

# PROBLEMS OF THE 1906 GENERAL ELECT

The British electorate does not care about the intricacies of foreign policy. This holds true today as much as it did for nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics. There were occasions in Victorian and Edwardian Britain when popular perceptions of external threats or government mishandling of foreign affairs affected the political dynamics at home, mostly through government defeats in by-elections, and even more so through extra-parliamentary agitations, usually in favour of suppressed nationalities abroad.

**Dr T. G. Otte** looks at foreign policy and the 1906 election.

Edward Grey  
(1862–1933),  
leading Liberal  
Imperialist and  
Foreign Secretary  
1905–16.



# OF CONTINUITY TION AND FOREIGN POLICY

**O**F COURSE, in the absence of modern psephological tools, no amount of election addresses or pamphlets will allow the historian of the period to gauge precisely 'what issues, if any, were decisive in determining the voters'.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a broad consensus amongst students of Edwardian politics that voters were moved by bread-and-butter – at any rate domestic – issues rather than matters of foreign policy.

This is not to argue that foreign affairs, in their broad outlines rather than in the minutiae of diplomatic moves and counter-moves, did not matter at all. To appreciate this in the context of the 1906 general election, it is necessary to go beyond the narrow chronological confines of the election campaign itself.

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Foreign and imperial policy issues affected both political parties. Their impact on the Conservatives was the more apparent, for barely concealed; that on the Liberal opposition more subtle but potentially no less disruptive. The contemporary Tory malaise, so often associated with Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign alone, was rooted in an intellectual dilemma; and foreign policy formed an aspect of it.

It is one of the fine ironies of history that later generations of historians have attested to the astute handling of foreign affairs by the Salisbury and Balfour administrations. This was not a judgement shared by contemporary observers. It was not a question of specific foreign policy measures; the Unionists' dilemma was too profound to be affected by details. Rather, having embraced the politics of imperial expansion, with all their Disraelian grandiloquence and Primrose League trimmings, by the turn of the century the Tories had to accommodate British foreign policy to a new international environment, one in which Britain no longer seemed to be in the ascendant, and was possibly even in decline. Already in the late 1890s conservative commentators clamoured for an infusion of a more assertive, neo-Palmerstonian spirit in the country's foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Later, the protectionist crusade and the emergence of right-wing pressure groups, such as the Navy League or the National Service League, articulated a conservative critique of the Unionist government and party for their seemingly inadequate response to the new external as well as domestic challenges.<sup>3</sup>

For the Liberals, foreign policy was no less divisive, certainly in so far as the high politics of the party were concerned. It had

always been a delicate subject. In recent years, foreign crises had brought out the fundamental fissures within a party that found it increasingly impossible to establish, let alone maintain, common ground between Radical dissenters, isolationist Little Englanders and Liberal Imperialists. In March 1895, a somewhat bellicose statement by Sir Edward Grey, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, concerning British supremacy in the Upper Nile region, nearly precipitated the collapse of Lord Rosebery's government.<sup>4</sup> Once in opposition, Gladstone's re-emergence from retirement to lead yet another atrocitarian crusade, this time against the Armenian massacres, was sufficient, in the autumn of 1896, to persuade the imperialist Rosebery, easily convinced on that score, that he was no longer the man to lead the party. Two years later, at the end of 1898, internal criticism of his generally supportive stance towards the Salisbury government's handling of the Fashoda crisis made Rosebery's successor, the elephantine Sir William Harcourt, resign in a huff.<sup>5</sup>

As if any further evidence of the potentially inflammatory impact of foreign and imperial questions on Liberal internal politics had been needed, the Boer War provided it in ample quantity. There was, indeed,

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little that seemed to unite the Radicals, who railed against Kitchener's 'methods of barbarism', and the Liberal Imperialists, who went a long way in their public support of the government and the Cape governor, Sir Alfred Milner. In the confusion of post-Gladstonian Liberal politics Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the 'cordite minister' of 1895 fame, was a compromise leader, just about acceptable to most Liberals.<sup>6</sup> Not a little indolent, without major past achievements and devoid of any serious political ambition, save that for the quiet spot of the Speaker's chair, this genial Scotch knight was the ideal leader for a squabbling party. He eventually succeeded in bringing to an end the open warfare on the opposition front bench, but CB's leaning towards the torch-bearers of Gladstonianism, Harcourt and John Morley, always had the potential to trigger fresh disruptions. If he thought himself imperial enough to appeal to centrist Liberals and mainstream voters, this did little to assuage the suspicions of the Liberal Imperialists.

