Urban History, **30**, 2 (2003) © 2003 Cambridge University Press Printed in the United Kingdom
DOI: 10.1017/S0963926803001147

Liberalism and the politics of suburbia: electoral dynamics in late nineteenth-century South Manchester

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ABSTRACT: The collapse of the Liberal party was arguably the most dramatic feature of British urban politics in the modern period. Many have argued that a major reason for the party's rapid decline was the defection of its suburban support to the Conservatives. By drawing on examples from Manchester, it is argued here that this process was not universal or inescapable. Liberal ideology could still have a strong appeal to the social and educational aspirations of the suburban middle class and their desire for a more genuinely meritocratic society.

The drift of middle-class suburbia towards Conservatism is often seen as an important factor in the decline of the Liberal party and the development of class-based politics in late nineteenth-century Britain.[1] However, this article will demonstrate that the process was neither inevitable nor universal. Drawing on case studies from Manchester's southern suburbs, it will argue that popular community-based campaigning that addressed local needs could provide both powerful cross-class appeals and help arrest Liberal decline in urban politics.[2] The historical background of the city's southern suburban development and the nature of its early social and

* These conclusions were developed during my doctoral research programme at the University of Manchester. I am particularly grateful for the advice and comments of Peter Lowe, Brendan Jones and Richard Rodger. See J. Moore, 'The transformation of urban Liberalism: Liberal politics in Leicester and Manchester 1885–1895' (unpublished University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 1999).

[1] H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780–1880* (repr., London, 1971) , 431–5; G. Crossick, 'The emergence of the lower middle class in Britain: a discussion', in G. Crossick (ed.), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain* (London, 1977); J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), especially 304–6.

[2] Increasingly there is a recognition that the Liberal party retained a significant portion of middle-class support well into the Edwardian period. For a detailed survey see D. Tanner's *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990). Bernstein argues that the party succeeded in maintaining middle-class support, but gradually lost its appeal to the working class; see G. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (Boston, Mass., 1986), esp. 1–5, 135–65, 200. Also see n. 30 (below). For a short summary of the debate on 'class politics' and the Liberal party see G. Searle, *The Liberal Party, Triumph and Disintegration 1886–1929* (London, 1992), esp. 55–9.

political leaders will receive close examination. There will be an analysis of the politics of the parliamentary division of South Manchester, and then of a particular local township within this division – Moss Side. Finally focus will turn to the ways in which Liberal political ideology was uniquely suited to meeting suburban aspirations and to resisting the rise of 'class politics'.

First, it is necessary to outline the current debate on suburban politics and the middle class – a debate that emphasizes the importance of empirical research in challenging general assumptions about the nature of suburban life. Work on Manchester has important implications for our understanding of late nineteenth-century suburban middle class and their politics. In 1885 the Conservative party campaigned for the creation of single-member suburban constituencies with the hope that they could create Conservative 'islands' in the larger Liberal boroughs.[3] Yet their success was patchy. Liberals in Manchester illustrated how suburban support could be maintained by adopting a new language of Progressivism and public improvement. Existing literature tends to view Manchester Progressivism primarily as a Liberal method of attracting working-class support.[4] However, as will be argued here, it also addressed the aspirations of the rising group of clerks, shopkeepers and small traders in the suburbs. Hastily built suburbs often lacked basic social infrastructure and facilities. Therefore, far from being hostile to increasing public expenditure on local services, many in suburbia were the most vehement advocates of public investment in public health, tramways, branch libraries and schools. These were services that were regarded as just as essential for the health and welfare of middle-class suburbia as the inner-city slums. Liberal Progressivism succeeded amongst the suburban middle class by addressing aspirations that were shared across all classes of the late Victorian city.[5]

The interpretation put forward in this article contrasts sharply with the Liberal party historiography that concentrates on how Gladstone's support for Irish Home Rule and land reform seemingly accelerated the growth of class-based politics. Parry regards these issues as driving English middle-class suburbanites into the arms of the Conservatives in defence of their property rights – turning 'the Liberal party from a great party of government into a gaggle of outsiders'.[6] Similarly, Magnus sees the 1892

[3] See J. Garrard, *Democratisation in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2002), 94–6.

[4] P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971); J. Hill, 'Manchester and Salford politics and the early development of the Independent Labour party', *International Review of Social History*, 26 (1981), 171–201.

[5] Indeed it is not entirely fanciful to describe the Liberal party as primarily an urban party, given the basic distribution of its electoral support. At the party's two most successful general elections of the late nineteenth century (1868 and 1880) Liberals took more than twice as many borough and university seats than the Conservatives, while Conservatives took more than twice as many county seats as the Liberals. *Constitutional Year Book* (London, 1886), 294.

[6] Parry, *The Rise and Fall*, 306.

general election as the first to be fought 'to a great extent upon class'.[7] Long-standing nonconformist suspicion of Roman Catholicism and a growing sense of imperialist egotism, it is alleged, further acted to prise 'Villadom' from a Gladstonian Liberal party allied to, and apparently politically dependent upon, Irish Nationalists.[8] Indeed, some argue that the core values of middle-class suburban nonconformists – the bedrock of Liberal support – were changing, with social ambitions and economic self-interest taking over from religious convictions as the chief motivational force in their public lives.[9]

Although there is disagreement about the degree to which the Liberal party suffered from the rise of class-based politics,[10] the middle-class flight from Liberalism has become an important part of subsequent explanations for Liberal decline. Clarke's study of Lancashire emphasizes how successfully the Liberal party attracted working-class support by transforming itself into a social democratic party.[11] A consequence of this transformation was, in his view, the loss of substantial middle-class support, as typified by the movement of the cotton barons towards Conservatism.[12] However, such accounts need to be treated with caution. Although the loss of Manchester's cotton barons may have had a very important symbolic importance for the Liberal party, it would be unwise to assume that their position was reflective of the allegiances of the wider middle class – the complex array of rising professionals, clerks, small tradesmen and shopkeepers who played such an important part in the late Victorian town economy.

Perhaps most significant, in any analysis of the suburban electorate, were those frequently termed 'lower middle class'. The lower middle class is often defined in occupation terms – namely as an economic group who earn their livelihood through the employment of their own capital and their own labour.[13] However, this definition is a little limiting. It

[7] P. Magnus, *Gladstone* (London, 1954), 394.

[8] R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher* (pbk edn, London, 1985), 160. For general background to the Home Rule crisis see W.C. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Question* (Oxford, 1988); A.B. Cooke and J. Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain, 1885–1886* (Brighton, 1974); M. Barker, *Gladstone and Radicalism: The Reconstruction of Liberal Policy in Britain, 1885–94* (Brighton, 1975); T.A. Jenkins, *Gladstone, Whiggery and the Liberal Party, 1874–1886* (Oxford, 1988).

[9] M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties*, vol. I (London, 1902), 621; J.F. Glasier, 'English nonconformity and the decline of Liberalism', *American Historical Review*, 63 (1957–8), 352–63.

[10] It could be argued that this is a long-term trend that only becomes conclusively evident following the franchise reforms of 1918; see H. Matthew, R. McKibbin and J.A. Kay, 'The franchise factor and the rise of the Labour party', *English Historical Review*, 91 (1976), 723–52.

[11] Clarke, *Lancashire*.

[12] P.F. Clarke, 'The end of laissez faire and the politics of cotton', *Historical Journal*, 15 (1973), 493–512.

[13] G. Crossick and H. Haupt, *The Petite Bourgeoisie in Europe 1780–1914* (London, 1995), 3–4; A. Kidd and D. Nicholls (eds.), *The Making of the British Middle Class?* (Stroud, 1998), xxvi.

is empirically problematic because it excludes white-collar employees – such as clerks and office workers – who were usually regarded as falling in the category of lower middle class. Additionally, it fails to recognize that economic function is only one signifier of class. In recent years urban historians have tended to stress much more the importance of shared culture and educational outlook in middle-class formation, as much as purely economic factors.[14] This method of analysis clearly should also be applied to the lower middle class. They can, therefore, best be characterized as a group which, although sharing similar cultural outlooks to the middle class as a whole, held a lower economic and social position and were inherently insecure in this position – either by virtue of the insecurity of their own businesses or because of their role as employees in a competitive labour market.[15] It was these individuals who numerically dominated the suburban electorate and who played a crucial role in determining Liberal fortunes.

