

Manchester Liberalism and the Unionist Secession 1886-95

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The Irish Home Rule crisis and the division of the Liberal party into rival Gladstonian and Unionist groups has dominated discussions of late nineteenth century Liberalism. Some suggest that the 1886 crisis effectively marked the end of the Victorian Liberal party.¹ Others have gone even further indicating that the Home Rule crisis represented a fundamental realignment towards the more class-based politics of the early twentieth century - "the geological shift in the structure of British politics."² Even sympathetic biographers of Gladstone have argued that the 1892 general election was the first to be fought "to a great extent upon class."³ A large number of Liberal peers left the party never to return, including Lord Hartington, the man many regarded as the Liberal leader in waiting.⁴ Many wealthier Liberal MPs also departed over the Home Rule issue suggesting a class basis to the revolt – although recent research has identified only a very weak correlation between high social status and rejection of the Gladstonian leadership.⁵

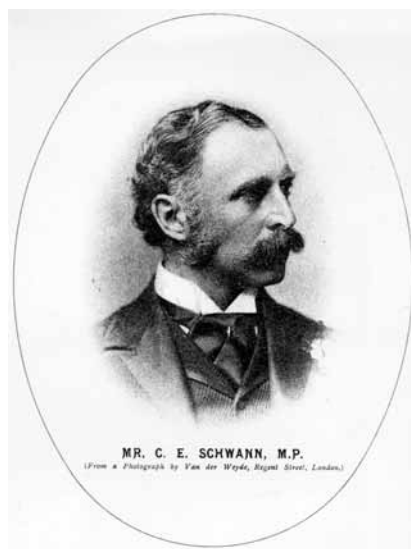
Manchester's Liberals were rocked by the crisis - some felt that their city had suffered more through Unionist secessions than any other outside Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham.⁶ To what extent were these feelings justified? Manchester Liberalism had already undergone a period of internal turmoil in the early 1880s before Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule.⁷ The executive of the central Manchester Liberal Association, largely composed of elderly Liberals from the 'moderate' wing of the party, was increasingly seen to be at odds with Radicals on issues of land and constitutional reform. In 1883 the executive fought off moves by Radicals who wished to install Dr Richard Pankhurst as

an official Liberal parliamentary candidate. Although rejected by the official Liberal machinery, Radicals persuaded him to stand as an Independent Liberal in a Manchester by-election of that year, after the Manchester Liberal Association had elected not to put forward a candidate.⁸ Pankhurst lost, but Radicals, angry at what they saw as their exclusion from the party executive, established their own Radical Association to try to gain more influence in the management of the local party.

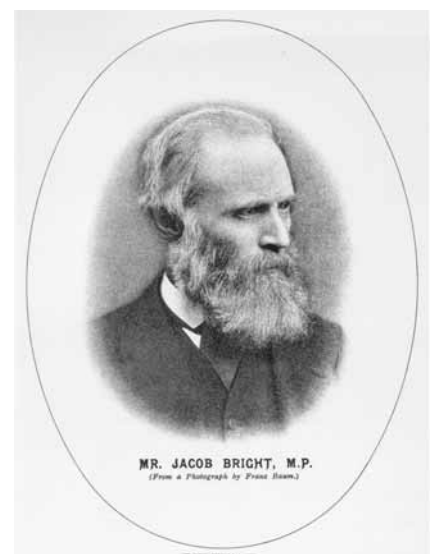
Traditionally, conflict between Radicals and 'moderates' had been restrained by an electoral compromise that allowed each wing of the party to nominate one candidate for the three-member parliamentary borough of Manchester. However this compromise collapsed when the electoral redistribution of 1885 divided Manchester into six separate parliamentary constituencies. Liberal doctrines of decentralised decision making dictated that each constituency should be allowed to freely nominate its own parliamentary candidate, which essentially devolved the power of political management to local committees, depriving Manchester's old Liberal political leadership of their traditional role. Moreover these new committees showed a strong preference for candidates from the left of the party. The three most winnable constituencies all selected those associated with Radicalism – South West Manchester nominated existing MP Jacob Bright, South Manchester nominated Sir Henry Roscoe and North Manchester, Charles Schwann. At the 1885 general election many in Manchester's large Irish population followed the advice of Parnell and boycotted Liberal candidates, helping to bring about the defeat of all but Roscoe. However within a year, Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule placated Irish supporting Liberals who



Sir Henry Roscoe, Liberal MP for South Manchester. Manchester's only Liberal MP to be elected at the 1885 general election. (Source: *Faces and Places*, Manchester 1889-1890)



Charles Schwann, Liberal MP for North Manchester – newly elected in 1886. (Source: *Faces and Places*, Vol. 1, Manchester 1889-1890)



Jacob Bright, Liberal MP for South West Manchester – newly elected in 1886. (Source: *Faces and Places*, Manchester 1889-1890)

helped return Roscoe, Schwann and Bright in the general election of 1886.⁹ Meanwhile candidates from Manchester's 'moderate' Liberal tradition, Sir Alfred Hopkinson and sitting MP John Slagg went down to heavy defeat in 1885 and declined to fight Manchester constituencies again in 1886.

