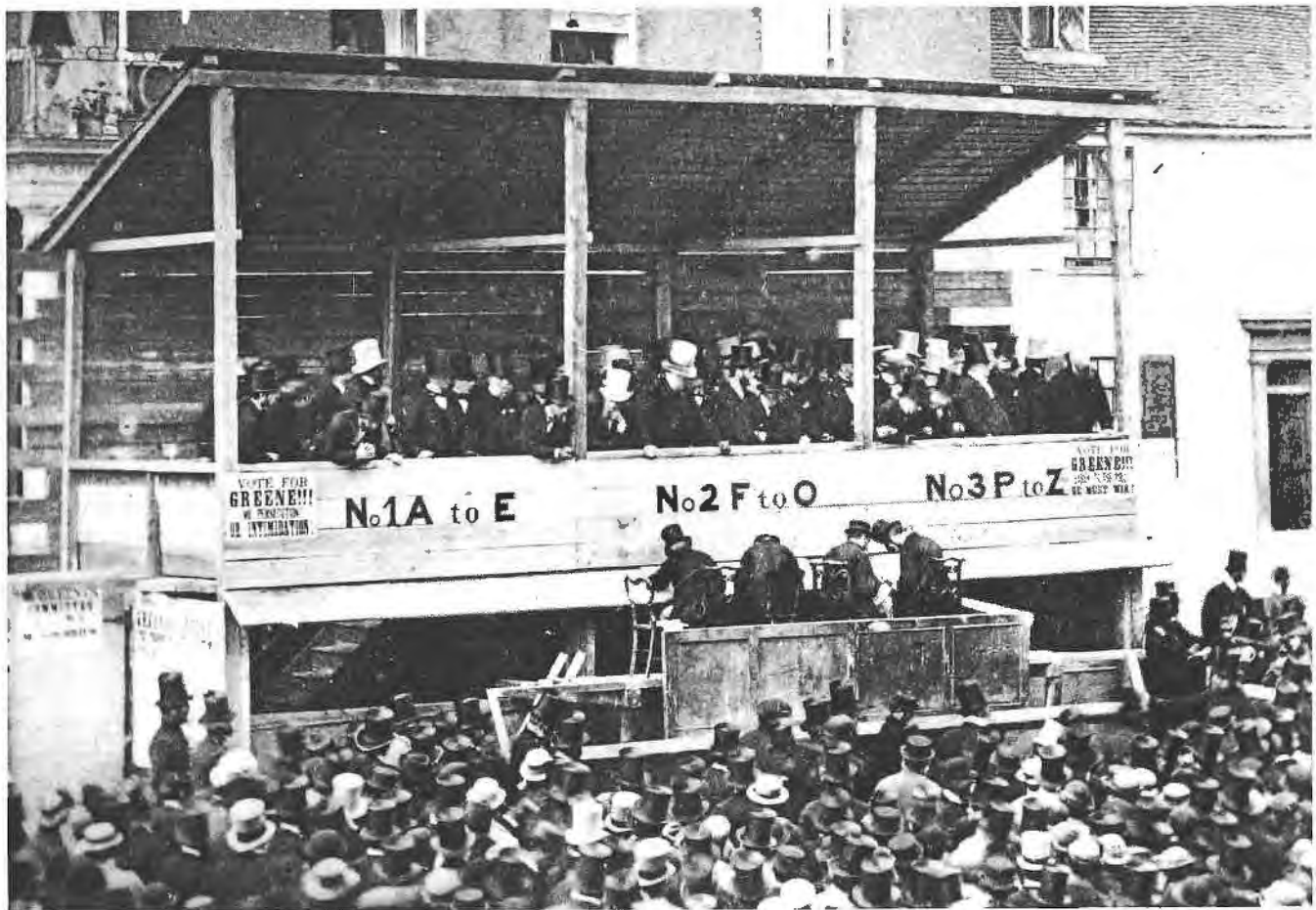


Elections and party organisation

Ian Cawood examines the emergence and impact of the Birmingham Liberal 'caucus'

Birmingham, the 'Caucus' and



Election hustings in the 1860s

'I've got it,' said he with a face full of glee, 'Dame Virtue shall no longer baulk us;' Then with a jubilant cry, he winked his left eye, Gave a laugh and invented – the caucus!'

