

THE 1895 GENERAL ELECTION AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN LATE VICTORIAN BRITAIN*

PAUL A. READMAN

Christ's College, Cambridge

ABSTRACT. *Since the 1960s, the politics of the period 1860 to 1906 have received much attention, particularly by historians of the Conservative party. On the whole, it has been argued that Conservative electoral success during this period was a 'negative' achievement. Through an examination of the election of 1895 this article questions this argument. It suggests that both the nature of the Unionists' appeal and the factors behind their performance in general elections in this period have to an extent been oversimplified since the pioneering quantitative work of James Cornford. A content analysis of Liberal and Unionist candidates' election addresses is presented in order to make sense of the issues of the campaign, full details of which can be found in the appendix to this article. The Liberal message is shown to be more coherent, and that of the Unionists more positive, than is usually assumed. Cornford's methodology is also challenged, and an alternative (and simpler) approach is suggested. It is argued that in 1895 there was in general no inverse correlation between Conservative vote and turnout, or between Conservative vote and changes to the electoral registers. And although party organization was very important to the Unionists' success there seems little evidence of any over-arching plan to keep both turnout and the number of registered electors down.*

That the electoral history of the last decade of the nineteenth century remains a relatively untrodden field of research is largely because historians have made up their minds about it. Since J. P. Cornford's *Victorian Studies* article in 1963 the argument that Unionist electoral success after 1885 was basically a negative accomplishment founded on 'low turnouts, Liberal disarray and organizational strength' rather than any real positive appeal has become something of an orthodoxy.¹ For most of the period 1885–1906, it was less a case

* This article is in essence a modified version of my BA dissertation, 'The general election of 1895' (Cambridge, 1997). I would like to express my gratitude to Peter Clarke, who supervised me for this dissertation, for his help and encouragement. Thanks are also due to Stephan Klasen, Kathryn Rix, Miles Taylor, and Claire Smith, who read and commented on earlier drafts.

¹ J. P. Cornford, 'The transformation of Conservatism in the late nineteenth century', *Victorian Studies*, 7 (1963), pp. 35–66; idem, 'The adoption of mass organisation by the Conservative party', in E. Allardt and Y. Littunen, eds., *Cleavages, ideologies and party systems: contributions to comparative political sociology* (Transactions of the Westermarck Society, Helsinki, 1964), pp. 400–24; idem, 'Aggregate election data and British party alignments, 1885–1910', in E. Allardt and C. Rokkan, eds., *Mass politics: studies in electoral sociology* (New York, 1970), pp. 107–16; P. Marsh, *The discipline of popular government: Lord Salisbury's domestic statecraft, 1881–1902* (Hassocks, 1978); E. H. H. Green, 'Radical Conservatism: the electoral genesis of tariff reform', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1985), pp. 667–92; idem, *The crisis of Conservatism: the politics, economics and ideology of the British Conservative*

of the Conservative party winning elections than it was of the Liberal party losing them: that of 1895, for example, has been described by Martin Pugh as ‘essentially a negative reaction’ which ‘saw Liberal abstentions and Conservative victory by default’.² And while it is true that Jon Lawrence has recently and persuasively argued that there was a ‘social’ aspect to the electoral appeal of the Conservatives that has previously passed unnoticed by historians,³ a coherent counter-interpretation has not yet emerged. What follows is in large part an attempt to provide a starting-point for just such a counter-interpretation, to suggest – by way of an examination of the general election of 1895 – that the grounds for this historiographical near-consensus are in fact open to considerable question.

I

The period of Rosebery’s first and only administration was not a happy time for the Liberal party. Opening with the ignominy of a defeat on the Address, hampered throughout by internal divisions and the resolute opposition of the House of Lords, it fell when it was alleged by the Unionists on 21 June 1895 that insufficient provision had been made for supplying the army with cordite. On Brodrick’s motion that the salary of the secretary for war be reduced by £100 the government was defeated by 132 votes to 125 and the following day Rosebery resigned, apparently glad to be free of the responsibilities of office.⁴ It is clear that the unorthodox decision not to dissolve parliament but to resign instead represented, as Peter Stansky has pointed out, ‘a last desperate attempt to change the situation, to hand over the initiative to the opposition and force them to enunciate a programme that could then be attacked’.⁵ Much to the chagrin of Liberal politicians, however, the Unionist party was alive to this stratagem and responded with no immediate declaration of policy beyond the announcement of an intention to call a general election.

It was thus with this typically Cecilian tactical flourish that the Liberal party was placed on the defensive and forced to defend a legislative record which, viewed in terms of the promises made before the general election of 1892, was indeed barren.⁶ Accounting in many Liberal eyes for the non-fulfilment of so much of the Newcastle Programme, of course, was the House of Lords, and it

party, 1880–1914 (London, 1995); R. Shannon, *The age of Salisbury, 1881–1902: Unionism and empire* (London, 1996).

² Martin Pugh, *The making of modern British politics, 1867–1939* (Oxford, 1993), p. 72.

³ J. Lawrence, ‘Party politics and the people: continuity and change in the political history of Wolverhampton, 1815–1914’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge, 1989); idem, ‘Class and gender in the making of urban toryism, 1880–1914’, *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), pp. 629–52.

⁴ E. T. Raymond, *The man of promise: Lord Rosebery* (London, 1923), p. 149.

⁵ P. Stansky, *Ambitions and strategies: the struggle for the leadership of the Liberal party in the 1890s* (Oxford, 1964), p. 174.

⁶ The only real legislative achievement being the Parish Councils Act of 1894.

was on the issue of the upper house that Rosebery had sought, even before the election, to unite the disparate forces of 1890s Liberalism. No doubt the passage of a National Liberal Federation⁷ resolution in June 1894 calling for the abolition of the Lords' veto persuaded the Liberal leader that there was at least one thing a strong majority of the party could agree on, and in the autumn of that year his already apparent public hostility towards the peers became more pronounced. In a speech at Bradford on 27 October 1894, for example, Rosebery told his audience the reform of the Lords was 'the greatest issue since your fathers resisted the tyranny of Charles I and of James II';⁸ and immediately before the election, in speeches at the Liberal Eighty club and in the Albert Hall, he attempted to make the 'annihilation of the... legislative preponderance' of the House of Lords 'the permanent and primary' issue of the campaign. It was argued by the ex-premier that the opposition of the Lords to Liberal legislation in general provided all members of the party with a common grievance, the removal of which each peak in the 'mountain range' of Liberal policy – local veto, disestablishment, home rule, etc. – depended on for its success. As he put it to the Eighty club, 'all the... great Liberal measures on which you are bent... can only pass the portals of the constitution over the body of the House of Lords'.⁹

Rosebery, however, was not Gladstone. He proved unable – as Gladstone was able to do in 1868 in his 'Justice for Ireland' campaign – to bring together his party around a single rallying cry. If the divided, programmatic nature of the Liberal party in terms of policy commitments created the rationale for the attack on the upper house, this – and the personal rivalries within the leadership¹⁰ – also proved its undoing. Despite considerable emphasis on the House of Lords at the January 1895 NLF conference in Cardiff, resolutions were passed on electoral reform, Welsh disestablishment, and home rule; Ireland's 'foremost place in the policy and programme of the Liberal party' being reaffirmed.¹¹ Furthermore, it was surely a reflection of the fact that there was no real agreement within the party over what exactly to do with the House of Lords that in the Queen's Speech of the following month the issue did not even get a mention. For if the earl of Kimberley was clearly against abolition and Labouchere clearly a 'single Chamber man', others still advocated its replacement with an elected second chamber. Despite the 1894 resolution of the NLF, the truth was that the Liberal party was no more likely to be brought to a state of greater unity by the question of the House of Lords than it was by any other question.

In the end, despite the fact that the 'ending', 'mending', or otherwise of the House of Lords featured in 79 per cent of Liberal election addresses, the attempt to reintroduce single-issue politics to Liberal electioneering was a

⁷ Hereafter NLF.

⁸ See *Times*, 29 Oct. 1894.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3 July 1895, p. 11, 6 July 1895, p. 13.

¹⁰ For details of the divisions within the Liberal hierarchy see Stansky, *Ambitions*, pp. 130–58.

¹¹ *NLF proceedings*, Jan. 1895 (quote on p. 80).

Table 1 *Home rule and the House of Lords in Liberal election addresses*

Percentage of Liberal addresses	London	English		Scotland	Wales
		English counties	English provincial boroughs		
Mentioning home rule first	31	31	40	32	35
Mentioning the House of Lords first	15	17	18	26	4

signal failure. Both in their opening speeches and throughout the campaign Harcourt and Morley emphasized not the House of Lords, but temperance reform and Irish home rule respectively.¹² More than was the case in 1892, the Liberal appeal was based on the provisions of the Newcastle Programme, the question of the upper house often being tacked on to the end of addresses and speeches or referred to in the same context as other ‘political’ measures such as the reform of registration law, the payment of MPs, and the abolition of plural voting. Although mentioned almost as frequently as home rule in the speeches of Liberal candidates, the House of Lords was not emphasized nearly as heavily, despite a clear decline in the importance of the Irish issue in Liberal politics since Gladstone’s retirement.¹³ (See tables 1 and 2.)

