

Sir Jerom Murch and the 'civic gospel' in Victorian Bath

The defeat of the Conservative Party Chairman and Member of Parliament for Bath, Chris Patten, in the 1992 general election was a surprise to many people in the country at the time. The victory of the Liberal Democrat, Don Foster, was, in addition to being a personal triumph over a formidable opponent, a reaffirmation of Liberal strength in the city. While the Conservatives held sway in Bath for most of the twentieth century, the Liberal Party was dominant there for the greater part of the Victorian period. From the time of the Great Reform Act in 1832 and of municipal reform in 1835, Bath increased its constituency from thirty to 3,000 voters, with a quarter drawn from the working class. The city had two MPs, often one Conservative and one Liberal, and forty-two councillors, six in each of the seven wards. Liberal domination of the Town Council was sustained not merely through a majority of council seats, but also through partisan use of the aldermanic system.

By the 1830s, Bath was no longer the resort of the fashionable elite who had departed to Brighton and Biarritz, and the city was cultivating a new genteel image to attract middle-class visitors and residents in a bid to restore its fortunes. Bath had grown remarkably during the eighteenth century, from 3,000 to 33,000 inhabitants, when it became the premier resort in Europe. By 1841, the city had 54,000 people and shared with other Victorian cities a host of social problems: poverty, crime and, most embarrassing for a health resort, epidemic diseases such as cholera and typhoid in 1832 and 1849. An obvious tension existed between the urge to lay on amenities to attract visitors and the urgent need to address such problems as the inadequate sanitary provision in the city.¹

Enter Jerom Murch (1807–95), a descendant of a Huguenot family that settled in England in the seventeenth century and of one of 2,000 nonconformist ministers ejected from the Church of England in 1662.

Murch was educated at University College London. He spent his early career as a Unitarian minister in Norfolk before settling in Bath in 1833, where he was appointed minister of Trim Street Chapel in a poor part of the city. He became a supporter of the Radical MP J.A. Roebuck, but lacked his enthusiasm for invective, and on Roebuck's defeat by the Tory Lord Ashley in 1847, was singled out as chief amongst his betrayers. He combined a preacher's oratorical skills with a politician's ability to reach agreement in smoke-filled rooms.

Murch took a great interest in educational and philanthropic institutions and established a political presence through assiduous networking. His marriage to Anne Meadows brought him in due course £80,000, which enabled him to sustain a political career that extended over sixty years in Bath. He had a long association with the Bath Board of Guardians, the Bath Literary and Philosophical Association, the Bath Mineral Water Hospital, the Theatre Royal Company and the Grand Pump Room Hotel Company, and was involved in improvements to Victoria Park and the restoration of Bath Abbey. In total, these organisations had the merit of extending across class, political and religious allegiances. Murch built a broad political base through personal contacts.

He became a member of the Town Council in 1862 and was elected Mayor of Bath in 1863 and again in 1864. In all he was mayor on seven occasions,

twice in successive years, stood for Parliament unsuccessfully as a Gladstonian Liberal in 1873, and at the end of a distinguished career he was knighted. He was the author of several works of religious history and wrote about Bath's role in relation to art, science, literature and education.² If there was one man who could be said to be the leading figure of Victorian Bath, it was assuredly Jerom Murch.

For all his successful ventures, Murch's political philosophy in action was best represented by one major failure in his municipal career – his personal defeat over the Corporation Water question. Murch's politics were grounded in that dissenting tradition that held a moral mission to be the impelling force of politics. Like fellow dissenters George Dawson, and later Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham, Murch saw the potential for local councils to raise the moral conditions of the people. It was certainly a paternalistic philosophy. Enlightened leaders proclaimed that what was good for the people was equally good for the commercial interests of the city. The rhetoric of what became known as the 'civic gospel' sought to cut across class lines and vested and parochial interests, and to unite all citizens in a common purpose, so that they would all gain from the increased prosperity of the city.

The civic gospel was founded on a belief in a common moral purpose that incorporated the responsibilities of the social elite and the needs of the poorest in society, and reconciled them through the agency of municipal government. Yet in Bath, a city seen as a place where social harmony characterised class relationships, the civic gospel failed to override the fragmented social structure that so often thwarted proposed improvement measures during the 1860s. One of the obstacles to achieving support for improvement measures, such as in the city's water supply, was the continuation of old powers for each of the city parishes. This state of affairs perpetuated a narrow, parochial mentality at the expense of schemes for the improvement of the whole city.

