

A 'DISTINCTION WITH THE LIBERAL UNIONIST –

The Liberal Unionists had their origins in the disastrous split within the Liberal Party over Irish home rule in 1886. They participated in coalition governments with the Conservatives in 1886–92 and 1895–1905, and eventually, in 1912, merged entirely into the Conservative Party. How close was the relationship between the Liberal Unionists and Salisbury's Conservatives between 1886 and 1895? **Ian Cawood** argues that the Liberal Unionists managed to maintain a distinct and separate identity until the formation of the coalition government in July 1895.



FOLLOWING THE home rule election of 1886, and reluctantly at first, a disparate group of Liberal aristocrats, wealthy businessmen and radical professional politicians gradually coalesced into a political party of sorts and attempted to maintain an independent policy whilst remaining part of the Unionist alliance. After 1895 the Liberal Unionists quickly became socially and politically allied with the Tories, and ever since there has been a tendency to forget that they were a separate party. This article intends to examine whether the absorption of the Liberal Unionists into the Conservative and Unionist Party was inevitable, given the historic differences that existed between their political

philosophies. An examination of the troubled relationship between the two branches of the Unionist alliance from 1886 until 1895, while redolent of the political culture of the late nineteenth century, reveals the ideological and operational difficulties of maintaining a sustained period of cross-party collaboration in the British political system. It also challenges the perception that Liberal Unionism was a mere 'resting-place' for Liberals en route to the Conservative party or that the Liberal Unionists disappeared into 'a political wilderness'.¹

The origin of the Unionist alliance has conventionally been seen as the issuing of the 'Hawarden Kite' simultaneously in the *Standard* and the *Leeds Mercury* in December 1885. The shock and surprise caused

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by this event, the 'earthquake and eclipse' as J. L. Garvin has it, goes some way to explaining the nature of the opposition that emerged once Gladstone's commitment to home rule was confirmed.² Gladstone's sudden public conversion to home rule, in December 1885, actually came from his long-term, traditionally Liberal attitude to national self-determination. He had been troubled by his own government's actions in Egypt in 1882 and later in Sudan. By adopting a policy of home rule while in opposition, he felt he was returning to a truer, more moral form of Liberalism, with which to appeal to the newly enlarged electorate. He had not, however, shared his moral struggle with his Cabinet colleagues, many of whom consequently interpreted the Liberal duty towards Ireland (and the wider Empire) in a very different fashion, although he was supported by Earl Spencer who had, as Lord Lieutenant in Ireland, implemented a coercive regime from 1882 to 1885.

On the other hand, the support that Parnell had offered to the Conservatives in the general election of 1885, meant, in Angus Hawkins' memorable phrase that 'an extraordinary fluidity prevailed over the political situation.'³ In these circumstances, with Randolph Churchill and Lord Carnarvon wooing Parnell, while Joseph Chamberlain floated his Central Board Scheme, some type of political reorientation seemed inevitable. The only question was the extent and origin of the alteration.

The splits within the party that had been problematic before 1886 became intolerable once the election result of December 1885, which gave the balance of power to the Nationalists, became known. Lord Derby wrote in his diary:

The state of things I imagine to be this – Gladstone has no time to spare and wants to get back to Downing St. The Whigs or moderate section, incline in that direction, but with less eagerness. On the other hand, the Radicals, Chamberlain and co., are not in a hurry. They had rather wait to get rid of Gladstone, Granville and the Whig party in general, thinking themselves strong enough to form a purely Radical cabinet.⁴

Most Liberals felt ambivalent about Gladstone's method of announcing the new policy, even if they supported the principle. However, as the announcement had been quite so unexpected, those who felt inclined to resist the home rule strategy took a long time to organise their forces as they needed to assess the policy itself and the best cause of affecting, adjusting or aborting it. Secondly, Liberals of all hues needed time to assess the attitudes of their allies. Even Chamberlain, who might have been expected to have led the revolt openly, given his role as the alternative figurehead of Liberalism between 1880 and 1885, chose to bide his time and actually to join Gladstone's third Cabinet, while promoting his own alternative approach to the Irish problem.

If the Liberal Unionist movement was to be anything more than a refusal to vote for a particular measure by disgruntled backbenchers, it needed a leader of national reputation and unquestioned political seniority around whom dissenting Liberals could coalesce. Although the Marquess of Hartington's position as this leader may seem to have been inevitable, due to his early denunciation of the policy of home rule at Waterfoot on 29 August 1885, he had, in fact, been more inclined to consider resignation and retirement from politics.⁵ The task of persuading Hartington to take on the task of leadership of a rebellion fell to George Goschen, who was unable to take on the role of leader due to his distance from the Liberals since 1874 and because of his unstinting opposition to any aspect of Chamberlain's radicalism. Queen Victoria herself was united with Goschen in her suspicion of Gladstone, who she regarded as 'a half-mad ... ridiculous old man'⁶ and she now bombarded Goschen with letters demanding that he persuade Hartington to act decisively. She encouraged Goschen to appeal to 'moderate, loyal and patriotic men' and urged him to consider 'an amalgamation or rather juncture of Conservatives and Whigs.'⁷ She never forgave the Nationalists for their refusal to participate in the Prince of Wales' Irish tour of April 1885, when he had been abused and threatened. Salisbury now encouraged her as well, describing home

Left: election poster for a Liberal Unionist candidate, featuring (left-right) Salisbury, Hartington, Chamberlain and Balfour (reproduced with permission of Lord Clifford, Ugbrooke Hall, Devon).

rule to her as 'a concession to the forces of disorder' and 'a betrayal of the Loyalists of Ulster'.⁸ Edward Watkin, maverick Liberal MP for Hythe, now urged Hartington to form an alliance with Salisbury, with the rousing (if rather self-serving) exhortation, 'while you will have saved your country, you will be Prime Minister by the summer.'⁹ Henry Ponsonby, on the queen's behalf, began floating a scheme to keep Gladstone from office, in which Salisbury would resign the premiership, but remain Foreign Secretary, while Hartington took over at No. 10. Derby, described this as 'eccentric' and suggested that Salisbury was behind it, in order to separate Hartington and Chamberlain.¹⁰

There was however a possibility that the campaign against home rule might become associated with the landowning elite in Ireland, or at least fall into the hands of the Conservatives. On 9 January, Colonel Edward Saunderson, a former Liberal MP, and the Duke of Abercorn, a leading Irish landowner, re-founded the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union, and organised a series of cross-party demonstrations in favour of the Union. The first of these was at Chester on 29 January 1886, when Tories, Whigs and Radicals condemned home rule. He liaised with Duke of Westminster to find 'how far the Whigs will go with us' – the result had been a united platform and the meeting was deemed 'a great success'.¹¹ Once Salisbury's government fell on 25 January 1886, and Gladstone became prime minister again, the initiative passed back to the dissenting Liberals and, in refusing office, Hartington became the de facto leader of the revolt, somewhat against his will.