Certainly, some in the independent, property-owning bourgeoisie began to reject the general trajectory of Liberal policy from the 1880s. Liberals gradually lost their reputation as a party of low taxation and retrenchment following large-scale municipal rate increases that were indicative of a growing urban fiscal crisis. Investment in new water and gas infrastructure between the 1850s and the 1870s, and the introduction of electricity at the end of the century, produced surges in municipal expenditure.[16] Tax yields from urban property failed to keep pace with the growing debt burden, producing unprecedented rate rises – and criticism of the often Liberal-led urban municipal authorities. The inflexible and regressive nature of the rating system meant that the lower middle class was particularly hard-hit, particularly those involved in the running of small businesses.[17] From the late 1860s, groups of property owners and ratepayers increasingly began to organize in an attempt to resist the inexorable rise of the local state – some developing into regional and national federations, such as the United Property Owners Association, which was particularly active in the north of England.[18] It is not surprising, therefore, that Liberal advocacy of municipal action and expenditure to tackle urban labour and social problems – later coined 'Progressivism' – was often seen by opponents to be at odds with the interests of the lower middle class and the small

[14] For example: R.J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party* (Manchester, 1990), esp. 318–24; S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class* (Manchester, 2000), esp. 22–3.
[15] Crossick and Haupt, *Petite Bourgeoisie*, 3–4.
[16] R. Millward, 'The political economy of urban utilities', in M. Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. III: *1840–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), 315–49. For background see P.J. Waller, *Town, City and Nation: England 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1983), esp. 298–316.
[17] B.M. Doyle, 'The changing function of urban government: councillors, officials and pressure groups', in Daunton (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. III, 287–313, esp. 290–4.
[18] A. Offer, *Property and Politics 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 1981), 297–301; D. Englander, *Landlord and Tenant in Urban Britain 1838–1914* (Oxford, 1983), 65–75.

property owner.[19] Liberal land reform plans – such as the Henry George inspired schemes for site value rating – may have been designed to relieve some of the tax burden on real estate, but they would also have limited the benefit that property owners could reap from rising land values.[20]

The emergence of Progressivism in local municipal politics was a key step in the development of the Liberal party into a social democratic movement – yet its specific objectives varied between cities and were only ever hazily defined. Progressivism had few formal creeds, although it drew much of its intellectual rationale from the work of a small group of Oxford academics such as T.H. Green, D.G. Ritchie, Graham Wallas and L.T. Hobhouse, who were key figures in the development of the social, 'positive' or 'advanced' Liberalism of the 1880s.[21] The movement was also shaped by the municipal reformism of Joseph Chamberlain at Birmingham and his subsequent 'Unauthorized Programme'.[22] Yet the term 'Progressive' did not enter general usage until the London County Council elections of 1889, when a band of Fabian Socialists and Liberal radicals co-operated, under a Progressive banner, to score a dramatic victory in the newly formed authority.[23] Municipal activism to tackle social problems – and to attract working-class support – thus became an important element of Liberal urban policy.

Debate rages as to whether lower-middle-class suburbanites, as a class, rejected Liberalism and its new collectivist local forms. Traditionally they have been seen as agents of Conservatism, committed to rugged individualism and laissez-faire, while resisting high taxes and government regulation of the local economy.[24] They have been viewed as playing an important role in undermining the Liberal party in the suburbs and assisting the Conservative party's urban revival. Thompson's work on London has been particularly influential in illustrating how suburban Liberalism apparently went into decline in the latter years of the nineteenth century. [25] Recently, however, scholars have questioned just how much the problems of Liberals and the Progressive party in London really did represent a rise in class voting. Both Jeffrey and Pennybacker have

[19] For background to these debates see P. Thane, *The Foundation of the Welfare State* (Harlow, 1982), 4–50; N. McCord, 'Ratepayers and social policy', in P. Thane (ed.), *The Origins of British Social Policy* (London, 1978), 21–35.

[20] M.J. Daunton, *A Property-Owning Democracy? Housing in Britain* (London, 1987), 48.

[21] I. Bradley, *The Optimists* (London, 1980), 216–21; P.F. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978), 9–27.

[22] For background see: R. Jay, *Joseph Chamberlain: A Political Study* (Oxford, 1981); P. Fraser, *Joseph Chamberlain: Radicalism and Empire, 1868–1914 (*London, 1966); M. Hurst, *Joseph Chamberlain and West Midland Politics, 1886–1895* (Oxford, 1962).

[23] H. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party* (Oxford, 1965), 73–4.

[24] Crossick and Haupt, *Petite Bourgeoisie*, 159–63.

[25] P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour – the Struggle for London, 1885–1914* (London, 1967). Thompson identifies a sharp decline in the fortunes of the party after 1892, and considers the lack of a viable electoral standpoint, working-class electoral base and financial backing as major reasons for this pattern. These trends are all viewed as the product of a rise in class-based voting patterns.

challenged traditional assumptions that the lower middle class was a force for Conservatism, arguing for a more sophisticated, issue-based understanding of metropolitan politics.[26] In any case it should not be assumed that the pattern of politics in London was necessarily typical of urban Britain as a whole. As Cox has observed, the majority of London suburbs began as well-established towns, some of which could trace their origins to medieval times.[27] Many originally had a significant number of residents from the landed aristocracy.[28] This was rarely true of suburbs outside London and therefore one must be cautious about regarding London as a reflection of provincial Britain. Although systematic studies of other British towns and cities are limited, recent research has tended to emphasize the resilience of Liberalism in suburbia and amongst the lower middle class. Savage has noted the strength of Edwardian Liberalism in suburban Preston, despite Labour progress in other parts of the town.[29] Similarly Doyle's work on Norwich and Jones' research on Manchester have served to demonstrate the continuity of the Liberal tradition in suburbia well into the 1930s.[30] Bernstein, too, has stressed how Liberal emphasis on 'traditional' nonconformist and ethical issues helped the party retain a significant middle-class base – even though he ultimately sees the party as a victim of 'class politics'.[31]

One must, therefore, be careful not to caricature the inhabitants of Victorian suburbs or assume that wealth and material ambition were the chief motivational force in the lives of suburbanites. Antipathy towards suburban life has somewhat distorted both popular and academic views of suburbia and its citizens.[32] This antipathy is not peculiar to Britain and is also strong in the United States.[33] Suburbs were often regarded as cultural and aesthetic deserts – a place 'without any society: no social

[26] T. Jeffrey, 'The suburban nation: politics and class in Lewisham', 189–216, esp. 189–92, and S. Pennybacker, '"The millennium by return of post": reconsidering London Progressivism 1889–1907', 129–62; both in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London* (London, 1989).

[27] R.C.W. Cox, 'The old centre of Croydon: Victorian decay and redevelopment', in A. Everitt (ed.), *Perspectives in English Urban History* (London, 1973), 186, cited in J.M. Rowcliffe, 'Bromley: Kentish market town to London suburb 1841–81', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Rise of Suburbia* (Leicester, 1982), 81.

[28] C. Miele, 'From aristocratic idea to middle-class idyll: 1690–1840', in A. Saint (ed.), *London Suburbs* (London, 1999), 31–60.

[29] M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics – The Labour Movement in Preston* (Cambridge, 1987), 150.

[30] B. Doyle, 'Urban Liberalism and the "lost generation": politics and middle class culture in Norwich 1900–1935', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), 617–34; B. Jones, 'Manchester Liberalism 1918–1929: the electoral, ideological and organisational experience of the Liberal Party in Manchester, with particular reference to the career of Ernest Simon' (unpublished University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 1997), 32–3, 310–11.

[31] Bernstein, *Liberalism*, esp. 1–5, 135–65, 197–201.

[32] R. Harris and P. Larkham, 'Suburban foundation, form and function', in Harris and Larkham (eds.), *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form and Function* (London, 1999), 3.

