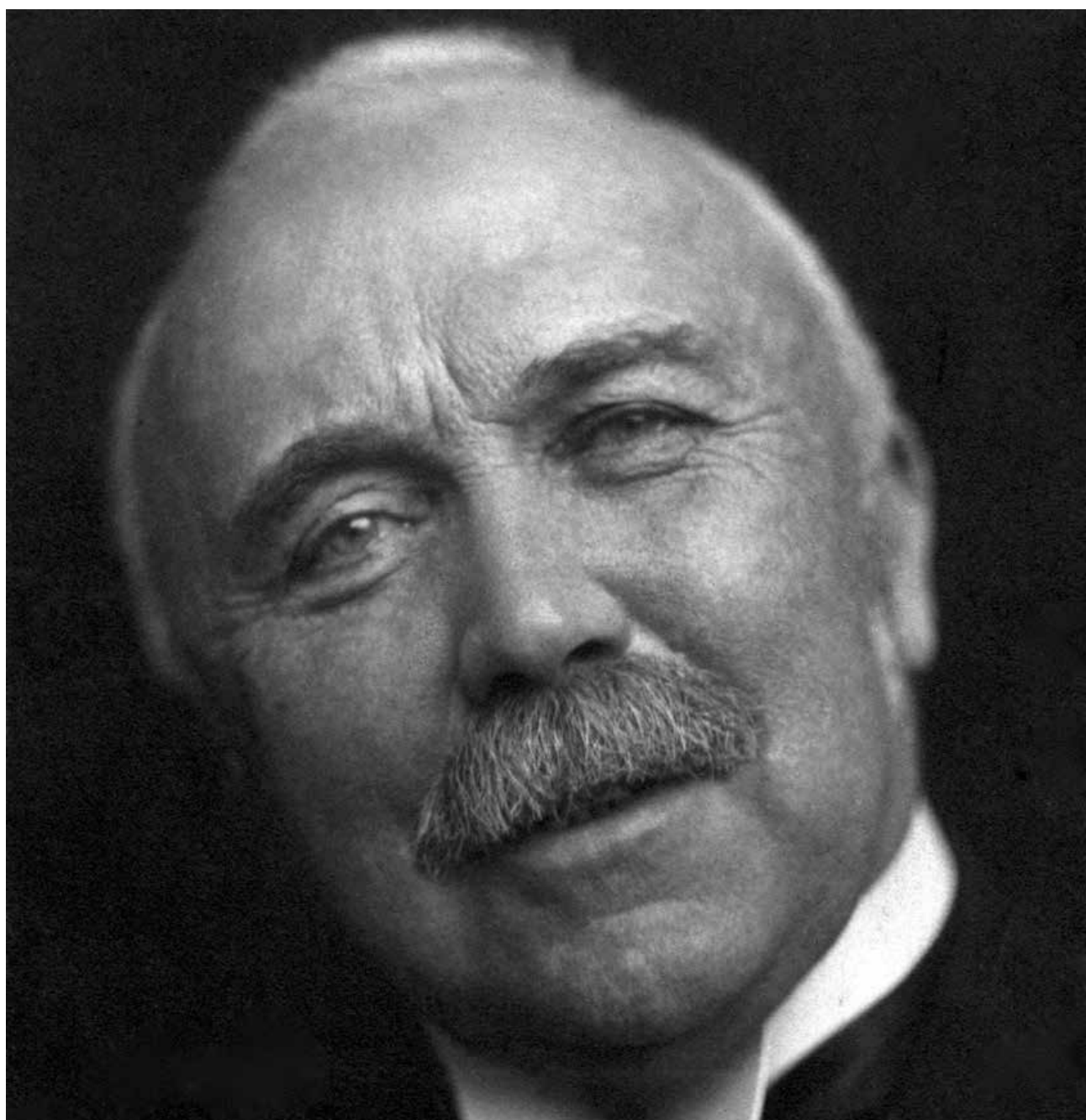


Introduction to Liberal history

In our short introductory article series, Ian Cawood analyses the record of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, Member of Parliament for Stirling Burghs 1868–1908, Leader of the Liberal Party 1899–1908 and Prime Minister 1906–08.