On 2 February Goschen began to sound out Salisbury on the opportunity for an electoral truce.

I acknowledged the importance of coming to an understanding on the point and said it would not be worth our while unless they would break definitely with Gladstone. He admitted this: and further limited his proposal to those places, where, without a split, our chances were hopeless. Without pledging myself I gave him general hopes of an understanding.¹²

One Conservative demanded, 'let no member of the Tory party assist in returning to Parliament any Liberal', but it appeared that in most constituencies the Liberal Unionists enjoyed considerable Conservative support for their principled stand against home rule.

Salisbury was clearly keen, seeing an opportunity of ending a period of nearly forty years in which there had been only one Conservative majority government, and he dissuaded his party from interfering in the home rule debate at Westminster, so that the opposition to Gladstone's bill would come from within his own party. Salisbury then met Hartington on 2 March, and proposed a full alliance between Conservatives and moderates, but, as Henry James recorded, 'Hartington declined to do more than express the hope that they might act together in defeating any proposition for a separate Irish Parliament'.¹³ When Chamberlain and George Trevelyan resigned from the government in March, Hartington was spurred into action to prevent the radical Unionists taking charge of the revolt. The Earl of Radnor recommended that Hartington should establish a committee of consultation between the Conservatives and the Liberal Unionists to discuss tactics, with a large public meeting in the west end of London and a series of further meetings across the country. As a result, Salisbury wrote to Hartington in early April proposing 'conversations' on future tactics.¹⁴ Derby advised Hartington to support a Conservative Cabinet but to avoid a coalition, on the grounds that they 'were always unpopular and seldom lasted long.' Instead he recommended that Hartington should 'come to an understanding with Chamberlain'.¹⁵ The future Unionist alliance was thus beginning to take shape.

In early May, in an attempt to secure the votes of the wavering Liberals, Goschen's close ally Albert Grey began negotiations with the Conservative whip, Aretas Akers-Douglas, in order to secure a promise that Liberals who voted against the Home Rule Bill would not face a Conservative opponent in the subsequent general election. On 16 May, Salisbury and Hicks Beach unveiled the electoral truce when they told the National Union of Conservative Associations that Conservatives must support Liberal Unionist candidates in constituencies where the Conservatives would have had no chance of defeating a Liberal in normal circumstances. The Conservatives were therefore carefully responding to the

concerns of the Liberals who did not wish to be publicly associated with 'their hateful allies', and were keeping their profile as low as possible.¹⁶

After the Bill was defeated by thirty votes (ninety-three Liberals voted against it), Salisbury wrote to Goschen on 20 June to make arrangements for the forthcoming election. On the following day, Salisbury wrote directly to Lord Hartington asking for his intervention in seats where Conservatives were fighting Gladstonians. Although Hartington was reluctant to endorse Conservatives with whom he disagreed on a myriad of historic issues, against Liberals with whom he disagreed on one, he did respond to Salisbury's pleas and eventually agreed to advise Liberal Unionist voters to support Conservatives in seats where no Liberal Unionist was standing.

Prominent Liberal Unionists, such as Edward Heneage in Grimsby, were supported by the local Conservatives and felt no restrictions on their expression of Liberalism. One Conservative demanded, 'let no member of the Tory party assist in returning to Parliament any Liberal',¹⁷ but it appeared that in most constituencies the Liberal Unionists enjoyed considerable Conservative support for their principled stand against home rule. Under the terms of the informal agreement, a few leading Liberal Unionists were forced to stand aside for Conservatives. The nascent alliance did manage a more cooperative approach in four double constituencies, running Conservatives in harness with Liberal Unionists in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, York, Northampton and Portsmouth. Some Liberal Unionists, and all the radical Unionists, managed to carry their constituency associations with them, but others, such as Hartington were rejected by their caucuses and had to rely almost exclusively on Conservative support in electioneering. In this way some Liberal Unionists emerged from the election with a strong sense of independence and freedom of action in the forthcoming parliament, while others were well aware of their position as political debtors and adjusted their rhetoric accordingly.

Once the 1886 election had produced a hung parliament (albeit

with a Unionist majority), the Liberal Unionists held the position of kingmakers. When Hartington asked Chamberlain his advice on whether or not to join a coalition, Chamberlain was quite adamant in his refusal and was supported by Lord Derby, who distrusted the Conservative leader. When he met Hartington on 24 July, Lord Salisbury found that the Liberal Unionist leader was determined not to enter a government, as it would jeopardise his standing as a Liberal. Hartington had to consider the effect that twenty years of Conservative–Liberal antagonism had had on his own supporters. The Liberal Unionists were determined that they should be an independent Liberal group and resolved at an executive committee meeting on 24 July to maintain a separate headquarters, with subscriptions to local Liberal Associations to be broken off. Chamberlain, Lord Wolmer, James and Derby also advised Hartington that the party should continue to sit with the Gladstonians, now on the opposition benches. [Fig. 1]

The Liberal Unionists' choice masked serious ideological divisions, as Chamberlain and Hartington held diametrically opposed interpretations of Liberalism and they had previously been the bitterest of rivals in the government of 1880–85. As early as May 1886, the *Birmingham Post* described Chamberlain's faction as 'for Mr Gladstone, if he will but modify his plan' and Hartington's as those who 'would refuse, at any time or under any circumstances, to concede autonomy to Ireland'. The article concluded, pessimistically, 'the two sections ... can have no continuous ground of common action.'¹⁸ Hartington himself confided to James that he could 'never ... be sure how far Chamberlain and I will be able to go on together'.¹⁹ Once appointed as Chancellor and Leader of the Commons, Randolph Churchill attempted to appease the Liberal Unionists' conscience over Ireland, promising to implement local government reform in Ireland. When Churchill unexpectedly resigned in December 1886, the pressure for a Hartington-led coalition government grew. However, the Tory chief whip, Aretas Akers-Douglas, played his first hand in his ongoing attempt to

keep Liberal Unionist influence to a minimum, warning that 'he could not whip up the [Conservative] men for Hartington.'²⁰ The perception that the government was tottering was quelled by the appointment of Goschen as Chancellor of the Exchequer in January 1887, encouraged by Queen Victoria, Hartington and Heneage, Goschen was chosen because, although a Liberal, he was barely distinguishable from the Conservatives in his economic outlook.