[33] D.C. Thorns, *Suburbia* (London, 1972), 147–9.

gatherings or institutions; as dull a life as mankind ever tolerated'.[34] They were places where the middle classes allegedly cut themselves off from wider society, abandoning public life for the nuclear family and duty for the pursuit of personal ambition.[35] Local empirical research has gone some way to correct this caricature. Often the image of a suburban exclusivity failed to reflect the reality. Dyos' study of Camberwell illustrated how, far from being uniform, one particular London suburb developed as a mosaic of estates.[36] Speirs' work on Manchester's Victoria Park depicted a vibrant, complex and socially aware community.[37] Even famous suburbs such as Edgbaston and Mayfair have been shown to be far more socially mixed than previously thought.[38] Similarly, sociologists have further demonstrated how modern suburbs developed as complex cultural hybrids with only superficially uniform characteristics.[39]

Recent historical geography has also questioned whether nineteenth-century cities really were becoming increasingly segregated on class lines through suburban development. On closer examination, many new suburban communities of the mid-nineteenth century have been found to be less socially homogeneous than once thought – with surprisingly little evidence of urban social segregation increasing over time.[40] Where significant geographical social segregation has been observed, empirical research has tended to locate it as much in ethnic and religious cleavages as those purely of class.[41] Indeed although many have characterized the late nineteenth century as a period of growing secularism, it is unclear just how far and in what ways the movement had advanced before the First World War.[42] There is at least a suggestion that churches with particular 'prestige', such as those in wealthier suburbs, could continue to be influential.[43] Moreover, declining church attendance does not necessarily indicate a decline in the political importance of religious and denominational issues.

[34] Sir W. Besant in 1909, cited in D.J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London, 1976), 210.
[35] See discussion in Olsen, *Growth*, 214–15, and Thorns, *Suburbia*, 14–16.
[36] H.J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study in the Growth of Camberwell* (London, 1961).
[37] M. Spiers, *Victoria Park, Manchester* (Manchester, 1976).
[38] D. Cannadine, 'Residential differentiation in nineteenth century towns: from shapes in the ground to shapes in society', in J.H. Johnson and C.H. Pooley (eds.), *The Structure of Nineteenth Century Cities* (London, 1982), 235–51, esp. 239–41; D. Cannadine, 'Victorian cities: how different', in R.J. Morris and R. Rodger (eds.), *The Victorian City: A Reader in British Urban History 1820–1914* (Harlow, 1993).
[39] R. Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (London, 1997), 6–7.
[40] R. Dennis, *English Industrial Cities in the Nineteenth Century – a Social Geography* (repr., Cambridge, 1986), 238–49.
[41] C. Pooley and R. Lawton, 'The social geography of nineteenth century British cities: a review', in D. Denecke and G. Shaw (eds.), *Urban Historical Geography – Recent Progress in Britain and Germany* (Cambridge, 1998).
[42] C.G. Brown, 'Did urbanisation secularise Britain?', *Urban History Yearbook* (1988).
[43] J.N. Morris, *Religious and Urban Change: Croydon 1840–1914* (Woodbridge, 1992), 182.

Cultural historians such as Bebbington have illustrated just how important religious cleavages continued to be in many citizens' public lives.[44]

Clearly, middle-class and suburban politics need to be viewed in the wider context of the political culture of the region and the locality.[45] Whilst 'Villa Toryism' may have typified some of the London suburbs, in South Manchester Liberal Radicalism continued to be a vigorous and successful political force, supported by a progressive and nonconformist culture. Engels' famous depiction of the geographical division of Manchester into distinct residential zones, from the urban proletariat around the centre to the upper bourgeoisie on the fringe, can blind us to the social diversity of suburban life.[46] By studying the development of Manchester's largest suburban community, South Manchester, and analysing the local politics of its most affluent township, it is possible to see how Radical and Progressive Liberalism[47] could prosper in the suburbs and why it may have suffered less from the rise of 'class politics' than some areas predominantly working class in social composition.

South Manchester – suburban political culture and parliamentary elections

The parliamentary constituency of South Manchester, the largest in the city, represented 'classic' nineteenth-century suburbia. Stretching from the older All Saints in the north to the newly developed Fallowfield in the south, it contained a large portion of leafy Moss Side lying outside the city council boundaries, the exclusive private estate of Victoria Park and the suburbanized village of Rusholme. It was an almost exclusively residential constituency 'largely composed, not of work people, but of clerks, shopkeepers, and others of the middle class'[48] and was regarded as 'the most aristocratic of the divisions'.[49] If class politics were to mean anything, one would expect this to be the most Conservative division in Manchester. Indeed, Pelling views Liberalism as being in decline in the constituency until Conservative support for tariff reform drove many middle-class businessmen back to the Liberals in 1906.[50] Yet in reality Liberalism continued to be a powerful electoral force in South Manchester

[44] D.W. Bebbington, 'Nonconformity and electoral sociology 1867–1918', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), 633–56. See also D.W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870–1914* (London, 1982).

[45] An approach reflected in important recent works on Liberal and Labour politics: Tanner's *Political Change* and J. Lawrence's *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

[46] F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (repr., Chicago, 1984), 78–9.

[47] Liberals on the left of the party used a variety of political descriptions during the period. In Manchester the term 'Radical' was used most frequently in parliamentary elections, while 'Progressive' gained wider currency in local government after the use of the term at the London County Council elections in 1889.

[48] *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Nov. 1885.

[49] *Ibid.*, 27 Nov. 1885.

[50] H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (London, 1967), 243–4.

throughout the period. In 1885 it was the only one of the six parliamentary divisions in Manchester to return a Liberal MP. In 1886 the South Manchester Liberal Association suffered a larger secession of Liberal Unionists than any other area of the city, and yet the sitting Liberal member was comfortably returned in the election of that year. Indeed, it was not until the nation-wide Liberal débâcle in 1895, where the party collapsed to just 177 seats at Westminster, that the South Manchester Liberals tasted defeat, and then only very narrowly at the hands of a Liberal Unionist.[51]

Part of the explanation for this success must be that South Manchester was the chosen residence of a large number of Manchester's most influential Liberals. Spiers, in his study of the exclusive estate of Victoria Park, draws attention to the important influence of a group of Liberal professionals with a close public interest in the growing educational institutions of South Manchester.[52] Significantly, John Slagg, MP for Manchester 1879–85, and Sir Henry Roscoe, MP for South Manchester 1885–95, both made their homes in South Manchester and patronized local educational and cultural institutions. Other senior local Liberals such as Edward Donner and R.D. Darbishire were actively involved in local civil society, including the nearby Victoria University.[53] However, perhaps the two most influential figures in South Manchester Liberal politics of the period were C.P. Scott, the editor of the leading Liberal newspaper the *Manchester Guardian*, and Edwin Guthrie, a fellow Radical, president of the South Manchester Liberal Association and a key influence on the policy of the Manchester Liberal Union. Both were staunch advocates of labour representation and felt that the Liberal party's future depended upon its ability to incorporate working-class interests.[54] Their influence in Liberal ranks can be seen through the Manchester Liberal Union's adoption of a Progressive Municipal Programme in the run-up to the 1894 local elections.[55] Far from being concerned with the narrow self-interest of the middle-class suburban property owner, it attempted to address the major claims of trade unionists by advocating corporation action to tackle unemployment, improved housing and the demolition of slum property, ground value taxation and the vigorous enforcement of the sanitary legislation. Although some 'suburban concerns' were addressed – greater municipal control of the tramways being one – the Progressive Programme presents the apparent paradox of middle-class suburban Liberals taking little interest in their own constituency's problems and instead focusing on the concerns of the urban industrial working class. If middle-class

[51] F.W.S. Craig (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results 1885–1895*, 2nd edn (Aldershot, 1989), 152. The swing to the Conservatives in South Manchester was less than 2%.
[52] M. Spiers, *Victoria Park, Manchester* (Manchester, 1976), 5–6, 51–2.
[53] *Ibid.*, 51–2.
[54] Manchester Liberal Union minutes (hereafter MLU), Union Committee, 16 Jul. 1894, Manchester Central Library (hereafter MCL), M283/1/1/3; MLU, Union Committee, 26 Jul. 1894, MCL, M283/1/1/4.
[55] MLU, Progressive Municipal Programme statement, 16 Jul. 1894, MCL, M283/1/1/3.

communities in suburbia were becoming more self-interested by the late Victorian period, it is difficult to explain how suburban politicians advocating policies which would seemingly materially disadvantage their constituents could remain a strong force in local suburban politics.

