Building an Imperial World: Ideologies of Imperialism and the Tariff Reform Movement in Britain, 1900-1914

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This dissertation examines the imperial rhetoric and ideologies articulated during the tariff reform controversy in Edwardian Britain. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British statesman Joseph Chamberlain organized a new movement, dubbed tariff reform, to enact a series of commercial policies that would integrate the British and colonial economies and, he argued, lay the foundation for the development of a unified imperial federation. Chamberlain’s proposals were controversial and divisive, resulting in years of political debate over the merits of tariff reform. While the tariff reform campaign has been studied in numerous histories, its imperial dimensions have been ignored in favor of its impact to the development of domestic British politics. This study argues that the tariff reform campaign reflected an ideological struggle about the future development of British society. The controversy involved a debate about the meaning of empire, and forced the people of Britain to consider both Britain’s place in the world and the importance of the British Empire in shaping their identity as a nation. It uses the papers of prominent politicians, press accounts, scholarly and popular publications, and propaganda materials to chart the many facets of the tariff reform debate and the diverse expressions of British imperial sentiment and ideology that underpinned it. They reveal that, while the people of Britain recognized the empire as central to the nation’s identity, they bitterly disagreed among themselves as to the future course the British Empire would take.
BUILDING AN IMPERIAL WORLD: IDEOLOGIES OF IMPERIALISM
AND THE TARIFF REFORM MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN, 1900-1914

BY
KEVIN J. LUGINBILL
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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This dissertation has been a long time in the making. After seven years, I have wracked up more than a few debts from everyone who has supported me along the way and made this dissertation possible. Those debts have been on my mind every day, and now that the dissertation is finally done, I can make some small gesture of appreciation. It is not in my nature to be ungrateful, or at least I try my best not to be. It is, however, very much in my nature not to be particularly effusive in my appreciation for all of those who, with generosity, goodwill, and faith in what I could do. But I still like to try sometimes.

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INTRODUCTION

IDEOLOGIES OF IMPERIALISM AND THE TARIFF REFORM MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN, 1900-1914

From its beginning, this project has been a study of the power of ideas. It seeks to explore the power of a particular set of ideas permeating the British Empire at the beginning of the 20th Century. Questions of power were very much on the minds of many British statesmen and thinkers, who feared that their nation’s long-cherished power and prosperity were in danger of slipping away; the golden age of the Victorian era appeared to be coming to a close, perhaps forever. Despite decades of global preeminence, the United Kingdom now faced the prospect of a future of decline. Searching for solutions to this peril, many Britons turned to their empire; but while all could agree that the British Empire, in its size and scale, was unlike any other, their ideas about what that Empire actually meant for themselves and the world differed sharply.

This dissertation is an account of these divergent ideas of empire; it charts the debates sparked by Joseph Chamberlain’s proposal to reform the country’s tariff system in May 1903. He hoped his tariff reform movement would lay the foundation for an empire-wide economic union, thereby cementing the unity of the empire and guaranteeing British power for generations to come. He believed that the decline in British power could be reversed, and a new golden age secured for the British people. Instead, Chamberlain instigated one of the bitterest political debates in Edwardian British politics.

My research on the British tariff reform movement began as an effort to understand why it provoked such a degree of controversial debate. With the passage of time and viewed from a distance, Chamberlain’s proposal for the United Kingdom to add a modest tariff on foreign
imports does not immediately stand out as a ready source of bitter divisiveness. And yet, for many on both sides of the debate, Chamberlain’s ideas were a powerful call for action. As Leopold Amery, one of Chamberlain’s most loyal followers, wrote in his memoirs fifty years later, the movement “was a challenge to free thought as direct and provocative as the theses which Luther nailed to the church door at Wittenberg.”¹ For a politician who witnessed revolutions, the end of empires, and two world wars, such a sentiment begs further explanation.

It quickly became clear to me that the tariff reform controversy went beyond simply a debate over relatively minor alterations in the rate of taxation on imported goods. Supporters and opponents alike treated the issue as the manifestation of a profound and fundamental clash over the future of the British Empire. As the controversy unfolded, it became an ideological struggle over the present and future of British society. But while British political history is replete with cases of intensely controversial issues, the disagreement on tariffs carried with it a particular urgency and emotional significance; Chamberlain’s call for reform tapped into a growing anxiety about the decline of British global power. He made clear to all who listened that, in his mind, the results of this campaign would decide the fate of the British Empire. Thus, for some, the tariff reform campaign charted the path towards the revitalization of British society and the salvation of the British Empire. But for others, Chamberlain’s crusade threatened to bring about the ruination of all that was best in Britain and would destroy the heart of the empire. With so much seemingly at stake, there was scarcely room for compromise or defeat.

Beyond such fears about the stability of the empire, the tariff reform debate expressed competing intellectual and ideological visions of the nature of the British Empire. There was

perhaps no other time than the early years of the 20th century when the people of Britain supported imperialism more thoroughly, or more strongly believed that the nation’s destiny was bound up in their empire. Yet despite this attachment to empire, the precise meaning of British imperialism, what forms it should take, and what it meant for Britain’s place in the world, remained ambiguous and ill-defined, open to competing definitions and ideological visions. The empire was so large, encompassing such a diverse set of cultures and populations, and governed in such different fashions, that there could not truly have been a single form or type of British imperial “idea.” It was therefore perhaps unavoidable that there should be differences of political opinion in the metropole about what British imperialism was, as well as what it should be, both in the present and in the future. Whether Britain, or at least its English component, ruled over an array of colonial possessions won by glorious conquest, or whether it was merely one nation among many, sharing a common destiny as part of a world-wide commonwealth, was a question that remained to be answered. This in turn led to searching questions about how the empire was governed, who should hold power in the empire, and the means and ends of how that power was used. The call for reform presupposed the need for change and a vision for what that reform would produce; resistance to reform, in turn, represented a rejection of these ideas and the values that underpinned them. Politicians and imperial thinkers, and the British public at large, were being asked to decide how they would structure their relationship with the rest of the world, how much that relationship would be defined by the ideas of empire, and what it meant to possess, or to be a part of, such an empire.

At a fundamental level, the debate revealed competing conceptions about the formulation and expression of national identity. The battle over the meaning of the British Empire
unavoidably grappled with the question of who, as individuals and groups, actually belonged as part of the imperial community. A shared sense of belonging was key to the debate, and central to Joseph Chamberlain’s presentation of tariff reform as the linchpin of unity of the British Empire. In his view, the unification of the empire meant the drawing together of a global British nation. The creation of a globe-spanning Greater Britain, or Britannic union, was simultaneously expansive and cosmopolitan on the one hand, and brutally limited and restrictive on the other. Paradoxically, his unifying vision of the empire as a global nation-state required the mental erasure and political exclusion of the vast majority of the people who actually lived within the British Empire’s borders. In this way, for as much as the tariff reformers debated empire, their understanding of British imperialism was defined more by the peoples and colonies they ignored than by those they welcomed.

