

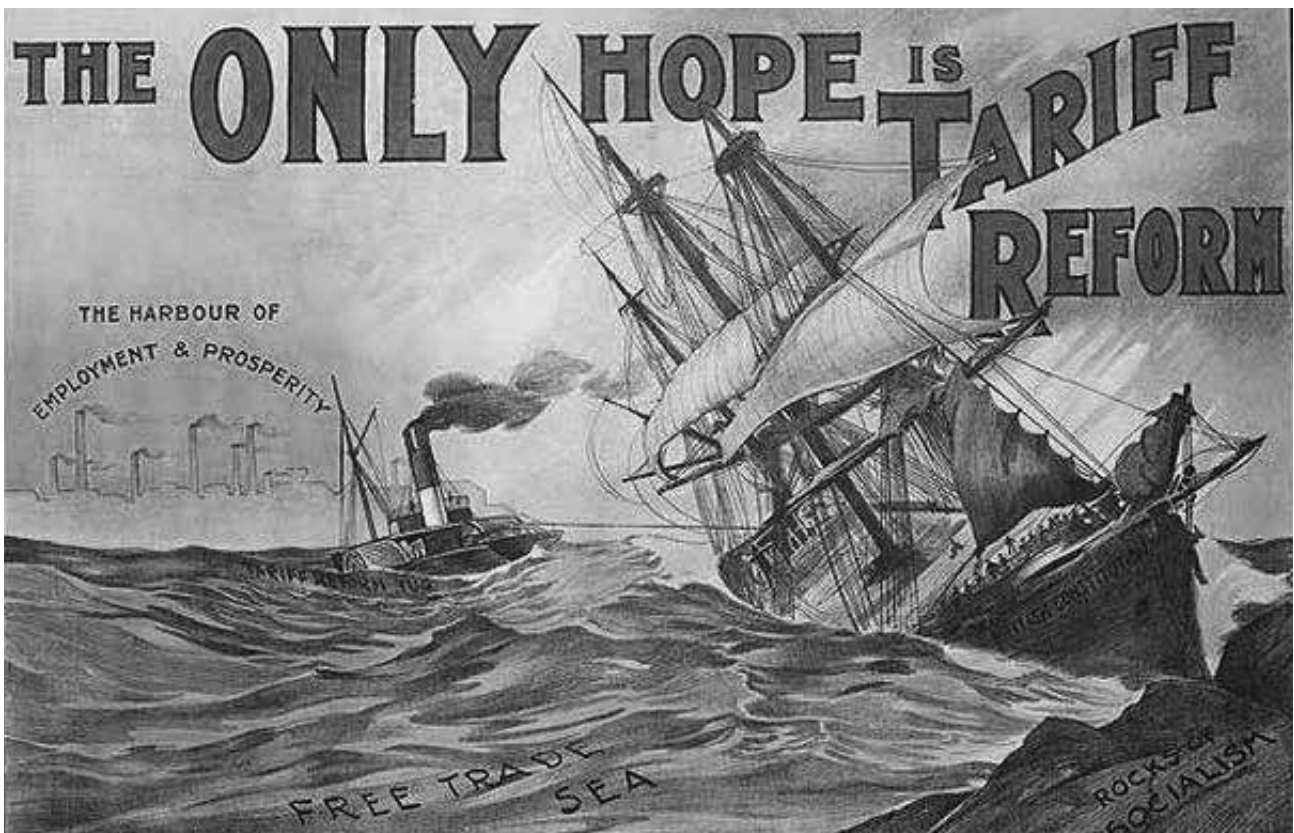
What role did attitudes to Empire play in elections? Luke Blaxill examines the record.

‘Sane Imperialism’: The Liberal Party and the issue of empire at elections, 1880–1914

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the Liberal Party and empire during the high age of British imperialism was both delicate and complex. While the schism of 1886 over Irish home rule saw the departure of some of the party’s most imperialistically minded big beasts to the ranks of the Liberal Unionists (most notably Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain), other ‘Liberal Imperialists’ remained. Led by Lord Rosebery, H. H. Asquith, Richard Haldane, and Edward Grey, these MPs rose to prominence following the retirement of Gladstone in 1894, and supported the Second Boer War which began in 1899. They were imperialists in the sense that they believed that, if colonies were administered liberally and judiciously and territorial expansion directed in pursuit of an ethical foreign policy rather than towards expanding the empire for its own sake, Liberals could be firm but pragmatic managers of imperial affairs whose judgement would be unclouded by the jingoistic bluster liable to seduce Conservatives. An ‘active’ imperial policy could also promote political and diplomatic stability

worldwide, as well as improve the lives of colonial subjects abroad and the working classes at home. In 1899, Rosebery christened this policy ‘sane Imperialism’.¹ On the opposite side stood the party’s radical wing, led by William Harcourt, John Morley, Wilfrid Lawson, and others. Better understood as ‘imperial sceptics’ than avowed anti-imperialists, these men’s detestation of military action inclined them towards pacifism. They also believed that imperial expansion made little economic sense (representing a net loss to the exchequer) and also levied a domestic political cost because its domination of the parliamentary agenda served to delay much-needed social reform. Due in part to this disagreement, the Liberal Party of the 1890s was intellectually confused and politically divided, and it fell to Henry Campbell-Bannerman to provide leadership from the centre and a bridge between these two opposed camps.