The 'Limps' posed a serious challenge to the future direction of Liberalism. Although by no means a consistent ideological formation, the empire question and its corollaries (including opposition to Home Rule) were at the core of their political concerns. Loosely organised, since January 1902, in the Liberal League, they subscribed to the doctrine of 'national efficiency' as the chief criterion for establishing the needs of the nation and its empire, and for recreating Liberalism as a force of positive change. For the 'Limps', the party's 1891 Newcastle Programme was the receptacle of every fringe fad of Liberalism since the Home Rule split. In practice, though, their views on education, housing, temperance or workers' rights were fairly conventional and in tune with orthodox Liberal thought.<sup>7</sup>

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In foreign affairs their watchword was 'continuity of policy'. Already in 1895, Rosebery had stressed the need for bipartisanism in foreign policy: 'whatever our domestic differences may be at home, we should preserve a united front abroad'.<sup>8</sup> 'Continuity' affected the position of the Leaguers in several ways. It was an explicit admission that, on foreign and imperial matters, the Unionists were trustworthy. It also implied that Radical dissenters and Little Englanders could not be relied upon, and had, in fact, to be isolated from foreign policy-making. Finally, the emphasis on 'continuity' entailed the need to refrain from detailed criticism of Unionist policy. The less foreign affairs were discussed in public, the better. '[I]t is hateful to discourse upon [them] from a public platform', as Grey, by then the acknowledged foreign policy spokesman of his party, wrote in 1896. And when, six years later, he reflected on the period since Rosebery's fall as a 'nightmare of futility', it was an expression of his chafing as much at the inactivity of opposition as at the Leaguers' Trappist vow of silence on foreign questions.<sup>9</sup>

Behind the emphasis on 'efficiency' and 'continuity' lay concerns about the defence of the empire. Army reform, naval rearmament, and a tightening of the ties with the white settler colonies were corollaries of foreign policy. This linked the 'Limps' with an older generation of imperialists in the Liberal ranks otherwise hostile to the League – men like the Radical baronet Sir Charles Dilke, who had always stressed the primacy of an effective imperial defence policy. On empire, defence and foreign policy they advocated the return to a Liberalism older than that of Gladstone and his acolytes: they stood for the return to the robust, centrist policies of Palmerston. Still, in focusing their efforts on one uplifting national crusade for imperial efficiency, they emulated the techniques of

Gladstonian domestic statecraft if not its underlying doctrine. And they did so in the sonorous and assertive language of Nonconformism that appealed to many Liberals, especially in the Celtic fringe.<sup>10</sup>

Doubts about CB's soundness on foreign policy were widespread within the Edwardian establishment. The King's dislike of the Liberal leader's views on foreign policy was well known. Mistrust of CB on this score was at the root of the plotting against him in the course of 1905. Through Richard Burdon Haldane, one of the vice-presidents of the Liberal League and a likely contender for the War Office in a Liberal administration, a channel of communication existed with the Palace. When, in August 1905, their paths crossed at the Bohemian spa town of Marienbad, the King quizzed CB on foreign policy, and was apparently much assured by the latter's moderation, and especially his adherence to the continuity principle.<sup>11</sup>

Since the leadership of the opposition in the Commons did not bring with it the automatic right of succession to the premiership, CB had overcome an important hurdle by allaying the King's fears about his suspected Radical inclinations. His success with the King may well have been behind the Relugas Compact of early September 1905, so named after Grey's fishing lodge on the banks of the Findhorn in Morayshire. In this private pact between the three leading 'Limps' in the Commons, the former Home Secretary Herbert Henry Asquith, Grey and Haldane sought to contain CB and the Radicals. CB was to become Prime Minister but be shunted into the relative tranquillity of the red benches of the Lords. Asquith was to lead the party in the Commons as Chancellor of the Exchequer, while Haldane from the Woolsack and Grey at the Foreign Office would shore up the 'Limps' position in the government. In the event of CB refusing to accept the scheme,

the three plotters resolved not to join his administration.<sup>12</sup>

The compact was a curious arrangement. Its demands were high. If accepted, it would have left CB the office of Prime Minister, but deprived him of any real political power. The eventual failure of the plot was caused by a combination of circumstances. For one thing, CB's acknowledged unifying influence in the party and his popularity with the Liberal rank and file in the country made him indispensable. For another, the terms of the Relugas Compact had already signalled a retreat from the position previously occupied by the three. Rosebery had ruled himself out as a possible leader. The veteran Whig statesman Earl Spencer, who had been pencilled in as premier in Cabinet-making games during 1905, was by now incapacitated and so out of the running. Under these circumstances, the Relugas three had reluctantly come to accept the inevitability of a CB premiership. Finally, irresolution and self-interest, skilfully manipulated by CB, led to the repudiation of the compact, first by Asquith, then by Haldane, and eventually by Grey.<sup>13</sup>

Although ultimately a failure, the Relugas Compact underscored the potentially corrosive effect of foreign policy on Liberal unity. But it also underlined the extent to which ideological clashes within post-Gladstonian Liberalism were a question of personalities more than anything else. In this, as well as in their social exclusiveness, the 'Limps' were something of a throwback to earlier Whiggery; separate from ordinary party activists, they were individual statesmen in an age of caucuses and party machines, even though the League was a modern and well-financed campaigning organisation.<sup>14</sup>

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Between them, Joseph Chamberlain's 'whole hoggers', Prime