Several senior 'moderate' Liberals, already dissatisfied with aspects of party policy, felt marginalised by the new party structures. Constituency associations flexed their muscles and made it clear they were reluctant to adopt candidates from the right of the party. Hopkinson obtained the 1885 nomination in East Manchester mainly because no other candidate could be found to fight what was regarded as an unwinnable seat. Even his constituency officials made it clear they would have preferred a more 'advanced' candidate.¹⁰ Many, like Hopkinson, who rebelled over Home Rule were expressing a broader dissatisfaction with the party – although it is important to stress that individual motives differed. Some Anglicans, such as George Milner, were known to be unhappy with the party's flirtation with disestablishment and had voted Conservative in 1885 as a protest.¹¹ Others left the party for more prosaic reasons. Henry C. Pingstone, a long serving councillor in New Cross Ward, was marginalised from the Liberal mainstream after his association with alleged irregularities in council business.¹² When he became a Liberal Unionist his ostracism was complete. Some, like George Clay, Liberal Unionist councillor for Oxford Ward, had long been at odds with members of their Liberal ward committees and the Home Rule crisis simply offered an opportunity to leave with dignity.¹³ Secession from the Liberal party, however, did not necessarily imply active support of the Liberal Unionists. Clay played little active role in Liberal Unionist politics.¹⁴ Indeed many Liberals who left the party in 1886 had little appetite for further party political work. Alderman Schofield, a council veteran, although nominally becoming a Liberal Unionist, never regarded himself as a 'party' politician, although previously "he was regarded as a Whig".¹⁵ Many Liberal elders who opposed Gladstone's Home Rule plans were often very reluctant to come out in public opposition to their party. Both Oliver Heywood and R.N. Philips only declared themselves after much persuasion by local leaders.¹⁶ As time passed, many were increasingly uncomfortable with the growing alliance with the Conservatives at national level. Sir Thomas Bazley severed his connection with the Liberal Unionists in protest at the parliamentary leaders seemingly acting in outright opposition to all Gladstonian Liberal proposals, whatever their merits, and condemned "a Liberal Unionism which is fast becoming a synonym for Toryism."¹⁷ The loss of such a senior figure from Liberal Unionist ranks prompted the national Liberal Publications Department to issue a pamphlet containing his resignation letter.¹⁸

Impact of the Split

The leadership of the Manchester Liberal party was initially taken aback by the scale of opposition to Home Rule noting that "divisions throughout the Liberal ranks resulting from the introduction of this measure have been acutely felt in Manchester, more so, perhaps than in any other place excepting Birmingham."¹⁹ Yet the Liberal Unionist rebellion in Manchester was limited by the cautious and measured response of senior party officials to the Home Rule question. Initially declining to support a proposal

endorsing the Home Rule measures, the officers of the Liberal Union instead called upon officers of the divisional associations to call meetings to consult and pass resolutions giving their views.²⁰ Within a fortnight all six divisional councils had held meetings endorsing the Gladstonian proposals, although the North and North-West Liberal divisional councils stressed the importance of compromise, where possible, to retain Liberal unity.²¹ By adopting a consensual approach the dissidents were marginalised. During two key council meetings in May, several Liberal Unionists attempted to overturn Home Rule policy, but in both cases were overwhelmingly defeated. Percy Glass, a senior party organiser, unsuccessfully tabled a Unionist amendment, whilst at a mass meeting in the Free Trade Hall just "8 or 10" Unionist dissidents recorded votes against Home Rule.²²

The Manchester Liberal associations did, however, lose some large donors to party funds.²³ Initially efforts to find new subscribers were not overwhelmingly successful, and attempts to persuade Liberal Unionists to continue with their party subscriptions were abandoned by mid-1887.²⁴ However, the party struggled through and party organisation was barely affected – the central association made grants of £320 to the divisional associations that year.²⁵ It is also important to place these financial difficulties in the context of the political cycle. With two general elections in nine months it would be surprising if local parties did not suffer some short-term financial problems.²⁶ What is remarkable was just how quickly the local party recovered. By the end of 1887 it had attracted five major new subscribers, while six others increased their contributions.²⁷ Total subscriptions and donations fell from just over £680 in 1887 to just under £360 in 1888. Yet around two-thirds of this decrease can be accounted for by Home Rulers, such as C.E. Schwann MP and H.J. Roby MP, reducing their subscriptions to the central funds, rather than by a withdrawal of funds by the Liberal Unionists. Indeed figures like Schwann and Roby may well have been contributing the same amounts to the party as a whole, but funding the divisional associations directly, rather than through the central committees. Any problems the Manchester Liberal Union had were only of a short-term nature. After an appeal to members, donations and subscriptions leapt to £830 in 1889, allowing the Liberal Union to increase its grants to divisional associations from £240 to £600 – a figure that increased further in the run-up to the 1892 general election. Difficulties in mobilising activists and finances were nothing new – they went back at least a decade before the Home Rule crisis.²⁸ Ironically the crisis helped foster organisational improvements by forcing Liberal leaders to face up to internal problems and, in particular, to address the party's financial difficulties.

The Liberal Unionist Dilemma

Almost from the outset Liberal Unionists struggled with their ambivalent and sometimes ambiguous position. To try to fight the battle through the party caucuses was clearly a lost cause and to argue the Unionist case within them could be seen as imposing on them an obligation to accept the majority view. The majoritarian decision-making process of the party institutions left them with no role in the official party organisation and the alternatives were unclear. By the July 1886 general election some Liberal Unionists had formed a branch of the Hartingtonite Liberal Committee for the Maintenance of the Legislative Union

between Great Britain and Ireland. The branch organised an open-air public meeting in the city centre to coincide with the general election, but it was a very curious election meeting. Sir Henry James, the main speaker, thanked Liberal Unionists in Manchester for their support, but gave little indication as to what Liberal Unionists were actually supposed to do during the course of the general election.²⁹ The answer was, of course, nothing. It soon became very difficult to maintain the interest of political activists when the only direction they were given by their political leadership was to stay at home. The logic of their position demanded that specific activities be organised to retain loyalty and interest.

Liberal Unionists in Manchester were very cautious about actively supporting Conservatives at the 1886 general election, or even co-operating with them to return Liberal Unionist candidates. After the election the local Conservative press criticised the Liberal Unionists for failing to bring forward possible candidates for joint nomination.³⁰ Although Withington Conservatives boasted that “a large number of Liberal Unionists voted for the Conservative candidate,” there was no reference to Liberal Unionists actually taking an active part in the campaign.³¹ North-West Manchester Conservatives rejoiced that some of their Liberal opponents had been taken “out of the field,” but regretted that they had not received the active help from Liberal Unionists that Conservatives in other parts of the country had enjoyed.³² Liberal Unionist abstention characterised the election. With Liberal Reunion talks on the agenda at national level, some Liberal Unionists began to drift back to the party and engage in local political activity. Many Gladstonian Liberals welcomed this trend. The South-West divisional association issued a special circular to woo Liberal Unionists back in to the fold. St. Luke’s Ward Liberals continued to elect Liberal Unionists to the divisional council.³³ Elsewhere, however, the failure of Liberal Unionists to support the party at the 1886 general election was not quickly forgotten. The *Liberal Manchester Weekly Post* was particularly uncompromising, describing attempts at reunification as a “well-meant waste of time and labour”.³⁴