The glaring limits of Chamberlain’s blueprint of imperial unification provoked fierce criticism from his opponents, who sought to deny Chamberlain control of a rhetorical monopoly on the language and imagery of imperial patriotism. Free trade critics worked to present themselves to the public as the true imperialists defending the true form of British imperialism from reckless and unscrupulous tariff reformers determined to surround Britain with legal and intellectual walls. Tariffs acted as both a practical as well as symbolic means of drawing borders. They are in essence a tool of exclusion, meant to limit or restrict flows of commerce with people deemed outside the community. That tariff reformers frequently presented their policies as “imperial preference,” emphasizes this point. The public was asked to decide if the nation would show preferential treatment to the colonies, or even just some of its colonies, to the detriment of the rest of the world, and perhaps the rest of the empire. Thus, the fight over these questions of
belonging reflected their clashing understandings of nationhood. The ideas both sides deployed to justify their stances, how they answered the pressing questions of why the nation’s economy should remain open to all, or why some should now be excluded in preference for only some of the empire’s colonial populations, were shaped by their understandings of how communities came into being and were maintained.

A corollary to this struggle over the meanings of national identity was an ideological battle for control of the British state. On the surface, the tariff reform campaign was a practical debate about what trade policy would be most beneficial for the British economy. But the choice between free trade and protectionism raised questions about the role of government and the state in society. The state’s responsibilities towards its people, the individual’s role within a community, and the meaning of British history were all issues at stake. Here the anxiety over Britain’s perceived decline loomed large, forcing politicians and thinkers to contemplate how Britain should respond to its decline, and whether reform was worth the cost. Free traders sought to preserve the cornerstones of liberalism and the progress of Victorian democratization – even as they harbored nagging doubts of the merits of the growing electorate – and protect the rights of individuals to work and live free from selfish interest groups; tariff reformers meanwhile strove to mobilize the power of the state to address the national community’s ills and foster renewed social harmony, and in the process correcting the worst excesses of Victorian progressivism that had allowed Britain to drift helplessly into its predicament.

By examining the ideas and rhetoric that emerged over the course of the tariff reform debate, this project considers how British society attempted to grapple with the growing and seemingly insoluble problems of the early years of the 20th century, how their competing
attempts exposed and deepened fissures within their society, and how these ideas created and recreated conceptions of a British national identity in relation to the empire. On one side, tariff reformers hoped to reforge the British Empire into a global imperial federation and assert this new imperial construct’s place as the leading power in the world. Opponents of tariff reform emerged from across the political spectrum. They drew their ideas from many different origins, including socialism and a revitalized liberalism adapted to the new century. They offered their own idealized visions of Britain’s imperial mission as a counterpoint to the dream of a tariff reform empire. By unpacking the ideas underpinning the bitter tariff controversy, the answer to the question of why a debate on the imposition of taxes on foreign imports would generate such fierce disagreement becomes clear. Tariff reform was a manifestation of a battle for Britain’s very soul. Everything, from the empire’s integrity and national security to the stability of the country and the future of British democracy, appeared to depend on the outcome of the debate. Under such circumstances, it would be more surprising if it had not been so controversial.

The tariff reform debate was an episode of acute high political drama, and the great question of the future course of British imperial development became one of the most contentious issues in Edwardian politics. Although grappling with many fundamental concerns in British society, in many respects it emerged unexpectedly onto the political landscape. Even tariff reform’s chief architect, Joseph Chamberlain, was surprised that his initial speeches made such a stir. Though guided by fundamental ideological disputes, the particular manner in which the tariff reform debate unfolded was shaped by the institutional and political framework of the time, as well as the personalities involved. A complete narrative of Joseph Chamberlain’s motives for launching the tariff reform campaign, the political climate in which the movement
operated, and the often torturous path the campaign took through British politics is beyond the scope of this project; to do so in full detail would become a distraction obscuring the exploration of the ideological and intellectual debates tariff reform opened up. Nevertheless, a brief survey of the politics of tariff reform is necessary to provide the context of the politics of tariff reform. A survey of the ideas driving the controversy would be incomplete without acknowledging what actually happened.

The figure of Joseph Chamberlain, whose “conversion” to the idea of tariff reform set off the firestorm of political controversy, is central to tariff reform’s origins and evolution over time. Over the course of a long and tumultuous career, Chamberlain pursued two main agendas, enacting social reform and consolidating the British Empire. Following the 1895 general election, the Conservative Party and Chamberlain’s Liberal Unionist Party entered into a coalition under the premiership of the Marquess of Salisbury. In a move that took most by surprise, Chamberlain became the Colonial Secretary, a heretofore relatively secondary position in the Cabinet. Over the next several years, through a combination of charismatic rhetoric, energetic administration, and skillful handling of several colonial crises, Chamberlain emerged as perhaps the most prominent and popular figure in the Unionist government and contributed to an unprecedented upsurge in patriotic enthusiasm for British imperialism.


3 This Conservative-Liberal Unionist alliance has been frequently referred to, both at the time and in subsequent histories, as simply the ‘Unionist party.’ Despite their close collaboration, both groups maintained separate party organizations and structures, and stood at elections as separate parties until their merger in 1912. To avoid confusion between these two groups, ‘Conservative’ and ‘Liberal Unionist’ will be used to refer to the individual parties, while references to ‘Unionists’ will refer to the entire coalition.
Chamberlain also firmly believed in the importance of establishing new policies and institutions in order to more closely integrate Britain with the empire, particularly the so-called self-governing colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The goal was to build a structure of combined political, military, and economic systems linking Britain and the colonies into what was described at the time as an imperial federation. Chamberlain made a major effort to advance the cause of imperial unity early in his tenure as Colonial Secretary, at the Colonial Conference in June 1897, a gathering of representatives of the British metropolitan government and the prime ministers of the self-governing colonies, who were in London attending Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. Despite his advocacy for shared political institutions, a unified military force, and an empire-wide customs union, or zollverein, the colonies rejected these suggestions. The chief stumbling block was that Britain had nothing to offer the colonies and the colonies had few incentives to sacrifice their autonomy with any steps towards a formal federation.

Recognizing that the time was not right for this kind of constitutional reform, Chamberlain took no further action until July 1902, when a new colonial conference was held. By then, events throughout the empire appeared ripe for change. In 1897, Canada granted British imports a preferential tariff rate over foreign imports. In 1900, the Australian colonies consolidated into a single commonwealth. Perhaps most important of all, all of the self-governing colonies had contributed military contingents to fight alongside the British Army.