A clue to the reason for the enduring strength of Liberalism in South Manchester lies in the history of the suburb itself. Manchester's suburbia, as with many other older industrial cities, was not a creation of the 1880s. Manchester could trace the beginnings of its suburban development back to the first decades of the nineteenth century.[56] Unsurprisingly its early residential structure was dominated by those from the city's economic and political elite. The most fashionable suburb of all, Victoria Park, included many prominent Liberals involved in the Anti-Corn Law League, including James Kershaw and George Hadfield. Both Kershaw and Hadfield made their mark locally. Hadfield was a prominent Congregationalist and resident in the park throughout his time representing Sheffield in parliament. Kershaw had a distinguished career not only in the League and in parliament as MP for Stockport, but also in local government serving as an alderman of the city between 1838 and 1850 and mayor 1842–43.[57]

Quite apart from their influence in formal politics, Manchester's mid-Victorian suburban Liberal elite spent much of their time and money supporting the spiritual work of the nonconformist churches. By the early 1890s no part of the city was provided with more nonconformist places of worship. The major nonconformist denominations – the Baptists, the Congregationalists and the Wesleyan Methodists – each had at least one place of worship in each of the major suburban areas of South Manchester – Chorlton-on-Medlock, Rusholme and Moss Side. Smaller dissenting congregations such as the Unitarians, Primitive Methodists, United Methodists, Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, Presbyterians, Salvationists, Armenians and Swedenborgians were also well represented.[58] There were few Roman Catholic churches – probably because of the relatively small Irish community – but the substantial Welsh population was well catered for by several Welsh Baptist and Methodist institutions. The prestige of South Manchester as a residential location attracted some of the best-known nonconformist leaders in the city – including the ardent Liberal Rev. Arnold Streuli of Moss Side, the Rev. Thomas Finlayson of Rusholme and the Rev. John Trevor of Chorlton – the last of whom became the founder of the Labour Church Movement and a key figure in the Manchester and Salford Independent Labour Party.[59] Clearly the South Manchester suburbs of the 1880s and 1890s were not ones in which residents were

[56] Thompson (ed.), *The Rise*, 6.
[57] Spiers, *Victoria Park*, 51–5.
[58] *The Official Handbook of Manchester and Salford 1892* (Manchester, 1892).
[59] L. Smith, 'John Trevor and the Labour Church Movement' (unpublished Huddersfield Polytechnic M.A. thesis, 1985), 28–30.

deprived of political or religious guidance. Although constantly changing physically through building development, the suburbs had deep Liberal and nonconformist traditions. There seems little evidence, from studies conducted on Manchester, that the early suburban residents substantially abandoned their traditional political and religious loyalties.

By the 1880s some of the older suburbs closest to the city centre were undergoing significant social change. Victoria Park was no longer the most fashionable part of the city and many, including senior Liberals Sir Henry Roscoe and Edward Donner, left for the newly developed Fallowfield on the southern edge of the parliamentary division.[60] In the place of Manchester's leading merchants and professionals came the lower middle classes identified by the *Manchester Guardian*. This change seems similar to a general trend of this period – namely the general 'social deepening' of suburbia identified in other British towns.[61] Yet if 'class politics' was becoming more significant in suburban politics, one may expect the new lower-middle-class voters of suburbia to be more likely to support the Liberal party than the generally wealthier elite they were gradually replacing.[62] By the 1885 general election the party had established Liberal clubs covering the four major areas of the new South constituency – Oxford Road, Rusholme Road, Moss Side and Longsight. At municipal level Liberal candidates had made significant progress taking the former Conservative stronghold of All Saints ward and strengthening their hold on St Luke's. The newly incorporated Rusholme and Moss Side also had a tradition of electing Liberals to local public bodies.[63]

South Manchester Liberals chose Owen's College academic Sir Henry Roscoe as their parliamentary candidate – a man who was unequivocally from the 'advanced' section of the party.[64] Roscoe was steeped in Radical family traditions.[65] Moreover his local party was not afraid to tackle issues which undermined 'traditional' property rights or class privilege. Roscoe's academic colleague Prof. Williamson, addressing Liberal campaign meetings, described himself as 'an enthusiastic Radical reformer', openly attacking the notions of 'respectability' and snobbery that were associated with middle-class suburban life.[66] Roscoe's own

[60] Spiers, *Victoria Park*, 51–5.
[61] *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Nov. 1885; S.M. Gaskell, 'Housing and the lower middle classes, 1870–1914', in G. Crossick (ed.), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain* (London, 1977), cited in Thompson (ed.), *The Rise*, 17.
[62] Some have suggested that the lower middle class were disproportionately inclined to support Unionist 'jingoism' – see R.N. Price, 'Society, status and jingoism: the social roots of lower middle class patriotism, 1870–1900', in Crossick (ed.), *The Lower Middle Class*, 89–112 – but in Manchester most lower-middle-class residential areas were principally Liberal.
[63] *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Nov. 1885; *ibid.*, 3 Nov. 1885.
[64] *Manchester Courier*, 27 Nov. 1885.
[65] Sir Henry Roscoe was the grandson of the famous Liverpool Radical MP, William Roscoe. Sir Henry's wife was a daughter of Edmund Potter, the Liberal MP for Carlisle 1861–74. One of Sir Henry's daughters married C.E. Mallet, the Liberal MP for Plymouth.
[66] *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Nov. 1885.

Radicalism was a little more understated, but he was a strong supporter of more working-class MPs and social reform, and a strong critic of the failures of the education system. His calls for a more meritocratic system in which talented people from all backgrounds could rise naturally had great resonance with the upwardly mobile suburban electorate.[67]

Roscoe's 1885 victory in South Manchester was of vital importance in that it saved the Manchester Liberals from losing all parliamentary representation. The lack of a large Irish constituency in South Manchester meant that, unlike other areas of the city, there was not an organized body of Irish Nationalists to vote *en bloc* against the Liberal candidate. Moreover South Manchester had a relatively high proportion of affluent Liberal residents prepared to support – with their wealth and spare time – the party organization in the division. There can be little doubt that Manchester Liberal party organization adjusted sluggishly to campaigning in the new single-member constituencies and was generally very unprepared for the 1885 general election.[68] A strong body of wealthy support in South Manchester, however, allowed for more successful reorganization in that area and the rapid formation of a new divisional campaign body. [69]

If there had been significant dissatisfaction with Sir Henry Roscoe's brand of Radicalism, one might have expected many middle-class suburban voters to take the opportunity of the Home Rule crisis to move into Liberal Unionism or switch to the Conservatives. Some Unionists did accuse Roscoe of acting like Gladstone in cynically setting 'class against class' but the issues of class conflict and property rights did not become a central feature of the campaign.[70] The Liberal party suffered some defections from its ranks, including veteran alderman Sir Alfred Hopkinson;[71] however, any advantage that the Conservatives might have obtained from the division in Liberal ranks was largely nullified by the failure of Liberal Unionists and Conservatives to agree upon a joint candidate for South Manchester. Liberal Unionists were eventually forced to withdraw in favour of a Conservative and then lost further credibility when correspondence in the local press revealed that several leading figures who claimed to have left the Liberal party over Home Rule had, in fact, already deserted the party before the 1885 general election.[72] No attempt was made to shield Roscoe from the Home Rule controversy despite the fact he represented a constituency that might be expected to generate the largest number of dissidents.[73] Rather, local Liberals seemed

[67] *Ibid.*, 20–21 Nov. 1885.
[68] MLA, Joint Consultative Committee, 17–18 Jun. 1885, MCL, M283/1/1/2. The party had recently fought an expensive by-election, was short of funds and seemed to underestimate the significance of the new constituency boundaries.
[69] MLU, Financial Statement, 3 Feb. 1886, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
[70] C.M. Wharton speaking at Longsight, *Manchester Examiner*, 2–3 Jul. 1886.
[71] *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Jun. 1886; Spiers, *Victoria Park*, 53–5.
[72] *Manchester Courier*, 30 Jun. 1886, *Manchester Examiner*, 2–3 Jul. 1886.
[73] MLU, General Council, 7 May 1886, MCL, M283/1/1/2.

to be using Roscoe's popularity to win over waverers. The gamble paid off. Far from a net loss of support, in January 1887 the South Manchester Liberal Association was able to report an increase in subscriptions and was second only to the commercial north-west division in terms of the total income they attracted.[74] By the summer of 1888 even the funds of the central Liberal Union had recovered and the executive committee could 'note with satisfaction that no indications are discernible of any increase in the number or power of the dissidents'.[75]