Sir Henry James aptly illustrated the difficulties faced by Liberal Unionists, in attempting to define their own role as an independent political force, at a Manchester Reform Club dinner. As many in his Liberal audience did not share his Unionist sympathies, he sought common ground with his hosts by launching a strongly worded attack on the Conservatives’ Primrose League. This, however, enraged the leading Conservative newspaper in Manchester and many Conservative activists, with whom the Liberal Unionists had made common cause.³⁵ Speaking at the Reform Club allowed Sir Henry James to retain his symbolic associations with the Liberal tradition; however only by offending his new allies, the Conservatives, could he find shared ground with his former Liberal colleagues. If controversy could not be avoided even in the genteel atmosphere of an after-dinner speech at the Reform Club, the chances of Liberal Unionists maintaining their connections with the Liberal tradition at election time, whilst preserving a harmonious alliance with the Conservatives, were clearly limited. With Liberal Unionists institutionalising their position by attempting to create their own registration machinery and organisation, the potential for conflict was certain to grow.

Liberal Unionist reluctance to withdraw fully from the Liberal party and co-operate with the Conservatives made planning the future role of Liberal Unionism in Manchester very difficult. Manchester’s Liberal Unionists looked largely to Hartington rather than Chamberlain for leadership, but Hartington showed only limited interest in developing Manchester as a political base, despite his connections with the area. When invited to a meeting at the Free Trade Hall, he declined to attend on the grounds that it was likely to be broken up by opponents, damaging the party’s reputation. He was eventually persuaded to speak in Manchester, but the hostile reception he received on leaving the Free Trade Hall must have done little to persuade him that Manchester could be strong Liberal Unionist territory.³⁶ Similarly the elderly John Bright played no public role in Manchester Liberal Unionism – probably because his brother Jacob was still a Manchester Liberal MP. Without strong leadership, it was difficult to unite dissident Liberals behind a common strategy.

The decision to launch a Liberal Unionist Association proper for Manchester was taken at a conference in February 1887 – although party leaders were a little unclear as to the role the new body should adopt.³⁷ One senior conference delegate believed the association should act as a pressure group to influence the views of parliamentary candidates. Similarly, another felt that the primary aim should be to re-establish Unionist influence in Liberal Associations. There was no widespread wish to organise a separate political party, rather the aim was to establish organisational machinery to force the Liberal party to address Liberal Unionist concerns about proposed Irish legislation. However, in adopting this position it seemed they underestimated the commitment of the party to Gladstone and Gladstone’s Home Rule scheme. Having largely opted out of Liberal party activity for almost a year, it was difficult for them to influence the local associations to reverse their commitments to Home Rule, dominated as they then were by Home Rule enthusiasts.

No sooner had the Manchester Liberal Unionist Association been launched than the frustrations of party activists began to show. One conference delegate openly warned that if Liberal Unionists leaders did not adopt a more positive approach, many dissidents would return to the Liberal party. Some believed that offering alternative proposals for land reform and Irish local self-government could provide a basis for re-uniting the party.³⁸ Although Gladstonians encouraged Liberal Unionists to debate the possibility of reunion, they also made it clear that any compromise would have to involve the acceptance of some form of Home Rule.³⁹ Liberal Unionists remained in a dilemma – should they try to convert or conquer Home Rulers?

Competition and Conflict

The death of Peter Rylands, the Liberal Unionist MP for Burnley, marked an important turning point for Manchester Liberal Unionism. Firstly, the party lost a formidable supporter and organiser in the north-west. Secondly, it forced local Liberal Unionists into an open and active alliance with the Conservatives for the first time. The failure of the Liberal Unionists nationally to find a candidate meant that Manchester Liberal Unionists, as one of the largest groups in the region, were called upon to support the Conservatives. Inevitably, their support for the Conservatives reopened old wounds and antagonised Manchester

Liberals.⁴⁰ Whatever decisions the national Round Table Conference on Liberal Re-union reached, local Liberal activists were being forced into direct conflict by electoral events. In an era when loyalty to a political tradition was only second to loyalty to religion, the emotional significance of former colleagues working with historic enemies cannot be understated. The language of moral absolutes that governed much of Gladstonian rhetoric left little room for compromise. Liberalism in Manchester was not simply a label, but a historic mission, with a rich history and mythology. It could fire up the most powerful emotions and motivate the committed to devote extraordinary amounts of energy and time to political activity. Memories were long. When one Conservative canvasser enquired of one Liberal's voting intention, he had a boiling bottle thrown at him; the elector concerned making it clear he declined to vote for "the Peterloo butchers".⁴¹ On approaching a Catholic church in North Manchester the same canvasser was "assailed with all manner of refuse, and covered with filth from an excited mob," whilst others had almost physically to fight their way out of Liberal districts.⁴² Co-operating with opposing political parties at election time was regarded by many as little short of treachery.

At national level Liberal Unionists were gradually beginning to accept the logic that, with Britain's majoritarian electoral system, isolation from the Liberal mainstream necessitated co-operation with the Conservatives. By the time of the Bradford Conference of 1888, the prospects for agreement at national level between the two Liberal groups seemed hopeless - the differences between Home Rulers and Unionists seemed to become more intractable as time went on. The Conservatives and Liberal Unionists were co-operating at Westminster and many felt similar relations should be fostered locally. Joseph Chamberlain, argued that some distinction should be retained between the two Unionist parties, yet also called for the creation of "a party which is greater than all parties - a party for the nation; a party which shall have national interests, national security and national faith as the only watchwords to which it owes its existence."⁴³ Although his use of the term 'party' may not necessarily have implied a single integrated organisation, it was a clear statement of an intention to maintain the Unionist alliance at parliamentary level.