Minister Arthur James Balfour's temporarising 'little piggers'<sup>15</sup> and the remaining rump of Tory free traders gradually and very publicly tore apart the Unionist government and party in 1904–05. But foreign policy issues also affected the prolonged and repeatedly postponed final demise of the administration. In November 1904, the by-elections at Monmouth West and Horsham highlighted the potential of foreign crises – here the so-called Dogger Bank incident<sup>16</sup> – to affect the fortunes of the ruling party. As a result, Balfour decided to defer dissolution. To the public, the Tory front bench in the Commons seemed not so much a row of exhausted volcanoes as limpets clinging to the rocks as wave upon wave of adversity crashed over them.<sup>17</sup>

In reality, foreign policy considerations played a significant role in Balfour's political calculations. Senior Unionists had been discussing the merits of dissolution or resignation since the spring.<sup>18</sup> But Balfour was bent on accomplishing one last major political task – the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. No doubt, a Prime Minister whose time has run out will always be tempted to cast about for pretexts to stay in office. Balfour's determination to see the negotiations with Tokyo through to a successful conclusion, however, reflected Tory scepticism of Liberal soundness on foreign affairs. It was of the uttermost importance, urged the Unionist Chief Whip, Sir Alec Acland Hood, to 'confine the Radicals to doing as little mischief as possible at home and abroad'.<sup>19</sup> The renewal of the Japanese alliance prior to dissolution would not only lock an incoming Liberal administration into the foreign policy framework created in recent years, it would also have the pleasing side-effect of being popular with the voters. As his Chief Whip impressed upon Balfour in August, shortly after the conclusion of the new alliance, if he had resigned before

then, 'though your record of foreign policy would have been good, it would not have met with so popular a reception as it meets with today'.<sup>20</sup>

Much to the surprise of both sides, the Unionist administration survived the 1905 session. As *The Times* commented, it left 'behind it a record of futile debates and disappointing achievement'. Even the constitutional propriety of the government's retention of office was now discussed at the close of the session.<sup>21</sup> With the Japanese alliance finally ratified in September, Balfour gave serious consideration to an autumn dissolution. His decision to stay in office was to a large extent motivated 'by concern for party organisation'.<sup>22</sup> Jack Sandars, Balfour's influential private secretary, warned that immediate dissolution meant fighting the election on the old electoral register, and counselled following Gladstone's 1874 example of going out before Parliament met.<sup>23</sup>

These were weighty reasons. But, once again, foreign policy affected Balfour's calculations. Throughout September and October, carefully dropped hints of the Relugas Compact fuelled speculations in Westminster tea rooms. They heightened Balfour's eagerness to exploit Liberal divisions. His strategy revolved around two considerations. He sought to unite his own divided party on a platform of opposition to the 'legislative projects of the most dangerous kind', 'the perilous diminution of military strength [and] ... Home Rule all round' that a CB government would usher in. On the other hand, he hoped to drive a wedge between the 'Limps' and the rest of the Liberal Party.<sup>24</sup>

The first objective was more easily attainable. With the end of the government now in sight, Unionist politicians launched a form of pre-election campaign in which they highlighted foreign and imperial matters.

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## PROBLEMS OF CONTINUITY: THE 1906 GENERAL ELECTION AND FOREIGN POLICY

Addressing a Primrose League meeting in mid-October, Hugh O. Arnold-Forster, the Secretary of State for War, stressed the need for union with Ireland, union with the Empire, and military strength: 'under the present Government this country has held its head high among the nations of the world'.<sup>25</sup> Earl Percy, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, underlined the Unionists' foreign policy credentials, while blaming the Boer War on 'the fatal policy of a Liberal Government'. Friendship with the United States, the *entente* with France, and the 1902 and 1905 Anglo-Japanese alliances, by contrast, 'were the products of a Unionist foreign policy and they might legitimately claim that the party which had initiated that policy should be entrusted with the duty of carrying it on'.<sup>26</sup>

Balfour decided to surrender the seals of office rather than to dissolve Parliament around 22 November 1905.<sup>27</sup> That decision was hardened by a speech by Rosebery on 25 November, in which he categorically refused to serve in a Campbell-Bannerman administration, ostensibly on the grounds of the latter's alleged support for Home Rule. Rosebery's outburst at Bodmin convinced Balfour that the rift between the former premier and the current Liberal leader, and the divisions between the latter and the 'Limps', would make it impossible for CB to form a government. He thus resigned on 4 December, expecting that the formation of a Liberal administration would fail in full view of an expectant electorate.<sup>28</sup>

Balfour had failed to appreciate the desire of leading Liberals for harmony, in public at any rate. Indeed, had the Relugas triumvirate persevered in its original plan, Balfour might well have pulled off a remarkable coup. As it was, all of them underestimated CB's toughness. Ironically, resignation rather than dissolution actually complicated the Relugas plan. Asquith,

unsurprisingly, balked at the idea of accepting office before the general election, but not so CB.<sup>29</sup> He accepted Balfour's poisoned chalice, faced down the Relugas challenge, and emerged as the undisputed and indispensable leader of Liberalism. Despite Limp plotting and Balfour's acute sense of timing, a Liberal administration under CB thus materialised. Once installed in office, the new government took to the hustings on 8 January 1906.