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman



HENRY CAMPBELL WAS born in Glasgow in 1836, the son of a wealthy Presbyterian Tory businessman. After his time at Cambridge University, however, he rejected the politics of his family and contested the Stirling Burghs by-election of April 1868. Despite losing, the enlargement of the electorate under the Second Reform Act encouraged Henry to stand for the seat in the general election in the autumn and he won the seat with a comfortable majority of 519 over the Whig incumbent, James Ramsay.

Under the terms of the will of his uncle, Henry Bannerman, he was obliged to change his name to 'Campbell-Bannerman' in 1871, though he preferred to be known as 'C-B'.¹ He was appointed as secretary to Edward Cardwell at the War Office in the same year and was mentored in the art of overcoming elite privilege as Cardwell battled to remove the aristocracy's monopoly on army commissions. Although his career advanced slowly, he was enormously popular in his constituency, winning 95 per cent of the vote in Stirling in the 1880 general election. His efficiency in his junior posts at the War Office and then at the Admiralty finally won him a cabinet post and he became a remarkably unflappable Irish chief secretary in 1884 and then minister of war in Gladstone's brief 1886 government – a post he was reappointed to in Gladstone's final ministry in 1892.

By the time he had established himself, however, the period of liberal dominance in British politics was drawing to a close and the landscape was dominated by the issues of Irish home rule and the defence and expansion of the empire, both of which played into Conservative hands. Gladstone's adoption of Irish home rule had split the Liberal Party, with Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1836–1908), photographed by George Charles Beresford in 1902 (public domain, Wikimedia Commons)

voting against the measure and establishing the Liberal Unionist Party which retained significant popular support among Methodists, Presbyterians, suffragists and liberal intellectuals until the 1900s.² Stirling, however, stayed loyal to Campbell-Bannerman, who was careful to make clear his opposition to full Irish independence.

After Gladstone's retirement as party leader and prime minister in 1894, the Liberal Party became seriously divided again between the followers of Lord Rosebery (leader 1894–96) and William Harcourt (leader 1896–98). When Harcourt suddenly resigned in December 1898, the young Herbert Asquith was seen as the rising star of the party, but Campbell-Bannerman was offered the position of leader in 1899 as his senior. He was unable to prevent a further Unionist victory when the Second Boer War bitterly divided the Liberals between the right-wing Liberal Imperialists, led by Rosebery and Asquith and those who opposed the war (nicknamed 'Pro-Boers' by the right-wing press), such as Henry Labouchere. Campbell-Bannerman himself was careful to support the imperial cause and to praise the courage of the British soldiers, but he was unafraid to criticise the initial failures of the military campaign and the accusations of corruption in the issuing of army contracts, including those awarded to firms in which the family of the colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, had a financial interest.³ He also stressed the difference between a war fought against conventional forces and the tactics that Lord Kitchener adopted when the Boer resorted to guerrilla tactics after 1900. The majority of the media, including *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, denied the truth of Emily Hobhouse's reports of Boer families, rounded up into concentration camps to prevent them sheltering Boer fighters, dying in their thousands from dysentery, enteric fever and dehydration.⁴ Campbell-Bannerman was so shocked by the

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman



Francis Carruthers-Gould, 'Blondin: Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman', n.d. [1904?] (Charles Blondin (1824–97) was a famous tightrope-walker)

undeniable evidence she presented that he made one of the greatest speeches of his life:

A phrase often used is that 'war is war', but when one comes to ask about it, one is told that no war is going on, that it is not war. When is a war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa.⁵

Although criticised by the Liberal imperialists and threatened with resignations from the party, Campbell-Bannerman stood by his words and was vindicated when the Fawcett Commission reported numerous cases of 'grossly culpable neglect' on the part of the British Army when they visited South Africa later in 1901.

Having asserted his leadership and his ethical standards, Campbell-Bannerman took advantage of the inexperience of the new prime minister, Arthur Balfour. Unwisely, under pressure from the right wing of his party, Balfour introduced an Education Act

under which church schools received money from the local taxes (rates) as well as from the state to bring their standards up to those of the state schools. A campaign of 'passive resistance' led by the Baptist John Clifford and organised by the *Daily News* saw fifty-three Nonconformists imprisoned for non-payment of their rates.⁶ As Joseph Chamberlain, the effective leader of Unionist Nonconformity, warned the Duke of Devonshire, 'our old friends are leaving us by scores and hundreds never to return.'⁷ In July 1902, a by-election in Leeds demonstrated what the education controversy was doing to party fortunes, when a Conservative Party majority of over 2,500 was turned into a Liberal majority of over 750. The Conservatives' decision to introduce a new Licensing Act in 1904 which offered compensation to publicans whose premises had their licences removed, hastened the Nonconformist return to the Liberal bosom still further.