A fear of adding a burden to the rates limited the progress of public health



Sir Jerom Murch: bronze bust by Sir Thomas Brock RA, presented by the citizens of Bath to the corporation in 1895.

provision. The city's response to the Public Health Act promised more than was delivered when the Bath City Act was passed in 1851. The corporation became the local board of health, establishing its own powerful subcommittee, the City Act Committee, but most of its powers, such as the right to appoint a Medical Officer of Health (MOH), and to register slaughterhouses, were not invoked directly. It was not until 1864, under the leadership of Murch, that the city began a civic programme of improvement that prompted the revival of the city's prosperity but also provided a comprehensive corporation water supply, the appointment of a qualified MOH, extensive street improvements, the building of the Grand Pump Room Hotel, and the acquisition of the Royal Victoria Park. Over the next fifteen years, the civic gospel was increasingly in evidence in Bath, with the corporation endeavouring to provide a unity of purpose, investing in greater amenities to achieve prosperity for all its citizens.

But beneath the lofty tone of moral improvement, sectional, class and parochial interests set limits on what the corporation could achieve.³

By the 1860s, the increased demand for water once more raised the issue of improving the supply. Between 1835 and 1861, the number of water tenants had risen from 2,381 to 4,073 and average supply per head per day had risen from six gallons to thirteen, although a sufficiency was reckoned to be twenty-five gallons. Additional sources of supply were needed to meet the growing demand for water. Amidst widespread dissatisfaction at the shortage of water, especially in the dry summers of 1864 and 1865, the council prepared a major scheme to extend the municipal water supply. The visit of the British Association to Bath added a new sense of urgency. The authorities were clearly anxious that nothing should impair Bath's reputation as a health resort. A letter from 'Civis' to the *Bath Chronicle* poked fun at the council's past neglect:



Bath: the eighteenth-century Guildhall with late Victorian extension, one of the monuments to the work of Jerom Murch.

It is quite delightful to see the state of trepidation into which our complacent Corporation has been thrown by the thoughts of the approaching visit of the British Association. It reminds one strongly of boys at school who have been idle, and are at last frightened at the near prospect of a sound whipping ... Let us look at the Bath Railway Station, the public flies and carriages, the pavements, the botched Market, and many other things, and ask ourselves how these will look in the eyes of travelled men – whether they are as they ought to be in 1864. Let us no longer live upon a reputation made for us sixty or eighty years ago, and almost if not quite worn out, but let us set about in right earnest to earn one for ourselves worthy of the present day.⁴

As pressure for public health improvements grew, investigation revealed new evidence of inadequate sanitary provision and a deficient water supply. An improvement scheme was duly prepared by Murch and submitted to the council. The proposal failed to secure a majority and was sent for approval to a public meeting in the Guildhall in April 1866. In a stormy confrontation the divisions within the council and amongst the public were all too evident. Murch and his colleagues were defeated.

The central objection was the scheme's estimated cost of £85,000,

which alarmed both the wealthy residents of Lansdown and the petty shopkeepers of the city. Lansdown had its own private water supply and its residents were unwilling to pay additional rates without receiving any benefit themselves. The shopkeepers feared that an increase in rates would threaten their business interests. The poor, identified as the main beneficiaries of the scheme in receiving a water supply for the first time, were largely unrepresented in the council.

After the defeat of the Water Bill in 1866 Murch acknowledged the strength of opposition but still proclaimed his faith in a civic gospel of improvement:

With all my heart, sir, I trust that future efforts may be made, and that in every respect they may succeed. For I do not abate one jot of the principle with which I started – that no greater duty devolves on those in power than that of seeing the city well supplied with water. And of this who can doubt, that, although Bath may, for reasons seeming good to her, delay the great work, she will ere long do it? She will not let heathen cities in ancient times put her to shame; she will remember what her neighbour Bristol is doing, how Glasgow has gone to Loch Katrine for water, and how London will probably go to the mountains of Wales; she will grumble

a little more, and then trusting that her debts will be diminished, and her coffers replenished, she will enable some future Mayor to boast that every house in the beautiful city over which he reigns – every house, even the poorest – has its stream of pure and healthy water.⁵

Despite the ratepayers' rejection of the scheme, the impetus for reform was maintained. Murch withdrew from the campaign but a new champion arose in the figure of Samuel Sneade Brown, the self-styled scourge of the council on sanitary matters. In a series of blistering pamphlets written in 1867, Brown denounced the neglect of public health provision in Bath.⁶ His impact on public opinion was strengthened with the appointment of Bath's first MOH, Dr. C. S. Barter in 1866, who investigated and reported on the sanitary condition of the city in 1867 and 1868. His findings, published in 1869, confirmed Brown's previous indictment of past neglect. He naturally supported the campaign to increase the water supply, making the telling point that every individual in Manchester had 'more than ten times the quantity of water' than the citizens of Bath.⁷

In 1870, after a decade of discussions, a fairly comprehensive municipal water supply was established in Bath. Following the 1870 Act, virtually all the citizens of Bath enjoyed the benefits of a good water supply. By 1878, 7,712 houses and 50,128 inhabitants were supplied with a daily average approaching thirty gallons per head. A major advance had been accomplished in both the quantity and quality of water.