Division in the parliamentary party represented only half of the Liberals’ ‘imperial problem’ however. The other lay in the realm of popular politics because it seemed that the



Top: Liberal Party poster, c. 1905–1910. The Free Trade shop is full of customers due to its low prices, while the shop based on Protectionism suffers from high prices and a lack of custom.
Bottom: 'The Only Hope is Tariff Reform', Conservative Party election poster, 1906.

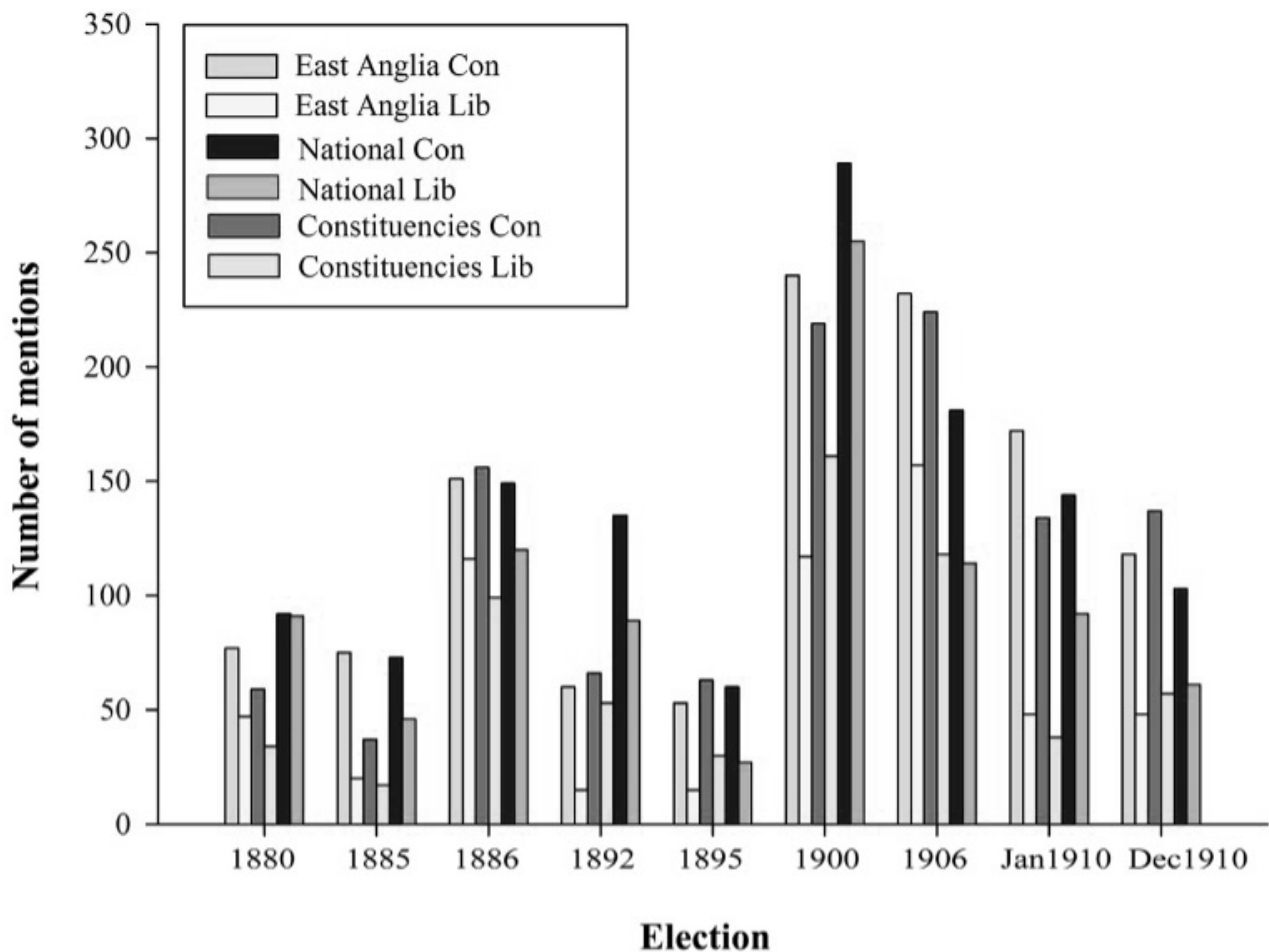


Figure 1: The Language of Imperialism, 1880–1910. Graph includes lemmas ‘imperial’, ‘empire’, ‘colony’, ‘flag’ and ‘British’ combined in each bar. Liberal Unionist speakers are excluded from these readings.