Of course, this was actually another coup for Salisbury, and another blow for Chamberlain. Now the Birmingham leader had lost his most useful ally in the Conservative Cabinet, one who had expressed sympathy with the idea of a new party comprising the 'advanced' sections of both Unionist parties. He was also now a member of a party which was in an alliance with the previously derided Conservatives, and one that would most likely last for the remainder of the parliament. As he put it, 'we may be face to face with a Tory government whose proposals no consistent Liberal will be able to support'.²¹ The fall of Churchill meant that a Crimes Bill, which Chamberlain had openly denounced, would now be introduced. William Harcourt spotted that Chamberlain's position was uncomfortable, if not untenable, and responded positively to Chamberlain's suggestion of a meeting at the end of 1886, which eventually led to the 'Round Table' conference which has been described in such minute detail by Michael Hurst.²² [Fig. 2]

When the Crimes Bill was introduced in March 1887, Hartington began to write to Salisbury, not to criticise the measure, but to ensure the distribution of honours among Liberal Unionists in exchange for their support. Chamberlain and his followers were the crucial problem, but here Hartington and Salisbury had a rare moment of good fortune. John Bright roused himself to offer his support of the Crimes Bill to Wolmer on the grounds that 'Mr Gladstone ought to have suppressed the Land League five years ago'.²³ As the Liberal Unionists had the choice of whether to support the bill or bring the government down, the Conservatives could safely call their bluff and the bill was passed with sixty-four Liberal Unionists voting

in favour of it. For many Liberals, this was the issue which finally made the breach in the Liberal Party irreversible. Henry James in Bury had managed to weather the storm of criticism that followed his vote against the Home Rule Bill in 1886 and had been re-adopted as the Liberal candidate. However, a meeting to condemn the Crimes Bill in April 1887 produced 'sulphur in the air' and the sight of Liberal Unionists 'hissing at old friends'.²⁴

For some Liberal Unionists who had made pledges against coercion, the alliance had served its purpose in defeating the Home Rule Bill, but it was now being distorted by the Salisbury–Hartington alliance. Arthur Winterbotham spoke out for this group during the debate in March 1887, and led three other radicals back to the Liberals. It looked as if Chamberlain would be left completely isolated, until W. S. Caine, the champion of the temperance movement, came to his rescue and stood firm. Others, such as F. W. Maclean, MP for Woodstock, voted in favour of the Crimes Bill, for the solidly liberal reason that it was 'paving the way for the introduction of remedial measures [including] a very wide measure of self-government'.²⁵ Salisbury realised that he had tested the patience of his allies too far and as a token of his constructive intentions, introduced a hastily devised Land Bill. The bill was only allowed to pass the Lords having been emasculated, however, leaving the land issue largely unresolved until the Wyndham Act of 1903.

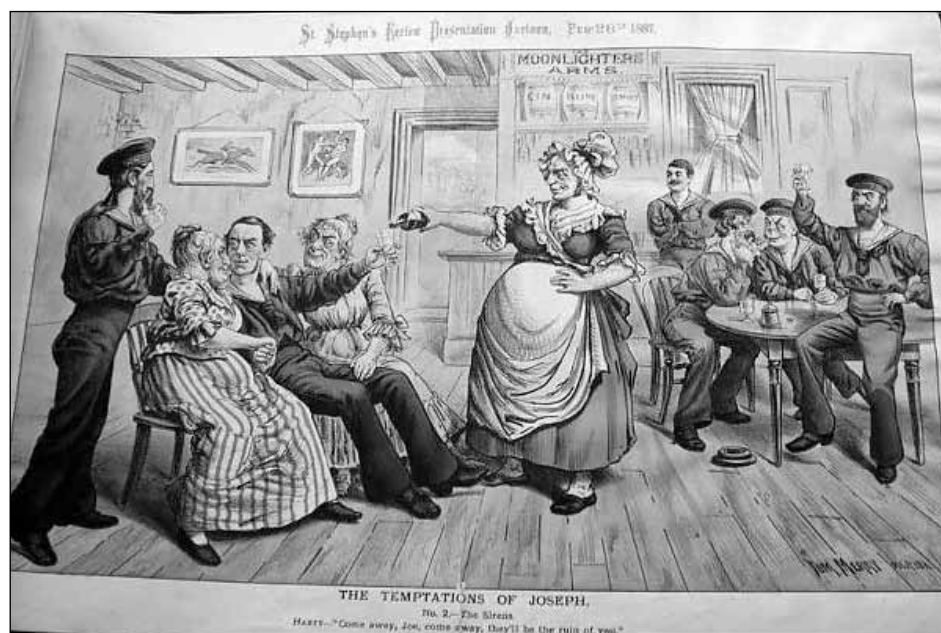
The alliance that emerged between the parties after 1887 was then one of electoral and political convenience, not born out of any natural affinity between the parties. In the subsequent eight years of the alliance, before the two parties finally formed a coalition government in 1895, a number of ideological and operational difficulties therefore challenged a relationship that had been forged by party leaders at Westminster.

Division

Firstly, there were clear political divisions between the parties. When the Irish National League was finally proscribed in 1887, the need to offer a constructive alternative to home rule became paramount.