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A Liberal victory was never in doubt. After almost twenty virtually uninterrupted years of Tory dominance a decisive swing of the pendulum was only to be expected. Most non-party voters had tired of the Unionist alliance, whose legislative record was unremarkable, and whose profound divisions over protectionism had made such an unattractive spectacle in recent years.

As A. K. Russell's pertinent analysis of the 1906 election has shown, foreign policy issues played no prominent role during the campaign. Unionist candidates naturally emphasised the outgoing government's foreign policy achievements; this accounted for the comparatively high incidence of references to foreign affairs in Unionist election addresses.<sup>30</sup> For the Liberals, Chamberlain's apparent Damascene conversion from 'three acres and a cow' to taxing bread was an easy target; all the more so since free trade was one of the policy issues on which all Liberals could actually agree. Similarly, Balfour's Fabian tactics on tariff reform were more inviting than Britain's relations with far-away countries. And Alfred Milner's rash introduction of cheap Chinese indentured labourers to the diamond fields of South Africa provided them with an opportunity to occupy the moral high ground – though not without staging a

publicity stunt by parading pig-tailed 'coolies' in the streets of London, or David Lloyd George stoking anti-immigrant fears among the quarrymen of North Wales.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, foreign affairs were not insignificant. Unionist propaganda painted the Liberals as unreliable and timid on defence and foreign policy. In early January, Balfour stressed Unionism's imperial credentials in a finely honed appeal to the centre ground. His foreign policy stood 'for firmness abroad, yet with a conciliatory spirit'. The Conservatives had brought 'the country to a greater and nobler position than she had occupied, at any rate during his lifetime'. By contrast, the Liberals were divided on foreign matters. Grey sought to imitate Lansdowne's policy, while his new chief had condemned it in late November as a 'policy of swagger, aggression, and greed'. Indeed, CB was 'not only in favour of reducing the military organisation of the country ... but actually went so far as to deprecate the extravagance the late Government had showered upon the Navy'.<sup>32</sup>

In a characteristically searing speech at Sheffield, Ulster rabble-rouser and Unionist Solicitor-General Sir Edward Carson argued that Liberal foreign policy was prone to fits of 'sentimental delusion'. The Conservatives had 'left behind no legacies of defeat or disgrace' in foreign and colonial affairs. This was the result not only of shrewd diplomacy, 'but by placing our naval armaments in such a state of efficiency that foreign nations had not only respected but feared us!' The new government, he implied, would reduce armaments. They 'might as well have told [the electors that they] were going to introduce a Bill to make England a second or third-rate Power'.<sup>33</sup>

Liberal campaign rhetoric on foreign policy was inevitably more varied. The failure of Relugas notwithstanding, Grey's

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accession to the government underlined its adherence to the principle of continuity. Already in his much noted speech at the Cannon Street Hotel in the City of London, that heartland of Unionism, in October 1905, he had effectively committed the Liberals to the line laid down by Lansdowne. Foreign policy should be a 'non-controversial issue'. The cardinal features of British diplomacy were the 'growing friendship and good feeling between ourselves and the United States', the alliance with Japan, and the 1904 *entente* with France. 'In these three things no change is desired.' Grey hinted at the desirability of improved relations with Russia and Germany, but emphasised that they could not be bought at the expense of Lansdowne's achievements. In this wide-ranging speech, Grey repeatedly returned to 'the need for continuity in foreign policy'.<sup>34</sup>

The extent to which Grey had committed the Liberals to the continuity principle became apparent when CB delivered his first major speech as Prime Minister on 21 December. He used his hour-long address to a packed Albert Hall 'emphatically to reaffirm my adhesion to the *entente cordiale*' and his commitment to friendship with Japan and America. But he also linked the theme of continuity to the Gladstonian tradition of arbitration. 'The growth of armaments', he warned, was 'a great danger to the peace of the world'. Arbitration and arms reduction were 'the highest tasks of a statesman'. Indeed, appealing to Radical sentiments, he asked '[w]hat nobler role could this great country assume than at the fitting moment to place itself at the head of a league of peace ...?'<sup>35</sup>

*The Times* later commented on the address as 'a very remarkable document', devoid of any political substance except for the pledge to continue Balfour's foreign policy.<sup>36</sup> CB's speech was, in fact, a skilful piece of

'triangulation'. Reaffirmation of continuity demonstrated imperial responsibility. His plea for 'peace and retrenchment' sought to merge continuity with the Gladstonian foreign policy tradition. All of this, moreover, could easily be wrapped up in a defence of free trade. In this fashion, CB established a platform that united the imperialist and dissenting wings of the party whilst also appealing to centrist non-party voters.