Conservatives had turned empire into a powerful and populist electoral weapon. According to H. C. G. Matthew, this had begun as early as 1872 with Disraeli’s Crystal Palace speech, which had ‘seized the wand of patriotism from the dead Palmerston’s hand, and captured the initiative from the Liberal Party on the dominant theme of late Victorian Britain- imperialism’.² For Robert Mackenzie and Alan Silver, Disraeli’s oration had successfully ‘picked up the banner of Imperialism’.³ This was symbolised by the popularity of the Great MacDermott’s music hall song ‘By Jingo!’ in 1878 following Disraeli’s flashy triumph of gunboat diplomacy over Russia at the Congress of Berlin. The song coined the term ‘jingoism’ and featured the memorable chorus

‘We don’t want to fight but by jingo if we do, we’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, and got the money too!’. Other historians place the advent of popular imperialism slightly later, citing the alliance between the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists in 1886 as the key moment, which added what Ewen Green has called ‘the patriotic-imperial card’ to their electoral hand.⁴ By the 1890s, it certainly seemed to the Liberals that, on the issue of empire, the Conservatives had stumbled upon an endlessly exploitable rhetorical resource which could weave a spell over newly enfranchised working-class voters to make them forget their rational self-interest, and poll for the reactionary party which was least likely to pass reforms for their benefit. Accordingly,

Liberals came to regard imperialism rather despondently as a vote loser, whose prominence on the political agenda simply served to weaken the loyalty of their most reliable voting constituency.

In this article, I assess the issue of imperialism at the nine general elections held between Gladstone's Midlothian campaign and the advent of the First World War. In this era, public speeches (reported very thoroughly in the press) were the primary tool of political communication, and I am concerned with assessing just how far imperialism really was a key campaign issue, both for the Liberals and their Unionist opponents. Secondly, I zoom in on the 1890s for two specific case studies, expanding on why the Liberals suffered so badly in the most imperial contest in the period: the 'khaki election' of 1900 held during the Second Boer War. Thirdly, I discuss how the Edwardian party learned from the failure of their late-Victorian predecessors and managed for the first time to separate imperialism and patriotism, crafting a strongly domestic-centred patriotic appeal which represented a repudiation of their opponents' continued obsession with empire, especially Joseph Chamberlain's politically disastrous policy of imperial preference.

Quantitative background analysis: the language of imperialism, 1880–1910

A key challenge faced by historians of elections in this period is establishing what the campaigns that preceded them were actually about. In particular, which issues were emphasised by candidates and parties in speeches across the country, and where, when, and how did imperialism fit into this matrix? Given that an estimated billion words of speech was uttered throughout the country in a given campaign (which was reported, generally faithfully, in newspapers) historians have

naturally struggled to summarise historical sources so large that they would take several lifetimes to read. Looking at central campaigns is also only of limited use: party manifestos did not exist and, while national and central campaigning resources were assuming progressively greater importance, campaigns in the 650 constituencies remained highly localised in comparison to today. Historians have seldom been able to move beyond selected (often cherry-picked) quotations to characterise the huge variety of multifarious local campaigns. While not a perfect solution, I have developed a technique for quantifying broad linguistic trends using three multi-million-word databanks ('corpora') of party speeches digitised from local and national newspapers.⁵ The first is centred on a specific case-study region (East Anglia); the second consists of a broader sample of constituencies throughout the country; and the third comprises the speeches of frontbenchers reported in *The Times*. Together, these three corpora contain around five million words of campaign speech, and each is subdivided by party and by election year, with each sub-corpus weighted to be numerically equal.