The key point about the events and debates on the water question is the unpredictability of the situation. Council policy was not frustrated merely by the permanent opposition of a few vested interests. Instead, events were influenced by chance happenings, by individual personalities, and by the volatility of the public mood. It was the shifting alliances among the elected councillors, and the changing perception of the voters in Bath that dictated the defeat of the council water scheme in 1866 and the passing of the Bath Waterworks Act in 1870. The

latter was a compromise reached as a result of the conflicts of the 1860s. Local landowner Mr. Gore-Langton, of Newton St. Loe, had demanded £10,000 in 1866 for seven acres of land on which the vital spring water needed to supply Bath was located. This level of compensation was seen as outrageous by the citizens of Bath and stoked up class resentment against the scheme itself.

The hostile mood against the council was compounded by a spirited campaign for extending the parliamentary franchise which chose as its target Liberal leaders, such as Murch, who were seen as unwilling to include working men within the party organisation. In the different climate of opinion after Murch's departure and Sneade Brown's campaign, Gore-Langton had to settle for £2,500 compensation. Brown's investigations found that the private water supplied to Lansdown was suspect and in 1870 he was able to turn the support of the wealthy Lansdown lobby, who had successfully opposed the 1866 plans, in favour of the Corporation scheme. Ironically, suburban Lansdown was the least well-served part of the city for some time to come.⁸

Murch came back for several more stints as mayor and his last political act was to steer through council the extensions to the Guildhall in the 1890s. There were many fine obituary notices following his death in 1895. In 1896 the *Bath Year Book* observed that 'almost every local institution which could claim to exist for the public good had to place on record its grateful recognition of services which he had rendered'.⁹ He also left a legacy to build a municipal art gallery, a cause he had advocated for many years prior to his death.

Proposals for a gallery revived an ongoing debate over the question of a municipal lending library. The acquisition of cultural amenities such as libraries gave expression to civic pride, but also encompassed the wider issue of the city's economic prosperity. Some councillors argued that they were a sound investment, pulling in potential visitors and new residents. Others believed that any rise in the

rates would only antagonise existing ratepayers and deter prospective incomers. The art gallery was eventually commissioned as a memorial to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, in conjunction with a reference library which would house the Guildhall collection of local books. The total cost was met by the legacies of Murch and Mrs. Roxborough, supplemented by additional subscriptions from prominent citizens and residents. This 'municipal charity' saved on the rates and provided an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to the civic good through publicly acknowledged donations.

The spirit of civic union was popularised by leading citizens and clergymen such as the rector of Bath, who asserted in a speech of 1890: 'We are learning to set aside our differences, to throw away the scum of religious dislike and partisan jealousy and hatred ... valuing our fellow citizens only as they live together in amity and peace, and are fellow labourers in the cause of the civic good.'¹⁰

The concept of the civic good in the 1890s was the successor to the civic gospel of the 1860s. That this kind of politics endured was testimony to the need to overcome the protracted wrangles in the council chamber and to attempt to reconcile the conflicting interests of all sections of society beyond the Guildhall. Beneath the veneer of social harmony in genteel Bath, class and sectional interests competed with the moral purpose of Jerom Murch and the civic gospel. Today, local authorities

are heavily dependent on the financial support and political direction of central government, which limits the entrepreneurial activity of civic leaders. Yet the civic gospel, stripped of its moral earnestness, has certain echoes of modern 'third way' politics, combining business enterprise with social amelioration. While the state of public services dominates national politics, in the regeneration of cities such as Birmingham and Manchester there is an historical continuity with the ideas of Jerom Murch and Victorian Bath.

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- 1 For a more detailed view, see G.P. Davis, 'Image and Reality in a Victorian provincial city: a working class area of Bath, 1830–1900', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bath (1981), ch. 8, pp. 503–92.
- 2 *Liberal Leaders of Somerset*, A. M. Press (1890), pp. 125–28.
- 3 Alex Kolaczowski, 'Jerom Murch and Bath Politics, 1833–1879', in *Bath History*, vol VI (1996), pp. 155–73.
- 4 *Bath Chronicle*, 11 August 1864.
- 5 Letter from J. Murch, *Bath Chronicle*, 26 April 1866.
- 6 S. Sneade Brown, *The Wants of Bath* (1867); *How We are Governed* (1867); *What can be done* (1867).
- 7 C. S. Barter, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the City and Borough of Bath during the years 1867 and 1868* (1869), p. 14.
- 8 Rev. CM. Shickle, authorship attributed, *History of the Bath Waterworks*, published by order of the Council, Bath (1878).
- 9 *Bath Yearbook*, 1896.
- 10 *Bath Chronicle*, 13 December 1890.

Bath: Bathforum House, the original design for the Grand Pump Room Hotel by Wilson and Willcox, 1865.