The Prime Minister had good reasons not to neglect the Radicals; for the Gladstonian tradition was by no means dead. During the October pre-election campaign Sir Robert Reid, soon to be the Earl of Loreburn and CB's Lord Chancellor, attacked the Conservatives' 'policy of adventure in foreign affairs' and cast doubt on the need for the Japanese alliance.<sup>37</sup> Opening his campaign at Battersea, John Burns, London labour leader and now, as President of the Local Government Board, a Cabinet minister, lashed out at the 'orientalised Imperialism' of the previous government. It had been 'a mere register for the desires of sordid, pushful, colonial capitalists'. In foreign policy, he affirmed, 'he should always look for points of agreement rather than disagreement. He would pursue with foreign nations the line of least resistance'.<sup>38</sup>

The election addresses and campaign speeches by leading Leaguers were as much about containing Radical influence as refuting Unionist charges of imperial irresponsibility. H. H. Fowler, now Viscount Wolverhampton, one the League's vice-presidents and a former India Secretary, castigated Conservative 'meddle and muddle, incompetence and indifference' in defence and diplomacy.<sup>39</sup> Grey mounted a strong counter-attack against Balfour's claims of competence in foreign and naval matters. The Conservative record, he asserted, was marred by two major wars, the Boer and

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the Crimean. As for the Unionist commitment to a strong Navy, the 1905–06 estimates, in fact, envisaged a £5 million reduction in naval expenditure. Nevertheless, there would be continuity in foreign policy.<sup>40</sup>

Once the general election was officially under way, Haldane and Grey appeared together at Alnwick. Turning to his favourite themes – organisation and efficiency – 'Schopenhauer' Haldane<sup>41</sup> underscored the Liberals' claims to competence:

They wanted a Ministry to think out foreign policy as a whole, and those problems which concerned the Army and Navy as a whole, and if at the time of the South African War there had been a brain for the Army, a thinking department, did they think they would have been brought face to face with all the disasters which overtook them in the early stages of the war?

Grey, in turn, stressed the new administration's moderation and pragmatism.<sup>42</sup>

To some extent the speeches by leading 'Limps' reflected the palpable lack of appetite for fundamental change on the part of the electorate. Foreign policy statements made during the election campaign were significant in terms of the propaganda battle between the two parties and, perhaps, even more so in terms of the internal dynamics of Liberalism. Unionist assertions of foreign policy competence could not outweigh a general impression of ineptitude.

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If foreign policy did not affect the outcome of the election, the latter nevertheless played a role in British foreign policy. Grey's commitment to continuity was not merely rhetorical. The formation of the new administration in December 1905 coincided with a period of international tension. Seeking to exploit the

disruption of the European balance of power caused by Russia's defeat in the war with Japan, in the summer of 1905 Germany had challenged Russia's ally France over her aspirations in Morocco. Russia's military weakness and domestic instability meant that, if Franco-German tensions were to escalate into a full-blown military conflict France would not be able to count on the effective support of her Russian ally. The outcome of another Franco-German war could not be doubted: Prussian *uhlans* would be parading on the *Champs Élysées* in a matter of weeks.

By the time Grey assumed the seals of the Foreign Office, the crisis had passed the moment of greatest danger. But the situation was not without risks. Above all, it concerned Britain. Under the terms of the 1904 Anglo-French understanding Britain was pledged to give diplomatic support to French ambitions in Morocco in return for France's formal recognition of British supremacy in Egypt. If, in the absence of sufficient British support, Paris were forced to yield to German pressure, the resulting settlement was likely to be detrimental to British interests. The understanding would have been dead, British rule in Egypt much more insecure again, and Germany would have dominated the new Europe, with Britain in renewed international isolation.<sup>43</sup>

On coming to office, Grey emphasised the underlying continuity in British diplomacy. He reminded the British ambassador at Berlin of 'our intention to keep in letter & spirit our engagements to other countries'; and he rejected German ideas of British mediation between Paris and Berlin prior to the international conference at Algeciras which was to settle the Moroccan dispute.<sup>44</sup> Like Lansdowne, Grey was convinced that in a Franco-German war 'we certainly should not be able to remain neutral. The public feeling would be too strong.'<sup>45</sup>

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Throughout the Moroccan crisis Grey performed a delicate balancing act. If British passivity brought about the collapse of the *entente*, Britain would be left vulnerable and so exposed to pressure by other Powers. Sir Charles Hardinge, Grey's Permanent Under-Secretary, endorsed this line: 'If France is left in the lurch an agreement or alliance between France, Germany and Russia in the near future is certain. This ... is the Kaiser's ideal, France and Russia becoming satellites within the Germany system.'<sup>46</sup> If, on the other hand, the *entente* remained intact, Britain would retain her newly found position as the lynchpin of European politics – but this could only be achieved by preserving peace and by preventing independent action on the part of France. A separate Franco-German deal on Morocco would undermine that position. But so would French 'independent action ... which might lead to a war with Germany'. For that reason, Grey refused to pledge British military support: '[A] promise in advance committing this country to take part in a Continental war is ... a very serious [matter] ... it changes the Entente into an Alliance – and Alliances, especially continental Alliances are not in accordance with our traditions.'<sup>47</sup>