However, whilst it is true that because of the reduced importance of home rule and Rosebery’s failure to introduce the issue of the House of Lords as the new keystone of Liberal policy, the Liberal appeal in 1895 was more ‘programmatically’ than that of 1892, it is misleading to describe the party’s platform as consisting of ‘laughably conflicting policies which bewildered its supporters and invited the ridicule of its opponents’.¹⁴ The extent to which the Liberal party of the 1890s was dominated by ‘log-rolling’ faddists with no concerns beyond the fate of their own pet projects can be, and has been, overstressed.¹⁵ The possibility that there was at least some coherence or even logic to the Liberals’ appeal in the 1895 general election has been overlooked by historians, who seem content to ignore the issues of the contest altogether, reducing the event – if it is mentioned at all – to an illustration of the disparity in effectiveness between the rival party organizations.¹⁶

Temperance legislation, which in the form of Harcourt’s local veto proposal

¹² See, for example, Harcourt’s speeches at Derby and Monmouth (*Times*, 6 July 1895, p. 16; *ibid.*, 19 July 1895, p. 10), and Morley’s at Manchester and Newcastle (*ibid.*, 5 July 1895, p. 10, 13 July, p. 14).

¹³ The general consensus of contemporary commentators was that home rule had moved into the background in the election of 1895. See, for example, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Aug. 1895, p. 306, Sept. 1895, pp. 448–9; *Daily News*, 18 July, p. 4; *New Review*, Aug. 1895, p. 179. Rosebery, furthermore, was extremely lukewarm on the question of Irish self-government.

¹⁴ Robert Rhodes James, *Rosebery* (London, 1963), p. 384.

¹⁵ E.g., D. A. Hamer, *Liberal politics in the age of Gladstone and Rosebery* (Oxford, 1972); M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the organisation of political parties* (London, 1901), esp. p. 320.

¹⁶ See, for example, Marsh, *Discipline*, p. 246, and especially the section on the election in Shannon’s *Age of Salisbury* (pp. 406–21).

Table 2 *Issues mentioned in Liberal election addresses (top seven)*

Issue	Overall (%)	London (%)	English counties (%)	English provincial boroughs (%)	English highly urbanized boroughs*	Scotland (%)	Wales (%)
Home rule	82	100	79	85	80	78	57
House of Lords	79	85	75	80	83	80	74
Local veto	72	81	67	74	83	68	83
Disestablishment	69	63	63	71	70	75	87
Abolition of plural voting	60	83	59	58	57	52	39
Registration reform	54	79	50	50	67	55	30
Employers' liability	50	67	41	62	63	42	30

* I.e., the boroughs of Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Salford, Newcastle, Sunderland, Middlesbrough, and Sheffield.

Source (for tables 1 and 2): *British political party general election addresses* (Harvester press microfilm, 1984–5). For a more complete breakdown of the content of both Liberal and Unionist election addresses see Appendix (tables 11 and 12).

was mentioned in nearly three-quarters of Liberal election addresses, is a case in point. Although this measure was informed to an extent by the moral imperative of reducing the levels of drunkenness in society and in this sense was presented, especially in urban areas, as lying ‘at the very root of social reform’,¹⁷ it cannot simply be understood in these terms. Liberals other than members of the relatively small band of self-confessed temperance fanatics like W. S. Caine and Sir William Harcourt tended to portray the Local Veto Bill, which provided for the closure of all public houses in a parish should two-thirds of the ratepaying inhabitants desire it, as a means of effecting ‘popular control of the liquor traffic’, of transferring the power to issue licences from unelected magistrates to the people. It was thus a measure for extending ‘democratic’ local government. As D. M. Watson, Liberal candidate for the south-eastern division of Essex explained, ‘I desire to see local self-government carried out to its fullest extent and *therefore* advocate local control of the Drink Traffic by the people themselves.’¹⁸ Similarly, Liberal commitment to Irish home rule and the extension of the powers of the recently created parish councils was a part of this preoccupation with ‘local self-government’, although the cry for a Welsh national assembly was scarcely heard at all, being mentioned in only four Liberal addresses. The Liberal position on education, which was more of an issue in London than it was in the counties and smaller boroughs,¹⁹ was also presented as involving the concept of ‘local control’; the argument being that if the ratepayers provided the money to fund the schools in an area they, and not the established church, should run them.²⁰

More broadly, the nature of the Liberals’ appeal in 1895 was overwhelmingly political, reflective of the priorities of the NLF and important pressure groups like the National Reform Union.²¹ Liberals of all shades in urban constituencies and especially in London (where the payment of MPs was also important)

¹⁷ Address of W. S. Caine (Bradford East), *Election addresses*, p. 69. For similar arguments see, for example, the address of C. Harrison (Plymouth), *ibid.*, p. 86; and Harcourt’s speech of 5 July, *Times*, 6 July 1895, p. 16. The prominence given to local veto by candidates in urban areas, especially in London and the other large cities of England, is clear from table 2.

¹⁸ *Election addresses*, p. 40 (my emphasis). Morley, too, defended the measure on the basis that it extended ‘the principle of self-government’ (*Times*, 11 July 1895, p. 6). However, this side of the Liberals’ local veto proposals has been somewhat downplayed by historians. Apparently unaware of the fact that the vast majority of Liberal candidates mentioned it in their addresses, David Brooks has written that the ‘positive aspect’ of the 1895 bill – the democratization of ‘the system of licensing by taking sole discretionary authority from magistrates and owners of large estates’ – was ‘rarely stressed by Liberal speakers who preferred to ignore what they feared was an unpopular subject altogether’ (D. Brooks, ed., *The destruction of Lord Rosebery: from the diaries of Sir Edward Hamilton, 1894–1895* (London, 1986), p. 106).

¹⁹ See appendix, table 11.

²⁰ See, for example, the speeches of the Leeds candidates Leif Jones and H. S. Baines, *Yorkshire Post*, 13 July 1895, p. 7.

²¹ At all the annual NLF conferences between the elections of 1892 and 1895 the need for political and specifically electoral reform was especially stressed, the council session of 14 February 1894 concluding, for example, that ‘no reforms are more urgent than those which will better enable the people to pronounce their verdict at the poll’ (*NLF proceedings*, Feb. 1894, p. 57). For the text of the manifesto of the National Reform Union, signed by fourteen important Liberal MPs, see *Daily Telegraph*, 2 July 1895, p. 7.

presented registration reform and the abolition of plural voting as basic planks in their platforms.²² And, moreover, throughout the country the reform of the House of Lords (along whatever lines) was also declared to be necessary before any beneficial social legislation could be passed; the Lords' handling of the Employers' Liability Bill of 1894 providing the Liberals with rhetorical ammunition – albeit of a somewhat low calibre – for this argument.²³

As regards the details of 'social reform' itself, however, the Liberals had very little to say. Unemployment was almost completely ignored, being denied a mention in nine-tenths of the hardly typically terse Liberal election addresses.²⁴ Indeed, specific discussion of the problem was confined to citing the words of the local secretary of the Sheffield branch of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, who apparently felt the bill passed by the Liberals providing for a reduction of working hours on railways had increased the numbers employed on the trains by 10,000.²⁵ Old-age pensions too, despite having been elevated to a new plane of political discourse by Chamberlain's championing of the issue, received little attention either in urban or rural areas relative to other items in the Liberal programme;²⁶ and non-interference with the workings of 'our great friendly societies' was the *sine qua non* of any support for any pension scheme. Particularly dismissive of old-age pensions were the Liberal leaders. Morley thought the subject 'not yet ripe for legislation', and Asquith reckoned all current proposals to be 'irreconcilable with the principle of actuarial calculation'.²⁷

II

Neatly tying in with the now standard interpretation of the period of Unionist political hegemony between 1886 and 1906 as essentially a negative phenomenon based on the weakness of their opponents, E. H. H. Green has recently argued that the *policies* advocated by the Conservative party in the 1890s were based essentially on resistance to Liberal proposals and a Salisburyian defence of property. At the grass-roots level, too, 'popular toryism' had little positive to offer, being based on local socio-economic connections and directed against pauper aliens, radical nonconformists, and other components of Conservative demonology.²⁸

²² See table 2, and appendix, table 11.

²³ The bill, first read in the Commons in February 1893, which made employers liable for accidents due to the negligence of their employees and thus abolished the doctrine of 'common employment', was amended by the Lords to allow workmen to 'contract out' of its provisions. This amendment, however, was rejected by the Liberal government and the bill was finally dropped on 20 February 1894.

²⁴ See appendix, table 11.