Home Rule continued to dominate the terms of the political debate over the next decade and, although Roscoe's parliamentary majority fell in 1892, interestingly Liberals continued to perform very well in suburban municipal elections.[76] The once strongly Conservative All Saints ward fell to Liberal Alexander McDougall by almost 500 votes in 1890. Two years later the Liberals inflicted a crushing defeat on the sitting Conservative councillor for Rusholme, Samuel Royle, winning by 708 votes to 478. St Luke's saw no contested elections before 1893 when the Liberals easily fended off an Independent Labour party (ILP) candidate. In Longsight's first election as part of the city of Manchester in 1890, it returned two Liberals and just one Conservative.[77] By the time the central Manchester Liberal Union adopted a Progressive Municipal Programme to fight off the ILP, South Manchester Liberals were already campaigning on Progressive issues, showing little fear of the reaction that they might receive from supposedly more conservative-minded suburban voters.[78] Indeed suburban Liberals went beyond the Progressive programme and campaigned vocally for the disestablishment of the Welsh church, another Irish Land Bill, Local Veto legislation and the abolition of the House of Lords.[79]

The policies of leading municipal candidates followed this Radical trend. Alexander McDougall attributed his large majority in the All Saints ward election of 1890 to the strong views he held on temperance and social reform.[80] In the only other contested election of that year, one of the Liberal candidates in Longsight, Dr Russell, made the pulling down of unsanitary property his electoral platform, and was elected second of six candidates – only being out-polled by the well-known former chairman of the Longsight Local Board.[81] This despite the fact that many middle-class residents in

[74] MLU, Financial Statement, 24 Jan. 1887, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
[75] MLU, Secretary's Report, 22 Apr. 1887, MCL, M283/1/1/2, MLU, Annual Council Meeting, 2 May 1888, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
[76] The marginal nature of the three central wards, St Luke's, All Saints and Rusholme, meant that previously contests were rare with Liberals and Conservatives usually coming to an agreement about the representation of the districts.
[77] Election results from *The Official Handbook of Manchester and Salford* (Manchester, 1884–96).
[78] MLU, Union Committee 16 Jul. 1894, MCL, M283/1/1/3; *ibid.*, 19 Dec. 1894, MCL, M283/1/1/3.
[79] *Ibid.*, 19 Dec. 1894, MCL, M283/1/1/3.
[80] *Manchester Guardian*, 3 Nov. 1890.
[81] *Ibid.*, 3 Nov. 1890.

South Manchester were small-scale property owners in central Manchester, which they were dependent on renting out for a supplementary income – property which was often in poor condition due to lack of capital for repairs and which would be clearly at risk from Russell's proposal. A further sign of the Radicalism of the South Manchester Association came with the election of the working-class trades council president, Matthew Arrandale, as the Liberal candidate for All Saints in a municipal by-election of June 1895.[82] Arrandale's Radicalism, like that of Roscoe, and many other Liberal municipal representatives, combined social reform with what are often regarded as typically 'nonconformist' ethical concerns. Like the ILP, Arrandale was an advocate of the eight-hour day, municipalization of the tramways and improved housing to be provided by the corporation. Like the traditional nonconformist Radicals, he was concerned with moral and spiritual issues such as the drink question and Sunday trading.[83]

South Manchester Liberals went into the 1895 general election with an agreed set of Radical priorities and considerable confidence. Home Rule, Welsh disestablishment, registration reform, Local Veto and reform of the House of Lords continued to be the central planks of Roscoe's programme.[84] Despite the candidature of the marquis of Lorne, the queen's son-in-law, for the Liberal Unionists, South Manchester Liberals saw little to fear. Liberal Unionists were now clearly an adjunct of the Conservatives making them less of the covert threat they once were.[85] Registration surveys indicated that local Liberalism was in a stronger position than ever before.[86] George Birdsall, vice-president of the Association, declared that 'victory for Sir Henry was certain'.[87] Yet by the evening of 14 July 1895 the longest held Liberal division in Manchester had fallen to a Conservative-backed Liberal Unionist. The victory of a Liberal Unionist was a major surprise – especially as the Conservatives did little more than recite rather tired anti-Home Rule arguments. Radical politics had been successful on three occasions at parliamentary level. Much of the Roscoe's programme had been endorsed in previous elections. House of Lords reform and Home Rule were well-worn issues. Registration reform did not involve a matter of principle and was relatively uncontroversial. Welsh disestablishment was potentially controversial, but the policy was widely supported by the large Welsh community in South Manchester.[88] Little attempt was made by Conservatives to attack Roscoe on the issue, perhaps fearing a Welsh backlash. Local Veto was controversial, although it had not prevented

[82] *The Official Handbook of Manchester and Salford* (Manchester, 1896).
[83] Arrandale election speech, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Oct. 1895.
[84] Sir Henry Roscoe's election address, George Birdsall Cuttings Book (hereafter GBC), 117, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[85] C.P. Scott, speech at Free Trade Hall, *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Jul. 1895.
[86] South Manchester Liberal Association cutting, GBC, 175, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] See the 'Welsh Meeting Moss Side Liberal Club' circular letter, 17 Jan. 1895, GBC, 183, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

Roscoe's return on previous occasions. The South Manchester Liberals thus went into the 1895 election with broadly the same Radical programme as that they had utilized successfully in 1885, 1886 and 1892.

The Liberal defeat in South Manchester should be seen therefore as a setback rather than a disaster. It represented the narrow loss of a marginal Liberal seat in a year when many much 'safer' seats were lost to the Unionists on much larger swings from the Liberals. The retirement of Gladstone alone could be enough to explain the loss of the seat.[89] Defeat brought no great loss of confidence to the local party, probably because of the continuing electoral strength of the party at municipal and local level. Roscoe was happy to reassure his supporters 'that when this wave of Tory reaction has passed away South Manchester will again return a Liberal member'.[90] The prediction turned out to be correct – the seat returned to the Liberals in 1906 and was retained in 1910. In what was regarded as the most aristocratic division in the city leading Liberals not only embraced Radicalism but were able to carry its doctrines to electoral success. South Manchester's large Welsh population, strong nonconformist traditions and caucus of influential Radicals helped sustain a strong local Liberal presence. These features, alone, however, could not produce electoral success unless the messages advanced by Liberals had an appeal to new voters in the rapidly expanding suburban electorate. If middle- and lower-middle-class voters of the 1890s really had voted primarily on grounds of material self-interest, defence of property rights and low taxation, it is difficult to see how Liberals could have triumphed at all, and particularly difficult to see how Radical or advanced Liberals such as Roscoe could have achieved repeated success.

Local politics and suburban progressivism: landlord and tenant

A suspicion exists, however, that it might be misleading to consider South Manchester an exclusively 'suburban' constituency by the mid-1890s. The introduction of labour candidates appears to indicate that the working-class electorate in the constituency was becoming more influential, particularly in All Saints and St Luke's wards – those nearest the city centre. Perhaps what is required is not a survey of the whole constituency, where the concerns of the growing working class dominate the language of politics, but rather a more specific analysis of local politics in a part of the constituency unquestionably dominated by the middle and lower middle class. Perhaps only by disaggregating the politics of such an area from wider constituency politics can one discover whether there

[89] Lorne also ran a very innovative campaign, making use of direct mail to voters through low-cost telegrams see *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Jul. 1895; Lord Lorne Circular Letter, 12 Jul. 1895, GBC, 191, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

[90] Letter, H. Roscoe to G.D. Birdsall, 15 Jul. 1895, GBC, 192, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

were any distinctive features of the politics of suburbia and why Radical Liberalism had a hold over these more materially affluent parts of the city.

The idea of attempting to identify an area as 'typical' of affluent suburbia is in itself problematic. South Manchester's suburban estates were by no means identical. Longsight had a strong industrial influence, due to its association with the railway and engineering works located nearby. Victoria Park, by the 1890s, was no longer the fashionable suburb of twenty years previously and had only a very small number of residents – albeit very wealthy ones. Moss Side, however, seemed to typify what is traditionally regarded as suburbia – an almost exclusively residential area outside the boundaries of the city with 'green lanes and stately avenues of trees'.[91] Although a detailed examination of its residential structure is beyond the scope of this article, outline details illustrate its unmistakable suburban form. Its topography was dominated by wide streets laid out on a grid pattern. Larger terraced houses predominated with most properties much more extensive than the average 'two up, two down' variety of the inner-urban core. While in Manchester residential properties with less than five rooms made up 55 per cent of the overall total, in Moss Side this figure was less than 4 per cent.[92] Residential population density was low and there was very little overcrowding.[93] Professionals, managers and the commercial middle class made up more than 25 per cent of the resident workforce. These, however, were outnumbered by the lower middle class. Shopkeepers and small tradesmen made up around 30 per cent of the local workforce, while clerks represented around 15 per cent. The majority of the remaining male workforce worked in the warehouse and distribution trades, whilst a significant number of women worked in domestic service and dressmaking.[94] Thus, Moss Side was a socially mixed suburb, popular not only with the wealthy, but also one accessible to clerks, shopkeepers, foremen and better-off workers. Thus study of Moss Side's development in the 1890s reveals much about the complex character of suburban political debate, its relationship with the nearby city and the problems associated with raising revenue for local public improvements.