IN THE NATIONAL historiography of the Victorian Liberal Party, Birmingham holds an ambiguous position. On the one hand, it pioneered a new approach to political organisation and electioneering, most spectacularly in the 1868 general election which saw all three of the seats for the city won for the Liberals, thanks to the work of the Birmingham Liberal Association (BLA). On the other hand, the BLA later proved to be a troublesome ally for Gladstone

and its founders, as Andrew Reekes has recently described.² And, in some ways, its actions were manipulative of the electorate and not fully representative of the political complexion of the city. If the BLA has been considered to be the prototype of modern political organisation, owing to its success in 1868, it has nevertheless been suggested by some commentators this was not entirely beneficial for the development of participative democratic politics in Britain nor for the long-term survival of the Liberal Party.³

Although the association was seen by Disraeli as an example of the growing 'Americanisation' of the English political system,⁴ it was, in fact, a natural development of the progressive movement

and the 1868 general election

in Birmingham.⁵ The BLA arose primarily out of the close relationship between the Nonconformist churches in Birmingham. These had been fired with a spirit of public service by the radical preacher, George Dawson, who preached at the Church of the Saviour in Edward Street. Dawson wished to see the energy and the professionalism of the Birmingham middle classes, hitherto dedicated to making money for themselves, turned instead towards the benefiting of the whole community through the provision of cultural, social and economic 'improvement'.⁶ As he famously put it, 'a great town exists to discharge towards the people of that town the duties that a great nation exists to discharge towards the people of that nation.'⁷ Dawson saw the enemies of his vast ambitions for the 'civic gospel' in the dominant 'economist' group on Birmingham council, who famously met in the Woodman pub, in Easy Row near the canal wharf, to save the expense of erecting a proper Council House.⁸ In 1861, he, together with like-minded progressives, such as the architects J. H. Chamberlain and William Harris, and the scholars Samuel Timmons and G. J. Johnson, founded the *Town Crier*, a satirical periodical which mercilessly lambasted the short-sightedness of the 'economists' who oversaw appalling rates of infant mortality due to the lack of adequate public health provision.⁹ In their place, the *Town Crier* supported Thomas Avery who, although cautious in expenditure, began to tackle the town's sewage problem, in the first stirrings of the 'civic gospel'.¹⁰ In Dawson's congregation were not only figures such as J. T. Bunce and Jesse Collings, who came to dominate Birmingham politics in the 1870s and thereafter, but also Harris, who has become known as the 'father of the caucus'.¹¹ Harris himself had been associated with Liberal politics since his support for nationalist causes in Hungary and Italy in 1848 and was at forefront of Liberal activity in the 1860s owing to his presidency of the Birmingham and Edgbaston Debating Society, where young professional and businessmen of all religious denominations such as George Dixon and Joseph Chamberlain, discussed how to improve their adopted town.¹² All

three were subsequently involved in the campaign for educational reform that would eventually produce the National Education League.¹³

Harris, the education reformer, George Dixon and the proprietor of the sympathetic *Birmingham Daily Post*, John Jaffray, founded the BLA in February 1865, shortly before Lord Palmerston called what was expected to be his last general election. The circular announcing the initial meeting noted that it was 'a matter of regret that the Liberal Party in Birmingham has had no recognised organisation by which its opinions can be expressed and its interests promoted.'¹⁴ The first meetings of the BLA took place on 17 February in a committee room of the Birmingham town hall with a committee of twenty one members, Philip Muntz as president and Dixon as honorary secretary.¹⁵ The title 'Liberal Association' was deliberately chosen instead of an alternative title to avoid alarming moderates who would be worried about a title containing words such as 'Radical' or 'Reform'.¹⁶ The purposes of the new association were given as follows:

To maintain the Liberal representation of the borough.

To assist in obtaining the return of Liberal members for the county.