While the corpus could be used to assess the visibility of any topic in electoral politics (for example the leadership of Gladstone in the 1880, 1885, 1886, and 1892 contests),⁶ we use it here to measure the visibility of imperialism throughout the period. We use a group of keywords (a 'taxonomy') which reliably correlates to occasions where party speakers talked about the empire. In this case, I have chosen 'imperial', 'empire', 'colony', 'flag' and 'British'. Figure 1 shows comparable like-for-like readings for each of our three corpora at each of the nine elections, weighted to be equal to each other, with all words aggregated. There are four key findings. The first is the seeming validation of the Liberal belief that imperialism was a 'Conservative issue': their opponents, in East Anglia, in constituencies

outside it, and on the national campaign stage, led them in each equivalent subsample in all nine elections (twenty-seven separate comparisons). The Tory net score – between all three corpora across all elections – is 68 per cent higher. The second is that three elections – 1886, 1900, and 1906 – which were dominated by Irish home rule, the Boer War, and imperial preference respectively, are far more empire-focused than the others in the period. Other contests in the period show imperialism looming far less large, most strikingly 1895, an election frequently seen as an archetype of Salisburyian imperial appeal, where the empire in fact saw less visibility than comparatively fringe issues such as local veto (local referenda on public house closing).⁷ This suggests that imperialism was of intermittent, rather than continual, electoral significance in this period, meaning that even if it was a key trump card for the Liberals' opponents, the Unionists only got to play it occasionally.

While Figure 1's word counts are extremely enlightening in allowing us to gage the general visibility of imperialism in campaigns, it reveals nothing about what parties actually meant when they mentioned the empire, and how it was connected to political arguments. The corpus can once again provide invaluable assistance by illuminating key linguistic trends and broad vocabulary patterns. A computational analysis can list common collocates (words which appear in the same sentence or close to a given word) and rank them by 'lexical attraction', using a popular metric, the 'mutual information' (MI) score. This allows us to dig deeper into the underlying lexicography of party language in this thirty-year period.

Figure 2 shows the top twenty strongest collocates of 'empire' (for Conservatives and Liberals respectively) in our corpora. The results suggest strongly that, when the empire was mentioned by either party, it was usually in the context of upholding its 'unity',

'stability' and 'integrity'. However, it reveals important differences between the Liberals and the Conservatives, with the latter far more inclined towards emotive political arguments, for example 'dismemberment', 'disintegration', 'disruption', 'glorious', etc. Only four Conservative words might be judged as 'neutral' at face value ('within', 'parts', 'vast' and 'world'), whereas for the Liberals, thirteen ('parts', 'part', 'whole', 'up', 'our', 'the', 'is', 'are', 'than', 'about', 'this', 'of' and 'one') fit this description. The party's seemingly more diluted focus is also reflected by the fact that their MI score for their twentieth collocate ('Ireland') is 5.11, whereas the Conservatives' twentieth ('world') stands at a considerably stronger 8.14. Indeed, we need to read down the Tory list to number ninety-one before they drop below an MI of 5.11.

Figures 1 and 2 suggest that Conservative speakers did not just refer to the empire more often, but more persistently connected it to a smaller number of politically and emotionally charged values and arguments, whereas Liberal mentions were more multifarious. Figures 1 and 2 thus suggest that imperialism was a more consistently important part of the Conservative rhetorical armoury than the Liberals', both quantitatively and qualitatively. That there was a rhetorical contest for empire is beyond doubt, but that should not stop us from concluding that it was rather one-sided. While this finding seems at face value to reinforce the traditional reading that the Conservatives were unambiguously the party of empire, it also quantifies what this might actually have meant in practice, and from this, an important caveat emerges. Namely, the finding that late-Victorian and Edwardian Conservatives talked about imperialism almost twice as often as their Liberal contemporaries must be contextualised by the parallel observation that empire was almost certainly a less consistently central election issue in these three decades than historians have assumed.⁸

Rank	Co. Collocate	Freq.	MI score
1	dismemberment	33	12.2
2	disintegration	24	11.97
3	integrity	49	11.69
4	disruption	17	11.59
5	unity	60	11.34
6	glorious	14	10.64
7	Indian	12	10.48
8	safety	11	10.36
9	British	109	9.75
10	maintain	24	9.7
11	united	41	9.57
12	union	18	9.42
13	within	19	9.06
14	vast	10	9.01
15	Kingdom	14	8.9
16	parts	12	8.83
17	danger	12	8.71
18	welfare	10	8.7
19	heart	19	8.54
20	world	31	8.14

Rank	Co. Collocate	Freq.	MI score
1	integrity	27	10.82
2	disintegration	10	10.7
3	unity	21	9.76
4	British	69	9.09
5	parts	13	8.95
6	danger	12	8.71
7	part	23	7.63
8	whole	18	6.6
9	great	48	6.59
10	up	18	6.21
11	our	29	6.17
12	the	536	6.16
13	is	19	5.89
14	are	11	5.78
15	than	14	5.61
16	about	14	5.58
17	this	45	5.41
18	of	306	5.4
19	our	25	5.17
20	Ireland	11	5.11

Figure 2: Top 20 collocates of 'empire' in grassroots electoral language, 1880–1910. Conservatives are displayed left, the Liberals right.