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4 The colonies of Australia and South Africa were not consolidated until 1901 and 1910 respectively. Likewise, the term ‘Dominion’ initially referred only to Canada. Australia, New Zealand, and the South African colonies were given the label in 1907. The terms ‘settler colonies,’ ‘self-governing colonies,’ and ‘Dominions’ will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation to refer to the grouping of these four colonies.

5 Contemporary imperialists routinely described the proposed imperial free-trade zone as a zollverein, a reference to the 19th century customs union of the German states prior to the nation’s unification.
during the Boer War. Another important change had occurred on the British side. To help balance the budget and pay for the war, in April 1902 the Treasury imposed small tariffs on all imported corn. Observers immediately grasped the potential significance of the corn tariff, even if the Treasury did not, and wondered if the corn duty might be used as leverage in negotiating preferential tariff arrangements with the colonies.

For his part, Chamberlain approached the conference prepared to embrace imperial unity in any form. Once again, his hopes were frustrated by colonial reluctance. Political and military reforms were soundly rejected, and virtually the only policy the colonial premiers showed any enthusiasm for was to use tariffs to establish reciprocal, preferential trade relations. At the conclusion of the conference, the delegates passed a resolution which would be quoted and scrutinized countless times in the ensuing years, advocating preferential tariffs as a means to “stimulate and facilitate mutual commercial intercourse,” and urging the British government to give the colonies preferential treatment on “duties now or hereafter imposed.” It was clear that fiscal policy and trade relations were the only avenue along which imperialists could advance a reform agenda.

Chamberlain brought the colonial recommendation to the Cabinet in October 1902, suggesting that the new corn tariff be remitted for colonial imports and maintained against foreign competitors. The proposal was politically attractive for several reasons. Imperial preference could be presented to the public as both a reduction of preexisting taxes, one technically in compliance with prevailing free trade precepts of reducing barriers to commerce,

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6 The term ‘corn’ was used in Britain as a generalized name for any cereal grain crop, particularly wheat but also including maize.
7 Papers relating to a conference between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Prime Ministers of self-governing colonies (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1902), ix-x.
and as a gesture of goodwill towards the settler colonies who had faithfully aided Britain during wartime. The new Prime Minister Arthur Balfour provisionally accepted Chamberlain’s formula. However, in early 1903, while Chamberlain was out of the country conducting a highly-publicized tour of South Africa, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Ritchie, threatened to resign if the corn duty was used as an experiment in preferential trade. In the face of this threat, Balfour and Chamberlain grudgingly relented and the duty was repealed entirely.

Chamberlain responded to this setback by taking his case to the British electorate. On May 15, 1903, in his first public address upon returning from South Africa, the Colonial Secretary gave a sobering assessment of the state of the British Empire. The empire stood at a fateful crossroads between union and disintegration, and the question of trade relations would decide the empire’s fate in the coming years. He offered no concrete policy proposals and presented his thoughts as a ‘call for inquiry.’ Whatever Chamberlain intended with his speech, it set off a storm of speculation that major policy changes were about to unfold. For the next month, the controversy deepened as Chamberlain committed himself more concretely to reform, and seemed to win the Prime Minister’s support as well.

While the Liberal Party rallied together in the defense of free trade, one of the core principles of British liberalism, the Unionist coalition was wracked by dissension on the issue. To forestall a party split, Balfour forced a truce on the fiscal and tariff question until he could organize an inquiry of his own. During this summertime lull, both sides began organizing for a national campaign, establishing a number of political organizations in anticipation of an all-out propaganda war on the issue of free trade and tariffs. At last, in September 1903, Balfour presented the Cabinet with the results of his inquiry, a moderate policy of retaliatory tariffs that
he believed would serve as a compromise and keep all but the most stubborn extremists on both ends of the debate from breaking with the party line. Balfour argued that tariff reform was too drastic a step to be popular, and offered instead to introduce the principle to the British public by raising punitive tariffs against foreign nations who kept their own tariffs on British goods at unreasonably high levels, thereby coercing them into lowering their trade barriers.

In order to carry his message to the British public, Chamberlain resigned as Colonial Secretary, and Balfour purged the free traders from the Cabinet to secure his ministry. In October, both of them unveiled their reform programs to the nation. Opponents to tariff reform quickly responded, and the fight to win the debate over tariff reform commenced. In public speeches, political rallies, and by-elections, through newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets, posters, plays, songs, films, and more, a propaganda war of unprecedented scale in British political history was fought on the question of imperial and fiscal policy. Contrary to most predictions, Balfour evaded calls for an early election, navigating his deeply-divided party through the controversy for another two years. However, in the 1906 general election, Balfour and Chamberlain’s Unionist coalition was dealt a crushing defeat. The Liberal Party secured an unassailable Parliamentary majority and declared the results a conclusive national referendum on tariff reform. Even worse for the tariff reformers, in July 1906 Chamberlain suffered a stroke and effectively retired from active public life.

8 Balfour engaged in a labyrinthine scheme to force the free traders from the Cabinet, while retaining the more prominent and respected Duke of Devonshire, who was the leader of the free trade faction within the Cabinet. The ruse almost worked, until Devonshire realized the deception and resigned several days after his compatriots had been removed. See Alfred Gollin, Balfour’s Burden: Arthur Balfour and Imperial Preference (London: A. Blond, 1965). The issue of the extent of Balfour’s dishonesty in this regard was a subject of some scholarly controversy that was not settled until decades after the fact. See Alfred Gollin, ‘Historians and the Great Crisis of 1903,’ Albion 8, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 83-97.
Despite the Liberal victory, the tariff reform movement persevered. The remaining Unionists in Parliament almost unanimously supported Chamberlain’s agenda, setting the stage for a new phase in the debate. The conflict once more came to a head in the summer of 1907, as the colonial prime ministers again gathered in London for a new conference. During the meeting, the premiers renewed the case for imperial preference, abetted by Unionist politicians hoping to embarrass the Liberal government. Propaganda clashes between tariff reformers and free traders continued to escalate, and reached new levels of intensity in 1910 when the country underwent two divisive and ultimately inconclusive general elections in which neither the free trade Liberals nor the tariff reform Unionists secured a majority in Parliament.