If this was a political gift to Campbell-Bannerman, the next step in the collapse of the Unionist alliance virtually guaranteed him the premiership. Since the repeal of the Corn Laws by Robert Peel in 1846, free trade had been a central part of the political consensus in Britain and a guarantor of cheap food for the poor, in an age before the welfare state. In 1903, however, Joseph Chamberlain, left the cabinet and spoke out in favour of 'tariff reform' – the introduction of import duties on competing foreign goods – and 'imperial preference' – an attempt to form an economic bloc with the settler colonies of Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa (despite the fact that there was little enthusiasm among the dominions for such an economic union). Chamberlain now formed a pressure group, called the Tariff Reform League, and several Unionists, such as Winston Churchill, left the party and joined the Liberals in protest, while others formed the Free Food League to try to resist Chamberlain's crusade. Balfour

attempted to keep the Unionists united but Chamberlain's influence grew.⁸

Campbell-Bannerman saw his chance to reunite the party and to exploit the Unionist divisions and the popular enthusiasm for free trade and focused ruthlessly on 'Free Trade vs Tariff Reform' in opposition. He formed an alliance with the new Labour Representative Committee, which had won two seats in the 1900 general election, and allowed the LRC a clear contest against the Unionists in thirty constituencies in the cities in the next election. As the infighting between Tariff Reformers and Free Fooders became more intense, Balfour, in a last-ditch attempt to prevent the Unionists breaking up, resigned as prime minister in December 1905, hoping that the Liberal divisions would resurface as soon as they entered government.

Although the Liberal imperialists attempted to persuade Campbell-Bannerman to move to the Lords, leaving Asquith as de facto party leader in the Commons, Campbell-Bannerman outmanoeuvred them by using his prime ministerial patronage to offer them important posts in his cabinet and then called an immediate general election in January 1906.⁹ The Unionist campaign returned to its traditional themes, portraying the Liberal leader as the puppet of the Irish nationalists, or as the leader of a party whose policies would lead Britain to decline. The Liberal campaign, masterminded by Gladstone's son, Herbert, countered with accusations of Unionist broken promises, reminders of misconduct in South Africa and, most effectively of all, of the impact of tariff reform on staples such as sugar, tea and bread. As Campbell-Bannerman made clear in his own election address, there was a need to recalibrate the priorities of the nation:

For ten years they [the Conservative Party] have been supported by an immense majority in the House of Commons. ... [it] presents

itself to me, I confess, as a well-nigh unbroken expanse of mismanagement; of legislation conducted for the benefit of privileged classes and powerful interests; of wars and adventures abroad hastily embarked upon and recklessly pursued.¹⁰

The result was a Liberal landslide, with the party winning 400 seats and the Unionists reduced to a rump of 157 MPs with even Balfour losing his seat.

With the election won and his premiership secure, Campbell-Bannerman lost no time in setting to work to address the problems that the Unionists had bequeathed his government. As a good Gladstonian, he was suspicious of state expenditure – instead he sought to remove obstructions to opportunity and to remove the causes of accidental

'How the Tories have increased the Cost of Living', Liberal Publication Department (1906), London School of Economics Library Archives and Special Collections



Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman

poverty among groups such as children, industrial and agricultural workers and married women. For some of these, he favoured traditional Liberal policies such as education reform, land reform and licencing reform. In the case of education, the Liberals introduced the Birrell Education Bill to address Nonconformist grievances arising from the 1902 Act and Campbell-Bannerman made his commitment to equality and opposition to vested interests clear in his speech in support of the bill:

Our aim is ... to secure a national and not a denominational system, public and not sectarian ... to make our educational system the handmaid of the community and not the handmaid of any church or sect.¹¹

The bill passed the votes in the House of Commons comfortably but the House of Lords, with a Conservative majority, passed wrecking amendments which undermined its meaning, and the government dropped the bill. A similar fate befell the land reform and licencing bills and Campbell-Bannerman made it clear that he would force a confrontation with the Lords unless they refrained from obstructing the government's agenda.¹²