To promote the adoption of Liberal principles in the Government of the country.¹⁷

The BLA was outwardly, therefore, a more centrist organisation, appealing to respectable Birmingham progressives, but it masked a very radical agenda of municipal reform and support for expansion of the parliamentary franchise.

The association was notably ineffective at first, struggling to operate within the restricted franchise imposed in 1832. In July 1865, George Muntz was defeated in the North Warwickshire constituency in the general election. In response the BLA declared that it would not disband and would become a permanent organisation determined to drive forward a more radical agenda in Birmingham and Warwickshire's Liberal politics.¹⁸ It funded the establishment

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of a Birmingham branch of the radical Reform League in November 1865 with the support of local trade unions.¹⁹ One of the co-founders of the association, James Baldwin, was appointed as first president of the Midlands 'department' of the league. The 'department' was inaugurated with a meeting in Birmingham on 4 July 1866 with a march of the trades unions from the Bull Ring to the town hall.²⁰ Shortly afterwards, an enormous meeting was held at Brook Fields, near Icknield Street, attended by around 200,000 supporters of reform.²¹ This was, in many ways, a return to the tactics of Thomas Attwood's Birmingham Political Union which had forged an alliance between the town's workers and businessmen in 1830 and which had held enormous meetings in May 1832 on New Hall hill, just outside the town centre, as a scarcely concealed threat of potential disorder if their demands for political reform were not met. The serious 'Murphy Riots' of late June 1867, the last anti-Catholic riots in nineteenth century Birmingham, added to the sense of tension, though the swift suppression of these by George Dixon, now Birmingham's mayor, did no harm for the reputation of the Liberals among the respectable of Birmingham.²²

The immediate target of the BLA and the Reform League was the extension of the franchise, following the death of Lord Palmerston and the rise of the more reform-minded William Gladstone. That the leading advocate of 'the widest possible suffrage', John Bright, was one of the MPs for Birmingham, helped to focus demands for Reform in the city.²³ The BLA and the Reform League also agreed that the number of MPs representing Birmingham should be increased, to match the growth of the city in nineteenth century. They were aided by an increase in unemployment and a rise in interest rates (consequent on a stock market crash in May 1866) which encouraged the political mobilisation of the skilled workers.²⁴ Between summer 1866 and 1867 the Reform League held nearly 600 public meetings in the Midlands and signed up nearly 20,000 new members.²⁵ At this point, the BLA was virtually in abeyance, with only twenty-eight people attending the association's annual meeting according to the memory of one eyewitness.²⁶ The reward was not merely the passing of the Second Reform Act which trebled the electorate (mainly in urban areas), but also the redistribution of seats, which allocated an additional, third constituency to Birmingham (as was also the case in Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester). The BLA claimed the credit for this latter achievement, and as one commentator has claimed, it 'made Liberalism more than ever the uncontested political creed of the working classes.'²⁷ Another of the leading Nonconformist Liberal leaders, R. W. Dale, gave a lecture, entitled 'The Politics of the Future', in which he repudiated the arguments of those who had prophesied social upheaval as a result of the

increase in the electorate, largely as a result of the disturbances in Hyde Park in July 1866.²⁸

I ask with whom does the blame lie of exposing us to this terrible danger – with those who endeavoured to keep the franchise from the most numerous class of the community, and so withheld from them the only weapon of self-defence, which is at once harmless and effective, or with me, for pointing out what would be the inevitable effect of that unjust and perilous policy in times of great popular excitement? With whom does the blame lie? With me, for maintaining that it is infinitely safer that the great masses of our countrymen should defend their rights by constitutional means than by the exercise of physical force, or with those who denied the people the suffrage, and were willing, if dark and calamitous times should come, to encounter the terrible risk of conspiracy and rebellion?²⁹