[91] J. Wynne, a Moss Side Local Board of Health member's description of the township during a public meeting opposing the amalgamation of Moss Side with the City of Manchester, GBC, p. 30, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

[92] Census of England and Wales: North Western Counties (Division VIII) 1891, Table VI, 90–1.

[93] For example, only one residence of less than five rooms was occupied by more than nine people: *ibid*.

[94] Estimates based on analysis of census books for the portion of St Clements parish located in Moss Side (including Bradshaw Street, Dorset Street, Emden Street, Fenwich Street, Henderson Grove, Lingard Street, Pindar Street, Stuart Grove, Moss Lane East, Raglan Street, Walridge Street). Figures are: management and senior commercial 6% (22), professional 15% (53), independent means 4% (14), retail traders 15% (53), other small traders and craft workers 15% (54), clerical 14% (51), warehousemen and labourers 12% (42), domestic and hotel servants 12% (42), dressmakers and related occupations 7% (26). Scholars and illegible entries excluded. Census, 1891 vol. 464 Chorlton, 4M Hulme [PRO fiche 1 + RG12 / 3202].

By the early 1890s Liberalism was emerging as the dominant political force in Moss Side. Local politics, however, were not officially conducted through the agency of political parties. Elections to the school board, the board of health and, later, the district council saw all candidates standing as independents, although leading Liberals were influential in forming 'Progressive' slates of candidates for all these bodies, raising issues that echoed many of the themes of municipal and parliamentary candidates in other parts of South Manchester. The headquarters of local Liberalism was the Moss Side Liberal Club with influential patrons including Jacob Bright MP, Charles Schwann MP, Edwin Guthrie and J.A. Beith. Many nonconformist ministers also lent their public support to the club with Rev. J.A. McFadyen, Rev. Charles Roper, Rev. J.H. Holyoak and Rev. R. Cheney among its patrons.[95] Liberal politics had strong roots in the community and yet outside parliamentary elections there was little scope for its health to be tested publicly. The decision of Moss Side voters to oppose the amalgamation of the district with Manchester in the mid-1880s left the area in an anomalous position, with the most local administration left mainly in the hands of the local board of health. Most Moss Side residents were, however, dependent on Manchester Corporation or the Manchester School Board for the provision of major public services such as gas, public libraries, public baths and elementary education. Moss Side had none of these public facilities provided locally. The politics of the 1890s were to be dominated by calls from Liberals demanding the amalgamation and the modernization of the suburb and the concurrent opposition of the local board of health to these demands.[96]

The issue of public improvements in Moss Side was raised partly as a consequence of pressure from within the suburb and partly due to the action of the Manchester Corporation in pointing out the failure of adjacent local authorities to act to improve sewage treatment and discharge facilities.[97] When the Moss Side Local Board did submit a scheme to the Local Government Board for authorization, the matter was referred back for reconsideration with a gentle hint that Moss Side should further assess its relationship with the city of Manchester before an irrevocable and expensive decision was taken. The scheme proposed by the Moss Side Local Board would treble the debt of the board, which, it was argued, would place the board in a much worse position when it eventually decided to negotiate with the city on the incorporation question. Higher debts meant a less favourable deal for the ratepayers if a differential rate for an incorporated Moss Side was to be negotiated.[98]

[95] *South Manchester Chronicle*, 5 Apr. 1894.
[96] See Local Board cuttings, GBC, 11–13, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[97] City Council report, GBC, 12, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[98] Decision of the Inspector of the Local Government Board cutting, GBC, 13, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

Growing public criticism of the local board's scheme prompted a number of Liberals to challenge the re-election of existing members. Two prominent members of the local Liberal Club and the Moss Side District Liberal Association, George Birdsall and Richard Chiswell, came forward as 'Progressive Candidates'.[99] Although their election address claimed that they had come forward as candidates in response to a requisition 'from owners and occupiers of ALL SHADES OF POLITICAL OPINION [sic]', their most prominent sponsors were all Liberals.[100] Their central complaint against the board was that nothing had been done to provide modern facilities for the suburb – the district had no free library, deficient school accommodation, no public baths and insufficient provision against fire and poor sewerage. The issue of amalgamation itself was not mentioned, although following the defeat of the Progressive candidates under a system of voting biased toward property owners, the amalgamation issue was soon to become the main feature of the Progressive platform. The four retiring members of the local board gradually became the focus of growing dissatisfaction with public services in the suburbs, and Progressives, although unsuccessful, took a significant share of the vote in the local elections.[101] Criticism intensified when it became clear that at least £60,000 would be required to finance the board's own sewage treatment scheme – and this for a population of just 23,500 people.[102] The leading Progressives, including the Liberal Club chairman, Reuben Spencer, formed themselves into an Amalgamation Committee and approached the local board with a memorial calling upon the board to summon a public meeting to discuss the issues of amalgamation.[103]

The intervention of a number of large property owners, concerned at the level of rates in Manchester and the abolition of plural voting, which incorporation would mean, soon turned the language of the battle into a conflict between landlord and tenant. Obsessive concern about the level of rates was depicted in the press as a sign of backward and self-interested property owners defending a class privilege.[104] The benefits of reduced gas prices, lower school fees and public libraries were being resisted by a self-interested landlord class concerned that they would be faced with an increase in taxation that could not be passed on to tenants. It is not possible to say with any degree of certainty which particular landlords were behind the opposition to amalgamation. No specific landlords were named in amalgamationist propaganda – and landlords in Moss Side, as elsewhere, were reluctant to come forward in their own defence for fear of reprisals.[105] It seems likely, however, that the criticism was mainly being aimed at those

[99] Local Board election address of Birdsall and Chiswell, GBC, 7, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[100] Local Board election address of Birdsall and Chiswell, GBC, 7, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[101] *South Manchester Chronicle*, 8 Apr. 1892.
[102] Sewerage question cutting, GBC, 35, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[103] Local Board cutting, GBC, 24, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[104] 'By Our Special Commissioner' cutting, GBC, 28, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[105] See remarks on the London Ratepayers' Association in Offer, *Property*, 299–300.

on the local board who had real estate interests. Yet the propaganda also represented a generalized attack on figures such as leading Conservative Stephen Chesters Thomson – a senior Manchester city councillor – who had recently been summoned to appear before his own local authority for neglecting rented properties.[106] Progressives argued that in order to protect their position, landlords were forced into the defence of an archaic Sturges Bourne plural voting system. The Amalgamation Committee attributed the previous poll majority of 815 against amalgamation to the preponderance of property votes – around 300 property owners had between them 700 votes. In addition proxy voting was seen as being wildly misused – it was alleged that over 60 votes were held as proxies at just one address.[107] Revelations in the *Manchester Guardian* that Anti-Amalgamationists had issued a private circular to property owners, urging them to use their influence over the votes of their tenants, seemed to confirm Liberal suspicions that a vested interest was standing in the way of progress.[108]