²⁵ *Liberal Magazine*, July 1895, p. 247; Harcourt at Derby, *Times*, 9 July 1895, p. 11. But enthusiasm for the Liberals was in 1895 unusual among railway workers. (See below, pp. 17–18.)

²⁶ See appendix, table 11.

²⁷ Morley at Newcastle (*Times*, 12 July 1895, p. 10); Asquith at East Fife (*ibid.*, 10 July 1895, p. 12). See also Morley's speech of 8 July (*ibid.*, 9 July 1895, p. 11).

²⁸ Green, *Crisis*, pp. 126–7. Green's more general contention is that between 1886 and 1914 the Conservatives transformed themselves from the party of landed property to the party of property in general (pp. 78–119).

There is much in the nature of the Conservative campaign to support this argument. It is worth pointing out, for example, that the unequivocally ‘negative’ policies of resistance to Liberal plans for home rule and Welsh disestablishment topped the list of issues mentioned in Unionist election addresses (see table 3). Moreover, the Conservative attack on the Liberals’ disestablishment bill was based less on the emotive cry of ‘The Church in Danger!’ than it was on the idea that its disendowment provisions constituted an inadmissible violation of property rights. It was thus denounced as unjust, as ‘an unpardonable act of plunder and spoliation’, as ‘absolute and downright robbery’.²⁹ Similarly treated was the question of local veto. Some Conservatives, being well aware of the social evils of alcoholism,³⁰ were not averse to some form of ‘temperance reform’: indeed, in Scotland 46 per cent of Unionist candidates broached the subject in their addresses. However, none wanted to see the enactment of a measure – such as that advocated by Harcourt – which did not provide publicans with compensation for the loss of their licences. If the liquor trade did need to be controlled, Unionists were adamant that it had to be done without resorting to ‘a policy of confiscation’, it being ‘obligatory to deal justly with those who are deprived of their property through no fault of their own’.³¹

In some respects too does the ‘popular toryism’ of the campaign fit Green’s description. Having been a major element of a bill introduced by Salisbury in 1894, the restriction of ‘pauper’ immigration was an issue not only in the East End of London but throughout the country, being mentioned in one in four addresses.³² Foreign – but not it seems specifically *Jewish* – immigrants,³³ it was argued, increased the level of competition for jobs through their alleged willingness to work for lower wages than British workmen. As John Lowles in Haggerston declared,

The time has come when some restriction should be placed upon the landing of foreign immigrants in London. The increasing hardness of the struggle for existence on the part of our own workers, makes it, in my view, imperative to take some practical step to lessen the grossly unfair competition to which they are exposed by these wretchedly poor foreigners, who, at the mercy as they are of sweaters, work and live under conditions absolutely disgraceful, and for wages with which it is impossible for our own workers to compete.³⁴

Hence in their advocacy of stricter immigration controls did Conservative candidates seek less to appeal to any xenophobic instincts than to the ‘bread

²⁹ Address of P. H. Dalbiac (North Camberwell), *Election addresses*, p. 4; speech of Lees Knowles (West Salford) *Manchester Guardian*, 8 July 1895, p. 8. For another good example of such sentiments see the speech of R. J. N. Neville (South Leeds), *Yorkshire Post*, 6 July 1895, p. 8.

³⁰ For a good example of the alarm insobriety caused to one Conservative see J. Vincent, ed., *The Crawford papers* (Manchester, 1984), p. 27.

³¹ Election addresses of Baron de Rothschild (Mid Buckinghamshire); J. Lowles (Shoreditch, Haggerston).

³² See appendix, table 12.

³³ That the vast majority of immigrants were Jews was of limited importance, as their Jewishness was largely seen as incidental to the material problems it was believed they caused.

³⁴ *Election addresses*, p. 22.

Table 3 *Issues mentioned in Unionist election addresses (top seven)*

Issue	Overall (%)	London (%)	English boroughs (%)	English counties		Scotland (%)	Wales (%)
				Contested (%)	Uncontested*		
Home rule	80	71	79	85	71	94	81
Disestablishment	67	68	60	69	57	89	88
Old-age pensions	52	56	45	60	30	48	69
Local veto	47	53	50	53	39	40	45
Agriculture	41	5	—	67	63	40	58
House of Lords	37	37	39	44	32	38	19
Employers' liability	36	25	35	43	11	54	54

* All uncontested constituencies where at least one issue mentioned in addresses.

Source: *Election addresses*.

and butter' interests of the working class. Other varieties of appeals to the economic interests of electors were also present in populist tory rhetoric, many simply taking the form of vague personal promises on the part of candidates to improve the trade or industry of their constituencies. Perhaps the best example was furnished by Colonel J. T. North, Conservative candidate for Leeds West, who openly boasted to his audiences that if sent to the House of Commons he would not waste his time in making speeches, but would devote his attention to attracting government orders to the city.³⁵ But it was in the textile regions of the north of England where 'bread and butter' issues were most important, the repeal of the 5 per cent duty placed on the import of cotton goods into India at the end of 1894 being presented by Unionists³⁶ as something that directly affected the lives of the working classes. As one placard enjoined, 'LOOK TO YOUR BREAD AND BUTTER: VOTE FOR HAROLD THOMAS AND THE REPEAL OF THE £100 WEEKLY TAX ON COTTON MILLS'.³⁷

More widespread, however, than appeals tailored to the specific economic character of individual constituencies was the general contention that under a Unionist government trade would improve, thus raising the standard of living of the people and the working classes especially.³⁸ This argument of 'Unionists and prosperity; Radicals and adversity' was related to the Conservative party's position on the rights of property insofar as the Liberals' attacks on property through local veto and disestablishment were presented as destructive of that confidence on which British economic strength was seen to depend.³⁹ Thus, along with a commitment to assisting working men in the purchase of the houses they rented⁴⁰ was property presented not as the 'enemy' but as the 'ally' of labour.

Outside of urban areas and especially in the English counties the parlous condition of agriculture was heavily emphasized by many Conservative candidates, who called on electors to 'send a party to power who ha[s] the interests of agriculture at heart'.⁴¹ Salisbury too laid great stress on the issue in his informal manifesto for the election delivered in the Lords on 6 July.⁴² However, what exactly the Conservatives proposed to do for agriculture

³⁵ *Yorkshire Post*, 8 July 1895, p. 9. See also *ibid.*, 10 July 1895, p. 9.

³⁶ Although it should be noted that some Liberals – like Sir John Hibbert in Oldham – declared themselves in favour of the removal of the duties. (See P. Harnetty, 'The Indian cotton duties controversy, 1894–1896', *English Historical Review*, 76 (1962), p. 693; *Manchester Guardian*, 9 July 1895, p. 8.)

³⁷ *Liberal Magazine*, Aug. 1895, p. 350. See also P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the new Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 86; M. Bickerstaff, 'Politics and party organisation in Oldham 1832–1914', (M.A. dissertation, Durham, 1964), pp. 167–8, 173–5.

³⁸ For good examples of electioneering material based on this idea see *Review of Reviews*, Aug. 1895, pp. 168–70.

³⁹ See, for example, the speeches of G. Balfour at Leeds and J. L. Wanklyn at Bradford (*Yorkshire Post*, 10 July 1895, p. 9, 12 July 1895, p. 7).

⁴⁰ An issue raised in 29 per cent of Unionist election addresses. (See appendix, table 12.)

⁴¹ Speech of H. L. B. McCalmont (Cambridgeshire, Newmarket), *Cambridge Daily News*, 11 July 1895, p. 3. The harvest of 1894 was thought by some at the time to have been the worst the century had experienced.

⁴² *Times*, 8 July 1895, p. 6.

remained unclear and most candidates limited themselves to nebulous references to the supposedly unfair burden of taxation borne by land. And despite the fact that it was possible in June 1895 for one of the Conservative MPs for Essex to discern ‘a Protectionist Revival’, very few candidates went as far as C. F. Hamond in Newcastle, who declared free trade ‘a sham and a fraud’.⁴³ Indeed, in the light of the fact that only 3 per cent of Unionists raised the issue at all in their addresses, it is difficult to agree with the judgement of one historian that ‘many Conservative candidates... recommended a return to protective tariffs in their manifestoes’.⁴⁴ Even where the subject was mentioned, vague declarations in favour of ‘fair trade for Britain against unfair competition’⁴⁵ or – as was common in East Anglia – proposals for the imposition of an import duty on foreign barley⁴⁶ were much more usual than any explicit calls for a *system* of protection.