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A 'DISTINCTION WITHOUT A DIFFERENCE'? THE LIBERAL UNIONIST-CONSERVATIVE ALLIANCE



Chamberlain attempted to preempt the damage this would cause to the Radical Unionists by establishing a national association distinct from Hartington's in London and with a speech in which he suggested the formation of a national progressive party to implement land and local government reform in Ireland. Of course, for Lord Salisbury and Arthur Balfour, there was nothing to gain and much to lose from such a reorganisation. This issue was only resolved by Hartington's *ex cathedra* pronouncement at Greenwich on 5 August, when he announced 'that the time is not yet ripe for such closer union'.²⁶ Constantly frustrated, Chamberlain

Fig. 1: 'Cross-Roads'. Salisbury: 'Hullo! Aren't you fellows going further with me?' (*Punch*, 31 July, 1886)

Fig. 2: 'The temptations of Joseph'. No. 2 The Sirens. Harty: 'Come away, Joe, come away, they'll be the ruin of you'. (*St Stephen's Review* presentation cartoon, 26 February 1887)

tried to put pressure on Hartington, on the ground that 'every day brings me letters from Liberal Unionists in all parts of the country asking me what the issue is and where we still differ from our old colleagues ... I am at my wit's end to know ... what to say to prevent the disappearance of our followers in the country'. It was at this juncture, with his allies deserting him and his constituents questioning his stance on coercion, that Salisbury handed Chamberlain a lifeline, or at least a breathing space. The opportunity to represent Britain in the fisheries dispute between Canada and United States would give Chamberlain the chance to prove his skill as a statesman and

avoid association with the implementation of the Crimes Bill.

Prior to Chamberlain's return, Hartington took the trouble to redefine the Liberal Unionists' position in a speech at Ipswich on 7 March 1888. He finally stated that he could not see how a reconciliation between the two branches of Unionism could be achieved, and therefore (nearly two years after the formation of the first party organisation) conceded that 'we have no alternative before us except to do all that is in our power to constitute a 3rd party'. He made clear that 'while we adhere to the opinions we have always held on the Irish question we have not renounced one single Liberal opinion or Liberal principle'. Finally, to appease Chamberlain, he stated that 'there is room within the Liberal Unionist party ... for the extremest radical as well as for the most moderate whig' and that the Unionist policy was not 'simply one of obstruction and resistance to reform'.²⁷ The tactic appeared to have worked, for Chamberlain at least, as he wrote to Wolmer on his return to England later that month, 'I shall be glad to be able once more to take my place amongst you'.²⁸ The Liberal Unionist party would remain allied with the Tories, but they would remain Liberals as well. [Fig. 3]

Writing in the party newspaper, Ebenezer Le Riche blamed the party's defeats in the 1892 election on the overly close relationship with the Conservatives. 'At meetings the relative merits of the Conservative and Liberal parties were pointed out, the Conservative big drum was beaten, the party colours and sentiments flaunted wholly regardless of the 10 to 40 per cent of radicals who were thereby alienated and whose votes lost us the seat.'²⁹ Study of the work of the chief ideologues of the party, the professor of Law, A. V. Dicey, the scientist and banker, Sir John Lubbock, and the Irish historian, W. E. H. Lecky confirms that Liberal principles were still championed by the Liberal Unionist party long into the twentieth century. What motivated Liberal Unionists was more than a mere 'fear of socialism' and arose from a contrasting interpretation of Liberalism and nationalism to that of Gladstone. It took until 1895 for the Liberal Unionists to find an opportunity to portray themselves

as more authentically Liberal than Rosebery's shambolic government, and a strong case can be made that it was the Liberal Unionists who made the decisive contribution to the Unionist landslide of that year.³⁰

Antagonism

At a local level in Britain in the late nineteenth century, Liberal-Conservative animosities were enforced by religious, social and working allegiances and these proved remarkably resilient, even when the cause of Union and empire offered a bridge between them. The first of many disputes which was to hamper the Unionist alliance until the 'fusion' of 1912, took place at St Ives in June 1887. Here, as in so many of the later cases, the issue of disagreement was disestablishment. Salisbury correctly commented 'I generally find that it is that question that makes the difficulty'.³¹ Local party leaders, accustomed to a simple divide between Liberal and Conservative, became increasingly restive at having to support a local Conservative candidate. Clearly the problem was becoming more serious, particularly as the position of the Liberal Unionists became more fragile as their membership haemorrhaged back to Gladstone in the aftermath of the Crimes Bill. Some, who found their Liberalism under question, chose to remind their electorate of their principles by criticising their Tory allies. Henry James, still supported by the Liberal caucus in Bury, attended a dinner at the Manchester Reform Club and gave a speech attacking the Primrose League.

Between 1887 and 1892, the Liberal Unionist party lost nineteen out of twenty three by-elections, including ones in their stronghold of western Scotland, and the Liberal Unionist Associations began to demand what they perceived as their side of the electoral bargain from the Conservatives. The growing divisions between Conservatives and Liberal Unionists at constituency level finally found public expression in the dispute over the candidate for John Bright's seat in 1889. Chamberlain regarded Birmingham Central as his to allocate, but the local Conservatives, bitter opponents of Chamberlain long before 1886,

saw an opportunity to make trouble. This reflected a distrust of radicalism that was certainly still felt by many local Conservatives. In the North Buckinghamshire by-election in October 1889, one of Evelyn Hubbard's Conservative supporters 'began his speech in the following style. "Chapter XV, verse 7 of the book of common sense - 'never trust a radical.'"³² The rapidly shrinking radical Unionist section of the party felt that the Birmingham seat was a vital test of the party's credibility as an independent force. A hastily organised party conference was held in Birmingham at the end of April with Hartington, Lord Camperdown and the Duke of St Albans all attending. The Conservative candidate withdrew,

Fig. 3: 'Is marriage a failure?' [Letter from a Liberal Unionist]. 'Dear Sir - I was divorced from a Party called Liberal, and am now united in the bonds of matrimony to a Tory Party. I do not like it quite so much as I expected.' Yours, 'Much-married man' (*Fun*, 29 August 1888)

under pressure from Balfour, and John Bright's son won the subsequent by-election with a majority of nearly 3,000.

To ease relations on a local level, Wolmer now urged Liberal Unionist Associations to regulate their relations with their Conservative allies through the creation of joint committees. In West Derbyshire, for example, a Joint Unionist Committee was organised, comprising two members of the Liberal Unionist Association and three members of the Conservative Association. This committee became the chief organising body in the constituency, meeting in 1892 before the election and in 1893 and 1895. Joint Unionist meetings regularly took place within the constituency, and



at every election until 1900 a joint Unionist manifesto was issued by the committee.

