

The Liberal Unionist Party: A History

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The split in the Liberal party in 1886 arising from Gladstone's conversion to the cause of Irish home rule was a turning point in British politics. The Liberals who, in one form or another, had been the dominant party of government over the previous half century spent all but three of the next 20 years in opposition, as the alliance of the breakaway Liberal Unionist party and the Conservatives won landslide victories in three out of four general elections. Given their significant impact on the course of British political history, it is remarkable that, until Dr Cawood's volume appeared, there was no full-length published study of the Liberal Unionists.

There may be a number of explanations for this. Gordon L. Goodman's 1956 University of Chicago PhD thesis on the Liberal Unionist party may have created a sense that the topic had already been done. Yet Dr Goodman's work remained unpublished in book form, and is therefore accessible only to more determined scholars of the field. Historians' fascination with the important and enigmatic figure of Joseph Chamberlain, radical Liberal turned imperialist and Tory ally, may have crowded out study of the party that he helped to found. The fact that the Liberal Unionists were from their inception in alliance with a Conservative party that eventually subsumed them has perhaps relegated the party's history to a mere subplot in Conservative politics. Certainly for a long time there was a tendency to see the Liberal Unionist schism as, in Goodman's phrase, the 'Revolt of the Whigs' (1), wealthy, aristocratic Liberals, feeling uncomfortable with their party's increasing radicalism and realising that their true interests lay with the Conservatives. Robert Ensor in his classic volume of the Oxford History of England saw the Liberal Unionist schism as introducing a class division to party politics that had previously not existed.(2) This is certainly a view that William Gladstone encouraged, most famously in his 'masses against the classes' speech, seeking thereby to impugn the

motives of his heretical former colleagues.

More recent historians, from the 1970s onwards, have questioned this view, seeing the Liberal Unionists as motivated more by ideology than class. Christopher Harvie has highlighted the overwhelming opposition to Irish home rule among Liberal academics in 1886. W.C. Lubenow has shown the lack of correlation between Liberal MPs' class background and their position on Gladstone's home rule bill. Jonathan Parry and T. A. Jenkins have each argued that Gladstone's style of leadership, his excessive religiosity and apparent willingness to pander to the will of the mob clashed with the more secular and rationalist outlook of many Liberals. His support for home rule was seen by those who refused to follow his lead as a negation of the attempts by Liberal governments over the previous 50 years to reconcile Catholic Ireland to the Union.⁽³⁾ These studies have, however, focused on the attitudes of parliamentarians and academics rather than on party organisation, propaganda and elections, and they have not taken the story beyond the 1886 split. Dr Cawood's volume therefore goes some way to filling a significant gap in published research, and makes a powerful case for the Liberal Unionists as a distinct and vital political force, at least until 1895 when they entered coalition with the Conservatives.

There was an initial reluctance among many Liberal opponents of home rule to break with Gladstone's Liberal party. Dr Cawood demonstrates the diffidence of Hartington's leadership in 1886, and the slow development of party organisation at least during the first half of the 1886–92 parliament, with the newly-formed party beset by problems such as the defection of its first organiser, F. W. Maude, back to the Gladstonian Liberal party and the lack of impact of its worthy but almost unreadable newspaper, the *Liberal Unionist*. The situation was not helped by Joseph Chamberlain maintaining his own organisation, the National Radical Union (later the National Liberal Union), separate from the Hartingtonite Liberal Unionist Association. In addition, many moderate Liberal Unionist MPs took a dim view of the growth of party caucuses, placed great importance on maintaining their own political judgement and were reluctant to soil their hands with the messy business of party organisation.

This began to change after 1889, following a restructuring of the party's central organisation, and although it was too late to avoid a disappointing result at the 1892 general election, by 1895 the party machine was sufficiently effective for it to make an important contribution to the Unionists' landslide election victory. This was particularly so in areas where a significant number of Liberal MPs had defected to the Liberal Unionists in 1886. Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham bastion is the most famous example of local Liberal Unionist success, but the West of Scotland and Cornwall too were areas where the party became the senior rather than junior partner in the Unionist alliance. Dr Cawood also highlights the often difficult relations between the two Unionist parties at constituency level, with squabbles in various constituencies over which party contested the parliamentary seat. In some cases it required the intervention of national leaders to resolve disputes. The Unionist alliance was not all plain sailing.