Dale, and the other leaders of what Leighton terms the 'new Radicals', who went on to give speeches in the weeks that followed, focused on one crucial social issue to bring the newly enfranchised into the national polity – the development of the state provision of education.³⁰ The state had funded both Anglican and Nonconformist schools since 1833 (which was called the 'voluntary system'), but they had not kept pace with the expansion of the population, nor had they acknowledged that half the population never attended church. In Birmingham, the leading progressives founded the Birmingham Education Society in March 1867 to campaign for greater popular access to education and a reduction in church influence in schools. In a report in 1868, the society found that, although there had been significant improvements in provision in the town, 13,000 children still received no schooling whatsoever and that standards of attainment were fairly low.³¹ George Dixon threw himself into promoting the cause of secular, free elementary education and is widely seen as the man who first transformed the aspirations of George Dawson into tangible policies and invigorated the Liberals and Nonconformists in Birmingham into political action.³²

As the Birmingham Reform League had now fulfilled its function, it was swiftly disbanded, and the BLA took centre stage as Disraeli called an election in 1868 hoping to capitalise on the goodwill from the majority of voters whom his party had enfranchised. Dixon had been elected to parliament in a by-election in July 1867 and Harris had succeeded him as secretary of the BLA. Harris, equally inspired by the radicalism of Dawson and Dale as Dixon, was determined that three Liberal candidates should win the three Birmingham seats and so had to turn its attention towards the marshalling of the Liberal vote. As Joseph Chamberlain (who played a very minor role in the work of the BLA in 1868) later wrote:

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It is not only desirable but absolutely necessary that the whole of the party should be taken into its counsels and that all its members should share in its control and management. It is no longer safe to attempt to secure the representation of a great constituency for the nominee of a few gentlemen sitting in private committee, and basing their claims to dictate the choice of the electors on the fact that they have been willing to subscribe something towards the expenses. The working class, who cannot contribute pecuniarily though they are often ready to sacrifice a more than proportionate amount of time and labour, are now the majority in most borough constituencies, and no candidate and no policy has a chance of success unless their good will and active support can be first secured.³³

Under the so-called 'minority clause' of the reformed political system, although Birmingham now had three MPs, the electors still had only two votes each and so there was a danger that all the Liberal voters would cast their ballot for the most popular candidate (Bright) and thus reduce the chances of enough votes being cast for each of the two remaining candidates (Dixon and Philip Muntz) to prevent the Conservatives from being able to elect one of their candidates (Sampson Lloyd or Sebastian Evans). Harris therefore re-organised the BLA into a hierarchy of committees, led by the management committee (the 'Committee of Ten'), with an executive and a general committee ('the four hundred') beneath it and permanent ward committees, of twenty-four members each, to direct electors in each ward to vote for a particular combinations of candidates. As the later constitution of the BLA revealingly noted, 'mere adherence to the objects and organisations of the [BLA]' was sufficient for membership of the ward committee.³⁴ Ward committees had been established for the purpose of fighting a forthcoming election in Birmingham since 1841, but these had been dissolved as soon as the election was over.³⁵

Harris divided Birmingham into three areas. In area A, Liberal voters were instructed to vote for Bright and Dixon; in area B they were told to vote for Bright and Muntz. In the most challenging area C, voters would be directed not to vote for Bright, the 'People's Tribune', but for Dixon and Muntz.³⁶ As Harris put it, 'in this way unity would be preserved and the danger of a Tory being elected in consequence of difference among the Liberals would be averted.'³⁷ While national Liberal organs such as the *Daily News* predicted a sorry failure, Birmingham's Liberals were confident of success and a mourning card was circulated announcing the burial of 'Old Toryism' on polling day (17 November) and ironically lamenting:

A man that is born a Tory has but a short time to live and is full of humbug; he springeth up like

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a fungus and withereth like a cauliflower; and is seen no more; in the midst of life, we hope he meets his death.³⁸

Conservatism in Birmingham had not been dominant since in the middle years of the century and had become locally identified with the 'economist' grouping on the town's council who oversaw the decline from the high standards of housing, health provision and sanitation in the town which had preserved Birmingham from the ravages of cholera in 1832.³⁹ While it was true that a substantial section of the local upper middle classes, particularly Anglican manufacturers and lawyers, had remained Conservative, this class was now out-numbered in the electorate by the newly enfranchised urban rate-payers. Socially aloof from the growing ranks of Nonconformity in the town and preferring to look to the neighbouring gentry of Warwickshire and Staffordshire for social alliances, this local elite had become increasingly removed from the practical concerns of Birmingham's citizens, as their inadequate responses to the calls for educational reform demonstrated. They claimed popular support for the causes of Church and Queen but in 1867 the Working Men's Liberal-Conservative Association could only claim 2,000 members.⁴⁰