As the title indicates, this project focuses on the period 1900 to 1914. The tariff reform debate is used as a window into Britain’s attempt to grapple with the twin ideologies of nationalism and imperialism at the beginning of the 20th century. It is not, however, envisioned as a general history of the tariff reform campaign. Tariff reform had many antecedents, whose lineage can be traced back several decades, and the movement itself continued in several different forms well after 1914, eventually triumphing in 1932. At the same time, the following chapters will trace elements of the evolution of imperial reform agendas and the development of alternative visions of empire from their late Victorian origins, and will point to the ways in which post-1918 schemes of imperial organization, particularly the idea of the commonwealth, sprung from the imperial debates of the Edwardian period. However, the revolutionary upheavals and the scale of the disruption caused by the First World War make it difficult to trace the lines of continuity between pre-war and interwar schools of imperial thought. While the outbreak of general war in 1914 seems to have validated many of the anxieties and predictions of imperialist
thinkers, its sheer destructiveness and disruptiveness makes following the course of ideological debate after 1914 a task too large for the scope of this study.

The tariff reform campaign has been well-represented in past historical scholarship. However, these studies have focused on the domestic political aspects of the movements, and examined the controversy as an episode of high political drama. In contrast, the imperial dimensions of tariff reform have been largely overlooked, if not ignored outright. This is all the more curious because Chamberlain and many of his followers made it abundantly clear that their call for tariff reform – for so-called “imperial preference” – was intended to unify the empire.

The earliest treatments of tariff reform, published when the events were still within living memory, were primarily biographical in nature, and attenuated by recriminations between politicians looking to defend their reputations and justify their decisions. These accounts were followed by historical studies concerned primarily with reconstructing the events themselves – some written before the papers and manuscripts of many of the main figures were made publicly available – pulling back the veil around the political machinations and party infighting between the statesmen who instigated the controversy.

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9 See, for instance, Blanche Dugdale, *Arthur James Balfour* (New York: Putnam’s, 1937); Bernard Holland, *The Life of Spencer Compton: Eighth Duke of Devonshire* (London: Longmans, 1911). These works represented a continuation of the feud over Devonshire’s resignation from Balfour’s ministry and the Prime Minister’s alleged dishonesty. Autobiographical accounts, including William Hewins, *Apologia of an Imperialist: Forty Years of Empire Policy* (London: Constable, 1929) and Leopold Amery, *My Political Life* offer insight into the workings of the movement, but are colored with antipathy towards their opponents’ character and intellectual rigor. Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *All the Way* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), written by a Unionist free trader, is conversely critical of the integrity of the tariff reformers, accusing them of representing an early manifestation of totalitarianism. John A. Spender, *The Life of the Right Hon. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), by the Liberal editor and free trader J.A. Spender, paradoxically gives a more dispassionate interpretation of the personalities involved in the division of the Unionists. Because the tariff reform debate was such a dominant political question of the period, the number of memoirs and recollections touching on some aspect of tariff reform is too large to fully recount.

10 For surveys of the campaign’s early years and the party conflicts it created, see Gollin, *Balfour’s Burden*; Richard Rempel, *Unionists Divided: Arthur Balfour, Joseph Chamberlain, and the Unionist Free Traders* (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1972); Zebel, ‘Joseph Chamberlain and the Genesis of Tariff Reform.’. The belated publication of
An important exception to these treatments is Bernard Semmel’s *Imperialism and Social Reform*. In his monograph, Semmel situates tariff reform within a larger turn-of-century movement he dubs social-imperial thought, arguing that reformers anxious over Britain’s waning power looked to the empire as a panacea for society’s many ills. Semmel effectively identifies the ideological conflict driving these Edwardian political controversies and the empire’s relevance to reformers, but misidentifies the nature of the role of imperialism. Semmel poses tariff reform as a conflict between imperialist reformers and anti-imperialist free traders, effectively accepting the tariff reformers’ propaganda about their rivals at face value. Moreover, Semmel’s focus is entirely domestic, with the empire merely a distant possession acting as a safety valve to ward off social upheaval at home. Reform is presented purely in its economic form, with nothing of the crucial intellectual reconceptualization of the boundaries of British nationhood and identity that was underway at the time.11

Semmel’s focus on the domestic element of the tariff reform movement was reinforced by Alan Sykes in his *Tariff Reform in British Politics*. Here, Sykes characterizes the ideological iconoclasm of tariff reform as one between traditional liberal individualism and a new conservative collectivism championed by an emerging group of zealots he describes as “radical Unionists.” The tumultuous and uncertain course of the debate reflected both this ideological struggle as well as a realignment of British political party structures that had been distorted by the aberration posed by the constitutional peril of Irish separatism. But Sykes is dismissive of the

imperial character of the debate. To Sykes, tariff reform was not a question of the future of the British Empire, with its “real significance” lying in how it shaped metropolitan political currents.¹²

Tariff reform would continue to be defined as a purely insular phenomenon in most subsequent studies.¹³ In the 1990s, tariff reform was the focal point of Ewen Green’s study of the Edwardian Conservative party. Green argued that Britain experienced a “crisis of Conservatism” in the early years of the 20th century. In the face of numerous social, economic, and political changes at the end of the Victorian era, the Conservative Party struggled to modernize. Tariff reform was a rational, though ultimately failed and unpopular, response to the challenges of new mass politics, an effort to construct a program of “constructive” legislation. Green’s argument proved extremely influential in shaping scholarly understandings of Edwardian conservatism, but positioned the tariff debate firmly as an issue to be studied as part of British political history.

It is perhaps this continued emphasis on tariff reform’s purely domestic, political elements that explain why the scholarship of the “new imperial history” largely passed it by. The “imperial turn” represented a major effort to explore the British Empire as a cultural and social phenomenon, and how the interaction with the colonial world shaped British society.¹⁴ In

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¹⁴ The corpus of new imperial literature is enormous and a full accounting of the growth of these scholarly debates would be cumbersome at present. Many of the intellectual underpinnings of new imperial history were inspired by Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). An important early statement of new imperial history’s methodology and objectives is Antoinette Burton, ‘Rules of thumb: British history and “imperial culture” in nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain,’ Women’s History Review 3, no. 4 (1994): 483-501. Two important edited collections of new imperial history’s contribution to the understanding of British imperialism are At Home With the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); New Imperial Histories Reader, ed. Stephen Howe (London: Routledge, 2009). For a retrospective overview of the ideas and debates involved in new imperial history see Dane Kennedy, The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
particular, historians of the new imperial school eschewed traditional studies of high politics in favor of examinations of the racial, gendered, and cultural meanings of British imperialism. In other words, new imperial history was an effort to uncover what the empire, particularly the predominantly non-white colonies, really meant for Britain, not simply how it was conquered and governed. Ironically, Joseph Chamberlain had asked the people of Britain, “Let us consider what that Empire is,” and in many respects the ensuing tariff controversy was the country’s way of expressing its consideration.¹⁵ The work of new imperial historians revealed much of what the empire meant to the people of Britain, but at the risk of exaggerating it at times; empire did not lurk behind every curtain in Britain, and there some truth to John Seeley’s famous remark that the empire was won “in a fit of absence of mind.”¹⁶