Ideologically, the Liberal Unionists seemed an unlikely combination, comprising those elements of the Liberal party that had most often clashed with one another during the 1880–5 government. To some extent these divisions continued within the new party, over temperance, disestablishment and enthusiasm for social reform. Yet Dr Cawood convincingly argues that there were at least two important unifying principles of Liberal Unionism, inherited from mid-Victorian Liberalism. These were, first, a commitment to the rule of law; the party's leading thinker, the jurist A. V. Dicey, identified Irish nationalists' encouragement of lawbreaking for political ends as a key objection to home rule. Liberal Unionists believed in Britain's liberal constitution and that political progress, in Ireland and elsewhere, had to come about by constitutional methods. Secondly, Liberal Unionists believed that theirs was a rational form of politics, based on a commitment to, as Dr Cawood puts it, 'political evolution from fear, inequality and reaction towards trust, liberty and progress'. Many of them set great store by the notion of character, believing their approach to politics to be 'manlier' than Gladstone's 'feminine' appeal to popular emotions.

For much of the first decade of the party's existence, party leaders and activists were keen to emphasise their continuing Liberal identity, seeing themselves as the true bearers of the Liberal torch, and believing, as breakaway parties often do, that their old party had left them rather than vice versa. Ironically, given Joseph

Chamberlain's later adoption of tariff reform, they were united in opposing attempts by some Conservatives in the early 1890s to revive support for protectionism. Unlike the Conservatives, they showed a reluctance (which they sometimes overcame) to play the sectarian, anti-Catholic card in debates over home rule. And of course Joseph Chamberlain continued to champion social reform, although he modified his rhetoric from the language of class conflict and 'ransom' to reconciliation between social classes.

Dr Cawood therefore makes a persuasive case for the Liberal Unionists as a genuinely independent political force within the Unionist alliance, by no means a mere cipher for the Conservative party. Yet in my view he pushes his conclusions further than is justified by the evidence presented here, in a way that diminishes his overall argument. For example, writing about areas of Liberal Unionist parliamentary strength, he comments:

The victory of Liberal Unionists in Bury, as in Birmingham, Cornwall and Scotland, owed everything to their commitment to unbending Liberal principles and absolutely nothing to the alliance with the Conservatives.

This stretches credibility beyond breaking point. To be true, it would mean that the Liberal Unionists in these places derived no advantage at all from the Conservatives not standing candidates against them and allowing their new allies a free run against Gladstonian Liberals. Surely Liberal Unionists benefited at least to some degree (more probably quite a lot) from the support of Conservatives! To take the example of Bury; this seat was won narrowly in 1885 by the Liberal Sir Henry James with the Conservatives just 189 votes or 2.4 per cent behind. Returned unopposed in 1886, James won a comfortable victory in 1892. But the swing to the Unionists, while impressive, was not dramatically different from that obtained by Conservative candidates elsewhere in Lancashire. And when he stood down at the 1895 general election, he was replaced by a Conservative candidate who won by a similarly clear margin. This was far from being a seat where the Conservatives ceased to matter. The position is similar regarding the other areas cited in the above quotation. No doubt the Liberal Unionists appealed to voters who were beyond the Conservatives' reach, but the support of Conservative voters undoubtedly made a difference too to their success. We cannot know how many seats the Liberal Unionists might have won in a genuine three-way party system, but without the guaranteed support of Conservative voters victories would have been much harder to achieve.

Likewise, I am sceptical of Dr Cawood's argument regarding the Unionists' landslide victory in the 1895 general election that 'it was the *Liberal* Unionist agenda that convinced the mass electorate', in particular Chamberlain's social programme. This was not how Liberal candidates at the time saw it – they put the blame primarily on Sir William Harcourt's misguided attempts at prohibitionist temperance reform (or 'local veto'), resistance to which was more a Tory than a Liberal cause, and to the electorate's continuing scepticism about home rule.⁽⁴⁾ Doubtless the obvious divisions among Liberal leaders did not help much either. Dr Cawood cites the example of the famous explorer and journalist H. M. Stanley, who won the seat of North Lambeth as a Liberal Unionist, as evidence of a candidate winning by stressing social reform in his campaign. But Stanley's result was very much in line with the swing achieved by Conservative candidates elsewhere in London. It may be that Conservatives stressed social issues too, but more evidence is needed before we can conclude that such questions were decisive in determining the result of the election.