The problematic issue of disestablishment resurfaced however with the ill-advised attempt to debate the position of the Welsh church in 1891. On 1 January 1892 a correspondent of *The Times* noted that, although 'there is at the present time complete harmony so far as the leaders are concerned', this was not the case in the rank and file of both parties, amongst whom 'there is a certain amount of jealousy and suspicion'.³³ Shortly after becoming party leader in the Commons, this jealousy was expressed in an area doubly close to Chamberlain himself. At East Worcestershire, the unexpected resignation of Hastings, on a charge of fraud, had led Chamberlain to persuade his eldest son, Austen, to stand as a Liberal Unionist for the constituency that included the Chamberlain home at Highbury. Unfortunately, the chairman of the local Conservative Association, Victor Milward, insisted that Austen Chamberlain must pledge not to vote for disestablishment in order to receive the support of local Conservatives. The Conservatives were eventually faced down when Chamberlain suggested that if pledges against disestablishment were to be asked from Liberal Unionists, pledges in favour of disestablishment might be asked from Conservatives by Liberal Unionists. Following the crisis, Lord Salisbury held the first joint meeting of the Unionist leadership that year, but the issue of disestablishment continued to hinder the relations between the radical Unionists and the moderates and Conservatives.

At Leamington and Warwick, just outside Chamberlain's duchy, the most serious local crisis between the parties of the Unionist Alliance took place shortly before the fall of Rosebery's ministry in 1895.³⁴ Here the Speaker, Arthur Peel, had represented the seat since 1865, and he had been counted among the Liberal Unionists as he had been opposed by the local Conservatives in 1885 (despite the speakership), but not in 1886 or 1892. On the announcement of his retirement in March 1895, the local Conservatives claimed the right to contest the seat. Chamberlain stuck to the terms of the 1889 'compact' and extracted

from the Conservative leader in the commons, Balfour, a letter of support for his chosen candidate, the speaker's son, George.³⁵ Alfred Austin in the *Standard* and Gerorge Curzon in the *New Review*, with at least the tacit consent of Salisbury, took the opportunity to launch attacks on Chamberlain's behaviour and character.³⁶ When a public meeting was held at Leamington Town Hall to launch Peel's campaign, he was humiliated, and Chamberlain hurriedly dropped him and adopted Alfred Lyttleton, the sporting hero and a friend of Balfour's, as a compromise candidate acceptable to the local Conservatives.³⁷

The crisis of Hythe is less well-known. Sir Edward Watkin, MP for Hythe, was seriously ill in 1894 and looked unlikely to stand again, and the Liberal Unionist chief agent, John Boraston, complained that the local Conservative leader had forced their candidate forward against the wishes of the local Liberal Unionists. When Devonshire approached Salisbury, the Conservative leader was a little taken aback. 'Mr Boraston's information to you is in hopeless disagreement with the information which has been furnished to me by Douglas.'³⁸ As far as Salisbury was concerned Bevan Edwards, the chairman of the Hythe Conservative Association, was now adopted as the Unionist candidate for Hythe. The rival Liberal Unionist was ordered to withdraw his candidature once a Unionist coalition Cabinet had been formed, and Edwards won the seat at the general election.

With the concatenation of the Hythe, Leamington and Birmingham disputes, it seemed a genuine Unionist crisis was underway, and Boraston was keen to encourage Chamberlain's sense of grievance. He sent Chamberlain a letter from the honorary secretary of a northern Association. 'There is an intensely strong feeling as to the questions which have arisen at Hythe and Leamington. If the matter is not settled soon and in our favour you may rest assured that a good many Liberal Unionists will not stir one peg at the next General Election.'³⁹ Boraston continued to worry Chamberlain by telling him of the experiences of Liberal Unionists in Barnstaple and Tavistock where the local Liberal

Unionists were 'sour'd at the mutinous spirit that the Conservatives are showing'.⁴⁰ These quickly receded once the election campaign of 1895 was under way, but the antipathy between certain Unionist Associations continued to trouble the alliance even when the central Associations merged in 1912. The Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association held aloof and refused to amalgamate until January 1918.

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Bias

The parties' managers and organisers, imbued with far greater authority since the expansion of the franchise in 1884, were charged with enforcing a Westminster electoral pact in the constituencies and they too proved less than enthusiastic in working harmoniously with those who had previously been their bitterest enemies. After the 1886 election, in which there were remarkably few disagreements over candidatures, disputes over the allocations of seats emerged, and the Conservatives' managers were clearly intent on serving the interests of their own party. In the first dispute at St Ives, Hartington wrote to Salisbury complaining about the behaviour of the Conservative chief agent, Richard Middleton. Middleton thought little of his new allies, observing in mid-1887, 'without the Conservative party ... no Liberal Unionist can secure his seat in any future election'.⁴¹ The actions of the *Birmingham Gazette* in provoking the crises in Birmingham in 1889 look particularly significant when one considers that Middleton was chairman of the syndicate that controlled the *Gazette*, a newspaper which was the rival of the pro-Chamberlain *Birmingham Post*. When Middleton was finally forced to disown Randolph Churchill's attempt to contest the seat and order the Birmingham Conservatives to back down, for the sake of future relations, the dispute was presented as merely the work of the ill informed and malicious.

In the wake of the crisis, however, there was now a need to define exactly what the relationship between the two Unionist parties should be and to turn the verbal 'compact' of 1886 into a more formal document. Hartington was forced to ask Wolmer, the newly appointed party whip, whether

any agreement existed in writing. It clearly did not and Salisbury only reluctantly agreed to extend the agreement to include the crucial issue of candidate vacancies. Three heads were agreed so as to avoid any repetition of the Central Birmingham dispute. It is notable that in the event of dispute over the choice of candidate, the party leaders in the Commons, W. H. Smith and Hartington, would be consulted, not the party managers, who were usually responsible for the selection of candidates. Although not explicit, it is possible to imagine that the Liberal Unionists now distrusted Middleton to act in a disinterested fashion, especially where West Midland seats were concerned.

Despite this document, realpolitik meant that the choice of candidate was largely determined by Salisbury, no doubt advised by Akers-Douglas and Middleton to give as little away as possible. In Cambridge in 1892, where there was a strong Liberal Unionist presence among academics, Hartington tried to have Albert Grey adopted for the university and Montagu Crackenthorpe adopted for the city constituency. Despite the aristocratic lineage of the former and the strongly anti-socialist beliefs of the latter, Salisbury refused to give way. In 1892, when the Liberal Unionists lost 37 per cent of their parliamentary strength overall, while the Conservatives lost only 19 per cent of theirs, Chamberlain complained bitterly to Heneage, 'I am afraid we get put off with all the hopeless seats and in this way we are slowly edged out of existence as a separate party'.⁴²

The impact of the 1892 general election results distinctly altered the relationship between the two parties. From Salisbury's perspective the result was perhaps as good as he might have expected. His party was in need of a rest after the unusual experience of minority administration for seven years. The Conservative dominance of the House of Lords and the small size of the Gladstonian majority (dependent on Irish votes) told Salisbury that a second Home Rule Bill could be successfully resisted and that any Liberal administration was likely to be short-lived. The dramatic decline of the Liberal Unionists now raised the prospect of a

The precise nature of the legislative programme that the alliance wished to see enacted presented the most serious challenge, especially with such contrast in ideological heritage of the parties.