What the above discussion shows, then, is that there is a strong *prima facie* case for a ‘negative’ interpretation of the Conservative appeal in 1895. However, it should be borne in mind that to accept this is largely to adopt what was the contemporary Liberal viewpoint. For James Bryce the Unionist platform was ‘purely negative’ and for Asquith it was ‘constructed of nothing but negations’; whilst for Harcourt, the Liberals main opponents were the party of ‘stagnation and utter reaction’.⁴⁷ Unionists, too, could give similar definitions of Conservatism. In an article in the *New Review* after the election, for example, A. Burroughs wrote:

Toryism needs no dynamic principle. It opposes criticism against philosophy. It represents no theory of the state; it makes no attempt, in England at least, to attain the polity of its ideal. It simply takes the statute book where Radicalism left it and draws a line across the page; when it is done drawing the line Radicalism takes away the pen and writes down a page or two more.⁴⁸

No doubt Salisbury would have agreed. But in his article Burroughs also discerned the growth of what he called ‘progressive Toryism’, blaming its emergence on Chamberlain and the Liberal Unionists, with whom Salisbury took his party into coalition immediately after the collapse of the Liberal government.⁴⁹

That there is certainly much truth in Burroughs’s comments is undeniable.

⁴³ *National Review*, June 1895, pp. 497ff; *Manchester Guardian*, 17 July 1895, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Brooks, *Destruction of Lord Rosebery*, p. 104.

⁴⁵ Byron Reed (Bradford East), cited in W. D. Ross, ‘Bradford politics, 1880–1906’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Bradford, 1977), p. 239.

⁴⁶ E.g., Rider Haggard in East Norfolk; H. L. B. McCalmont in Cambridgeshire, Newmarket; and C. W. Gray in Essex, Saffron Waldon. (See Sir R. H. Rider Haggard, *The days of my life* (2 vols., London, 1926), II, p. 112; *Cambridge Daily News*, 3, 15, 16 July 1895.)

⁴⁷ Speech of Bryce at the 1895 NLF conference, *NLF proceedings*, Jan. 1895, p. 70; Asquith at Carlisle, *Times*, 9 July 1895, p. 7; Harcourt at Nottingham, *ibid.*, 11 July 1895, p. 7.

⁴⁸ *New Review*, Aug. 1895, p. 118.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–21. From a Liberal Unionist perspective, the *Spectator* also argued along these lines, seeing the development as a good rather than a bad thing for Conservatism and Unionism generally (*Spectator*, 20 July 1895, p. 76).

Despite Chamberlain's inability to extract more than a cautious response from Salisbury to the package of reforms which he advanced in the summer of 1894,⁵⁰ it seems that many rank and file Conservatives reacted very favourably indeed to his initiative. On 30 October 1894, for instance, the Scottish National Union passed resolutions in favour of labour conciliation boards, an inclusive scheme of employers' liability, the restriction of pauper aliens, working-class house purchase, old-age pensions, registration reform, and female suffrage.⁵¹ All of these measures with the exception of the last two were components of Chamberlain's own programme.⁵² As has been shown by Hutchison, this endorsement of a 'positive Unionism' by Scottish Conservatives was reflected in the election campaign itself.⁵³ In Falkirk, for example, the contest saw both the Liberal Unionist candidate for the burgh division and the Conservative candidate for the county division propose Chamberlainite policies.⁵⁴

However, this phenomenon of 'positive Unionism' was not simply confined to Scotland, as Green seems to suggest.⁵⁵ As W. D. Ross has pointed out, Bradford Conservatives fought the election on a platform of social reform; and even A. B. Forwood, the veteran tory boss of Liverpool, was in favour of a scheme of employers' liability which would cover 'all working people'.⁵⁶ Neither was it confined to urban areas, the advocacy of old-age pensions, employers' liability, and the like occurring on a nation-wide level, being at least as prominent in contests in the counties as anywhere else; although unopposed Unionist candidates for English county seats tended to feel that the issue – indeed controversial and social issues generally – did not require to be mentioned in their usually perfunctory election addresses.⁵⁷

Moreover, the prominence of social issues like old-age pensions in the campaign of the Conservatives poses difficulties for any wholly negative interpretation of their appeal. It is, of course, true that social reform was not necessarily incompatible with the defence of property. It was hoped, for example, that by making the receipt of a pension conditional on an individual 'not having for a long antecedent period been chargeable to the public, a new and powerful motive for keeping off the rates would come into operation'.⁵⁸ But in advancing schemes of social reform, Conservatives (and Unionists generally) sought less to portray themselves as the upholders of the rights of property than to offer what they presented as a positive alternative to 'destructive' policies like disestablishment and home rule, which, they argued,

⁵⁰ Marsh, *Discipline*, p. 236.

⁵¹ *Times*, 31 Oct. 1894.

⁵² For details of Chamberlain's proposals see Marsh, *Discipline*, pp. 235–6; idem., *Joseph Chamberlain: entrepreneur in politics* (New Haven, 1994), p. 356.

⁵³ I. G. C. Hutchison, *A political history of Scotland, 1832–1924: parties, elections and issues* (Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 199–204.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁵⁵ Green, *Crisis*, pp. 129–30.

⁵⁶ Ross, 'Bradford politics', pp. 239–40; P. J. Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism: a political and social history of Liverpool, 1868–1939* (Liverpool, 1981), p. 155.

⁵⁷ See table 3, and appendix, table 12.

⁵⁸ Sir J. Gorst, 'The Conservative programme of social reform', *Nineteenth Century*, July 1895, p. 16.

could in practice do little to benefit the material welfare of the people.⁵⁹ As Salisbury explained:

Our policy is a negative one so far as it refuses to enter into these ambitious programmes or further these revolutionary changes; but it is not a negative, but a very positive policy in that it pledges us to do the utmost that our powers enable us to do in order to mitigate the misery which attends the vicissitudes of this changed time and to lessen the sorrows that attend the lot of so many of our fellow creatures.⁶⁰

Also, through their rejection of Harcourt's Local Veto Bill, Unionists presented themselves as opponents of legislation directed against the interests of working-class electors. In exempting from its provisions restaurants, hotels, wine merchants, railway station waiting rooms, and 'the rich man's club', local veto was 'class legislation in its worst form', directed at 'the working man's public-house, the home of his friendly societies'.⁶¹ As Balfour put it:

The poor man, the man of moderate means, who gets his glass of beer – and surely he has a perfect right to get his glass of beer – at the publichouse will be prevented from doing so, while the rich man who supplies his consumption from the wholesale dealers, the member of the club, the person who has access to the railway station, will all be entirely outside the [provisions of the bill].⁶²

Conservative identification with aspects of working-class popular culture beyond the doors of the pub was also important. In his opening speech of the campaign, for example, the Conservative candidate for West Leeds told his audience how 'he always read with pleasure about the doings of Yorkshire football teams'.⁶³ This identification with working-class popular culture could extend to a defence of it, against the attacks of the censorious, kill-joy Liberal party. One Unionist activist in Lincolnshire argued, for instance, that 'in voting for the Unionist' the electors would be 'taking the best means to preserve sport and the healthy recreations in which Englishmen delighted', and 'if they did not support the Unionists the faddists would close the music halls, stop horse-racing, and would gladly put a veto on football matches'.⁶⁴

Most important of all though was the fact – largely ignored or unnoticed by historians⁶⁵ – that the 1895 campaign saw the Unionist party cast itself as a positive and truly *liberal* alternative to the falsely liberal 'democratic tyranny' of modern radicalism. As one of the Conservative candidates for Essex put it in his address, 'true[r] Liberalism and better legislative progress will be obtained

⁵⁹ The speeches of C. T. Ritchie (Croydon) and F. Wooton Isaacson (Stepney) on 11 July contain typical examples of such arguments. (See *The Standard*, 12 July 1895, p. 2.)

⁶⁰ *Times*, 8 July 1895, p. 6.

⁶¹ Handbill of E. H. Llewellyn (Somerset North), cited in *Irish Times*, 23 July 1895, p. 5; Chamberlain at North Lambeth, *Times*, 8 July 1895, p. 8.

⁶² *Times*, 10 July 1895, p. 9. Similarly, the Conservative candidate for the Gainsborough division of Lincolnshire argued that local veto would have the effect of 'preventing the agricultural labourer having a glass of beer' while at the same time allowing the rich man to 'have as much liquor as he is able to pay for' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 July 1895, p. 8).

⁶³ *Yorkshire Post*, 5 July 1895, p. 5.

⁶⁴ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 July 1895, p. 8.