The author has, I think, succumbed to the constant temptation for researchers of overstating the importance and distinctiveness of their subject. He cites the famous remark of Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* that '[Liberal Unionists] count as Tories. They dine with us. Or come in the evening at any rate'. But he sees this comment as indicating that Liberal Unionists 'remained Liberals, so would not be invited to dinner'. Surely, however, the key words here are 'count as Tories'. If one wishes to draw a political inference from this line of dialogue, it is perhaps that, just as the Liberal Unionists allowed Tory hostesses to widen their social circle, they may also have helped the Conservative party to increase its pool of potential voters. In that sense the importance of the Liberal Unionists was that, in partnership with the Conservatives, they gave resistance to Irish home rule an image of being a national cause, above class and sectional interests, for which it was worth sacrificing traditional political loyalties. There is much in Dr

Cawood's book to indicate that he would agree with this, and I merely suggest that he would have been better to have left it at that rather than over-egg the pudding.

Similarly, although it is a less important matter, the book's title overstates its actual content. The innocent reader may assume that this is a complete history of the party from 1895 through to the merger with the Conservatives in 1912. Yet the last 17 years of the party's history are dealt with in one fairly short chapter that reads more as an extended postscript than part of the main body of the book. This is partly justified by the increasing convergence of the two parties after the Liberal Unionists entered a coalition government with the Conservatives in 1895. There is much more to be said about the remainder of the party's history than is included here. The title may of course be the choice of the publisher rather than the author – I note that the University of Leicester Phd thesis on which the book is presumably based was entitled 'The Lost Party: Liberal Unionism 1886–95'. That would have been a more accurate title for this book as well.

There are a few howlers that should have been corrected. It may just be an unfortunate slip that the first sentence of chapter one refers to the work of Gerald when it should be Gordon Goodman, but other errors look like carelessness. For example, the Liberal Party's Newcastle Programme was agreed in 1891, so Liberal Unionist denunciations of socialism in January 1890 were by definition not a response to it (p. 67). The Irish historian and Liberal Unionist MP W. E. H. Lecky was a Protestant so his adherence to the party was not a sign of its drawing support from Roman Catholic intellectuals (p. 44). And Gladstone did not retire from the premiership until 1894, so the 1893 Employers' Liability Bill was not a sign of Rosebery indicating a new direction for the Liberal party (p. 98). (In any case the bill was more associated with Asquith, the home secretary).

Despite these quibbles, and my disagreement with elements of the author's conclusions, it would be churlish to end this review on a negative note. This is an important book that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of late 19th-century British party politics. It is written in a clear and accessible style that makes it an enjoyable read. It engages successfully with existing historiography while expanding our understanding of a neglected historical subject. The author and publishers are particularly to be commended for the illustrations, including the examples of Liberal Unionist leaflets and posters which give a strong sense of how the party actually engaged with the electorate. As well as being a valuable work in its own right, Dr Cawood's book will, one hopes, rekindle interest among historical researchers in the study of the Liberal Unionist party.

Notes

1. Gordon L. Goodman 'Liberal Unionism: the revolt of the Whigs', *Victorian Studies*, 3, 2 (1959), 173–89.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Robert Ensor *England 1870–1914* (Oxford, 1936, reprinted 1992) pp. 206–7.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Christopher Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy, 1860–86* (London, 1976); W. C. Lubenow *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Crisis: the British House of Commons in 1886* (Oxford, 1988); J. P. Parry *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT, 1993); T. A. Jenkins *Gladstone, Whiggery, and the Liberal Party, 1874–1886* (Oxford, 1988).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See the survey of Liberal candidates' explanations for their party's defeat in the *Westminster Gazette* 13, 14, 15 and 19 August 1895.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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