Conservative majority in a future election, rather than a Unionist one and this appeared to cause little concern to the Conservative managers. As this likelihood drew nearer in early 1895, the malicious influence of Akers–Douglas and Middleton on the alliance became apparent in the Hythe and Leamington disputes. At Hythe, adjacent to Akers-Douglas' Kentish fiefdom, the Conservative chief whip was brazenly partisan. Devonshire wrote to Chamberlain complaining that 'A. Douglas seems to have been acting in a very extraordinary manner'.⁴³ Chamberlain was clearly concerned about the behaviour of the Conservative whip, as he now began to keep detailed notes of Akers-Douglas' role in the crisis.

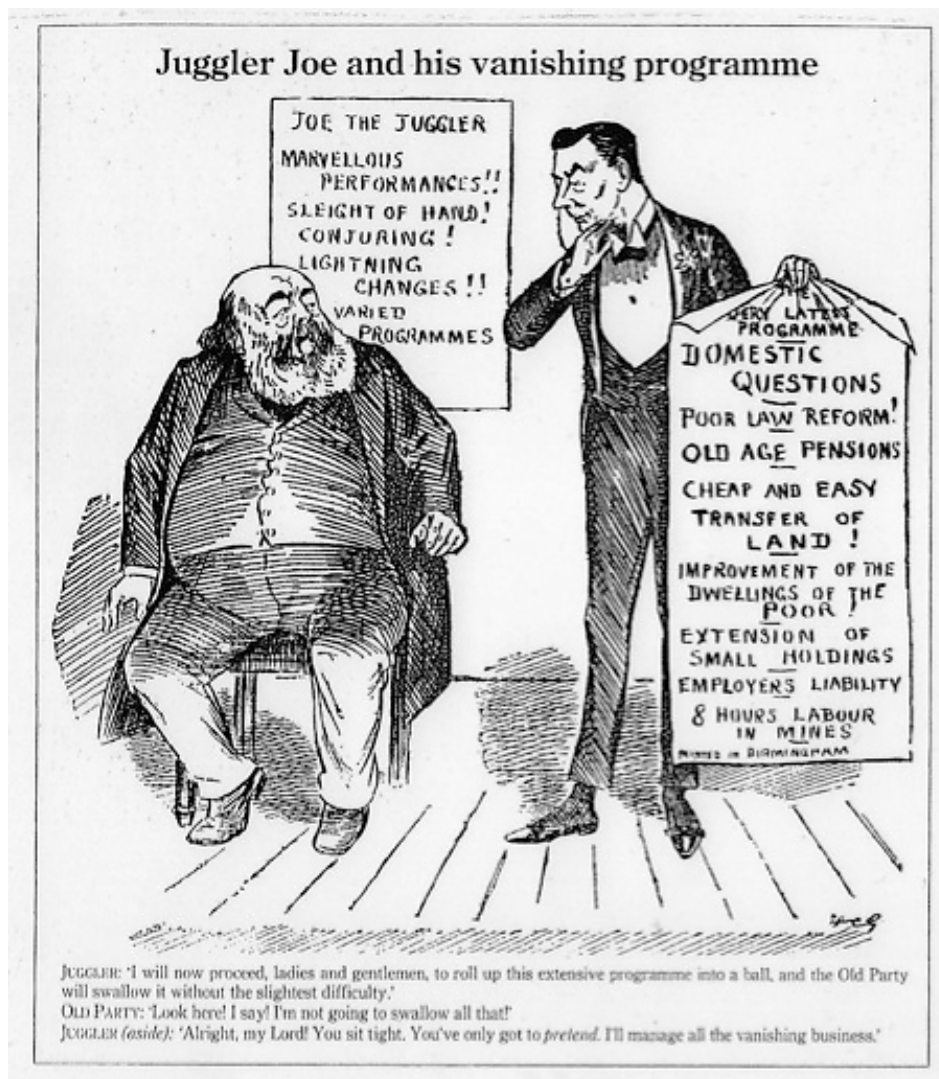
Middleton's role in stirring up the Conservatives in Leamington was revealed in my article on the dispute,⁴⁴ and he also played a role in stiffening Conservative resolve at Hythe. Less well known is that a second dispute arose at his behest in Central Birmingham in July 1895 when Lord Charles Beresford offered himself as a Conservative candidate, once Albert Bright's intention to stand down became public. It was reported to Chamberlain that Middleton took a keen interest in the affairs of Birmingham, and Powell Williams was in no doubt that the crisis was once again of Middleton's doing, but all he could suggest was that Bright should fight the general election and then resign. In the end, a compromise Liberal Unionist candidate was selected, to demonstrate Chamberlain's willingness to meet the Conservatives' concerns about the proposed candidate, Grosvenor Lee. Beresford was forced to withdraw his candidature after he came under pressure from Salisbury, who was, as at Leamington, forced to intervene to undo his principal agent's mischief.

Policy differences

The precise nature of the legislative programme that the alliance wished to see enacted presented the most serious challenge, especially with such contrast in ideological heritage of the parties. Without a document of agreed policy, the struggle for influence continually unsettled the alliance. The Liberal Unionist party could point to two solidly

liberal achievements in the period, with the introduction of free elementary education and the content of the 1888 Local Government Act, both of which Chamberlain had demanded in the 'unauthorised programme' three years earlier, but there was scant achievement in Ireland and friction over the Church. Hartington knew that Chamberlain could only demand so much, as 'he knows too well that the Gladstonians hate him too much ever to take him back again'.⁴⁵ When Hartington succeeded to the Dukedom of Devonshire at the end of 1891 however, the party took a gamble, appointing Chamberlain as leader in the Commons, in the hope of restraining his radical instincts, whilst retaining his undoubted electoral appeal. At a meeting to endorse his leadership at Devonshire House on 8 February 1892, rather than avoiding the difficult issue of disestablishment, Chamberlain made his position clear. 'I stated my intention of continuing to support by vote, and in any other way that seemed fitting, the disestablishment of the State church'.⁴⁶