⁶⁵ But see Lawrence, 'Party politics', pp. 65ff; idem, 'Urban toryism', pp. 638–41.

from the Conservatives and Unionists than from the Political Party who has been in power for the past three years'.⁶⁶ Thus, far from being a device to lure the beer-sodden lumpenproletariat to the polls, the Unionists' position on local veto – as exemplified by the words of Balfour above – was designed to appeal to the freedom-loving, hardworking, and above all respectable working man, and his right to a pint or two after downing tools for the day.⁶⁷ In assailing this right, local veto was presented as an unreasonable, unfair, and basically illiberal measure.⁶⁸ In Derby, posters proclaimed that 'Harcourt and Roe' were 'sapping and undermining the liberties of the people'; and in Bradford, a group of men paraded around the town in the Conservative interest wearing muzzles symbolic of the repressive nature of the Liberal proposal.⁶⁹ Three months after the election, the Liberal *Westminster Review* echoed what many Unionists had said during the campaign by recognizing that local veto 'was of all measures the most difficult to defend from the standpoint of true Liberalism', it being regarded as 'a clumsy infringement of the doctrine of individual liberty'.⁷⁰

Local veto was not, however, the only proposal which Unionists attacked as illiberal; it simply served as the best example of the 'grandmotherly legislation' which the Liberal party was seeking to foist upon the British people, who were after all, 'free men and not children to be dictated to'.⁷¹ In respect of employers' liability, Liberal insistence on there being no provision for contracting out was condemned as injurious to 'the liberty which every one now enjoys to promote his own individual interests in the way he thinks best'.⁷² Preferring a measure which allowed the workman to negotiate with his employer an alternative deal to that offered by the state, the Unionists could present themselves as upholding 'that freedom of action which has always been the pride of our race'.⁷³ On the same grounds were based Unionist objections to that great tenet of Labour policy in the 1890s, a universal (and non-

⁶⁶ *Election addresses*, p. 39. Speaking at Saffron Walden, the same candidate declared that if the electors 'wanted true Liberalism they must belong to the modern Conservative party; if they wanted political tyranny, [they must] enrol themselves among the Liberal body' (*Cambridge Daily News*, 10 July 1895, p. 3).

⁶⁷ This was very much the theme of the popular election poster which showed "'Rosebery, Harcourt, Morley, and Co.'" putting up the shutters of a public house, notwithstanding the protests made by an "intelligent seventh standard boy", who tells these statesmen "I have come for father's dinner beer"' (*Manchester Guardian*, 17 July 1895, p. 4). For a reproduction of the poster itself – along with several other popular posters of the campaign – see 'The general election, 1895: the poster in politics', *Review of Reviews*, Aug. 1895, pp. 168–76.

⁶⁸ Local veto, of course, was an especially convenient issue for Liberal Unionists, as it gave them a valuable opportunity to assert their liberal credentials. The Liberal Unionist candidate for Edinburgh East, for instance, 'thought the bill brought in by the Government was a very wrong measure and... was opposed to it because he was Liberal' (*Scotsman*, 5 July, p. 6).

⁶⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 18 July 1895, p. 9; Ross, 'Bradford politics', p. 240. T. Roe was Harcourt's running-mate in Derby.

⁷⁰ *Westminster Review*, Oct. 1895, pp. 358–9.

⁷¹ Address of C. G. Pym (Bedford), *Election addresses*, p. 66.

⁷² Address of S. Gedge (Walsall), *ibid.*, p. 87.

⁷³ Address of H. L. B. McCalmont (Cambridgeshire, Newmarket), *ibid.*, p. 31.

voluntary) eight-hour day.⁷⁴ For W. Garfit, Conservative candidate for the tiny borough of Boston, such a measure ‘would ... interfere too much with that individual freedom which has hitherto been one of the cherished principles of the English people’.⁷⁵ Even the defence of the House of Lords – an institution which incidentally many Unionists declared themselves not unprepared to consider reforming⁷⁶ – was presented in libertarian terms. Especially through their rejection of home rule, the upper house was hailed as the defender of the ‘Rights and Liberties of the people’ which the bill of 1893, by placing ‘Great Britain at the mercy of eighty irresponsible Irishmen, who would impose laws and vote taxes to which they would neither contribute nor be subjected’, threatened to trample on.⁷⁷

Given all this, then, it should come as no surprise that Liberal commentators complained after the election that the party which they saw as that of ‘vested interests, monopoly, and privilege’ sought to bolster itself with the old Liberal ‘theories of the liberty of the subject, freedom of contract, [and] unrestrained competition’.⁷⁸ However, for many Unionists the new libertarian appeal of their party had real substance: it was not mere politicking. *Blackwood’s Magazine*, for example, was by the time of the formation of Salisbury’s ministry convinced that the ‘one great principle’ of the incoming government was that ‘of personal freedom in all the relations of life. Free labour, free contract, free choice of education ... and the ability of each individual to regulate his own life and morals’.⁷⁹

III

In returning to the House of Commons 341 Conservatives and 70 Liberal Unionists, the general election of July 1895 was a crushing defeat for the Liberal party, who together with their Irish allies obtained only 259 seats. It was a result which confounded the political meteorologists of the time, Leopold Maxse’s *National Review* remarking in August ‘how foreign to all minds was the notion of the utter smash-up of the Home Rule Party’.⁸⁰ Although it was true that most people – the Liberal chief whip included⁸¹ – anticipated a Unionist victory, the magnitude of this victory took them by surprise.⁸² Indeed, it was

⁷⁴ Although a significant number of Unionist candidates, especially in London and mining constituencies, declared themselves in favour of an eight-hour day for those – like miners – who were engaged in dangerous trades. ⁷⁵ *Election addresses*, p. 68.

⁷⁶ Even cabinet members like Sir Michael Hicks-Beach (see his speech at Bristol, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1895, p. 5). In all, 34 Conservatives and 12 Liberal Unionists were willing (if their election addresses are to be believed) to allow some moderate sort of House of Lords reform.

⁷⁷ See Salisbury in the House of Lords, *Times*, 8 July 1895, p. 6; Chamberlain at North Lambeth, *ibid.*, p. 8; Balfour at Glasgow, *ibid.*, 17 July 1895, p. 10; Hicks-Beach at Bristol, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1895, p. 5. The quote is from the address of E. F. G. Hatch (Lancashire, Gorton), *Election addresses*, p. 45. ⁷⁸ *Westminster Review*, Aug. 1895, p. 175.

⁷⁹ *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Aug. 1895, p. 306. ⁸⁰ *National Review*, Aug. 1895, p. 722.

⁸¹ See J. A. Spender, *Sir Robert Hudson: a memoir* (London, 1930), p. 51.

⁸² Sir William Harcourt, for example, had ‘expected a deluge but had not calculated on an earthquake’ (letter to Robert Spence Watson, 28 July 1895; cited in P. Corder, *The life of Robert Spence Watson* (London, 1914), p. 269).

generally assumed that the election would return a house in which the Conservatives would be forced to rely on the Liberal Unionists for an absolute majority, this majority being estimated at between 30 and 60 votes.⁸³ In the event, the majority was 152, a result that only Lord George Hamilton came close to predicting.⁸⁴

As the magnitude of the Unionist victory became clear, the Liberal press scrambled to find explanations for it, one journal detailing at least fourteen – from the retirement of Gladstone to the deleterious effect of the disastrous first days of polling.⁸⁵ However, for a great many Liberals chief among the causes of the defeat was the Local Veto Bill, which according to the *Speaker* had been ‘the determining influence of this General Election’.⁸⁶ Also prominent in Liberal exculpations was the question of ‘bad trade’, which Harcourt apparently attributed his defeat to more even than local veto.⁸⁷ Indeed, the charge that many Unionist candidates mounted ‘bad trade’ or ‘bread and butter’ appeals was very much the line of official Liberalism, the NLF Report for 1896 coming to the conclusion that ‘The electorate was misled... by wholesale promises on the part of Tories and Liberal Unionists alike as to the material advantages to be obtained by returning their party to power.’⁸⁸

Historians like Neal Blewett and Henry Pelling appear to have accepted this interpretation and have argued that in allowing the Unionists to present themselves as the harbingers of economic prosperity, the recession of the early-mid 1890s was the primary cause of the Liberal defeat in 1895.⁸⁹ Although it is difficult to evaluate with any great certainty the electoral impact of ‘bad trade’, it seems clear that in urban and industrial areas it was of at least some importance. In the textile regions of the north of England, for example, where electors were enjoined to ‘help bring in a Government which will look after the interests of British trade’, there is little doubt that the Liberals lost heavily over the issue of the Indian cotton duties – which were presented by Unionist candidates as imposing a ‘£900,000 tax on the manufacturers and operatives of Lancashire and Cheshire’.⁹⁰

If in 1895 local veto and Unionist pronouncements about the economic

⁸³ *Annual register*, 1895, p. 149.

⁸⁴ Lord G. Hamilton, *Parliamentary reminiscences and reflections, 1886–1906* (London, 1922), p. 249. For a more detailed analysis of the results of the election see P. A. Readman, ‘The general election of 1895’ (B.A. dissertation, Cambridge, 1997), pp. 28–32. ⁸⁵ *Speaker*, 27 July 1895, p. 85.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 20 July 1895, p. 58.

⁸⁷ Letter to Gladstone, 16 July 1895 (cited in A. G. Gardiner, *The life of Sir William Harcourt* (London, 1923), p. 371); letter to R. S. Watson, 28 July 1895 (cited in Corder, *Spence Watson*, p. 269).

⁸⁸ *NLF proceedings*, Mar. 1896, p. 12. See also R. S. Watson, *The National Liberal Federation* (London, 1906), pp. 179–80.