The result of the poll only gave added strength to those who argued that 'landlordism' was resisting suburban modernization. Those opposing amalgamation secured victory, but with a tiny majority of 22. Immediately the Amalgamationists attempted to focus attention on how property owners had used their plural votes to defeat the will of the majority of voters. Alongside the result the local press published a statement claiming that just 255 property owners in Moss Side held a total of 620 votes, immediately casting doubt on the political validity of the result.[109] Scrutiny of the votes cast showed that owners' plural votes had turned a large majority for the Amalgamationists into a small majority for their opponents. Ratepayer-qualified voters had polled 1,700 to 1,416 in favour of amalgamation negotiations. In contrast, ownership-qualified voters had voted 408 to 113 against. Given that a considerable number of owners were also qualified as ratepayers, the charge that plural voting had cost the Amalgamationists victory seemed justified.[110] The narrowness of the result had cast serious doubt upon the validity of the electoral system and the political legitimacy of the local board. The *South Manchester Chronicle* declared that the poll had only demonstrated local preference for amalgamation and it attacked the local board for failing to come to the defence of the householder against the landlord.[111] What had begun as a debate about public improvements quickly resolved itself into one about sectional interests and political democracy, highlighting that even in suburbia the tenant could suffer, like the tenant in Ireland, at the hands of the self-interested landlord. Although more materially prosperous than

[106] Letter, S. Chester Thompson to Allison, 8 Apr. 1889, Manchester City Council, Special Committee Letter Book I, 116, MCL, M9/77/1.
[107] Amalgamation Public Meeting, GBC, 68, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[108] Letter of 'Property Owner,' *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Jan. 1893, GBC, 32, f379.4273 Bil.
[109] Poll cutting, GBC, 15, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[110] Amalgamation poll cutting, GBC, 57, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[111] *South Manchester Chronicle*, 27 Jan. 1893.

many residents of Manchester, the Moss Side clerk or shopkeeper was often still not a property owner with the security that came with it. Opposition to selfish landlordism consequently became the central theme of Progressive campaigners.

Education, nonconformity and popular politics

Debates about public improvements also had a religious dimension. The conflict over educational facilities in Moss Side illustrated how denominational differences could be equally important in defining the terms of the political debate, and the extent to which religious affiliation was an important force in suburban political mobilization. The poor public provision for elementary education in Moss Side had long concerned local Liberals and nonconformists. In 1887 Sir Henry Roscoe, responding to a local request, offered to assist in the matter and place the issue before the Education Department in Whitehall.[112] When Whitehall officials investigated the issue they found a deficiency of some 2,398 school places in the township and in 1893 ordered the formation of a local Moss Side School Board.[113] As the Progressives had attacked the local board for its record in local education in previous local board elections, the battle for the school board quickly resolved itself into a similar conflict with battle lines being drawn between supporters of the local board and its Progressive critics. Religious differences, rather than cutting across these divisions, largely reinforced them. Local board leader James Blair, originally selected as a church school board candidate, was the Progressives' and Amalgamationists' chief opponent. He was supported by his controversial local board colleague, Nathaniel Rowley, who also came forward for the church party.[114] In contrast the leading Progressive, George Birdsall, came forward as one of the 'Unsectarian' candidates.[115]

The Unsectarian candidates' election committee membership gives a strong indication of how close the alliance between Progressive Liberals and nonconformists was. It included ministers from all the major nonconformist denominations in Moss Side and many active Liberals, including city councillors and the president of the South Manchester Liberal Association, Ald. Edwin Guthrie, who represented Moss Side on the county council.[116] Public meetings for the Unsectarian candidates were held at all the major nonconformist places of worship and education – the Baptist church schoolroom, the Ridgeway Street Mission Hall, the New Church Society schoolroom, the Primitive Methodist schoolroom and the

[112] Letter, A.D. Johnson to Jas. Flanagan, 23 Dec. 1886; Sir Henry Roscoe to Jas. Flanagan, 21 Jan. 1887; Moss Side Letters, MCL, M158/1/1/1–2.
[113] Moss Side School Board cutting, GBC, 93, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[114] Nomination cutting, GBC, 18, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[115] Public meeting cutting, GBC, 100, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[116] *Election Committee for Unsectarian Candidates*, GBC, 94, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

schoolroom of the Welsh Calvinistic church.[117] However much this was supposed to be an election about education, the church candidates were not allowed to escape from their associations with the local board, with electors being reminded that of the original five church candidates, four were members of the local board and two were allegedly not even Anglicans![118] The result of the contest was an overwhelming victory for the Unsectarian group with all five of their official candidates securing election together with their Amalgamationist colleague, independent churchman Rev. Dr Garrett. Just two of the local board's church candidates were elected and one independent.[119]

It is important to see how the difference in the franchise between the local board and school board election influenced the result. The former was much more limited and allowed for plural voting. The latter was essentially a householder franchise, which allowing for cumulative voting, ensuring the protection of minorities. Indications from the Amalgamation poll clearly suggested that the former system heavily disadvantaged the Progressive ratepayer and gave greater influence to property owners who overwhelmingly supported the position of the local board and the status quo. Moreover, the cumulative vote is well known to advantage the well-organized campaign group which tries to allocate votes to their candidates in roughly equal proportions, in order to avoid wasted surplus votes and to maximize the candidates elected. The large number of Progressive and Unsectarian meetings was probably indicative of a stronger organization supporting their side, and the inclusion of a number of leading Liberals on the Unsectarian election committee suggests that they had access to a very wide range of organizational expertise.

The more democratic household franchise was seen by the Progressives as a great opportunity to defeat the entrenched property-owning conservative influence on the local board – a feeling that was strengthened after the success of the Unsectarian candidates in the school board. With the coming of new district councils and the household franchise, Progressives could break through into local politics whether or not Moss Side was amalgamated with the city. Local Liberals, such as William Axon, approached the election with the belief that the old order would be swept away with the old electoral system.[120] They chose to turn the election into a referendum on the issue of the Moss Side destructor – the proposed erection of a large mechanical furnace for the disposal of refuse. Understanding local residents' concerns about the possible effects on the district of air pollution, leading Progressives moved to form a 'Committee of Ratepayers and Property Owners for Opposing the Erection of a Destructor in Moss

[117] Public meeting cutting, GBC, 100, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[118] John Garrett election address, GBC, 95, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[119] Election results cutting, GBC, 121, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[120] Moss Side Election Notes, William Axon Papers, MCL, M158/2/1/1.

Side', electing William Axon as their chairman.[121] The committee became a rallying point for all those opposed to the local board, selecting candidates for a Progressive slate almost exclusively from ranks of active Moss Side Liberals.[122]

Progressives posed as popular defenders of Moss Side's suburban character, opposing a polluting machine.[123] The district council election results repeated the pattern seen in the school board election with the Progressives sweeping to an overwhelming victory. Of the twelve newly elected councillors, nine were elected from the Progressive slate, and only two from the slate representing the old local board.[124] The Progressive manifesto, combining calls for public improvement with a healthy dose of local populism, was everywhere triumphant.

Class, meritocracy and suburban aspirations

The Progressive success was a Liberal party success in all but name. Its candidates were overwhelmingly Liberals, the candidates' committees were dominated by Liberals, they met at the local Liberal Club and they were supported by a movement synonymous with British Liberalism in the nineteenth century – the nonconformist churches. Local Liberal Progressives campaigned against the sectarian influence of the established church and the dominance of local government by a property-owning elite and for effective public improvements and the protection of the suburban environment. However, it is important to see that the Liberal defence of suburbia was not a defence of the privileges of a suburban elite, but rather part of their approach to public improvement. By the late 1890s public improvements began to materialize with Moss Side gaining its own board school, public library and newsroom.[125] The Progressive appeal was, in part, a 'class' appeal; however, it was not an appeal to a secure affluent middle class but rather to a lower middle class, insecure in its social status and requiring the public provision of important services, like many of the city's working population. In Moss Side this appeal had an important religious dimension. The area's nonconformist population required board schools not just for convenience and to end school fees but also to ensure that their children could enjoy education free from Anglican dogmas. For these people Progressivism addressed their interests and their desire for a more democratic, open and inclusive local politics. It met their aspirations for a healthier lifestyle outside the urban slums, while also addressing

[121] Moss Side Election Notes, William Axon Papers, MCL, M158/2/1/1.
[122] See District Council and Liberal Association cuttings, GBC, 160–1.
[123] *The Ratepayers' Candidates' Election Address*, Moss Side UDC Broadsides, MCL, LB3. There were also suggestions of petty corruption on the part of the local board see William Axon election letter, 5 Nov. 1894, Axon Letters, MCL, M158/2/1/12.
[124] Election results cutting, GBC, 121, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[125] *Moss Side District News*, 8 May 1897.