It was a Conservative issue but formed a central pillar of election campaigns only when an imperial issue happened to be particularly politically salient. Because that was only the case in three elections out of nine in this period, we can conclude that the audience most transfixed by the populist spectre of electoral jingoism was in fact the Liberal Party, who were more fearful of its political influence than perhaps they should have been.

Case Study 1: Imperialism in the election of 1900

While the above analysis gives us interesting macroscopic data, the subtleties of how

imperialism was actually used in elections can be more sharply (and entertainingly) illustrated with references to actual campaigns, especially from the general election of 1900, held when British troops in southern Africa appeared to be closing in on victory against President Kruger and the Boers following the relief of Mafeking five months previously. The Conservatives, led by Lord Salisbury, undoubtedly felt confident that they would be re-elected with a landslide victory of similar magnitude to the 152-seat majority they secured in 1895. The Liberals, now without Gladstone (who had retired in 1894, and died in 1898) faced a wartime 'khaki' election. Many were extremely pessimistic of their

prospects, and many campaigned explicitly on the ticket of strengthening the opposition benches rather than making a serious bid to take office.⁹ Morley lamented the plight of constituency workers and grassroots activists, writing that he did not 'very well know what to say to our poor sheep wandering around in the wilderness' and the party left a record 163 constituencies uncontested.¹⁰

On the campaign trail, the Liberals swiftly discovered that their opponents were

While few Conservatives had qualms about calling themselves 'imperialists', many Liberals of 1900 outside the outspoken Liberal Imperialist contingent remained instinctively uncomfortable with the term, which had connotations of reckless territorial expansion, military adventurism, and authoritarian regimes such as Napoleon III's France.

in no mood to draw a distinction between being an imperialist and being a patriot. W. L. Priorleau (East-Norfolk) 'pleaded' with his audience 'to vote straight for the Unionist party, for in so doing they would be doing their share in upholding the glory of the greatest empire that ever existed in the world' while H. S. Foster (Lowestoft) described the purpose of the election as to 'decide whether the great British Empire was to be maintained or not ... it was a battle between the Little Englander and the Big Englander'.¹¹ In King's Lynn, Thomas Gibson-Bowles pointed to a Union Jack pinned above his platform and asked his audience to:

Look at that flag ... it has a great and glorious history. There are no standards of Europe ... that have not gone down before that flag ... do not forget its past. That flag floated at the mainmast of the Victory when Nelson sailed into action at Trafalgar; that flag waved over the British squares at Waterloo ... God grant that this flag, which so many times has shaken

out its folds and brought freedom to the slave, comfort to the oppressed, may once more honour the name of Victoria'.¹²

Conservative praise for the empire was not simply confined to abstract jingoism, and many celebrated the expansion of imperial territory. Harry Bullard (Norwich) boasted that 'Lord Salisbury had demonstrated the might of the empire by sending 200,000 men 7,000 miles', a military manoeuvre which,

according to Captain Pretyman (Woodbridge), 'no other nation could hope to accomplish'.¹³ More worryingly still for the Liberals, the Conservatives not only labelled them as weak and divided, but also questioned their national

loyalty. Their pacifistic radical wing would, according to Ipswich candidate J. F. Rawlinson, make them 'shrink from the dread responsibility of war'.¹⁴ They would also give 'opposition to everything connected to the defence of the nation' (Samuel Hoare, Norwich) and make them 'turn tail and ran away' from the Boers (Priorleau).¹⁵ Even if a Liberal candidate was not a so-called 'pro-Boer' himself, he was still from the same party as sympathisers such as Ellis, Labouchere and Clark, who had been equivocal on the South African issue. This idea of 'guilt by association' was also extended more widely: to connect Liberals with the pro-Boer Irish Parliamentary Party, with the recently deceased Gladstone (who had memorably abandoned General Gordon to his fate in Khartoum in 1885), and to the anti-British continental press, who apparently wanted a Liberal victory.¹⁶ The dichotomy between militaristic loyalist and anti-imperial traitor was stark, and was augmented by the Unionists' decision to select a particularly high number of candidates who had served in the military,

with eight of their twenty East Anglian candidates having links to the forces.