Closer links fostered at national level naturally influenced Manchester Liberal Unionists to investigate a closer alliance locally. However, to a large extent, the Manchester Liberal Unionists were forced into a closer relationship with the Conservatives more by necessity than by choice. Two years after its creation, the Manchester Liberal Unionist Association still had no ward organisations or representative institutions on the Liberal model. Only three of the six parliamentary divisions had local committees. The Association claimed to have "many Liberals of great influence" as members, but few held significant public office.⁴⁴ Moreover the resources of the Manchester Liberal Unionist Association were stretched very thinly.⁴⁵ The Manchester Association organised Liberal Unionist activities across large parts of south-east Lancashire, but their regular rounds of anti-Home Rule public meetings often attracted more Home Rulers than Unionists. When speaking at a meeting in Littleborough, one Manchester Liberal Unionist saw his anti-Home Rule resolution defeated by "at least ten to one."⁴⁶ Even in John Bright's Rochdale often at least half of those attending the Unionist meetings were Home Rulers.⁴⁷

The party's failure to obtain a majority at its own poorly attended meetings can have done little for party morale and may partly explain the move to closer co-operation with the Conservatives. A joint Unionist demonstration at the Free Trade Hall was much more successful and on a scale that the Liberal Unionists alone could not have contemplated.⁴⁸

Organisational Frailty

The geographical dispersion of Liberal Unionist support made it difficult for the party to establish effective party organisation or develop a strong base in local politics. The largely suburban South Manchester division was organisationally the strongest for the party, but by 1892 the party had just one councillor in this division. In South-West Manchester the Conservatives allowed the Liberal Unionists to put forward their own nominee for the local parliamentary seat, safe in the knowledge they were unlikely to win, as the Liberal Unionists did not have a single councillor in the district. North-West Manchester was the strongest municipal district for the Liberal Unionists - the party having councillors in Exchange, Oxford, St. Anne's and St. James' wards - yet it was the only division in Manchester that had neither an official Liberal Unionist association or even a "good nucleus" of activists.⁴⁹ The North West division incorporated the whole of the central and the commercial quarter of the city, and with its large number of non-resident ratepayers was notoriously difficult to organise.⁵⁰ Although Liberal Unionist strength was marginally greater in middle class and commercial districts, the geographical dispersion of Liberal Unionists, many living outside the city, made it very difficult for them to be mobilised effectively. Had Liberal Unionist support been concentrated in one suburb of Manchester, they could have possibly built a powerful political base in that area. However, the majoritarian electoral system was not designed to reward third parties with geographically dispersed strength and consequently the physical distribution of Liberal Unionist support further forced the party to rely on a Conservative alliance. Without a physically concentrated organisation of its own, the bipolar tendencies of the electoral system were irresistible. By 1890 the Liberal Unionists were regularly holding joint public events with the Conservatives and co-operation in registration work was the next logical step if the parties were not to duplicate effort.⁵¹

Preparations for the general election revealed the organisational frailty of the Manchester Liberal Unionists. Desperate appeals for new party subscribers fell largely on deaf ears and the central district association became heavily indebted.⁵² Even the South Manchester Liberal Unionist Association was not an especially active group. In 1888 they reported that the "past year had not furnished any scope for political activity" and there was no evidence of registration work being undertaken - a core activity for a nineteenth century political association.⁵³ A year later the party did undertake a canvass of the district, from which they claimed to have an estimated 1,500 Liberal Unionist supporters in the constituency - but these figures clearly need to be treated with caution. Although Liberal Unionist grandee Sir Joseph Lee boasted of an overall collective membership of 1,500 to 2,000, there was, in the words of the *Manchester Guardian*, "a fine generality about that statement which is suggestive."⁵⁴ The level of activism and attendance at meetings would indicate an active membership of little more than a tenth of that figure.⁵⁵ To put these statistics into context, the Manchester Reform Club with a

system of election for membership and a large annual subscription rate had at least 1,200 members during this period and a long waiting list of those keen to join.⁵⁶ It became clear Liberal Unionists could not win parliamentary seats alone - but they could prevent Home Rule candidates from gaining election, especially if they worked with the Conservatives. The adoption of this negative approach put paid to any local hopes of reunion and increased the mutual hostility between the two wings of the Liberal party.⁵⁷

At municipal level, both wings of the Liberal party worked together for a time but by the early 1890s the Liberal Unionists were gradually moving into a loose alliance with the Conservatives at municipal level, too.⁵⁸ This move to closer relations on the city council had important ramifications. Liberal Unionists only ever consisted of around a fifth of the total Liberal representation on the council and with the enlargement of the city council in 1890, they were reduced to less than a sixth of the total Liberal force. However, with ten Liberal Unionists allying themselves with the Conservatives, the Liberals lost their nominal majority on the council for the first time since incorporation. A combination of convention, continuing hopes for reunification and a fear of importing 'Imperial' politics into the council chamber meant that Gladstonian Liberals failed to oppose the re-election of no less than eight Liberal Unionists between 1887 and 1891. Many of these unopposed Liberal Unionist returns were in wards which Gladstonian Liberals would probably otherwise have won. New Cross, returned Liberals in every contested election between 1886 and 1895. Exchange Ward, in which a Liberal Unionist had an unopposed return in 1888, also returned a Gladstonian Liberal in every contested election during the same period. Even in newly created wards such as Rusholme, Liberal Unionist victories were often largely due to Liberal reluctance to engage in a fight with former colleagues. On the two occasions the Liberal party fought a contested election in the ward between 1891 and 1895 they won. Liberal Unionist councillors retained their positions chiefly through the reticence of Gladstonian Liberals and the tacit support of Conservatives.

Skilful Conservative tactics helped drive Liberal Unionists into a closer alliance with their former adversaries. With Liberal Unionists lacking an organisational framework of any sort in half of Manchester and over-stretched in the remainder, Conservative overtures and offers of co-operation could not be spurned cheaply. The Conservatives offered the Liberal Unionists generous terms - including a Joint Conference Committee, with an equal number of representatives from each party - to co-ordinate registration work.⁵⁹ The first action of the Conservatives on the JCC was to offer the Liberal Unionist Executive the joint parliamentary candidature of the South-West Manchester division. When the local Liberal Unionist chairman, Alfred Hopkinson, accepted the candidature, it gave the leader of the Liberal Unionists a vested interest in bonding the two parties together, while not threatening the Conservatives' existing electoral position. Furthermore there was great significance in whom Hopkinson was being invited to challenge - Jacob Bright - Radical icon, brother of John Bright and president of the Manchester Reform Club - the spiritual and historic home of Manchester Liberalism. Hopkinson was later to claim that he accepted the candidature against Bright with much reluctance, implying that he foresaw the crisis that was soon to break out at the Club.⁶⁰

The Reform Club: The Unionists' Last Stand?