The main battle ground between Liberals and Conservatives in terms of policy in 1868, was on the question of the Irish church, which Gladstone had promised to disestablish in order to pacify Ireland. The Conservative candidates were both strong supporters of antidisestablishmentarianism. Sampson Lloyd, in an attempt to appeal to the anti-Catholic prejudices of the Nonconformist Birmingham voter, declared in his election address that Gladstone's proposed Irish Church Bill would lead 'to a great increase in the political power of the hierarchy and established in that country by the Court of Rome.'⁴¹ The two sides produced short-lived, 'wretchedly executed' satirical journals for the duration of the contest – the Liberals printing *Toby* and the Conservatives, *The Third Member*.⁴² A meeting at the town hall with Dixon and both putative Conservative candidates present on 22 April was disrupted when physical violence broke out and both Conservative candidates were howled down.⁴³ It was normal for violence to break out at the hustings; for example it was alleged that the BLA had hired thugs to intimidate Lloyd when he had stood against Dixon in the 1867 by-election.⁴⁴ But it was unusual for violence to occur in the confines of as august a building as the town hall and must serve as an indication of the passions provoked by the contest.

It is striking how much Gladstone's name was already being used as a talisman by the 'new Radicals'. In a speech in late October, Muntz praised Gladstone as 'the finest financier of the age', while a Jewish member of the audience gave the Liberal leader sole credit for granting civil rights to those

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of his faith. The Conservatives were forced to resort to defamation to tarnish his obvious popularity, accusing Gladstone of being 'in league with the Church of Rome to fight her battles.'³⁵ On 16 November, at the hustings outside the town hall, nominations took place. Those for Dixon and Muntz stressed that both were 'supporters of Mr Gladstone' and that for Bright described him as 'the real great champion of the working classes of this country.' By contrast, the nominators for Evans or Lloyd warned of 'the shackles of Rome, the thumb-screw and the rack.' The mayor of Birmingham, Alderman Henry Holland, called for a show of hands and declared the three Liberals elected. Lloyd and Evans demanded a poll to be held (as was their right) and this was held at the same site on the following day, with the *Birmingham Daily Post* confidently predicting that 'today we are going to win a great victory at the poll.'³⁶ Voters declared their votes verbally to an election clerk who recorded these in a poll book for the last time in a general election, prior to the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872. The Mayor was given the poll books the day after and, after an hour of public arithmetic, he declared the following results:

Dixon	15,098
Muntz	14,614
Bright	14,601
Lloyd	8,700
Evans	7,061

John Skirrow Wright, president of the BLA, called for 'ringing and hearty cheers for Bright, Dixon, Muntz and for Gladstone' and then 'the immense and orderly assembly dispersed.'³⁷

The campaign of the BLA had proved staggeringly successful as there was less than 500 votes' difference between the first and the third Liberal candidates. As Philip Muntz commented after hearing the declaration, 'had it not been for the magnificent organisation of our friends ... we had been in the same position as our friends in Manchester, where for want of organisation, they have lost a vote which ought to have been saved.'³⁸ All three Birmingham Liberals had secured enormous majorities and advice about electioneering was instantly requested by Liberals in many other constituencies.³⁹ In recognition of his achievement, Harris was presented with a cheque for £240 (worth well over £25,000 today) by Skirrow Wright in May 1869.⁴⁰ Gladstone won the election with a majority of 107, the largest since 1832, but even he recognised the significance of Birmingham's achievement. Bright was offered a cabinet position and accepted the post of president of the Board of Trade – Birmingham's first cabinet minister.⁴¹ The 'new Radicals' were not entirely convinced that Bright sympathised with the Civic Gospel and Harris led a deputation in autumn 1869 to persuade Joseph Chamberlain to stand for election to the town council, convinced that

he combined the right political views and ability to replace Bright as the leader of Birmingham's Liberals.⁴²