While few Conservatives had qualms about calling themselves 'imperialists', many Liberals of 1900 outside the outspoken Liberal Imperialist contingent remained instinctively uncomfortable with the term, which had connotations of reckless territorial expansion, military adventurism, and authoritarian regimes such as Napoleon III's France. However, they drew a firm line between the imperial and the patriotic, and actually mentioned 'patriotism' more often than their opponents in all corpora, echoing Edward Grey's criticism of the Conservatives' 'gigantic imposture' to claim their party possessed a 'monopoly of patriotism'.¹⁷ In East Anglia, a King's Lynn Liberal declared, 'true liberalism in politics' as being 'purely patriotic in national service and national life' and Alderman Adams (Lowestoft) claimed 'I am neither Liberal nor Conservative, I am patriotic'.¹⁸ George White (North-West Norfolk) questioned the notion that 'every officer is a Tory' or that 'Tommy Atkins is a Unionist', and Richard Winfrey (South-West Norfolk) remarked that 'the Tory party might attempt to allocate themselves a monopoly on patriotism, but the Liberal Party were equally as patriotic as the Tories and equally proud of the British Empire'.¹⁹ The Liberals also developed their own version of patriotism in Rosebery's 'sane imperialism' which, in the context of 1900, continually evaluated generals' military decisions to improve future military efficiency, critiqued the government's preparations for war, and refused to neglect social conditions at home. 'Sane imperialists' might oppose excessive force not just for pacifistic reasons, but for diplomatic utility, with Winfrey, for example, arguing that the South African war 'might have been avoided with wiser and more tactful diplomacy', something that Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain (who had called Kruger a 'squeezed

sponge' and likened negotiating with Russia to 'supping with the devil with a long spoon') understood poorly.²⁰

While this 'sane imperialism' represented a determined attempt to challenge the resolutely imperial and militaristic Tory narrative of patriotism, Liberals were gloomily aware that they were fighting an uphill battle. A febrile wartime atmosphere was not an auspicious environment to make nuanced arguments or constructively critique the tactics and preparation of wildly popular military leaders like Lord Roberts. Conservatives could simply point at the Union Jack to make their argument, while Liberal rebuttal – what Herbert Samuel called their 'policy of rational patriotism' – required lengthy exposition.²¹ The election result – a second demoralising landslide defeat, this time by 134 seats – seemed to confirm these fears. Indeed, Liberal defensiveness over their patriotic credentials perhaps revealed an underlying pessimism in the electorate's political intelligence and a growing fear of the psychology of the herd.²² White bemoaned that 'the salvation of the Tories is the short memory of voters ... the curse of the military spirit which has been roused ... means the neglect of all social questions' and a depressed Harcourt reflected that the electorate had conceived of the war like 'a savage tribe'.²³ Much the same sentiment was echoed in the socialist journal *Justice* which complained that the electorate had treated the war issue with the civic consciousness of 'a howling, brutalised savage'.²⁴ Indeed, the radical organ of London working men's clubs, *Club Life*, reacted to the defeat by complaining that 'we are glad that manhood suffrage is not an acknowledged fact ... many of the people ... are too naturally ignorant to understand what an election really means ... they have no time to read and think – they know nothing of the great problems of our time'.²⁵ John Hobson, in his *Psychology of Jingoism* published in 1901, pointed

to the music hall's role in stoking up imperialist fervour, and the Liberals' pessimism at the electorate's limited intelligence was also connected to other bugbears, particularly the drink interest which they believed was insufficiently regulated by temperance legislation, and had, according to the *Liberal Suffolk Chronicle*, reduced the previous election to 'a battle of brains against beer' which the latter had won.²⁶ However, their analysis of the 1900 defeat also seemed to constitute an unstated admission that – while both parties advanced competing definitions of patriotism – the Unionist version was better adapted to the modern election platform precisely because it was so simple and intuitive. A rapidly expanding suffrage with many poorer men of limited political experience and education now wielding the franchise was an unforgiving environment for a self-consciously intellectual party, and the particular circumstances of a febrile khaki election made it politically untenable to force a dichotomy between 'sane' and 'insane' imperialism, or to decouple imperialism from patriotism.

Case Study 2: Imperialism in the election of 1906

While the Conservatives had been able to make imperialism and patriotism synonymous in the election of 1900, the circumstances changed markedly in 1906. In this campaign, Chamberlain's policy of tariff reform (or 'imperial preference' as he originally christened it) was explicitly designed to bind the mother country closer to her colonies with commercial ties.²⁷ His proposal was to place a series of tariffs on foodstuffs (including corn) imported from outside the British empire, creating a protected imperial free-trade zone and internal imperial market. In East Anglia, ten Unionists explicitly endorsed all his proposals as 'whole hoggers'

and praised his policy's imperial credentials. Francis Hervey (Bury St. Edmunds) described himself as 'a follower of that great colonial statesman, Mr. Chamberlain' and Raymond Boileau (East-Norfolk) claimed simply that 'he was an imperialist and a big Englander and wanted to see the colonies bound more closely to their mother country'.²⁸ Even amongst the remaining East Anglian candidates who sided with Arthur Balfour's more equivocal 'half hogger' position, none openly questioned the imperialist credentials of Chamberlain's manifesto, with even the sceptical Edward Wild (Norwich) declaring that a general measure of tariff reform was 'a policy which would ... consolidate the British Empire'.²⁹

