16 Lewis’s diary, 20 Apr. 1900, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B13.
- 17 J. Speed to J. Morgan, 9 Jun. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/137.
- 18 J. Morgan to Lewis, 13 Jun. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/139.
- 19 Lewis to Harding Roberts, 25 Jul. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/139.
- 20 Lewis’s diary, 30 Jul. 1900, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B13.
- 21 Rev. John Owens to Lewis, 31 Jul. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/141.
- 22 Lewis to Harding Roberts – late Jul./early Aug., North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/139.
- 23 Rev. John Owens to Lewis, 31 Jul. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/141.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 K. O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics 1868–1922* (3rd edn., Cardiff 1980), p. 168.
- 27 Lewis to F. Llewelyn-Jones, 3 Aug. 1900, North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/139.
- 28 Lewis to Harding Roberts – late Jul./early Aug., North East Wales Archives, Flintshire, John Herbert Lewis Papers D/L/139.
- 29 *County Herald*, 28 Sep. 1900.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 *County Herald*, 5 Oct. 1900.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 *Flintshire Observer*, 27 Sep. 1900.
- 35 See R. Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class* (London, 1972) and P. Readman, ‘The Conservative Party, Patriotism, and British Politics: The Case of the General Election of 1900’, *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (1), pp. 107–145.
- 36 *County Herald*, 28 Sep. 1900.

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- 4) vol. 13, col. 155–157 (5 June 1893) – reported in third person, as the Lords Hansard then was; accessed 14 Jul. 2022.
- (Sefton was responding to the explanation and rebuttal that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster had given in the House of Commons on 25 Apr. 1893 for removing the power to create magistrates from him: Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4) vol. 11, col. 1128–1130 (25 Apr. 1893) – accessed 14 Jul. 2022.)
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Vincent, *Later Derby Diaries*, pp. 206 and 219 (diary entries for 18 Jan. and 12 Mar. 1880).
- 26 Ibid., p. 223 (diary entry of 31 Mar. 1880).
- 27 *The Times*, 15 Mar. 1880.
- 28 H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Harvester, 1978 (orig. 1959)), p. 289.
- 29 Dennis J. Mitchell, *Cross and Tory Democracy: A Political Biography of Richard Assheton Cross* (Garland Publishing, 1991), p. 156. Mitchell noted that the letter was also published in the *Manchester Guardian* on the same date (15 Mar.).
- 30 Vincent, *Later Derby Diaries*, p. 659 (diary entry of 1 May 1884).
- 31 Vincent, *Diaries 1878–1893*, p. 838.
- 32 Vincent, *Later Derby Diaries*, p. 752 (diary entry of 13 Feb. 1885).
- 33 Ibid., p. 818 (diary entry of 31 Oct. 1885).
- 34 Ibid., p. 831 (diary entry of 30 Jan. 1886).
- 35 Ibid., p. 838 (diary entry of 2 Jan. 1887).
- 36 Ibid., p. 839.
- 37 Ian Cawood, ‘A distinction without a difference? the Liberal Unionist–Conservative alliance’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 72, pp. 14–25; also, Ian Cawood, *The Liberal Unionist Party: A History*, (IB Tauris, 2012), pp. 14–16, 18, 20–24.
- 38 Vincent, *Diaries 1878–1893*, p. 838.
- 39 Lord Wolmer letter to Lord Hartington (by then 8th Duke of Devonshire), 5 Sep. 1892, clarifying that not all the funds had been expended in the July general election and the residue had been banked at Childs & Co. as ‘Lord Wolmer’s LU Account’. It is reprinted in full as an appendix to T. A. Jenkins, ‘The funding of the Liberal Unionist party and the honours system’, *English Historical Review*, 105, pp. 920–938. Wolmer and Hartington were the only two people who knew of this account.
- 40 Vincent, *Later Derby Diaries*, pp. 87–8 (diary entry of 20 May 1890).
- 41 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4) vol. 17, cols. 563–649 (8 Sep. 1893). Though both Hansard and the following day’s *Times* report the scale of the vote, neither list the votes of individual peers. Although this second bill allowed continued Irish representation in the Commons, it is difficult to think this was a reason for Sefton to change his previous view.
- 42 Vincent, *Later Derby Diaries*, p. 833.

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- 37 *Flintshire Observer*, 4 Oct. 1900.
- 38 *County Herald*, 5 Oct. 1900.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 *County Herald*, 5 Oct. 1900.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 *County Herald*, 12 Oct. 1900.
- 44 Lewis’s diary, 14 Nov. 1900 National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B13.
- 45 *County Herald*, 16 Nov. 1900.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Hansard, Parl. Debs (series 4), vol. 88, col. 886 (15 Dec. 1900).
- 49 Ibid., col. 888.
- 50 Ibid., col. 890.
- 51 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4), vol. 94, col. 1228 (6 Jun. 1901).
- 52 Lewis’s diary, 15 Jun. 1901, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B14.
- 53 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4), vol. 95, col. 620 (17 Jun. 1901).
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid., col. 621.
- 56 Ibid., cols. 621–2.
- 57 J. Wilson, *Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (London, 1973), p. 349.
- 58 *County Herald*, 13 Jun. 1902.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Lewis’s diary, 2 Jun. 1902, National Library of Wales, Lewis Papers B6.