The Manchester Reform Club had been, hitherto, a passive player in the Home Rule debate. Standing at the head of one of Manchester's finest streets, it was a powerful symbol of the triumph of Manchester Liberalism and there was a desire on all sides not to bring conflicts over Home Rule beyond its portals. When the Liberal Unionists organised their first major conference in Manchester, they were thus granted the use of the Reform Club for their evening entertainment.⁶¹ Respect for the past services of leading Liberal Unionists inhibited Gladstonian Liberals from taking action against the minority of Liberal Unionist members.⁶² The first president of the club, R.N. Phillips, had gone over to the Liberal Unionist side, as had the club's vice president, Benjamin Armitage.⁶³ It was also feared that attempts to remove Liberal Unionists could alienate those who were genuinely undecided on Home Rule.⁶⁴

By continuing to accommodate Liberal Unionists, the Manchester Reform Club managed to avoid the damaging split that engulfed the National Liberal Club and which saw 300 Liberal Unionists follow Hartington's example and resign their membership.⁶⁵ In Manchester, personal sentiment towards former colleagues had much to do with the accommodation. John Bright, in many respects the father of the 'Manchester School' and an inspirational figure for north-west Liberals, continued to use the club intermittently right up to his death and Gladstonians clearly had little desire to provoke a conflict with this frail icon of past glories. Thus it is very significant that no action was taken against Liberal Unionist members of the club until after the death of Bright in 1889. The nomination of Hopkinson against club president Jacob Bright in South-West Manchester, however, "was held by



The Manchester Reform Club – the 'traditional' home of Manchester Liberals.
(From W. Haslam Mills, *The Manchester Reform Club*, Manchester, 1922)

the majority of the members to be a breach of club etiquette” and the truce was broken. A special general meeting passed a resolution condemning Hopkinson by “little short of three to one.”⁶⁶

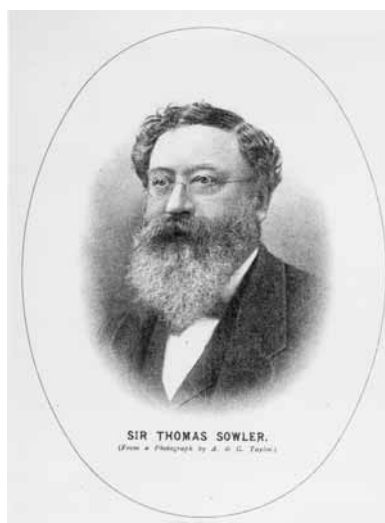
Despite the powerful bonds of club life, electoral competition gradually forced Liberal Unionists to relinquish their remaining ties with the Liberal party. A by-election, held in North-East Manchester in 1891, drew the two Liberal parties into open conflict. C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, and a leading figure in the Reform Club, faced Sir James Ferguson, a Conservative Unionist. This represented an important test for the Government in a marginal seat and came immediately after a series of promising by-election results for the Liberals. Leading Liberal Unionists in the Reform Club actively supported Ferguson

closer relationship between Liberal Unionists and their Conservative allies, Unionist activity in the club declined.

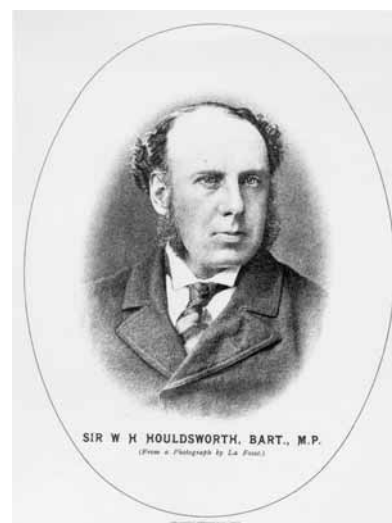
The intensity of the Reform Club dispute should not be taken to indicate that the Liberal Unionist division was primarily a revolt of upper middle class Liberals, however. In attempting to be a catholic institution, the Reform Club was always more likely to suffer during times of ideological division. The majoritarianism of the caucus gave little hope to those in minorities - they had little choice but to leave and start afresh. In the Reform Club differences of opinion seemed to be actively encouraged as a reflection of a healthy Liberal environment.⁷¹ The general atmosphere of tolerance and fellowship in the Reform Club meant that Liberals and Liberal Unionist continued to work together in this forum long after they had been divided into separate political



C. P. Scott, Editor of the *Manchester Guardian* and Liberal candidate in the 1891 North East Manchester by-election. (Source: C. P. Scott 1846-1932, *The Making of the Manchester Guardian*, London 1946)



Sir Thomas Sowler, Conservative and Liberal Unionist candidate for South Manchester until his controversial withdrawal in January 1891. (Source: *Faces and Places*, Manchester 1889-1890)



Sir William Houldsworth, Conservative MP for North West Manchester. (Source: *Faces and Places*, Manchester 1889-1890)

and Scott went down to a narrow defeat.⁶⁷ Gladstonians were appalled at the action of Liberal Unionists in assisting the Conservatives. H.J. Roby condemned “the presence of traitors in the camp” and accurately predicted that the current state of affairs, with Liberal Unionists actively involved in Liberal organisations while fighting official Liberal candidates, could not survive a general election.⁶⁸ There was a suspicion that Liberal Unionists had used their position as members of the Club to pass on information from private discussions held within its walls. The club committee made it clear that active support for a Conservative candidate was inconsistent with membership of the Club but were taken to court by Liberal Unionists in an unsuccessful attempt to overturn the decision.⁶⁹ A partial truce followed but it did not survive the 1892 general election, when the Liberal Unionists reneged on a gentleman’s agreement to withdraw from partisan actions within the bounds of the club. Benjamin Armitage chose the occasion of the election to invite A.J. Balfour, and the controversial Conservative brewery owner, Stephen Chester Thompson, to lunch at the Club.⁷⁰ Inevitably, a protest meeting was called. It was to be the last major clash between Gladstonians and Unionists in the Reform Club. After 1892, with the ever-

associations. Thus when conflicts did arise they arose later and were of much greater intensity.