Chamberlain's renewed appeal to the imperialism that had carried the Unionists to a landslide victory in 1900 seemed to stem, at least in part, from his faith in it as a populist electoral weapon.³⁰ But his attempt to once again use empire to claim the patriotic mantle misread the public's exhaustion with the war, which had dragged on until 1902, and had seemingly already contributed to a string of by-election losses.³¹ This dampening of public enthusiasm did much to deflate the Unionists' khaki patriotism, and reciprocally, to inflate aspects of the Liberals' domestic-centred counter which had struggled to fire in 1900.³² In 1904, Campbell-Bannerman reiterated the 'sane imperialism' line, declaring that 'true patriotism ... seeks not aggrandisement of any particular class or interest ... but the comfort, the improvement, and the best welfare of the people at large'.³³ A key guarantor of that welfare, of course, was cheap food, and adopting Chamberlain's protectionist proposals would, the Liberals argued, caused prices to rise: especially of bread, the staple food of the poor. Campbell-Bannerman's lead was followed at the grassroots in the election eighteen months later, and Liberals began to articulate a patriotism without its previous imperial

touchstone, with constituency speakers mentioning the word ‘patriot’ more than four times as often as Conservatives. Edward Beauchamp (Lowestoft) believed that ‘they heard a lot, probably too much, of the word “imperial”. He thought all in that room were in one sense imperialists, [but] he did not agree with Mr Chamberlain in his interpretation and application of the word ... if our Empire was to be maintained, young people must be trained to temperance, thrift, manliness, and honesty’.³⁴ The Yarmouth clergyman, Reverend Guttery, also took aim at ‘the man in Birmingham’ who ‘was once more attempting to hold aloft the tattered flag of prostituted patriotism, and was a mere echo of the madness which had once deluded the nation, madness that they would be very glad to forget’. He went on to describe:

Two types of patriotism. There was the patriotism such as their fathers knew ... the patriotism that was willing to tell England, if need be, unpopular truths, the patriotism that was ready to work, suffer ... to widen the bounds of liberty and to win the people a good life [Cheers]. And there was the patriotism of swagger, the boasting and blatancy, the patriotism of the stock exchange, the patriotism of Park Lane, the patriotism that ... could not shout ‘rule Britannia’ except with a beery hick-up.³⁵

Outside East Anglia, Liberals made similar criticisms of the Unionists’ misplaced imperialism. George Lambert (Devon, South Molton) poured scorn over the ‘new imperial gospel of Mr. Chamberlain’ and mocked his proposal to exclude imported maize from tariffs, arguing that ‘maize is the food of pigs ... what imperial aspiration! Free food for an imperial race of pigs! [laughter]’.³⁶

In Derby, a local Liberal – J. P. G. Shires – explained the changing zeitgeist, stating that ‘the Tory party seemed to imagine that they enjoyed a monopoly on patriotism, and they delighted to dub their opponents Pro-Boers or Little Englanders; but the moral sentiments of the people were rising above such insults, and they were recognising that Jingoism and so-called Imperialism was not true patriotism’.³⁷ When the results were counted, the Liberals had managed to transform landslide loss into landslide victory, winning a majority of 128.

Perhaps Chamberlain’s mistake was to assume that a robust imperial appeal would automatically allow the Unionists to retain their pre-eminence as the patriotic party. Imperial preference *did* succeed in once again placing empire prominently on the 1906 election agenda, but this time it clearly failed to trump the Liberals’ counter-appeal to ‘domestic’ patriotism, suggesting that imperialism’s utility as a vote-winner was conditional, not universal. War weariness clearly helped tip the scales, but perhaps the decisive factor was simply that, however popular the imperial credentials of tariff reform might have been in isolation, they were poisoned by the spectre of rising food prices. In East Anglia, vivid Liberal anecdotes of a return to ‘the hungry forties’ under the Corn Laws were combined with famous posters such as ‘save the children

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from Tariff Reform’ and ‘the big and the little loaf’ to create a simple and pithy electoral appeal powerful enough to smite Chamberlain’s offering, whether wrapped in the Union Jack or not. These appeals were allied with

popular exhibitionism (traditionally a Tory forte) featuring unappetising horseflesh sausage displays, didactic circus acts in seaside towns such as Yarmouth and Lowestoft and free trade song parties.³⁸ Chamberlain – the man Lloyd George described as ‘the raging bull from Birmingham ... smash[ing] up the great shop of the world’ – was cast as the pantomime villain.³⁹ Balfour was his comically pathetic subordinate, whom Daniel Goddard (Ipswich) dismissed as ‘the alleged leader who was really a lady help to Mr. Joseph Chamberlain’.⁴⁰ As Michael Bentley has put it, the full-bodied attack on protectionism ‘removed the need to think’.⁴¹ Such Liberal humour was widespread and, critically, one-sided; the corpus shows that the traditionally more sober Liberals were noted by newspapers as evoking ‘laughter’ from grassroots audiences in and outside East Anglia in 1906 more than twice as often as their opponents.