In response to this stinging defeat, the Conservatives attempted to improve their own organisation after 1868 and more particularly after 1874,⁴³ but the BLA went on to enjoy a monopoly of political power in Birmingham with the establishment of the National Education League in 1869 and Joseph Chamberlain's election as mayor of Birmingham in 1873. In the same year Harris stepped down as secretary following a minor stroke and was replaced by the young Francis Schnadhorst. The caucus was the means whereby positive, reforming local government was achieved, particularly during the period of Chamberlain's mayoralty from 1873 to 1876. In 1877 the BLA hosted a conference of ninety-five Liberal associations and Harris encouraged them to use the 'caucus' system to give voice to the popular mood over issues such as the 'Bulgarian horrors' then dominating the news. Harris was appointed as chairman of the Central Committee of a newly formed National Liberal Federation (NLF), with Chamberlain as president and Schnadhorst as secretary. As Robert Self has perspicuously noted, 'although the ostensibly representative structure always concealed a high level of oligarchical control, its claim to legitimacy permitted the NLF to claim the right to control the destiny of the Liberal party.'⁴⁴ Hugh Cunningham disagrees that the NLF was ever that powerful, however, as Hartington, one of those Whigs whom Chamberlain had hoped to unseat from their position at the heart of British Liberalism came to respect the services that the NLF could provide, especially after the scale of the Liberals' election victory in 1880 became clear.⁴⁵

It is true that the organisation of the BLA moved forward the 'improvement' of Birmingham which began spectacularly under Chamberlain's three-year mayoralty and continued to pursue 'gas and water socialism' under successive Liberal mayors. It also served as the springboard for Chamberlain's rapid ascent into national politics, with him becoming president of the Board of Trade only four years after his election as an MP in 1876. But its legacy is mixed, even for its progenitors. Bright remained Member of Parliament for Birmingham until his death in 1889, but he had little love for the new forms of political organisation which his thrusting young colleague had perfected. Dixon was forced out his seat in parliament by the ambitious Chamberlain in 1876.⁴⁶ Muntz, who had unwisely refused to give up his political independence to Chamberlain, unwittingly sealed his fate when he beat Chamberlain to second place in the 1880 election and he too was forced out in 1885 to make way for those more loyal to the 'Boss'.⁴⁷ After successfully capturing the council, the BLA became increasingly 'dictatorial and tyrannical', in the opinion of W. J. Davis, the leader of the Brassworkers'

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Union.⁵⁸ It refused to listen to the Labour Representative League's concern that working men were not being nominated as candidates for election, which led Davis to set up the Birmingham Labour Association. The BLA backed down and Schnadhorst agreed to let a few Labour figures such as Davis to stand as candidates for the school board or the town council without opposition from the BLA.⁵⁹

Gladstone, in the midst of his campaign against 'Bulgarian atrocities' came to Birmingham in 1877 to speak at the inauguration of the NLF, but pointedly refused to do more than endorse it, having been warned by Granville of Chamberlain's ambitions.⁶⁰ He had been annoyed by the National Education League's campaign against Forster's 1870 Education Act and by Chamberlain's critical article, 'The Liberal Party and its Leaders'.⁶¹ He was proved correct to be suspicious when the NLF was used by Chamberlain to promote his 'unauthorised programme' in the 1885 general election. Chamberlain's increased focus on his national career also proved disastrous to Harris and Schnadhorst, who refused to break with Gladstone, when the Birmingham Liberal MPs opposed his Irish Home Rule Bill in 1886. Schnadhorst made sure that the BLA (and the NLF) stayed loyal to the GOM but neither he nor Harris were able to advance their political careers significantly thereafter.⁶² Chamberlain meanwhile was forced to found the Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association and to rebuild his caucus from the ground up.⁶³ He consequently became increasingly dependent on Conservative support to further his career, the contradictions of which position came near to forcing his retirement over the Leamington Spa candidature dispute in 1895.⁶⁴