Liberal Unionists did not slide easily into a Conservative alliance, despite welcoming Conservative tactics and the lack of a viable alternative. South Manchester Liberal Unionists possessed the strongest association in the city and tried to assert an independent line at times, particularly when local Conservative leaders acted without consulting their allies. The most potentially damaging dispute came when Sir Thomas Sowler retired as the jointly agreed Unionist parliamentary nominee for the division. Liberal Unionists were kept largely in the dark about Sowler’s resignation and only heard the decision through the local press or a few moments before it was publicly announced at a meeting in a local Conservative Club.⁷² The Conservatives then compounded Liberal Unionist anger by bringing forward an alternative candidate, J. W. Hamilton, without consultation, and then simply asked the Liberal Unionists to confirm the decision that they had already taken. This flew in the face of an earlier decision by both parties to set up a joint committee to discuss key decisions and take collective action.⁷³ The complete bypassing of this committee by the

Conservatives caused much anger amongst Liberal Unionist leaders who made it clear they would not accept the decision.⁷⁴ Deadlock continued for several months until a joint meeting of the Conservative and Liberal Unionist divisional associations agreed to submit a new candidate, Viscount Emlyn, to each association separately, before formal adoption proceeded.⁷⁵ Despite South Manchester's Liberal Unionist chairman asserting that the Manchester group were "probably the strongest in England outside Birmingham," they were not strong enough to assert any real degree of independence in strategy, candidate selection or organisation without damaging their own cause.⁷⁶

Following the 1892 general election the Liberal Unionists gradually merged their every day political activities into joint endeavours with the Conservatives. Thus when a Liberal Unionist candidate won the South Manchester parliamentary seat in 1895, it was a victory for the Conservatives in all but name. Although the Manchester and District Liberal Unionist Association continued, its politics and outlook were little different to those of the Conservatives. Indeed in terms of its policy towards Home Rule, some of its members became even more uncompromising on the issue than their Conservative colleagues. At the Liberal Unionists' annual meeting in 1893, the mover of the principal motion, W. Hughes, declared that Liberal Unionists should have supported Randolph Churchill's call to defend Ulster by force of arms.⁷⁷ Faced with statements like this, Manchester Liberals increasingly regarded their former colleagues as having simply become Conservatives, and worthy of no special consideration. Rumours about negotiations between Liberal Unionists and Gladstone at Westminster just before the 1892 general election had attracted little interest in Manchester and even less public discussion. The Liberal *South Manchester Chronicle* spoke for many when it felt there was "small chance of an agreement or even preliminary negotiations".⁷⁸ It was also clear that many senior Liberals no longer regarded the return of the Liberal Unionists as being at all desirable. Sir Henry Roscoe MP, harassed by Liberal Unionists in his South Manchester constituency, made it clear that he neither regretted the Unionist secession or believed there was any way in which they could ever return to the Liberal party.⁷⁹

Perspectives and Analysis

The Home Rule crisis changed the nature of the Liberal party's electoral base in Manchester. Support for Home Rule united the city's large Irish population behind the Liberal party – a move which compensated, in some respects, for the loss of Liberal Unionists. The Liberal party in Manchester inherited strong Irish Catholic support, without provoking strong organised 'Loyalist' working class opposition. In Manchester sectarian feeling between Catholics and Protestants was much more limited than in nearby Liverpool and there was only one significant sectarian disturbance in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ Precise calculations of the Liberal electoral dividend from Home Rule are clearly impossible, but it was significant. In 1885 the Irish Nationalists opposed the Liberal party and Liberals took just one of Manchester's six parliamentary seats. In 1886 they were allied to the party and Manchester Liberals won three seats, against the national trend, and held them until the party's disastrous general election defeat of 1895. In two of the three constituencies held by the Liberal party between 1886 and 1895, North and South-West Manchester, Irishmen made up over 10% of the electorate.

The Irish also made up a high proportion of North-East Manchester's electorate and although never won by the party in this period, the division was regarded as the most marginal in Manchester. Irish support also brought substantial dividends to the party at municipal level, with the Irish-dominated St. Michael's and New Cross wards regularly returning Liberal representatives to the town hall. Two councillors from these areas, Dan Boyle and Dan McCabe became the first Irish Catholics on the city council and went on to develop successful careers as Liberal representatives.⁸¹

Changes in the Liberal party's electoral base had implications for party organisation. While it is clear that the Irish vote was a key component of Liberal party support after 1886, Irish and Catholic leaders were reluctant to lose their independence and continued to operate outside the auspices of the party. The Manchester branches of the Irish National League had their own electoral organisation, which they were not prepared to subsume into that of the Liberals. Thus at the Gorton by-election of 1889 the Irish organisations formed their own election committee and took responsibility for their own part of the constituency. Although the relationship between the Irish organisations and the Liberals was harmonious, they remained distinctly separate.⁸² At the North-East Manchester by-election of 1891 the local Liberal Association attempted to take responsibility for both English and Irish areas of the division. The Irish, however, acted independently and there was unnecessary duplication of effort. From that point Liberal organisers came under pressure to leave Irish groups to mobilise voters in predominantly Irish areas.⁸³ Irish reluctance to merge their political organisation with that of the Liberals was not simply an expression of a separate cultural identity. Important political differences remained. The local Catholic press called for the creation of a separate Catholic party to look after specifically Catholic interests after the granting of Home Rule. Editorials called upon Irishmen to resist Liberal attempts to bind them "hard and fast to the Liberal party for all purposes" and reminded them of Liberal hostility to public funding for separate Catholic education.⁸⁴ The Catholic Bishop of Salford similarly warned his followers about becoming too closely bound to the major parties whilst the *Catholic Herald*, even during the 1895 election campaign, stressed the importance of Irish independence from the British parties.⁸⁵ Of course, not all Manchester's nationalists voted Liberal after the Parnell crisis, with a small number even opposing C.P. Scott, a passionate Home Ruler, during the 1891 North East Manchester by-election.⁸⁶ Loyalty to the principle of Home Rule kept most of Manchester's Irish Catholic community within the Liberal coalition, but Irish leaders made it clear their support was conditional and limited. The Liberal party's electoral base became broader, but it could not consolidate its position organisationally because Irish Catholic leaders had their own priorities and wanted to limit their own integration into the party.