But the lack of any “master plan” to the British Empire does not mean that empire did not have a powerful influence on British society; indeed, Seeley’s words were meant as a criticism, not a defense. A study of the imperial rhetoric and ideologies found within the tariff reform debate demonstrates the paradoxes of empire in British society. On the one hand, it confirms that the empire was indeed a central component of how the people of Britain imagined themselves. But at the same time, it highlights the many limits of that imagination at the moment of imperialism’s high-water mark. Joseph Chamberlain asked the people to consider what the empire meant to them; he did not necessarily like their answer.

were frequently neglected topics of research. In response, a group of historians adopted a conceptual framework dubbed the ‘British World’ to refocus the relationship between Britain and these colonies.\(^{17}\) The idea of a British world, a diffuse and globe-spanning national-imperial community, as a frame of reference offered new openings for a reappraisal of the British imperial project beyond the scope of culture. In particular, it brought attention to the operation of networks of exchange, movement, and communication, the systemic, structural manifestations of Britain’s imperial experience.\(^{18}\)

But tariff reform was never implemented, or at least not until 1932. Thus, the British world’s network methodology can provide only limited insight into the workings of the tariff reform movement; the possibilities of an empire-wide commercial union and an imperial federation remained speculative and hypothetical.\(^{19}\) Tariff reform is instead more appropriately understood as an expression of the ideas that gave life to the notion of a global British community, and a set of plans for how those networks could be drawn together. Duncan Bell’s study, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, made an important contribution in this respect, exploring the late Victorian imperial federation movement which was the major antecedent to the tariff reform movement. Bell explored the realignment of the British imagination necessary in order to


\(^{18}\) Perhaps the most perceptive examination of the workings of this global network can be seen in John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

\(^{19}\) Efforts throughout the 20th century to cultivate inter-imperial trade are examined in David Thackeray, *Forging a British World of Trade: Culture, Ethnicity, and Market in the Empire-Commonwealth, 1880-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
envision the union of the so-called Greater Britain. Doing so also required an adjustment of the psychological parameters of perceptions of the nature of distance and time, as well as the boundaries of political community. Bell, however, halts his study at 1900, only hinting at the further intellectual debates that were to unfold in the Edwardian period. Even with the many continuities that carried over from the nineteenth century, the shock of the war in South Africa, the death of Queen Victoria, and the general sense of crisis that pervaded the Edwardian period drastically altered the contours and nature of discussions of imperial policy.

Taking stock of the field, there has been no full history of the tariff reform campaign. Elements of the debate have been explored in detail, but its full dimensions as an insurgent effort to change the course of British imperial policy remains largely unexamined. My intention here is not to present a full history of tariff reform. Rather, I seek to situate tariff reform in its proper context, as one of the most controversial, fiercely contested, and perhaps significant debates over the nature of British imperialism prior to the First World War. The battle for imperial unity was inextricably bound up in questions of the nation’s great power status, as well as the make-up of society and politics. Multiple visions of how the world worked, and how the British nation should be, collided with one another over the course of the debate. It reveals the extent to which the leading politicians and thinkers of the era conceived of Britain as an inherently imperial state. Reformers, as well as their critics, felt no compunctions about this fact, and saw nothing amiss in believing that the future of Britain’s role in the world would be as the possessor of a vast global empire.

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Yet the way in which reformers defined British imperialism was not a straightforward narrative of conquest and acquisition. Much of the new imperial history has shown how British identity was formed by what it was not, by contrasting with a foreign “other.” Contrarily, the British World scholarship has emphasized the reverse, how a sense of British community was extended abroad to encompass distant colonial populations. The tariff reform debate embodied both of these perspectives on the British imperial encounter, the confluence of the inclusive and exclusive impulses of British imperial ideology. The shifting discourse of ideas, ambitions, and anxieties marked the curious process in which these impulses could intermingle. This was not a contest between clearly opposing visions of openness and tolerance against exclusion and bigotry. Visions of openness could be savagely limited in their own ways, and in those contradictions and hypocrisies, something of the values of that society can be seen, and something to be reflected back upon the values of the present.

A second narrative running through the debate, sometimes spoken of openly but more often hidden just beneath the surface, was a sense of impending crisis. Looking back, the outbreak of the First World War casts a long shadow over the Edwardian era. When Chamberlain warned that the empire was not ready for a global conflict, he could not have known that the country would go to war a decade later, but his reform program seemingly anticipated such a crisis. These were the ingredients for the explosive nature of the ideological elements of the debate. Most agreed that not all was well in British society, though depending on where they

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21 The scholarly assessment of the questions of the inevitability of and the responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914 is too immense to address here. For this project, its significance lies in how the tariff reform debate connected to the same ideas and forces that shaped Britain’s decision to go to war. The world was not inevitably pushed into war by systemic forces, though these systems made war more and more likely, and desirable, as a result of a series of deliberate choices by leaders in the responsible countries. I am guided by Zara Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013); Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980).
stood on the political spectrum, reformers diagnosed the nation’s ills quite differently. Placed within its broader historical context, the tariff reform controversy can be seen as an example of a nation’s attempt to grapple with the issues and tensions found in modern society, and the ease with which fearing and preparing for conflict can slip into conflict outright. Chamberlain and many other tariff reformers warned that Britain was not ready to face the challenges of the 20th century, while their opponents feared what Britain might become if the tariff reformers triumphed. At the same time, this was a process playing out across the world.

The issues Britons grappled with over the course of the debate have an all-too familiar resonance with the politics of the present. Though the particular details have changed drastically since 1903, the questions of national identity and competition with foreign states remain fundamentally the same. Now, as then, Britain is in the midst of realigning its place in the world. How Britain attempted to overcome the obstacles to imperial unity can be compared to its reckoning with continental integration. The political fallout in the wake of the Brexit referendum has left the country adrift, pulled in opposite directions by the voices of “Leave” and “Remain.” The question of Scottish independence also presses upon the union of Great Britain, and it remains unclear if that union will endure. Whether the country’s leaders and electorate decide that Britain must look abroad, link itself more closely to its European neighbors, or stand alone

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as an island apart, remains to be seen. However the debate unfolds, resolving what its means to be British and the bonds that unite the country has perhaps never been more urgent.