The National Liberal Federation grew in power and influence, however, moving to Westminster in 1886 and then establishing the Liberal Publications Department in the following year.⁶⁵ As the NLF stayed loyal to Gladstone, the new president, Robert Spence Watson, demanded a price from the leader in 1891 – the 'Newcastle Programme', which presented the party with a list of demands for radical reforms from the party's grassroots.⁶⁶ The Federation finally reached its apogee under the presidency of Augustine Birrell from 1902, who effectively coordinated the defence of the workers' 'cheap loaf' in the face of Chamberlain's sudden conversion to the cause of Tariff Reform.⁶⁷ In many ways, the NLF can be credited for the scale of the Liberal landslide, even if, ironically, it must thank Chamberlain for dividing both of the Unionist parties in one maladroitness manoeuvre and handing the Liberals a cause on which they could reunite.

Political historians such as Jon Lawrence and James Vernon have worried that the political apparatus created by Harris and inherited by Chamberlain and then expanded nationally into the NLF amounted to a form of 'coercion'

whereby the representative nature of mass politics was subverted by powerful elite groups and used to silence minority voices.⁶⁸ In her study of the political culture of Victorian Birmingham, Anne Rodrick notes that 'the Liberal caucus closed off many avenues for service to those beyond the pale of the ruling party', as can be witnessed by the bitter attacks on the BLA by the anonymous authors of *The Dart* magazine after 1879 when it was bought out by a consortium of leading Birmingham Conservatives.⁶⁹ Lord Randolph Churchill described the caucus system of which the BLA was the central component as 'Tsarist despotism ... dispensing patronage to maintain 25,000 servants and to employ none but the blindly docile as chinovniks'.⁷⁰ This was popularly referred to as 'vote as you are told' (which was the verbatim message in the *Birmingham Daily Post* on the day of the 1868 poll).⁷¹ Harris defended the scheme, however, on the basis that a political organisation 'should not only be a reflex of popular opinion, but should be so manifestly a reflex of that opinion that none could doubt it'.⁷² As he put it in his *History of the Radical Party in Parliament*, it was 'in the borough constituencies where alone the Radical feelings of the People can obtain expression' and so it was his responsibility to maximise the political representation of that feeling, both to combat the Conservatives and also to challenge the Whig influence on the Liberal party itself.⁷³ Chamberlain himself offered a more typically vigorous rebuttal of the charge of tyrannical direction, though in private he admitted that he had 'almost despotic authority' over Birmingham, thanks to the caucus.⁷⁴ Asa Briggs' conclusion is that the BLA was in fact a form of 'democratic centralism' in which twenty members could demand a meeting of the general committee (which in time grew to number 2,000) which had considerable influence over the choice of candidates. He argues that in spite of the BLA's subsequent condemnation by commentators and historians, the association contributed significantly to the public interest in politics and the revival of local pride which manifested itself in support for ambitious spending plans and conspicuous philanthropy in Birmingham in the 1870s.⁷⁵ Given the considerable advantage in wealth, social connections, cultural authority and deference that both the Tories and the Whigs enjoyed even in Birmingham, it is possible to understand that the BLA, whilst not altogether democratic, was a necessary evil, if vested interests and entrenched institutional inertia in municipal politics was to be overturned. Moreover, as the 'minority clause' had been designed by a Tory government to increase Conservative representation in borough seats, it was beholden on the 'new Radicals' to use any means available to strike back at this blatant electoral manipulation with, in Harris' own words, 'the nicest calculation and the utmost subordination ... to carry the three Liberals'.⁷⁶

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Dr Ian Cawood is Associate Professor in Modern British Religious and Political History at the University of Stirling. He is the author of *The Liberal Unionist Party 1886–1912: A History* (Bloomsbury, 2012) and editor of *Joseph Chamberlain: Imperial Statesman, National Leader, Local Icon* (Palgrave, 2016).

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- 18 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 2 Aug. 1865.
- 19 *Birmingham Journal*, 25 Nov. 1865, 18 Aug. 1866.
- 20 *Birmingham Journal*, 7 July 1866.
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- 30 Leighton, 'Municipal Progress, Democracy and Radical Identity', p. 116.
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