their needs for improved access to education and local public services. They required local government that was prepared to raise rates and squeeze property owners in order to raise the sums for investment in public services. Progressivism provided just that type of politics.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that the suburban Liberal outlook of Moss Side excluded interest in labour questions. It is true that no Liberals from a working-class background were elected to the new urban district council, but this is not too surprising at a time when the Manchester City Council could boast of only two working-class Liberal councillors – the trade council leaders, Matthew Arrandale and George Kelley.[126] Moreover, the social make-up of Moss Side and the failure of the ILP to challenge the Liberal dominance never really forced the Moss Side Liberals to face up to the issue of labour representation in the same way as their colleagues in the city of Manchester.[127] The Progressive candidates put forward for the first Moss Side District Council election were a combination of 'shopocracy' and professionals, and included a journalist, a science teacher, an architect, an engineer, two butchers, an auctioneer, a contractor and a publisher.[128] This did not, however, imply a general disinterest in the problems of working-class residents. Edwin Guthrie, on his retirement from the aldermanic bench of the county council, stood for re-election as a councillor on a platform that advocated minimum wages clauses in all council contracts.[129] The proceedings and lectures of the Moss Side Liberal Club indicates considerable grass-roots enthusiasm for labour issues and demonstrates that Liberals were alive to a possible ILP threat.[130] The language of the debate was one which saw labour issues as being primarily about the development of a society based on merit rather than privilege – a message that resonated as much, if not more, with the lower-middle-class Moss Side suburbanite as the Longsight railway worker: 'Liberalism's true aim was to give the working man the same social advantages as the rich man . . . the Liberal party are anxious that no barrier should be placed before the labourer, but every man should have a fair and equal chance of success.'[131] Democratic reform was depicted as being as much in the interests of suburbia as anywhere else, with the aim of democratic legislation 'not legislation for the poorer classes of the community but legislation for all classes'.[132] This did not mean, however, that the party was fearful

[126] *The Official Handbook of Manchester and Salford 1893–4* (Manchester, 1894).
[127] See chapter on C.P. Scott and Progressivism in P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), 153–97; J. Hill, 'The early development of the Independent Labour party in Manchester and Salford', *International Review of Social History*, 26 (1981), 171–201.
[128] *The Ratepayers' Candidates' Election Address*, Moss Side UDC Broadsides, MCL, LB3 MCL.
[129] Election meeting cutting, GBC, 166, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[130] Speaker's comments 'Liberalism and Labour' cutting, GBC, 164, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[131] Speaker's comments, 'Liberalism and Labour' cutting, GBC, 164, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.
[132] Registration meeting cutting, GBC, 166, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

of supporting controversial proposals – Moss Side Liberals even came out in favour of land nationalization.[133]

Liberalism in Moss Side, like that in the South Manchester parliamentary division as a whole, had developed into a Progressive and at times extremely Radical creed. Part of the explanation for this Radicalism must be the influence of a number of wealthy Radical Liberals who chose to reside in the area, patronizing local Liberal associations and clubs, helping to set a Radical agenda in local politics. The presence of a formidable cadre of 'advanced Liberals' – Edwin Guthrie, William Axon, George Birdsall – clearly assisted the emergence of a Progressive agenda in local politics. However, the Progressives may not have emerged so strongly had it not been for the Anglican-dominated local board acting, it seemed, with the interests of wealthy property owners as their chief concern and resisting demands for public improvements and public unsectarian education. With the coming of the school board and the urban district council elections, opposition to old local board members was consolidated and a more democratic electoral system allowed for the emergence of a Liberal-dominated Progressive majority on both local public bodies. The Progressive appeal was one designed to appeal to the concerns of the lower middle class dependent on the wealthier property owner for their residence, board schools for their children's education and public services for their education and entertainment. Although materially better off than the average Manchester resident, their needs were substantially different from the super-rich who resided in the exclusive dwellings of areas like Victoria Park. Suburban Liberalism was successful, not because it spoke the language of a privileged group, but, somewhat paradoxically, because it attacked a privileged group – the largely Anglican property-owning class who resisted the public improvements prized by many of the lower middle class.

A recent national survey of Liberalism at the 1895 general election has illustrated how the Liberal platform had a much greater coherence at this time than has sometimes been suggested.[134] Similarly, there were few signs of fundamental disagreements amongst Manchester Liberals, either on issues of nationalization, property ownership or any other subject associated with 'class politics'. In contrast to Thompson's London, suburbia in Manchester remained largely Liberal and its Progressive policies rarely offended middle-class or lower-middle-class sensibilities.[135] As Bernstein noted, this brand of Liberalism could be used to mobilize all the 'productive classes' against privilege and landlordism.[136] Suburban

[133] Henry Aldridge, speaking at the Moss Side Liberal Club, meeting cutting, GBC, 195, MCL, f379.4273 Bil.

[134] P. Readman, 'The 1895 general election and political change in late Victorian Britain', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 467–93.

[135] Thompson, *Socialists*.

[136] Bernstein, *Liberalism*, 3–6. Bernstein's work is specifically on the Edwardian period, but a similar case could be made for Manchester Progressivism in the late Victorian era.

Liberalism in Manchester could afford to be Radical because either, as in the case of Welsh disestablishment, a large number of nonconformist Liberals supported such stances on religious or ethical grounds, or, as in the case of labour representation, it could be depicted as a further step toward a meritocratic liberal society, threatening only the privileged classes, not the hard-working shopkeeper or clerk. Although some public improvements, such as board schools and public libraries, were costly and benefited the poorer ratepayers the most, they could equally appeal to the nonconformist who resented Anglican domination of local government and education and the educated clerk who placed value on self-improvement and literary culture. South Manchester Liberalism, typified by Sir Henry Roscoe, presented itself as an enlightened, meritocratic and moral force opposed to a self-interested and unenlightened property-owning elite. 'Radical Villadom' came to dominate local politics because it addressed many of the key concerns of suburban South Manchester's largest social group – the mainly nonconformist lower middle class. Consequently, Liberalism continued to be a powerful political force in Manchester's southern suburbs well into the twentieth century.[137]

These conclusions have significant implications for the study of both Liberalism and nineteenth-century towns. Far from becoming outdated in an era of 'class politics', Liberalism could clearly prosper in the middle-class suburbs. As far as class issues were observable at all, they tended to advantage the Liberal party, uniting all classes against powerful landlords and the Anglican church. Those who regard the Home Rule crisis as the end of the Liberal ascendancy or the beginning of the party's decline have tended to neglect the vitality of the party at local level, preferring instead to concentrate on the more glamorous world at Westminster.[138] Closer examination of local urban politics can reveal a very different picture – one where Liberal ideas and policies were in the ascendancy. Of course, one should be cautious about assuming that any one study provides a 'typical' case but equally it is clear that the type of issues Liberals addressed in South Manchester were questions relevant to the development of suburbs more generally. In an era when town planning was in its infancy, it seems few suburbs were built with entirely adequate sewerage, transport, schools or recreational facilities.[139] Suburbs promised an improved quality of life but the realities may not have lived up to expectations. Study of suburban

[137] Even after the First World War Manchester Liberalism continued to be electorally and organizationally stronger in middle- and mixed-class suburban constituencies. See Jones, 'Manchester Liberalism 1918–1929', 32–3, 310–11.

[138] See, for example, T.A. Jenkins, *The Liberal Ascendancy 1830–1886* (London, 1994), and Parry, *The Rise and Fall*.

[139] Of course, some developers were themselves advocates of town planning but these figures tend be noted by historians precisely because they were unusual. See, for example, the case of Arthur Wakerley in Leicester in J. Farquhar, *Arthur Wakerley 1862–1931* (Leicester, 1984), 29–39; J. Martin and R. Bird, 'Evington', in R.H. Evans (ed.), *Victoria History of the County of Leicester*, vol. IV (1958), 436; R. Rodger in D. Nash and D. Reeder (eds.), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century* (Stroud 1993), 6–9.

politics reveals that not only were local amenities often regarded as inadequate, but that local landlords were frequently perceived as resisting public improvements and political modernization in order to protect their own interests.[140] It also suggests that many residents of suburbia, far from being privileged and secure, struggled to maintain their economic status and standard of living. This interpretation may lead us to revise both our popular conception of suburbia and the degree to which economic differences fostered the growth of class-based politics.

[140] The level of landlord profit reinvestment in the maintenance and improvement of housing stock in the privately rented sector was often minimal. See references in R. Rodger, *Housing in Urban Britain 1780–1914* (Cambridge 1995 (first publ. 1989)), 43.