In terms of the diplomatic dynamic of the crisis, Grey was able to turn the ongoing general election to his advantage. Pre-1918 elections, of course, did not take place on single day, but were fought over several weeks. The resulting dispersal of ministers across the country and the infrequency of Cabinet meetings during the election enabled Grey to present his advice to the French and German ambassadors as personal rather than official. Thus, he assured Paul Cambon of Britain's 'benevolent neutrality if such a thing existed', but suggested privately that, in the event of war, 'public opinion

would be strongly moved in favour of France'.<sup>48</sup> Count Metternich was told officially that the British government wished to 'avoid trouble between Germany and France'. Unofficially, he was warned that, 'if circumstances arose, public feeling in England would be so strong that it would be impossible to remain neutral'.<sup>49</sup> Grey's studied vagueness paid off. French anxiety that Britain might not support her militarily, and German fears that she would, acted as a deterrent on both sides. France was sufficiently confident of British diplomatic support so as not to yield to German pressure, but not so confident as to provoke Germany into military conflict, while the latter also refrained from escalating the stand-off.<sup>50</sup>

Grey's handling of the Moroccan crisis underlined the essential continuity with Lansdowne's foreign policy. One aspect of Grey's policy, however, remains controversial – his authorisation of Anglo-French military talks. When Cambon came to see him on 10 January, he 'put the question ... directly & formally': could France count on British armed assistance in the event of '*une agression brutale*' by Germany?<sup>51</sup> Grey's temporising answer has already been referred to. Cambon's enquiry, in fact, did not come as a surprise. Rumours of German preparations for a spring offensive were circulating around the chanceries of Europe. In consequence, in early January 1906, Grey and Haldane discussed the possibility of war, and afterwards the Foreign Secretary authorised informal talks between the Director of Military Operations and the French military attaché.<sup>52</sup>

These talks, and their alleged secrecy, later earned Grey the opprobrium of 'Little Englanders' like Morley and Burns, as well as of some historians. In fact, the importance of the talks is easily exaggerated. The key members

of the government were clearly informed, even though the talks were not formally reported to the whole Cabinet until July 1911. Their true significance lay in the degree of assurance they gave to Paris in the face of German pressure. They were a confidence-building measure rather than a preparation for war. Crucially, these informal discussions did not entail a binding commitment by Britain.<sup>53</sup>

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The impact of foreign policy on the 1906 general election was indirect; and it was not confined to the actual election campaign. It reflected, in different ways, the state of the two parties. The deep contemporary Tory malaise was not merely triggered by Chamberlain's newly found protectionist predilections; it was also rooted in an intellectual crisis caused by the apparent discrepancy between the party's post-Disraelian embrace of the imperial idea and the altogether more mundane reality of turn-of-the-century foreign policy. For the Liberals, foreign affairs had never lost the potential to reinforce the existing fissures between Radicals and 'Limps'. The failed Relugas plot underscored how real these divisions were, but it also highlighted the extent to which they were a matter of personalities rather than policies.

During the election campaign foreign policy was significant in terms of the propaganda battle between the parties, and even more so with regard to the internal dynamics of the Liberal Party. That Unionist campaigners stressed the Balfour government's foreign policy credentials was hardly surprising; they had few other achievements to point to. The Liberals' desire for public unity, meanwhile, allowed Grey and other Leaguers to emphasise 'continuity' in foreign policy without being challenged by the Radicals. Indeed,

the speeches by Grey, Asquith and Haldane complemented CB's triangulating tactics at the Albert Hall and after.

Grey's commitment to 'continuity' was practical as much as rhetorical. The new Foreign Secretary used the uncertainties of an election campaign stretched over several weeks to amplify his moderating message to France and Germany. His policy of support for France was in clear continuity with the foreign policy of the Unionist government. In the altered post-1905 international circumstances, the Liberals' espousal of Lansdowne's *entente* policy required a closer involvement in continental affairs than previous governments would have thought advisable. To what extent the new administration as a whole appreciated this is unclear, but certainly Grey had come to understand that the demands on him would be quite different from those on Lord Salisbury only a few years previously.

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- 2 'Diplomaticus', 'A Monroe Doctrine for Asia', *Fortnightly Review* lxiii, 374 (1898), p. 333.
- 3 A. Sykes, 'The Radical Right and the Crisis of Conservatism before