Liberalism had other pressing concerns. Class was emerging on to the political agenda, but not through the action of Liberal Unionists or even as a by-product of the Home Rule crisis. Organised labour was becoming discontented with its marginal position in the Liberal coalition, and in particular its exclusion from the city council.⁸⁷ The election of trade unionists George Kelley and Matthew Arrandale as Liberal councillors helped promote labour-related issues both within the party and the

council chamber, and meant that the issue of Home Rule no longer dominated the local political agenda as it had done in the late 1880s.⁸⁸ From 1892 the local Independent Labour Party became a significant influence in local political life, forcing Liberals to re-examine their priorities. When Manchester Liberals produced their first formal political programme, the Progressive Municipal Programme, it was clear that local labour issues, not Irish government reforms, had become central to local political debate.⁸⁹

Contemporaries in both wings of the Liberal party considered Liberal Unionist strength in Manchester to be greater than that of any other part of the country outside Birmingham. However, if this indeed was the case it suggests that the significance of the Home Rule split has been overstated. The divisions of 1886 did not significantly damage Manchester Liberalism because Liberal Unionists, desperately clinging to the claim that they were true to Liberal traditions, were very reluctant to work with their historical enemies. Moreover the culture and majoritarianism of local political institutions limited the prospects of an independent third party. The Liberal party had never had a particularly strong local organisation and the loss of Liberal Unionist subscribers

only encouraged the party to redouble its recruitment efforts. Minor financial problems produced only short-term inconvenience for the party that did not have a measurable impact on party activity. In the November municipal elections the party made two net gains in both 1886 and 1887, and took two-thirds of the seats in the new wards created in 1890. In contrast the Liberal Unionists failed to develop significant party organisation in four of the six parliamentary divisions of Manchester, and none at all in the one that furnished most of their town council representatives. Their only notable political success was in depriving the Liberal party of an overall majority on the city council for the first time. This change was not as serious as might have appeared - partly because the city council was not seen simply as a partisan forum and partly because the change made it more difficult for Socialists to blame Liberals for council inaction on labour issues. In Manchester the Home Rule crisis did not so much mark a class-based shift in the geological structure of politics, as a tremor that re-shaped the Liberal party's electoral appeal and reinforced the ethnic and denominational cleavages in local politics.



The Free Trade Hall – the location for many of the crucial home rule public debates. (Source: *Faces and Places*, Manchester 1889-1890)

NOTES

- 1 J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), especially pp.304-6; "Gladstone's behaviour in 1886 turned the Liberal party from a great party of government into a gaggle of outsiders", p.306. Although, of course, the party was back in power by 1892.
- 2 A phrase popularised by Harold Perkin who saw the Irish Home Rule crisis as marking the beginning of a fundamental political realignment based around class. H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (1971), p.434.
- 3 P. Magnus, *Gladstone* (1954), p.394.
- 4 For analysis of the position at Westminster see, A.B. Cooke and J.Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain, 1885-1886* (Brighton, 1974).
- 5 W.C. Lubenow, *Parliamentary Politics and the Home Rule Question* (Oxford, 1988), pp.335-6.
- 6 Manchester Liberal Union minutes (hereafter MLU), Secretary's Report, 22 April 1887, Manchester Central Library (hereafter MCL), M283/1/1/2.
- 7 For details see J. Moore, 'The Transformation of Urban Liberalism: Liberal Politics in Leicester and Manchester 1885-1895' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1999), chap. 1.
- 8 *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Oct. 1883 (hereafter M.G.); Manchester Liberal Association minutes, Executive Committee, 3 Oct. 1883, MCL, M283/1/1/1.
- 9 F.W. S Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885-1918* (Aldershot, 1989), p.150.
- 10 Sir A. Hopkinson, *Penultima* (1930), pp.144-5, 152-4.
- 11 See correspondence in the *Manchester Examiner*, 2-6 July 1886.
- 12 *Faces and Places*, 8 (1896-7), 86.
- 13 M.G., 27 Oct. 1891.
- 14 *Faces and Places*, 8 (1896-7), 75.
- 15 *Faces and Places*, 2 (1890-1), 101.
- 16 Hopkinson, *Penultima*, pp. 154-5.
- 17 LPD Leaflet No 1668, National Reform Union papers (hereafter NRU), 37, 20, MCL, 306 N6.
- 18 LPD Leaflet No 1668, NRU, 37, 20, MCL, 306 N6.
- 19 MLU, Secretary's Report, 22 April 1887, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 20 MLU, Union Committee, 15 April 1886, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 21 MLU, Union Committee, 29 April 1886, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 22 MLU, Union Committee, 4 May 1886, MCL, M283/1/1/2; MLU, General Meeting, 7 May 1886, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 23 MLU, Union Committee, 28 March 1887, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 24 MLU, Union Committee, 27 June 1887, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 25 MLU, Annual Meeting, 2 May 1888, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 26 The financial difficulties the party faced following the Home Rule crisis pale into insignificance when compared to the chronic financial problems Manchester Liberals faced after 1918. See B. Jones, 'Manchester Liberalism 1918-1929: the electoral, ideological and organisation experience of the Liberal party in Manchester, with particular reference to the career of Ernest Simon', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1997), p.13, pp.119-22.
- 27 MLU, Memorandum of Subscriptions and Donations, 1886-91, MCL, M283/1/1/2.
- 28 Letter, G. Meulor, M.G., 26 Feb. 1886.
- 29 M.G., 2 July 1886.
- 30 *Manchester Courier*, 14 Feb. 1887.
- 31 *Manchester Courier*, 8 March 1887.
- 32 M.G., 10 Feb. 1887.
- 33 M.G., 19 Jan. 1887.
- 34 *Manchester Weekly Post*, 11 Dec. 1886.
- 35 *Manchester Courier*, 8 Feb. 1887.
- 36 Hopkinson, *Penultima*, pp.152-5.
- 37 M.G., 7 Feb. 1887.
- 38 M.G., 9-10 Feb. 1887.
- 39 M.G., 7 Feb. 1887.
- 40 M.G., 26 Feb. 1887.
- 41 Odds and Ends Magazine of the St. Paul's Literary Society, Volume XXXV (1889), pp.418-9, MCL, M38/4/2/35. No specific dates are given for the instances reported in this essay, but the implication seems to be that they took place within the author's recent memory.
- 42 Odds and Ends Magazine of the St. Paul's Literary Society, Volume XXXV (1889), pp.418-9, MCL, M38/4/2/35.
- 43 M.G., 21 Sept. 1888.
- 44 M.G., 23 Jan. 1889.
- 45 Interestingly, the only detailed coverage of Liberal Unionist activities is to be found in the pages of the Gladstonian *Manchester Guardian*. To the alarm of some Gladstonians, a consortium of Liberal Unionists took over the struggling *Manchester Examiner* at the end of 1888 but were unable to prevent that paper's demise. See Letter, W. Mather to C.P. Scott, 28 Dec. 1888, John