At the same time, the challenges that faced these attempts to forge a united federal state out of widely disparate colonial holdings have important parallels to the problems of European unity today. Shockwaves from the financial and refugee crises, as well as Brexit and the growth of other Euro-skeptic voices, have underscored the fragility and vitality of the European Union project. The sudden reappearance of the specter of war in Europe, and the new refugee crisis developing with unprecedented speed and scale has only heightened the urgency of these dilemmas. The EU may yet move towards closer integration, drift apart, or perhaps maintain, like the British Empire did, a tenuous balance between union and autonomy. At the same time, the influx of refugees, resentment over free movement of peoples and competition for economic resources, as well as fears about cultural assimilation and change, all have serious ramifications for the tenor of European politics in the coming years. The tariff reform debate offers an example of how identity can be made and remade, flexibly adapted and extended to include others, or be savagely curtailed to exclude those deemed too different to belong.

The lessons of the tariff reform campaign can be applied with equal relevance in the United States. The discourse of the controversy in 1903 was dominated by the crisis of confidence flowing from a perceived decline in power. Long decades of global predominance and economic prosperity had been replaced by heightened foreign competition and a steady transition away from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. Fears of foreign peril, manifested in geo-political rivalry and immigration, combined with frustration with persistent social inequality, to foster an atmosphere of sharpened partisan polarization. Politics regressed
into a battle over the soul of the nation, a quest to restore Britain’s greatness, real or imagined. In contemporary America, the problems of identity, economic inequality, and populism are only partially expressed through questions of tariffs, protectionism, and foreign trade, but they reflect fundamentally similar questions about whether or not a society is best served by building walls around itself against those it considers menacing and different. It shows the ways in which established institutions and prevailing ideas like British free trade and liberalism, once thought unassailable and undeniable, can be eroded over time; how a belief system’s limitations and flaws, the gulf between words and deeds, over time can create brewing dissent in society that can erupt in destabilizing and complicated ways. Overall, the tariff reform debate illustrates some of the myriad ways in which a nation, once confident in its power but now gripped by anxiety, comes to terms with change.

This dissertation is organized into four chapters, encompassing the major intellectual and ideological facets of the tariff reform debate between the years 1900 to 1914. The chapters are organized thematically rather than as a chronological narrative of the course of the debate. Chapter One examines the policies and ideas of the tariff reformers themselves. Comprising established political figures, revisionist experts and thinkers, and idealistic young reformers, their movement was an amalgamation of skeptics and critics unhappy with many of the tenets of late Victorian political orthodoxy. Tariff reform’s leader and instigator, Joseph Chamberlain, was the central figure driving the movement, and his philosophy of imperialism and dream of imperial union was chiefly responsible for setting the terms of the ensuing debate. His scheme was aimed at laying the foundations for the creation of a unified imperial economic bloc, as the first step in building a federation from the empire. Chamberlain’s charisma and national prominence
overshadowed Britain’s sitting Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, who nevertheless attempted to regain some measure of control by presenting the country with his own, allegedly more moderate, version of tariff reform. Following them were a number of followers who embraced tariff reform with fervent dedication. Ranging from scholarly economists to journalists and political operatives, they were tariff reform’s most articulate lieutenants. These men laid out how tariff reform would renovate the decrepitude in British society and revitalize the nation’s power.

Chapter Two looks next to the opponents of tariff reform, a diverse array of free traders united in their belief in maintaining the nation’s fiscal status quo. Much of their belief in the continued validity of free trade derived from an acceptance of a narrative of national prosperity rooted in the traditions of the early Victorian period. At the same time, they viewed tariff reform as a manifestation of anti-democratic corruption and social inequality, a reactionary urge by selfish interest groups to enrich themselves at the nation’s expense. Liberals and socialists offered the British public their own programs of reform and visions for a more just and equitable society. At the same time, Liberals in particular insisted that tariff reform was, in actuality, an anti-imperial measure which threatened to bring the empire into ruin. Instead, they offered up the conception of liberal imperialism as an alternative, the true and durable conception of the empire distinct from the tariff reform rhetoric they saw as corrosive to imperial unity.

Chapter Three explores the efforts by a number of other imperial reform movements to advance the goal of imperial unity as the tariff controversy unfolded. The Pollock Committee, the Round Table, and the colonial conferences were all instances by imperialists to fulfill their reform agendas while avoiding the partisan acrimony generated by the tariff question. These efforts could trace their lineage to the work of the Imperial Federation League active in the late
The chapter situates tariff reform within its wider context, the community of British imperial reformers and organizations who held a diverse range of assumptions and ideals about the empire. It also shows that the colonies put obstacles of their own in the path of the dream of an imperial federation, as they began to develop distinct national identities separate from that of the metropole. In particular, the chapter examines the operation of the so-called liberal imperialism analyzed in Chapter Two. The Unionists’ electoral defeat in 1906 brought the Liberals to power, giving them the opportunity to demonstrate the efficacy of their imperial policy at the 1907 Imperial Conference. The collision of liberal imperialism, tariff reform, imperial reform, and colonial nationalism was a crucial watershed moment for Edwardian imperialism, and a unique instance of British imperial theory being put to the test under new conditions.

Chapter Four focuses on what I have taken to calling the popular culture of tariff reform, the enormous propaganda efforts employed by both sides of the debate to sway the British public to their cause. For all the interplay of ideas and theories discussed by statesmen and thinkers, the competing movements needed to win votes. The scale of the propaganda effort was great enough that to an extent two competing popular cultures emerged, complete with separate symbols, rituals, and vocabularies of free trade and tariff reform. A consideration of the ways propagandists distilled their messages for popular consumption, using both traditional and new means of electioneering, reveals much about the political values and cultural assumptions of those participating in the debate. The propaganda was an expression of what they believed was most important for the common person to understand about the debate, delivered in ways they believed would be effective and efficient. Conversely, drawing upon a large cache of letters
written by a wide array of Britons from across the empire, I suggest that public participation in
the debate, and awareness of the empire, was more substantive than the often cynical and
patronizing assumptions of politicians and political operatives.
CHAPTER ONE

THE TARIFF REFORM VISION OF IMPERIAL BRITAIN

The tariff reform movement began with a suitably impressive display of drama and pageantry on the evening of May 15, 1903. Thousands eagerly awaited the Colonial Secretary in the Birmingham Town Hall to hear Joseph Chamberlain’s first public address since his much-publicized tour of war-torn South Africa months earlier. Even more people waited outside and cheered Chamberlain and his wife as their procession arrived. When Chamberlain entered the hall, the audience rose to its feet and applauded for several minutes, as the organist played Handel’s “See, the Conquering Hero Comes.” Chamberlain’s address, a “Demand for Inquiry,” startled listeners with ominous warnings about the condition of the British Empire and rekindled their hopes with promises of a glorious future if the British people were prepared to embrace change. Almost immediately, the speech provoked a storm of political controversy across Britain, and the issues Chamberlain raised would become the primary focus of a debate in British politics for years to come.