It seemed that the Liberals had discovered a simple populism that enabled them to exploit, rather than hide from, the mass electorate’s appetite for the politics of passion. By contrast, the Unionists were now lumbered with the more counter-intuitive appeal running against the zeitgeist. With the addition of free trade (with its important implications of material well-being) the argument that had begun as ‘sane imperialism’ in 1900 was transformed, and the Liberals found it much easier to cast themselves confidently as the patriotic defenders of British workmen. Although they developed a more punchy and dynamic popular appeal, the real Liberal success in 1906 arguably lay not in matching the Unionists as imperialists, but in successfully differentiating love of country from love of empire. By doing so, the Liberals were able to cast the Unionists as a destabilising and dangerous political force precisely because they were so ideologically obsessed with imperialism through their crusade for imperial preference and were

prepared to sacrifice cheap bread at home for a political project abroad.

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The 1906 campaign perhaps demonstrated that the Liberals had been too afraid of popular imperialism. The issue was not consistently central in late-Victorian and Edwardian elections, and, even if it did dominate a given campaign, this did not mean Liberals were condemned to lose. However, there is no doubt that the defeat in 1900 was extremely traumatic for the party, principally because it damaged their traditional faith in elections as exercises in public intellect. By repackaging the electoral albatross of ‘sane imperialism’ in patriotic wrapping in 1906, the Liberals were able to match the Conservatives as promoters of simple and populist electoral appeals, and thus leave behind the highbrow but incoherent platform of the 1890s. In this sense, the traumatic loss not only helped propel the party towards a more electorally dynamic new Liberalism, but also allowed it to slam the door on their sentimental mid-Victorian ideal of high-minded electoral debate with a considered ‘rational’ voter at its centre. Elections were becoming exceptionally partisan and ruthless, and the claim that the Unionists were sentencing the poor to starvation in 1906 was arguably no less of a smear than the Tory allegation that ‘pro-Boer’ Liberals had been in traitors in 1900. The Liberals had now learned to ‘fight dirty’, something that would serve them well in elections in the years that followed as the political temperature reached boiling point over the ‘Peers vs the People’ crisis. ■

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'Sane Imperialism': The Liberal Party and the issue of empire at elections, 1880–1914

- 1 *The Times*, 6 May 1899.
- 2 H. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and politics in Great Britain, 1860–1950', in P. Waller (ed.), *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain* (Sussex, 1987), p. 49.
- 3 R. McKenzie and A. Silver, *Angels in Marble: Working Class Conservatives in Urban England* (London, 1968), pp. 49–50.
- 4 R. Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury, 1881–1902: Unionism and Empire* (London, 1996), esp. chs. 8–11; D. Savage, 'The General Election of 1886 in Great Britain and Ireland' (PhD, London, 1958), p. 560; E. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The politics, economics and ideology of British Conservatism, 1880–1914* (London, 1994), pp. 54, 76.
- 5 This methodology is expanded in full in L. Blaxill, *The War of Words: The language of British elections, 1880–1914* (Woodbridge, 2020), pp. 241–7.
- 6 Blaxill, *War of Words*, pp. 103–11.
- 7 A five-word taxonomy for local veto in 1895, consisting of 'Local Veto', 'beer', 'drink', 'public house' and 'pubican' scores 64 among East Anglian Conservatives and 51 among Liberals. Outside East Anglia, it scores 62 among Conservatives and 36 among Liberals. In the national speakers' corpus, it scores 44 among Conservatives and 37 among Liberals. The combined 1895 local veto score between both parties across all three corpora is thus 294, whereas the 1895 imperialism equivalent score is just 248.
- 8 For a full outline of the historiography, see L. Blaxill, 'The Language of Imperialism in British Electoral Politics, 1880–1910', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 417–20.
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- 11 *Norwich Argus*, 29 Sep. 1900; *Eastern Evening News*, 8 Oct. 1900.
- 12 *Lynn Advertiser*, 28 Sep. 1900.
- 13 *Norfolk Argus*, 29 Sep. 1900; *East Anglian Daily Times*, 29 Sep. 1900.
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