- Rylands University Library of Manchester (hereafter JRULM), C.P. Scott Collection (hereafter CPSC) 118/120.
- 46 *M.G.*, 6 March 1889.
- 47 *M.G.*, 31 Jan. 1889.
- 48 *M.G.*, 4 March 1889; *Manchester Courier*, 4 March 1889.
- 49 *M.G.*, 6 Feb. 1890.
- 50 It was this division that was famously termed the Exchange Division by Winston Churchill during his short tenure of the seat between 1906 to 1908.
- 51 *M.G.*, 31 Jan. 1890.
- 52 Manchester and District Liberal Unionist Association circular, 19 June 1891, MCL, Local Studies Box 517, 329.942.
- 53 *M.G.*, 19 March 1889.
- 54 *M.G.*, 6 June 1890
- 55 The largest recorded membership total for a Liberal Unionist organisation in the period is 204 for the South Manchester Liberal Unionist Association in 1890 (*M.G.*, 28 March 1890). This was regarded as the strongest parliamentary division of the party in Manchester. Average attendances at Liberal Unionist Council meetings were usually substantially smaller.
- 56 See the minute books of the Manchester Reform Club, 1885-95, JRULM (Deansgate branch).
- 57 *M.G.*, 28 March 1890.
- 58 Simon, *A Century of City Government*, p.400.
- 59 *M.G.*, 6 Feb. 1890.
- 60 Hopkinson, *Penultima*, p.161-3.
- 61 By this time the Reform Club itself played no formal role in local party politics other than providing a meeting place for Liberals on major social and political occasions. W. Haslam Mills, *The Manchester Reform Club 1871-1921* (Manchester, 1921), p.41, p.81.
- 62 *M.G.*, 7 Feb. 1887.
- 63 *M.G.*, 6 Feb. 1890; *M.G.*, 23 Feb. 1887. There were two senior Manchester Liberals called Benjamin Armitage. The one referred to here was a resident of Sorrel Bank, Salford and was usually referred to in printed contemporary sources as "Benjamin Armitage (Sorrel Bank)" to distinguish him from his namesake.
- 64 Letter, J.A. Beith to C.P. Scott, 23 July 1889, JRULM, CPSC 118/126.
- 65 *M.G.*, 25 Jan. 1889.
- 66 Mills, *The Manchester Reform Club*, p.78.
- 67 Sir J. Ferguson (C) 4058, C.P. Scott (L) 3908.
- 68 *M.G.*, 16 Oct. 1891.
- 69 *Manchester City News*, 19 March 1892.
- 70 Mills, *The Manchester Reform Club*, p.79.
- 71 "One may be permitted to point out that the club is not a political organisation, but it provides a home for Liberals in which they can discuss questions of public interest in a liberal spirit. Agreement is not expected on every question of public policy, and the main thing is the Liberal atmosphere." Mills, *The Manchester Reform Club*, p.81.
- 72 *M.G.*, 12 Jan. 1891.
- 73 *M.G.*, 24 March 1891.
- 74 It is unclear whether this joint committee ever actually met. There were no discussions of its proceedings at the Liberal Unionist annual meeting of 1891, or any reference to its activities in the party's annual report.
- 75 *M.G.*, 28 June 1891.
- 76 *M.G.*, 26 March 1891.
- 77 *M.G.*, 13 April 1893.
- 78 *South Manchester Chronicle*, 17 June 1892.
- 79 *M.G.*, 4 Nov. 1891.
- 80 S. Fielding, 'The Irish Catholics of Manchester and Salford: Aspects of their Religious and Political History, 1890-1939' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1988), pp.141-5.
- 81 Fielding, 'The Irish Catholics of Manchester and Salford', pp. 191-2, 223-4. Local Liberal Associations also lobbied for Irish representation on other public bodies including the local bench, see: Letter, C. Walls to C.P. Scott, 9 Jan. 1893, JRULM, CPSC 119/148.
- 82 *Weekly Herald*, 29 March 1889.
- 83 Letter, C. P. Allen to C.P. Scott, 9 Oct. 1891, John Rylands University Library of Manchester (hereafter JRULM), C.P. Scott Collection (hereafter CPSC) 119/93.
- 84 *Weekly Herald*, 22 and 29 Nov. 1889.
- 85 *Catholic Herald*, 12 July 1895.
- 86 Letter, J.E. Taylor to C.P. Scott, 6 Oct. 1891, JRULM, CPSC 129/208.
- 87 J. Hill, 'Manchester and Salford Politics and the Early development of the Independent Labour party', *International Review of Social History*, 26 (1981), 171-201.
- 88 *Faces and Places*, 7 (1895-6), 145; *Faces and Places*, 2 (1890-1), 92.
- 89 For details of Manchester and Progressivism in Lancashire see P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971).