The tariff reform movement that coalesced around Chamberlain in the aftermath of his May 15 speech drew many supporters in a short amount of time; within months, the Colonial Secretary’s ideas became the basis of a national political movement. But this movement was never a homogenous group. Distressed farmers, struggling industrialists and unemployed urban workers, imperialist thinkers, military reformers, academic economists, and social activists alike found much to support in the promises and opportunities of tariff reform. In many cases, the similarities ended there; tariff reform meant different things to different people over time, and

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24 *The Times* (London), May 16, 1903.
the disparate groups which supported Chamberlain’s call for reform did not necessarily agree on
the desired outcome, or how to achieve it. While Chamberlain’s supporters enthusiastically
fought a war of words with their free-trade opponents, oftentimes they worked harder quarreling
with other tariff reformers for control of the movement.

This factional strife reached to the very top of the movement’s leadership. On one side
was Joseph Chamberlain, the popular, charismatic Colonial Secretary and the driving force
behind tariff reform. On the other was Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister and leader of the
Conservative Party, who resisted fully committing to tariff reform and instead offered a more
moderate agenda he believed was more likely to sway the electorate and avoid a party schism.
This dual leadership ensured that, for many years, no single tariff reform vision was put before
the British public, and the Unionist coalition was wracked by infighting. Both Balfour and
Chamberlain purged free traders from the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties, others
defected to the Liberal Party, and in many elections candidates without official backing emerged
as spoilers to deny their erstwhile comrades a victory. Unsurprisingly, the disagreements and
dissension within the movement played directly into the hands of its critics, who eagerly
emphasized the contradictions between the Chamberlain and Balfour factions.

The drama and bitterness of the intra-party factionalism caused by tariff reform looms
large in many scholarly accounts of the history of tariff reform. Biographical portraits of the
clash between ambitious leaders, studies of the backroom maneuvering of political operators and
interest groups for power, and analyses of the outcomes of elections form the main focus of a
significant number of historical studies of tariff reform.\footnote{For Arthur Balfour’s effort to preserve party unity through compromise, see Gollin, \textit{Balfour’s Burden} and Rempel, \textit{Unionists Divided}. Elements of tariff reform’s factionalism have been surveyed in several works. Cain and Hopkins,
reform’s political dimensions has taken center stage, while its ideological components have largely been neglected, even in scholarly works that acknowledge the tariff reform movement represented a major departure from the dominant narratives of the Victorian period. The standard interpretation of the tariff reform movement as divided between protectionists and a small group of imperialists illustrates these problems; first, it presumes that protectionists sought reform in order to advance the economic interests of certain pressure groups and struggling industries. At the same time, it dismisses the imperialist dimensions of tariff reform as either belonging to only a small faction of tariff reformers who were quickly marginalized, or who used the rhetoric of empire as window-dressing to mask their self-interested pursuits.

Contrary to this interpretation, the desire for reform was driven by an iconoclastic ideological impetus from beginning to end that sought a drastic change in the political, economic, and imperial makeup of Britain. Alan Sykes has argued that the most dynamic faction amongst the tariff reformers were adherents of so-called “radical Unionism,” those who rejected the outcome of a half-century of Victorian democracy and free-trade liberalism in favor of a collectivist vision of imperial patriotism and state-sponsored social reform. In Sykes’ view, ideology is thus central to explaining why Chamberlain staked his career on his bid for imperial preference.  


26 Sykes, Tariff Reform in British Politics.
Unionist coalition, but it is far less certain that he did so to become Prime Minister or strengthen the government’s legislative record. In judging radical Unionism a failure for the tariff reformers’ inability to gain office, Sykes reaffirms the centrality of high politics as the chief marker of success in this ideological struggle. Similarly, Ewen Green has written that the Conservative Party experienced a crisis of identity at the turn of the century and seized upon tariff reform as a means of offering voters a constructive policy adapted to the new era of mass democracy.

Green’s work is focused on explaining the Conservative Party’s simultaneous dogged adherence to tariff reform and repeated electoral losses, and he unsurprisingly finds his answer to these questions in the dynamics of electoral politics and inter-party maneuvering. Other historians of the Conservative Party, most notably David Thackeray, have questioned the degree to which the Conservatives experienced a “crisis” prior to the First World War, pointing to the energetic political outreach of a number of grassroots party organizations prior to 1914. Similarly, Neil Fleming observes that throughout much of British history, the Conservative Party has possessed a right-wing faction that repeatedly transformed and evolved over time, with the most enthusiastic adherents to tariff reform being but one manifestation of a recurring pattern of radical rebels within the Tory ranks.

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27 For the interpretation that Chamberlain sought to advance his own career, see Dutton, ‘Unionist politics and the aftermath of the general election of 1906.’ For the view of tariff reform as an effort to improve the government’s electoral chances, see Denis Judd, Radical Joe: A life of Joseph Chamberlain (London: Hamilton, 1977).
28 Green, The Crisis of Conservatism.
But whether or not the Conservative Party underwent a process of crisis and transformation during the Edwardian period, the tariff reform movement and the Conservative Party were not synonymous. Chamberlain was leader of the Liberal Unionists, and many of the most outspoken tariff reformers were Liberal Unionists as well. Indeed, the Liberal Unionist party embraced tariff reform more quickly and completely than the Conservatives ever did.\textsuperscript{31} While the two parties operated in a close electoral coalition, they remained distinct parties throughout the course of the debate. At the same time, the marginalization and electoral defeat of many prominent Conservative free traders did not erase their belief in conservatism, nor did it make them any more willing to cooperate with liberals and socialists on other political issues.

Certainly, the history of tariff reform as party policy was an important factor shaping the course of Edwardian British politics. It further weakened the flagging Unionist coalition, and contributed to the Liberals’ landslide victory in 1906, which catapulted them into power where they would remain until the end of the First World War. But at the same time, fixating on tariff reform as partisan politics obscures its important ideological dimensions. It is in this respect, as the manifestation of a broader vision of Britain’s transformation, that the tariff reform campaign produced such polarized responses and impassioned debate. Tariff reformers embraced Chamberlain’s call for change, not to enact minor alterations to the rate of taxation on foreign imports, but to convince the people of Britain to reject many of the dominant ideological pillars of the Victorian age for a new path forward. Faced with sharpening foreign competition and increasingly concerned with questions of the stability and prosperity of the nation, skeptical of the results of popular democratization, laissez-faire liberalism, and free-trade imperialism, the

tariff reformers were determined to reshape Britain into a nation strong enough to face the enemies, both internal and external, that sought to topple its global power.