Chamberlain attempted to exploit his association with radicalism in the few months before the election in 1892, by returning to the issue of social reform that had proved so successful at the Aston by-election the previous year. Bolstered by the increase in the majorities of the six Liberal Unionist seats in Birmingham and the four in neighbouring areas in 1892, he stepped up his attempts to persuade his party and the Tories to accept a programme of social reform, writing to James, 'our Unionist programme of the last 5 years is nearly exhausted ... If we attempt to win on a policy of negation, the fate of the moderates on the LCC will be ours'.⁴⁷ In November 1892 Chamberlain published an article, 'The Labour Question' in the *Nineteenth Century*, advocating an increasingly collectivist approach from the Unionists in order to prevent the emergence of class-based politics, which the election of Kier Hardie seemed to presage. Despite the clear dislike for collectivism that many Liberal Unionist had previously voiced, the party, desperate to avoid political oblivion, fell into line behind their leader in the Commons. Installed as chief organiser by Chamberlain, Joseph Powell Williams had the



party's publicity department print posters, pamphlets and even song-books endorsing social reform. Speakers operating the Union Jack vans took Chamberlain's message throughout the country and the more radical party Associations such as that of the West of Scotland filled the local press with endorsements. Even Devonshire was eventually persuaded to support it (cautiously) as the election of 1895 drew near.

At first the reaction from the Conservatives was lukewarm. Although Balfour expressed his sympathy in a speech at Sheffield in December, he was unwilling to commit to specific policies. After Gladstone's retirement, Rosebery had signalled a new direction for the party with the introduction of an Employers' Liability Bill in 1893, swiftly followed by the Mines Eight Hours Bill. Chamberlain firstly strove to distance his programme from that of the Liberals, accusing them of issuing 'appeals to class

Fig. 4: 'Juggler Joe and his vanishing programme' (*Westminster Gazette*, 9 July 1895)

prejudice'.⁴⁸ This could not disguise the fact that Rosebery was attempting to occupy the same collectivist ground as the Liberal Unionists and that the actions of the Lords in blocking these reforms would undermine Chamberlain's own programme. When Rosebery's Employers' Liability Act was thrown out by the upper house, Powell Williams warned Wolmer of the consequences. 'The effect of the loss of the Bill on the north is very bad indeed ... This is not an opinion. I can give you proof.'⁴⁹ Powell Williams, now the party's chief manager, encouraged local Associations in the north of England, the West of Scotland, Ulster and Cornwall to pledge their support for a sustained campaign of Unionist reform. Although criticised in the Tory press continuously, the campaign was supported by such solidly liberal figures as Millicent Fawcett, a prime mover in the Women's Liberal Unionist Association.

When, after the Second Home Rule Bill, Chamberlain demanded an alternative Unionist reform programme at Bradford on 2 June 1894, Balfour responded more positively, increasingly convinced by Chamberlain's argument that such pledges were necessary for the Unionists to break through in the north and in Wales. By the time Chamberlain spoke to his constituents in West Birmingham in October, as well as an extension to the Artisans' Dwellings Act, a House Purchase Act, employers' liability and alien immigration, there was a call to enact temperance reform and a tribunal of industrial arbitration. In his ongoing attempt to win Salisbury's approval, the restriction of labour hours was explicitly limited to miners and shopkeepers (therefore excluding domestic servants and agricultural labourers as Salisbury and his party wanted). As for old age pensions, Chamberlain now stated that 'I do not propose to give everyone a pension as a matter of right; I propose to help the working classes to help themselves.'⁵⁰ The first response from Hatfield was eventually made public in a speech at Edinburgh at the end of October. Salisbury admitted that he had sympathy for Chamberlain's 'general objectives' but claimed to have no knowledge of the detailed programme that the Liberal Unionists were preparing. [Fig. 4]

By contrast, Balfour appeared ever more eager to endorse Chamberlain's proposals wholeheartedly, claiming in November that the Unionists would have 'a monopoly of [social] legislation'. Buoyed by this, Chamberlain suddenly ceased his caution, perhaps realising that he would never win over Salisbury and began to make a number of wild promises to the electorate. Speaking at Heywood in Lancashire later that month, he made the choice for working class voters clear.

You may as I have said, try to disestablish the Welsh church, or you may, on the other hand, try to become the owners of your own houses. You may attempt to pass an Irish Land Bill, or you may attempt to get old age pensions for yourselves.⁵¹

Balfour continued to encourage Chamberlain's campaign during a speech in January 1895 at



Manchester in which he claimed that social reform came second to the maintenance of the Union in the Alliance's priorities. Emboldened by this, Chamberlain became even more open in his programme, even referring to social issues as 'the primary policy' in his response to the Queen's Speech in the Commons in February.⁵²

The campaign to convince the Conservative leadership to accept Chamberlain's programme was terminated however by the local crises at Hythe, Leamington and Birmingham which broke out in spring 1895 as the prospect of election victory drew close. Having realised that he was in no position to make political demands after the Leamington debacle, Chamberlain was faced with an opportunity to distance himself from his own programme when it received the support of Mrs Fawcett, who spoke at a meeting of the Metropolitan Liberal Unionist Federation in May and who proposed a motion urging the party leadership to press forward measures of social reform. Chamberlain, chastened by his treatment by the Conservative press, failed to respond to Mrs Fawcett's invitation and instead spoke of his priority as 'the expansion of the empire'. On the same day, Salisbury spoke at Bradford, making it clear that 'nothing would induce me to adopt the socialistic [sic] remedies', but he acknowledged, 'there is an evil'.⁵³ When Chamberlain issued his personal

manifesto, although he claimed that 'Unionist leaders are absolutely agreed in their determination ... to devote their principal attention to a policy of constructive social reform', he no longer enunciated specific policies.⁵⁴ [Fig. 5] It cannot be denied, however, that support for elements of the social programme was widespread among Liberal voters and the party's achievement of seventy seats, including nine in the north of England and one in Wales, owed much to popular expectation of substantial reform.