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- 4 G. Martel, *Imperial Diplomacy: Rosebery and the Failure of Foreign Policy* (Kingston, Ontario, 1986), pp. 237–41.
- 5 L. McKinstry, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (London, 2005), pp. 390–95; A. G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt* (2 vols., London, 1923) ii, pp. 470–75.
- 6 On 21 June 1895, the House of Commons passed a no-confidence vote against Campbell-Bannerman as Secretary of State for War on account of the alleged inadequacy of the supply of cartridges. This ministerial defeat triggered the government's resignation.
- 7 See H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 90–101; also G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899–1914* (London, repr. 1991), pp. 54–106. For the view that the League's positions did not deviate significantly from mainstream Liberalism, see G. L. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (Boston, MA, 1986), pp. 33–34.
- 8 Rosebery speech, Albert Hall, 5 July 1895, anon (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Lord Rosebery: Two Chapters in Recent Politics, 1886 and 1892–5, with Extracts from Lord Rosebery's Speeches* (London, 1901), p. 74.
- 9 Grey to Rosebery, 15 June 1896 and 22 February 1902, Rosebery Mss, National Library of Scotland, 10028; K. G. Robbins, *Sir Edward Grey: A Biography of Lord Grey of Fallodon* (London, 1971), p. 99.
- 10 S. Koss, *Nonconformism in Modern British Politics* (London, 1975), pp. 34–35; also M. Bentley, *Politics without Democracy, 1815–1914: Perception, Preoccupation in British Government* (London, 1984 (pb)) pp. 318–19.
- 11 Campbell-Bannerman to Sinclair, 26 Aug. 1905, J. A. Spender, *The Life of the Right Hon. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, GCB* (2 vols., London, 1923) ii, pp. 175–76.
- 12 Haldane to Knollys [Edward VII's private secretary], 12 Sept. 1905, D. Sommer, *Haldane of Cloan: His Life and Times, 1856–1928* (London, 1960), pp. 145–46; R. B. Haldane, *Autobiography* (London, 1929), pp. 157–61.

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During the election campaign foreign policy was significant in terms of the propaganda battle between the parties, and even more so with regard to the internal dynamics of the Liberal Party.