For industrial workers, Campbell-Bannerman wished to protect Trade Unions' right to strike, which had been weakened by the 1901 Taff Vale judgement which held unions responsible for any damage incurred during a strike. This view helped to strengthen the alliance with the LRC which had been re-founded as the Labour Party in 1906, following the election of twenty-nine Labour MPs as a result of the electoral pact they had previously agreed. Although he initially went along with his cabinet in agreeing to a merely partial reversal of the judgement, on listening to the arguments put forward by the Labour MPs he spoke in favour and voted for the bill they proposed rather than his own government's bill.¹³



Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman; pencil sketch by Sir Leslie Ward, 1890s–1900s (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Perhaps the most radical act of C-B's curtailed premiership was his support of interventionist legislation relating to children, who, he felt, could bear no responsibility for their mistreatment and poverty. The provision of school meals and the start of medical inspection were the most significant first steps towards a welfare state under his leadership but equally important were the introduction of children's courts, the probation service and the Children's Act which established borstals, regulated fostering and attempted to protect children from exposure to moral hazard such as brothels, gambling and alcohol.¹⁴

On the issue of women's suffrage, however, despite his personal support for the cause, C-B's party-political priorities outweighed his principles, as he knew his party was divided on the issue, largely because they feared that the female vote would favour the Unionists. When he met a deputation led by Emily Davies, he attempted to persuade them to continue to lobby MPs peacefully and to show patience.

Although historians disagree as to Campbell-Bannerman's position on the issue, it is certainly true that many campaigners who had fought their cause for decades, found this attitude patronising and deliberately unhelpful and it convinced some members of the Women's Social and Political Union to step up their campaign of militant, direct action.¹⁵

As early as 1892, the reformer and sociologist Charles Booth had proposed a practical old age pension plan which gained popular support. A select committee on the issue had reported to parliament in 1899 and recommended a non-contributory scheme for the 'deserving' poor. However, the Unionist government took no action, purportedly on the grounds of cost.¹⁶ Campbell-Bannerman promised a pensions bill to a deputation from the Trades Union Congress, partly out of humanitarian concern and partly to challenge Chamberlain, who had been promising some form of old age pension since 1892, without any result.¹⁷ The King's Speech of 29 January

1908, the last which Campbell-Bannerman wrote, committed the government to introduce a pension bill in the coming session of parliament. The Pensions Bill emphasised the importance of dissociating pensions from the Poor Law. This was the first major social legislation in Britain designed not to stigmatise and punish the poorest – a significant change from the nineteenth century approach to poverty – and a central tenet of the welfare state which emerged thereafter.

Campbell-Bannerman's biographer John Wilson believes that, 'had he lived longer, he might have helped to forge a close union between Liberals and Labour and the left-wing progressive party in Britain might have evolved on different lines.'¹⁸ However, Campbell-Bannerman was increasingly ill. The election campaign, battles with the Lords, his drive to address childhood poverty and caring for his wife, Charlotte, who died in August 1906, had sapped his energy and he suffered a serious heart attack in November 1907. He resigned as prime minister on 3 April 1908 and died on 22 April, having nominated Asquith to

Commemorative postcard, 1908



Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman

succeed him. David Lloyd George, who Campbell-Bannerman had appointed as president of the Board of Trade, despite his inexperience in government, paid tribute to 'CB':

The masses of the people of this country, especially the more unfortunate of them, have lost the best friend they ever had in the high places of the land ... He was truly a great man – a great head and a great heart. He was absolutely the bravest man I ever met in politics.¹⁹

As well as reuniting the Liberal Party to be fit for government after the divisive Rosebery-Harcourt years in the 1890s, Campbell-Bannerman should not be underestimated for keeping the party together for the nine years of his leadership. Euan Cameron noted that, in contrast, 'Campbell Bannerman's much vaunted successors, Asquith and Lloyd George, presided over the creation of new factions around their personalities and the ultimate destruction of the party.'²⁰ Campbell-Bannerman was a principled politician, who may have shared the attitudes of his age towards empire and female suffrage, but who embodied a new politics, focused on public service, the promotion of merit, the alleviation of poverty and the needs of the whole community. Such figures are rare at the top of British politics and even more rarely set a stamp on the country in as short a time as the twenty-eight months when Henry Campbell-Bannerman was prime minister of Great Britain. ■

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