With the election over, Salisbury made it clear that 'the condition of England' would not be eagerly confronted under his premiership. The Queen's Speech of August 1895 contained no mention of domestic reform at all, and he did nothing to prevent an amendment to the speech asking for measures to address unemployment from being defeated by 211 votes to 79. Speaking at Brighton in November, he made his caution clear, 'however much you may desire to benefit your neighbour, you do not benefit him by taking money out of the pockets of another man.' In contrast to Chamberlain, he promised that 'the sufferings under which agriculture is groaning are the first evils to which we must apply ourselves'.⁵⁵ It is difficult to dissent from David Steele's conclusion that unlike Gladstone and Devonshire, Salisbury had successfully tamed Chamberlain.⁵⁶ Chamberlain at the colonial office was no longer the

Fig. 5: 'On the altar of the coalition' (*Westminster Gazette*, 5 July 1895)

Fig. 6: 'The cold water cure' (*Westminster Gazette*, 21 September 1895)

Liberal Unionist spokesman on this issue and it was left to an equally quiescent Devonshire, as Lord President, to attend a conference on the Poor Law at Derby in September 1895, where he stated that 'a great proportion of even the industrious aged poor must be dependent for their support ... [on] the Poor Law'.⁵⁷ [Fig. 6] Chamberlain's advocacy of social reform for the common good would only be resurrected by the united party in the changed circumstances of the inter-war years, when it proved to be a valuable asset for Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain in offering an alternative to the Labour party's collectivist programme.

Conclusion

The nine years of political manoeuvring, between 1886 and 1895, demonstrated the dangers of collaborating with the Conservatives. In a warning that Nick Clegg might heed, Arthur Pease, who had stayed loyal to Gladstone, gave his view of the compromises that the Liberal Unionists had had to make in these years:

I have often thought of a story I was told as a child of a Russian family flying before a pack of wolves, in their sledge with four horses. To save themselves they tried sacrificing one horse, then



another, each victim relieving them for a short time from a terrible fate, and in their desperation finally sacrificing their children, and all in vain ... [Liberal] principles, their promises ... all had to be thrown away to defeat the policy of conciliation and justice.⁵⁸

In truth, some Liberal Unionists remained as committed to policies such as temperance, non-denominational education, state support for the poor, further franchise reform and disestablishment as they had been in 1885. Of course, these policies posed a particular threat to the party of the church, the farmer and the businessman – the Conservatives – and were, as a result, a significant stumbling block in the Unionist alliance. What emerged instead, was a commitment to the rule of law, a defence of the benefits of the Union and the historic mission of the British empire. The persistence of political sectarianism among party managers and among many local activists that was revealed by the events in Hythe, Leamington and Birmingham, led to the strategic decision to create a coalition immediately prior to the 1895 election. It was also a political decision on Chamberlain's part, to use the imperial mission between 1895 and 1903 to finally try to bring a genuine affinity to the two wings of unionism. The party's survival was thus assured into the twentieth century, but eventual fusion with the Conservatives could only be avoided with the active cultivation of the local party's separate identity by the leadership, even as they entered a Unionist coalition Cabinet. That this support was not forthcoming is clear from the party records after 1895, which show little opposition to Middleton's appropriation of former Liberal Unionist constituencies, at least outside the area controlled by the West of Scotland regional Association. Some radicals and committed Liberals such as T. W. Russell and Leonard Courtney refused to go along with this and grumbled, resigned or returned to the Liberal Party, but Chamberlain no longer needed the Liberal Unionists as much as he needed to prove his acceptability to the Tories.

By 1902 despite being opposed to those clauses that provided ratepayer funding for denominational

'To be used as the ladder up which Joe climbs into a Conservative Government, waving aloft his banner of shoddy reform then to be thrown ignominiously aside. A fit ending for a company of prigs!'

schools in the Education Bill, he defended the Cabinet's decision in a series of ill-tempered meetings in Birmingham.⁵⁹ Chamberlain's great achievement between 1886 and 1902 had been in securing the affection of a substantial body of Nonconformist Liberals though the agency of bodies such as the Nonconformist Unionist Association. Now, as he wrote to Devonshire, 'our best friends are leaving us by scores and hundreds never to return.'⁶⁰ This spread nationally until a major protest meeting was held at Queen's Hall, London on 10 June, where Nonconformist Unionists were described as those 'who gave their votes to the betrayal of their coreligionists'.⁶¹ Paul Readman has suggested that the Education Bill was valuable ammunition in the Liberal party's post-war attempt to regain ownership of liberal, patriotic constitutionalism, in the face of the (alleged) denominational, sectarian and anti-democratic bill.⁶² At the time, Edward Porritt considered that 'much of the disappearance of Liberal Unionism is traceable to the Education Act of 1902.'⁶³

Chamberlain was therefore desperate to reassert his Radical credentials, and the tariff reform campaign, with its initial promises of social reform, certainly allowed him to consolidate his support in Birmingham.⁶⁴ To take a more sympathetic view, the new policy can be seen as consistent with all Chamberlain's actions since 1886. Tariff reform was another attempt to promote the interests of the nation above those of particular classes or national groups, just like the defence of the Union in 1886 and 1893, and the promotion of 'constructive unionism' in his social programme of 1892–1895. The attempt to fuse patriotism with an attack on 'the condition of England' had motivated his negotiations with Lord Randolph Churchill in the mid-1880s and his wooing of Balfour after 1891 and helps to explain his enormous popularity in the Midlands.⁶⁵ It also provided an ideological glue to bind the two Unionist parties together as the Conservative party had a long-standing protectionist instinct that even Salisbury had occasionally indulged. To Liberals like Arthur Elliot, Henry James and Sir John Lubbock (now Lord Avebury) the

abandonment of the principle of free trade, and of the legacy of Cobden and Bright, was one pill they would not swallow under any circumstances. Between 1903 and 1906, eight Liberal Unionist free trade MPs left the party and rejoined the Liberals.⁶⁶ James, in common with the remaining Liberal Unionist free traders, refused to campaign for Balfour and Chamberlain:

We see the Unionist flag held aloft, but beneath it Protectionist forces are gathered. We free traders have a right to say these are not our friends, we will not fight on their side.⁶⁷

The former governor of Ceylon, West Ridgeway, wrote an article on the death of the Liberal Unionist party in which he claimed that the party had been 'strangled by its own parent'.⁶⁸ Beatrice Webb noted the effect her former sweetheart had had upon 'the poor, dear Liberal Unionists – that little company of upright, narrowly enlightened, well bred men.'

To be used as the ladder up which Joe climbs into a Conservative Government, waving aloft his banner of shoddy reform then to be thrown ignominiously aside. A fit ending for a company of prigs!⁶⁹

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