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election and foreign  
policy  
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- 13 Grey to Campbell-Bannerman (private), 7 Dec. 1905, Campbell-Bannerman Mss, British Library, Add.Mss. 41218. For a detailed discussion see J. F. Harris and C. Hazlehurst, 'Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister', *History* lv, 185 (1970), pp. 366–70; T. Boyle, 'The Formation of Campbell-Bannerman's Government in December 1905: a Memorandum by J. A. Spender', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* xlv, 112 (1972), pp. 283–302; also S. E. Koss, *Lord Haldane: Scapegoat for Liberalism* (New York and London, 1969), pp. 32–39.
- 14 Political differences and intellectual snobbery aside, one of Haldane's and Grey's objections to CB was that 'in their eyes [he] was not "in society"', F. W. Hirst, *The Golden Days* (London, 1947), p. 254.
- 15 The two contemporary terms referred to Chamberlainite Tariff Reformers, who wished to 'go the whole hog' to protectionism, and the Prime Minister's followers, who advocated a mediating position between Chamberlain and the Free Traders.
- 16 In late October 1904, the Russian Baltic fleet, en route to fight the Japanese in the Far East, sank Hull fishing trawlers off the Dogger Bank in the North Sea, in the mistaken belief that they were Japanese torpedo boats. The incident threatened to embroil Britain in the Russo-Japanese War.
- 17 For details of these elections, S. MacCoby, *English Radicalism, 1886–1914* (London, 1953), pp. 385–92.
- 18 Lansdowne to Balfour, 18 May 1905, Balfour Mss, BL, Add. Mss. 49729.
- 19 Hood to Balfour, 17 Sept. [1905], and reply, 21 Sept. 1905, *ibid.*, Add.Mss. 49771.
- 20 Memo. Hood, 'The General Election' (confidential), 10 Aug. 1905, The National Archives (Public Record Office), CAB 37/79/145.
- 21 *The Times* (11 Aug. 1905); cf. Hamilton diary, 27 Nov. 1905, D. W. R. Bahlman (ed.), *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton, 1885–1906* (Hull, 1993), p. 459.
- 22 Lansdowne to Balfour, 27 Oct. 1905, Balfour Mss, Add.Mss. 49729; also A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (Newton Abbot and Hamden, CT, 1973), p. 31.
- 23 Sandars to Balfour (private), 19 Oct. 1905, Balfour Mss, Add. Mss. 49764.
- 24 Balfour to Devonshire, 27 Oct. 1905, Devonshire Mss, Chatsworth, 340.3155. For the rumours, Koss, *Haldane*, p. 32.
- 25 Arnold-Forster, Croydon speech, *The Times* (19 Oct. 1905).
- 26 Percy, North Kensington speech, *ibid.* (10 Nov. 1905).
- 27 Min. Balfour [22 Nov. 1905], Balfour Mss, Add.Mss. 49764; Cawdor to Balfour (private), 28 Nov. 1905, *ibid.*, Add.Mss. 49705.
- 28 Balfour to Jameson [Unionist candidate at Chatham], 27 Nov. 1905, *ibid.*, Add.Mss. 48858; Russell, *Landslide*, p. 34.
- 29 Asquith to Campbell-Bannerman, 25 Nov. 1905, and Campbell-Bannerman to Ripon, 25 Nov. 1905, Campbell-Bannerman Mss, Add.Mss. 41210 and 41225.
- 30 See Evelyn Cecil, election address, Birmingham Aston, *The Times* (28 Dec. 1905). For a detailed analysis of election addresses see Russell, *Landslide*, pp. 64–94.
- 31 cf. Atherley-Jones, election address, Durham North West, Jan. 1906, S. MacCoby (ed.), *The English Radical Tradition, 1763–1914* (London, 1952), pp. 219–20; J. A. Spender, *Sir Robert Hudson: A Memoir* (London, 1930), pp. 11–13; H. V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics, 1892–1914* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 141–42.
- 32 Balfour speech, Leamington Spa, *The Times* (2 Jan. 1906). The reference to CB's utterances was to his Stirling speech, *ibid.* (24 Nov. 1905).
- 33 Carson speech, Sheffield, *ibid.* (6 Jan. 1906).
- 34 'Foreign Policy and Fiscal Reform', 20 Oct. 1905, P. Knaplund (ed.), *Sir Edward Grey: Speeches on Foreign Affairs, 1904–1914* (London, 1931), pp. 26–32.
- 35 Campbell-Bannerman, Albert Hall speech, *The Times* (22 Dec. 1905); cf. J. E. B. Seely, *Adventure* (London, repr. 1936), p. 103. This was one of the first political speeches ever to be broadcast by wireless. The Electrophone Company, of Gerrard Street, transmitted it to political clubs in London and as far afield as Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield.
- 36 *The Times* (8 Jan. 1906).
- 37 Reid speech, Finsbury Park Hall, *ibid.* (17 Oct. 1905).
- 38 Burns speech, Battersea, *ibid.* (28 Dec. 1905); W. Kent, *John Burns: Labour's Lost Leader* (London, 1950), pp. 152–58.
- 39 Fowler speech, Willenhall, *The Times* (29 Dec. 1905).
- 40 Grey speech, Alnwick Corn Exchange, *ibid.* (5 Jan. 1906).
- 41 CB's nickname for Haldane on account of the latter's German university education. Haldane was, in fact, an eminent Hegel scholar.
- 42 Haldane and Grey speeches, Alnwick Corn Exchange, *ibid.* (13 Jan. 1906).
- 43 For a more detailed discussion of the background to the Moroccan crisis and the underlying rationale of Lansdowne's policy, cf. my "'Almost a Law of Nature'?: Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Office, and the Balance of Power in Europe, 1905–1912", in B. J. C. McKercher and E. Goldstein (eds.), *Power and Stability: British Foreign Policy, 1865–1965. Essays in Honour of Michael Dockrill* (London, 2003), pp. 82–88.
- 44 Grey to Lascelles (private), 1 Jan. 1906, Lascelles Mss, TNA (PRO), FO 800/8.
- 45 Sanderson to Lascelles (private), 2 Jan. 1906, *ibid.*, FO 800/13.
- 46 Min. Hardinge, 23 Feb. 1906, on memo. Grey, 20 Feb. 1906, G. P. Gooch and H. W. V. Temperley (eds.), *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914* (11 vols., London, 1924–38) iii, no. 299 [hereafter *BD*].
- 47 Grey to Bertie (private), 15 Jan. 1906, Bertie Mss, BL, Add.Mss. 63018.
- 48 Memo. Grey, 10 Jan. 1906, Campbell-Bannerman Mss, Add.Mss. 41218; Cambon to Rouvier (no. 4), 11 Jan. 1906, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (ed.), *Documents Diplomatiques Français* (Paris, 1938), second ser., viii, no. 385 [hereafter *DDF* (2) viii].
- 49 Grey to Lascelles (no. 11), 9 Jan. 1906, *BD* iii, no. 229.
- 50 Otte, 'Balance of Power', pp. 88–89.
- 51 Memo. Grey, 10 Jan. 1906, Campbell-Bannerman Mss, Add.Mss. 41218; Cambon to Rouvier (no. 4), 11 Jan. 1906, *DDF* (2) viii, no. 385.
- 52 Repington to Grey, 29 Dec. 1905, A. J. A. Morris (ed.), *The Letters of Lt. Col. Charles à Court Repington, 1903–1918* (Stroud, 1999), no. 19. For a detailed discussion, S. R. Williamson, *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (London, 1990), pp. 59–88.
- 53 Ripon to Fitzmaurice (private), 11 Jan. 1906, Ripon Mss, BL, Add.Mss. 43543; J. W. and P. F. Coogan, 'The British Cabinet and the Anglo-French Staff Talks: Who Knew What and When Did He Know It', *Journal of British Studies* xxiv, 2 (1985), pp. 110–31.

## History Group on the web

The Liberal Democrat History Group's website, [www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk), is currently undergoing an extensive revamp and reorganisation.

Thanks to funding kindly provided by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for the 'Liberal history online' project, we have been able to extend the website's content well beyond our original expectations, with the result that its internal architecture was no longer able to cope well. So it has been radically redesigned to provide a more easily navigable internal structure. This is a lengthy process, however, and is not yet complete – please bear with us while it is in process!

### Email mailing list

If you would like to receive up-to-date information on the Liberal Democrat History Group's activities, including advance notice of meetings, and new History Group publications, you can sign up to our email mailing list: visit the website and fill in the details on the 'Contact' page.