⁸⁹ N. Blewett, *The peers, the parties and the people: the general elections of 1910* (London, 1972), p. 17; H. Pelling, ‘British labour and British imperialism’, in *idem.*, *Popular politics and society in late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), p. 92; and *idem.*, *A social geography of British elections, 1885–1910* (London, 1967), pp. 18, 369, and *passim*.

⁹⁰ Unionist election leaflet, cited in *Liberal Magazine*, Oct. 1895, pp. 420–1. The *Review of Reviews* estimated that the cotton duties cost the Liberals about a dozen seats (Aug. 1895, p. 100).

consequences of a Liberal government served to alienate some Liberal voters, home rule, disestablishment, and the issue of the House of Lords aroused no popular passions on a national scale. With respect to Irish home rule, both Liberal and Unionist opinion was agreed that it had comparatively little to do with the result, despite Chamberlain's predictable assertions that it was the 'cardinal' or 'primary' issue of the contest.⁹¹ If anything, home rule drove votes from the Liberals, it being hard to defend the justice or indeed liberality of a bill which proposed to send to Westminster a greater number of Irish MPs than either Ireland's population, or her contribution to the imperial exchequer, warranted; and which allowed these representatives to vote on purely British matters.

Although poor organization and not the party's commitment to Welsh disestablishment was at the root of Liberal reverses in Wales, in Scotland disestablishment lost more votes than it won. Whilst Sir Charles Cameron's Scottish Disestablishment Bill drove both the 'Wee Frees' and supporters of the established church into the arms of the Unionists, the long delay in its introduction served to estrange many Liberal activists to the extent that come the election considerable apathy prevailed in the party's Scottish organization.⁹² In the light of this, and the defeat of Cameron in the College division of Glasgow, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that disestablishment had much to do with the heavy Liberal losses in Scotland in 1895.

Similarly, there was little enthusiasm for Rosebery's crusade against the House of Lords. Indeed, it is likely that the vagueness of the Liberals' position on the issue did much to negate any potential enthusiasm that did exist, and allowed the Unionists to cast them in the role of unprincipled constitution-wreckers bent on the ending rather than the mending of the upper house simply because it opposed Liberal bills.⁹³ Furthermore, there was no great popular grievance which the Liberals could use as a stick with which to beat the peers, as there certainly was in 1910. The Lords' insistence that a contracting out clause be added to the Employers' Liability Bill, for example, was by no means universally disapproved of by working men, as even landed backbenchers like A. S. T. Griffith-Boscawen were aware.⁹⁴ If the Lords' action invoked the strong condemnation of the TUC,⁹⁵ many railwaymen – whose pension schemes were threatened by the bill – registered their appreciation by voting for Unionist candidates. As the *Spectator* pointed out, the Unionists won not

⁹¹ E.g., *Westminster Review*, Oct. 1895, p. 359; *Nineteenth Century*, Aug. 1895, p. 179. Chamberlain at North Lambeth, *Times*, 8 July 1895; at Hanley, *ibid.*, 13 July 1895, p. 14.

⁹² J. G. Kellas, 'The Liberal party in Scotland, 1885–1895' (Ph.D. dissertation, London, 1961), p. 108.

⁹³ Balfour, for example, asserted that the Liberals had chosen to abolish the Lords simply because it contained 'very few gentlemen of Lord Rosebery's way of thinking' (speech at Glasgow, cited in *National Review*, Aug. 1895, p. 728).

⁹⁴ A. S. T. Griffith-Boscawen, *Fourteen years in parliament* (London, 1907), p. 79.

⁹⁵ See H. A. Clegg et al., *A history of British trade unions since 1889* (3 vols., Oxford, 1964), I, p. 253.

only in Crewe, where a Liberal majority of 1568 was converted into a minority of 550, but in at least eight other constituencies where the railway vote was ‘the dominating factor’.⁹⁶

In contrast to the opinion of many historians, Liberal contemporaries did not generally ascribe the Unionist victory to the relative organizational strengths of the two main parties. Most thought the result a consequence of a failure to explain adequately the principles which lay behind many of their great reforms, ‘the real want’ being ‘not so much party organization as political and civic education’.⁹⁷ But despite this argument – which seems incidentally to have been a little too uncritically accepted by H. C. G. Matthew as a reason for the party’s comparative lack of success after 1886⁹⁸ – organization was a very important factor in the election of 1895.

If, as Janet Howarth has suggested, the Liberals in two Northamptonshire divisions were well prepared for the ensuing contest,⁹⁹ this was exceptional. In Liverpool, for example, the unpreparedness of Liberals for battle in July 1895 was indicated by the decision of the Liberal mayor of that city to hold the elections at the latest possible date;¹⁰⁰ and Lawrence has described how in Wolverhampton between 1892 and 1895 official Liberal party activity in the West division of the town ‘was confined to the spasmodic and rather genteel exploits of the Women’s Liberal Association – since both the Liberal 300 and the Executive Committee had died out’.¹⁰¹ Such was the manifest torpor exhibited by the Liberals throughout the Midland region as a whole that the Eastern Union of Conservative Agents were as early as spring 1894 driven to speculate as to whether ‘the leaders of the Radical party’ were ‘seeking a defeat at the general election as a means of ridding themselves once and for all of the Home Rule difficulty’.¹⁰²

The situation in Birmingham, where Liberal disorganization was reflected by the fact that the process of selecting candidates was not actually begun until after the fall of Rosebery’s government, doubtless fuelled such speculation.¹⁰³ But even in the traditional Liberal strongholds of the ‘Celtic fringe’ the picture was little different. In Scotland, notwithstanding D. W. Urwin’s in any case highly dubious argument that after 1893 ‘in many, if not in most, constituencies [Unionist] organization was badly defective or non-existent’, that it was in much better shape than its Liberal counterpart is surely unquestionable.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ *Spectator*, 3 Aug. 1895, p. 142. See also *Globe*, 22 July 1895, p. 5, and *National Review*, Sept. 1895, p. 87.

⁹⁷ *Westminster Review*, Jan. 1896, p. 6. See also the letters of J. Howes to the *Daily News* and the *Manchester Guardian* cited in J. Howes, *Twenty five years fight with the tories* (Leeds, 1907), pp. 316–18.

⁹⁸ H. C. G. Matthew, ‘Rhetoric and politics in Britain, 1860–1950’, in P. J. Waller, ed., *Politics and social change in modern Britain: essays presented to A. F. Thompson* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 34–58.

⁹⁹ J. Howarth, ‘The Liberal revival in Northamptonshire, 1880–1895’, *Historical Journal*, 12 (1969), p. 94.

¹⁰⁰ Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism*, p. 154.

¹⁰¹ Lawrence, ‘Party politics’, p. 100.

¹⁰² *Tory*, 15 Feb. 1894, p. 12.

¹⁰³ See Marsh, *Chamberlain*, p. 369.

¹⁰⁴ D. W. Urwin, ‘The development of the Conservative party in Scotland until 1912’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 61 (1965), p. 109. More recently Hutchison has painted a very different picture

Whilst the Unionists made substantial gains in the registration courts in 32 constituencies in 1893, in only 6 did the Liberals make any gains at all, and the following year the Liberals allowed their opponents to record a net gain of over 2,000 in Glasgow alone.¹⁰⁵ In Scotland as elsewhere, the Liberals seemed to have difficulty finding suitable candidates: if as early as the spring of 1894 the Unionists had candidates for most Scottish constituencies, as late as 25 June 1895 the Liberals lacked candidates for 6 of the 26 divisions in the west of the country and ultimately ended up contesting fewer seats than their rivals in Scotland as a whole.¹⁰⁶ It was thus with warranted pessimism that the Scottish whip recalled one of his regional organizers from holiday with the telegraphed instruction to ‘prepare for the worst’.¹⁰⁷

In no better state was the Welsh organization which, despite having no real lack of candidates, had neglected the register, was short of funds, and suffered from the fact that the newly formed Welsh National Federation was unloved by most Liberals.¹⁰⁸ Divisions to an extent attributable to the widespread belief that the activities of a group of five dissident Welsh MPs in large part accounted for the defeat of the government also existed. During the campaign, for example, Bryn Roberts refused to speak on behalf of Lloyd George, one such rebel MP.¹⁰⁹

Nothing illustrated the poor state of Liberal organization better than the party’s want of candidates: in all, 115 constituencies were left uncontested by the Liberals, 109 of which were in England. Throughout great swathes of the south and Midlands Unionist seats lay unmolested by Liberal challenges. In the 31 county divisions of Middlesex, Sussex, Surrey, Hertfordshire, and Kent, for example, there were only 6 contests. Only in Wales and the north of England did the Unionists leave more constituencies than the Liberals uncontested. However, in terms of those seats actually contested, it is difficult to come to any general conclusions about where geographically party organization was important; yet what certainly can be said is that it mattered most in marginal constituencies. As Ostrogorski long ago pointed out, it was only through good canvassing that the ‘floating voters’ crucial to the outcome of tight contests could be got at,¹¹⁰ and it was clear that by 1895 the Unionists had a better canvassing machinery in place than their opponents. In Scotland,

of the organization of Scottish Conservatism in his *Political history of Scotland* (see esp. pp. 196–7). For the poor state of its Liberal counterpart at the time of the election see Kellas, ‘Liberal party in Scotland’, pp. 121–6.

¹⁰⁵ *Scottish Review*, Apr. 1894, p. 377; Hutchison, *Political history of Scotland*, p. 197.

¹⁰⁶ *Scottish Review*, Apr. 1894, p. 378; *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1895, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 1895, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 29 July 1895, p. 8, 30 July 1895, p. 8; *Times*, 5 July 1895, p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ K. O. Morgan, *Wales in British politics* (Cardiff, 1980), p. 156. The five Welsh MPs had renounced the whip in spring 1894 on the basis that the issue of Welsh disestablishment was not placed at the head of the Queen’s Speech. (Ibid., pp. 143–4.)

¹¹⁰ Ostrogorski, *Democracy*, pp. 459–60.

Table 4 *Unionist registration work in Leeds, 1894*

Division	Number of electors	Number of days canvassing
Central	13,263	135
North	16,173	184.5
East	11,168	87
South	13,604	136.5
West	16,452	164

Source: Tory, Aug. 1894, p. 492 (microfilm pagination).

for example, where, according to one authority, ‘Liberal organisation was probably a contradiction in terms’, so much difficulty had the Liberals in finding canvassers in 1895 that they were forced to rely on student volunteers.¹¹¹ Success in the registration courts too was often sufficient to swing the balance in marginal seats. In Walsall and the Stroud division of Gloucestershire, for instance, small Liberal majorities of 79 and 201 were easily erased by Unionist registration court gains of 238 and 615.¹¹² Moreover – and this fact appears to have escaped even Ostrogorski – such gains were crucially dependent on thorough canvassing work, which even in densely populated urban constituencies such as those of Leeds could take hundreds of days to complete (see table 4). And it was the Unionists, assisted by the substantial reservoir of man and woman power provided by the Primrose League, who were best able to undertake the year-round canvassing activity required to make a good show at the Revising Barristers’ courts.

It is unsurprising, then, that the Unionists topped the poll in the vast majority of marginal constituencies in 1895, winning 56 of the 66 seats held in 1892 by majorities of less than 5 per cent.¹¹³ In Salford, for example, the more effective organization of the Conservatives no doubt enabled them to increase their representation from 2 to 3 seats on a very small swing, the pioneer psephologist J. A. Baines commenting that ‘93 votes would have been enough, if judiciously cast... to have handed the whole town over to the Gladstonian side’.¹¹⁴ The same point can be made for Manchester, where a swing of 0.9 over the city as a whole was enough for the Unionists to gain 2 seats from the Liberals, thereby increasing the number they controlled to 5. Indeed, the almost universal success of the Unionists in marginal constituencies goes a long way in explaining the complaint, much aired by Liberal commentators at the time, that the distribution of seats between the parties was not in proportion to

¹¹¹ Kellas, ‘Liberal party in Scotland’, pp. 124, 129.

¹¹² See *Tory*, Oct. 1894, pp. 591, 593 (microfilm pagination).

¹¹³ J. A. Baines, ‘Parliamentary representation in England illustrated by the elections of 1892 and 1895’, *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* (1896), p. 77.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Table 5 *Relation between Conservative vote and the size of poll in English borough constituencies 1885–1906*

	Number of constituencies with correlations of			
	Less than –0.20	Total more than –0.50	Total more than –0.50	More than –0.80
London	4	10	49	33
Yorks/the north	15	28	8	4
Lanc./Cheshire	5	13	21	6
North Midlands	12	18	12	6
West, East, and South Midlands	3	8	12	5
South-east/west	4	8	9	4

Source: J. P. Cornford, 'The transformation of Conservatism in the late nineteenth century', *Victorian Studies*, 7 (1963), p. 55.

the distribution of votes cast.¹¹⁵ Even the hardly pro-Liberal Baines reckoned the Unionists to have won 92 more seats than their share of the vote indicated.¹¹⁶

The centrality of party organization to Unionist and especially Conservative electoral success between 1886 and 1906 generally has been highlighted by historians, but since Cornford's seminal article in 1963 the tendency has been to put a negative spin on its importance.¹¹⁷ Rather than Unionist organization being particularly strong, its Liberal counterpart was particularly weak, proving itself less able to mobilize both resources and potential supporters. For Blewett, 'in the period 1886–1910, the Unionist achievement was essentially a negative one based on the failure of the Liberal leaders to arouse the party workers and to rally the Liberal voters'; and as already noted at the beginning of this article, Pugh has argued that 'Liberal abstentions' lay at the heart of a 'Conservative victory by default' in 1895.¹¹⁸

Crucial to interpretations like these is Cornford's argument that until 1906 Unionist success at the polls – based as it was on the non-participation of Liberal supporters – was 'inversely correlated with turnout'.¹¹⁹ Cornford's arrival at this conclusion was based on his use of a computer to generate correlation coefficients expressive of the relationship between the Conservative vote and the size of the poll in English borough constituencies for the six general elections between 1885 and 1906 (see table 5). Despite the fact that this analysis

¹¹⁵ See, for example, *Liberal Magazine*, Aug. 1895, p. 339; *Review of Reviews*, Aug. 1895, pp. 99–100.

¹¹⁶ Baines, 'Parliamentary representation', p. 82.

¹¹⁷ Cornford, 'Transformation'; Marsh, *Discipline*; Shannon, *Age of Salisbury*; Green, 'Radical Conservatism'; idem, *Crisis*.

¹¹⁸ Blewitt, *Peers*, p. 22; Pugh, *British politics*, p. 72.

¹¹⁹ Cornford, 'Election data', p. 113.

Table 6 *Multiple regressions of changes in turnout and Unionist vote for all constituencies* at each pair of elections, 1885–1906*

General elections	Correlation
1885/6	–0.361
1886/92	–0.086
1892/5	–0.033
1895/1900	–0.083
1900/6	–0.223

* By ‘all constituencies’ it is assumed that Cornford means ‘all *English* constituencies’.

Source: Cornford, ‘Transformation’, pp. 54–5 n. 45.

Table 7 *Relationship between turnout and swing to Unionists 1892–5: constituency average*

	Swing where turnout rose	Swing where turnout fell
London	7.6	6.4
English boroughs	2.4	2.8

was limited to English boroughs, it is now commonly implied that the Unionists generally did well even in non-urban constituencies when the turnout was low.¹²⁰ But, as Cornford himself asserts, his work does not support the argument that there was an inverse correlation between Conservative electoral success and turnout, *except in English boroughs*.¹²¹ As his own figures (reproduced in table 6) show, only between the general elections of 1885 and 1886, and 1900 and 1906 are the correlations large enough to sustain the notion that throughout the country generally such an inverse relationship existed.

Now, for one reason or another, Cornford chose not to extract from the data presented in table 6 the relationship between turnout and vote in *English boroughs* over each pair of elections between 1885 and 1906.¹²² Yet as tables 7 and 8 show, the election of 1895 demonstrates that it was not always the case during this period that in English borough constituencies there was any real inverse correlation between turnout and the Conservative – or Unionist – share of the vote. Using the same method of analysis – which seems more intuitively accessible than any based on correlation coefficients – it becomes

¹²⁰ Marsh, *Discipline*, p. 428. See also Green, *Crisis*, p. 126.

¹²¹ Cornford, ‘Transformation’, pp. 54–5 n. 45.

¹²² An odd oversight, given the fact that the subject of his analysis was the relationship between turnout and the Conservative vote in urban areas.

Table 8 *Relationship between turnout and swing to Conservatives 1892–5: constituency average*

	Swing where turnout rose	Swing where turnout fell
London	8.8	6.3
English boroughs	2.3	2.4

Table 9 *Relationship between turnout and swing in English counties 1892–5: constituency average*

	Swing where turnout rose	Swing where turnout fell
To Unionists	3.8	2.7
To Conservatives	4.1	3.0

Table 10 *Relationship between swing and turnout in Wales and Scotland 1892–5: constituency average*

	Swing where turnout rose	Swing where turnout fell
To Unionists	3.3	2.1
To Conservatives	3.6	2.0

Figures for tables 7–10 computed from F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary election results, 1885–1918* (Dartmouth, 1989).

clear that in both English county constituencies and Wales and Scotland there are even fewer grounds for the argument. Indeed, it seems more likely that a small positive correlation existed. (See tables 9 and 10.)

It has, however, been argued that the Conservative leadership none the less believed that their party would be more successful if turnout was low, and therefore directed much of their organizational energy to keeping voters – especially rural labourers – away from the poll.¹²³ As Green has argued, ‘To achieve low turnouts in the counties the Conservative hierarchy sought to hold general elections at times, such as during the harvest, when the labouring turnout was certain to be low.’¹²⁴ Moreover, Peter Marsh, Richard Shannon, and Ewan Green have all suggested that in addition to seeking to keep the polls

¹²³ Marsh, *Discipline*, p. 207; Green, ‘Radical Conservatism’, pp. 677, 680; idem, *Crisis*, p. 126.

¹²⁴ Green, *Crisis*, p. 126.

down, the Conservative organization aimed at minimizing the numbers of registered voters.¹²⁵ By 1895, according to Shannon, ‘tight registers and low polls were classic axioms of Conservative electioneering’.¹²⁶

However, I have discovered no compelling evidence to suggest that the Conservatives saw either low turnouts or short registers as advantageous in any general sense. For a start, whilst it is true that three of the five general elections between 1885 and 1900 (including that of 1895) were held at harvest time, the only real evidence that has been presented to back up the argument that their timing reflected a Conservative plan to keep turnout low relates to the general election of 1892 and the Rossendale by-election of 1891.¹²⁷ And that the Unionists were less fearful of the urban masses than has previously been assumed seems borne out by the fact that in April 1894, at a council meeting of the National Society of Conservative Agents – a body actuated more by considerations of party than principle – a resolution was passed calling for ‘the shortening of the [franchise] qualification to six months’, and the ‘facilitating [of] the acquisition of the franchise by lodgers’.¹²⁸ Furthermore, some Conservative agents objected to the Liberal Registration Bill of 1894 on the grounds that in providing for the holding of all polls on one day – Saturday – it would serve to lower the turnout by effectively ‘disenfranchising’ those working-class electors who attended football matches, and thus do damage to the Unionist cause.¹²⁹ Similarly at constituency level, it is impossible to discern any *systematic* attempt on the part of Conservative agents either to keep registers down or polls low. Whether an agent in a particular constituency made more claims than he did objections, or vice versa, was a function of the pre-registration canvass and not a reflection of any hard and fast plan imposed by Middleton and Co. from above. And at the registration courts prior to the election of 1895, it seems clear from the information given by the *Tory* that agents concentrated at least as hard on getting people on as they did on getting people off the register. In the Gower division of Glamorgan, for example, 386 claims were made, but only 10 objections; and in Tyneside the ratio of claims to objections was nearly 7:1.¹³⁰

Conservative party organization was a major factor behind the defeat of the Liberals in 1895, but not because it was oriented around and achieved the

¹²⁵ Marsh, *Discipline*, pp. 195–6; Shannon, *Age of Salisbury*, p. 313; Green, ‘Radical Conservatism’, pp. 679–80.

¹²⁶ Shannon, *Age of Salisbury*, p. 313.

¹²⁷ See Green, *Crisis*, pp. 126, 365 (nn. 41, 42, 43, 46). Although Marsh has argued that ‘Middleton contributed to the timing of the elections of 1892 and ‘95 by urging that they be called for harvest time, when agricultural labourers... would be distracted from voting’ (*Discipline*, p. 207), the only evidence presented in support of this statement is a communication of April 1890 from the chief agent to Salisbury concerning the best time to elevate a certain MP to the Lords, thereby creating the need to hold a by-election.

¹²⁸ *Tory*, 9 May 1894, p. 331 (microfilm pagination). Similar resolutions were passed at provincial agents’ meetings around the same time. That the *Tory* was a semi-secret organ with a very limited print-run makes it highly improbable that the publicizing of such resolutions was part of any sort of propaganda exercise.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 1894, pp. 591, 589.

‘negative’ goal of keeping the numbers on the register low and the turnout down. Indeed, given the fact that no inverse correlation existed – or was generally believed to exist – between Conservative electoral success and turnout in 1895, it is difficult to see how it is possible to assert the reality of such a goal.

To return to the impact of the issues of the campaign on the result, no doubt Liberal ‘faddism’ alienated some voters, as contemporaries were very ready to point out. Even the Unionist *Quarterly Review* was prepared to interpret the result as ‘more a condemnation of the Gladstonians than a declaration in favour of Conservatism’.¹³¹ Yet it is misleadingly reductionist to present the Unionist, or even the Conservative, message in 1895 as a negative defence of property and the institutions of the realm when the reality was much more complex. Combined with their championing of working-class popular culture and (more incongruously) with their espousal of social reforms like old-age pensions, was a definite and electorally effective *liberal* message. And it is possible by way of conclusion to suggest that this message did much to convince many on the ‘progressive’ wing of the Liberals that it was now time for the party to take a new course, towards the removal not of political but of social grievances. It was felt that as ‘the worn-out creed of decayed Liberalism ha[d] become in great part the political faith of the Conservatives’,¹³² it was time to remodel the agenda for reform along more ‘collectivist’ lines. In the *Progressive Review* of November 1896, Haldane put the radical point succinctly:

To-day it is not for individual freedom that we have to struggle against classes and privilege. That battle has been fought by our ancestors and won. But we have to win a yet harder fight, a fight for emancipation from conditions which deny fair play to the collective energy for the good of society as a whole... the struggle must take place as it did of yore, for freedom from hampering restrictions, but restrictions not of individual but of social liberty.¹³³

Without going so far as suggesting that the election of 1895 was crucial to the move toward ‘New Liberalism’, it is at least true that for some Liberals it demonstrated the political bankruptcy of many of the old ideas and in doing so added weight to the progressive argument.¹³⁴ It was not for nothing that that great left-leaning historian Elie Halevy judged 1895 to be ‘a turning point in the moral and political history of the British people’.¹³⁵

¹³² *Westminster Review*, Jan. 1896, p. 1. And cf. David Brooks’s comment that the experience of the election did much to suggest that ‘the traditional appurtenances of British Liberalism... [had] been appropriated by its ancient rival’ (*Destruction of Lord Rosebery*, p. 107).

¹³¹ *Quarterly Review*, Oct. 1895, p. 552.

¹³³ *Progressive Review*, Nov. 1896, pp. 141–2.

¹³⁴ Although in some circles the defeat seemed to indicate that the party needed to ditch programmatic faddism and get back to individualist basics. (The best example of this is probably F. W. Hirst et al., *Essays in Liberalism by six Oxford men* (London, 1897)).

¹³⁵ E. Halevy, *Imperialism and the rise of labour* (2nd edn, London, 1951), p. 4. For a similar assessment see F. A. Channing, *Memories of Midland politics* (London, 1981), p. 172.

Appendix Table 12 *Issues mentioned in Unionist election addresses*

Issue	Overall (%)	London (%)	English boroughs (%)	English counties		Scotland (%)	Wales (%)
				Contested (%)	Uncontested (%)		
Home rule	80	71	79	85	71	94	81
Disestablishment	67	68	60	69	57	89	88
Old-age pensions	52	56	45	60	30	48	69
Local veto	47	53	50	53	39	40	45
Agriculture	41	5	—	67	63	40	58
House of lords	37	37	39	44	32	38	19
Employers' liability	36	25	35	43	11	54	54
W/c house purchase	29	41	26	32	11	35	54
Defence	29	34	34	28	32	25	8
Poor law reform	26	42	20	39	13	22	12
Alien immigration	25	44	26	29	14	15	23
Religious education	22	20	35	26	14	8	38
Foreign policy	20	22	23	21	18	15	19
Registration reform	19	31	18	22	11	20	4
Labour conciliation boards	19	14	19	22	2	35	12
Housing improvement	17	19	17	16	16	18	31
Temperance reform	14	12	12	11	7	46	—
Import of prison-made goods	11	10	15	12	9	5	8
The empire	11	14	17	7	5	9	12
Female suffrage	4	5	4	3	4	5	4
'Fair trade'	3	—	2	9	2	—	—

Appendix Table 11 *Issues mentioned in Liberal election addresses*

Issue	Overall (%)	London (%)	English counties (%)	English provincial boroughs (%)	English highly urbanized boroughs (%)	Scotland (%)	Wales (%)
Home rule	82	100	79	85	80	78	57
House of Lords	79	85	75	80	83	80	74
Local veto	72	81	67	74	83	68	83
Disestablishment	69	63	63	71	70	75	87
Abolish plural voting	60	83	59	58	57	52	39
Registration reform	54	79	50	50	67	55	30
Employers' liability	50	67	41	62	63	42	30
Hours of labour	42	44	35	54	50	32	39
1894 budget	41	52	40	46	40	28	35
Parish councils	37	23	50	33	27	26	26
Old-age pensions	31	42	30	30	27	23	26
Agric. reforms	31	—	56	8	—	37	43
Payment of MPs	25	46	16	32	47	25	4
Tax, ground values	22	65	13	20	27	12	9
Foreign policy	19	17	19	24	10	14	9
Poor law reform	18	21	23	20	27	2	9
Defence	18	4	17	27	10	15	4
Education	15	25	17	15	27	6	9
The unemployed	8	15	5	12	7	3	4
Female suffrage	7	17	5	9	10	—	22
Housing	7	8	5	10	10	8	4
Free trade	5	—	9	7	—	—	13