    Chamberlain’s reform agenda was to be the first step in this national reorientation, laying the foundation for a new and better Britain. In certain respects, the precise details of Chamberlain’s proposals were less important than the ideals guiding them, of Britain as the prosperous manufacturing heartland of an integrated global empire-state, where the boundaries of a British nation and a British empire were identical. These ideals were far more compelling than the reforms themselves, and go much further in explaining both the depth of devotion tariff reformers felt for the cause as well as the intensity of hostility expressed by their opponents. It also goes far in explaining the persistent divisions and squabbling within the tariff reform movement; the ideal of a unified empire drew supporters from many different sections of British society and politics, with their own separate agendas and ambitions.

    This chapter examines the ideas, beliefs, and motivations which served as the driving force behind the tariff reform movement. It explores how arguments that, on their surface, appeared to be focused on issues of domestic political economy, were expressions of a deeper challenge to the status quo in British society. Tariff reform’s leading figures and thinkers were articulating a challenge to the prevailing political and social assumptions, inherited from the nineteenth century, of how the state and society was to confront the challenges of the modern world and guide the nation into a better future. Empire, not domestic fiscal policy, was the beating heart and driving force of this movement.

    But the tariff reformers were also a diverse and fractious collective. Some had campaigned for similar policies founded on similar ideas for many years, embracing
Chamberlain as an influential and charismatic new ally to the cause. Others rallied around the tariff banner as new converts, inspired to action by the prospect of a new, dynamic departure in national and imperial policies. Many sympathized with the reformers’ goals but doubted their practicality in the moment, and hoped to lessen the controversy through moderation and compromise. Ironically, it was these moderates, not Chamberlain and the staunchest tariff reformers, who proposed the more radical and drastic reforms; yet theirs was the “compromise” because it departed less from the conventional ideological bases of Edwardian Britain. But each of these groups shared a fundamental point of reference and perspective, one that blurred the lines between the nation and the empire. They saw Britain as an imperial power, but one whose global reach meant they shared a common identity with at least some of the peoples they ruled. In the tariff reformers’ vision, Britain’s grand imperial project was still very much a work in progress, and dangerously fragile to the pressures of the modern world. Britain would need to transform itself, and transform its empire, in order to save itself and to save its imperial character.

**Joseph Chamberlain and the Demand for Inquiry**

In the early years of the controversy, tariff reformers universally recognized Joseph Chamberlain as leader of the tariff reform movement. Charismatic, energetic, and boasting a well-respected reputation across the nation and the empire, Chamberlain’s actions and ideas were the main impetus behind the growth and evolution of tariff reform between its emergence in 1903 and 1906.\(^{32}\) His prominence guaranteed that Chamberlain’s acts and speeches received widespread and detailed coverage in both the British and even foreign press, ensuring that his

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\(^{32}\) In June 1906, Chamberlain suffered a stroke that severely limited his ability to speak, write, and walk. Though he remained committed to the cause and attempted to stay involved in British politics, his lingering infirmity in practical terms ended his participation in public life.
ideas on the purpose and nature of tariff reform overshadowed potential alternatives. His imperial vision of a united empire served as the focal point around which the rest of the debate orbited, shaping the basic parameters within which the tariff reform debate unfolded. More than anyone else, Chamberlain defined what tariff reform meant.

Chamberlain’s speech at the Birmingham Town Hall on May 15, 1903 was the flashpoint for tariff controversy. The issues the Colonial Secretary brought to public attention would, within a matter of days, become the overriding topic of debate in British politics. From the start, in Chamberlain’s mind tariff reform and imperial policy were inseparably connected. Events over the previous years – his administration of the Colonial Office and the popularization of imperialism, the conclusion of the Boer War, the 1902 Colonial Conference, and private feuds in the Cabinet – had each in various ways convinced him that reform was essential at this moment.³³ In other respects, the intensity of public interest in the wake of the May 15 speech was unusual; the idea of imperial federation had been a subject of discussion for decades prior to 1903, and much of Chamberlain’s speech echoed themes he had espoused many times in the past.³⁴

Whether he was swept up in the tide of public interest or acting upon a premeditated agenda, Chamberlain’s May 15 speech was based on firmly imperialist beliefs; its tone and content were also alarmist. Remarking on his experiences during his tour of South Africa earlier in the year, Chamberlain confessed to having a new perspective on the empire. “My ideas even

³³ The most comprehensive account of Chamberlain’s motives and decision-making process remains Amery, The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, v.
³⁴ Antecedents of the 1903 tariff reform movement will be examined in chapter 3. For Chamberlain’s earlier speeches on similar topics, see James Garvin, The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, 3:173-202. Almost exactly a year earlier, Chamberlain had delivered another speech in Birmingham using much the same rhetoric. See The Times, May 17, 1902.
now,” he explained, “run more on those questions which are connected with the future of the Empire than upon the smaller controversies upon which depend the fate of by-elections, and sometimes even the fate of Governments. When you are 6000 miles away from the House of Commons, it is perfectly extraordinary how events and discussions and conflicts of opinion present themselves in different – I think I may say truer – proportion.”

Chamberlain sought to redirect his audience’s attention to the empire, to events and possibilities far greater than domestic politics, and to emphasize that his concerns were not partisan, but driven by imperial patriotism. Forebodingly, he warned the country, “Upon that Imperial policy and what you do in the next few years depends that enormous issue whether this great Empire of ours is to stand together, one free nation, if necessary, against all the world, or whether it is to fall apart into separate States, each selfishly seeking its own interest alone, losing sight of the commonweal, and losing also all the advantages which union alone can give.”

Chamberlain elaborated on his conception of the story of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, dividing it into three phases of alternating action and reaction. The flawed imperial policy of the eighteenth century had been overturned by the disaster of American independence, provoking a new attitude of anti-imperialism. He lamented the actions of the statesmen of the middle third of the nineteenth century, who neglected the “hearts and minds of our children beyond the seas” out of a sense of “apathy and indifference which were the characteristics of our former relations with our colonies.” Chamberlain condemned the latter-day ‘Little Englander’ as someone who “taught us to consider ourselves alone, and to regard with indifference all that concerned those, however loyal they might be, who left these shores in order

35 Boyd, Mr. Chamberlain’s Speeches, 2:127.
36 Ibid., 2:127-128.
to go to our colonies abroad.” But recently, a new spirit of cooperation had blossomed, culminating in the colonies dispatching soldiers to fight alongside the British Army in South Africa. Chamberlain asked, “Is it to end with the end of the war…? Are we to sink back to the old policy of selfish isolation which went very far to try, and even to sap, the loyalty of our colonial brethren?” The mistakes of the past, however, were not irrevocable. The empire could still be molded and changed. Chamberlain was leading his audience inexorably through his line of reasoning towards the imperative of establishing some practical measure of imperial union, and uplifting that reform into the realm of a patriotic duty rather than partisan politics.

Chamberlain made clear that when he spoke of “empire,” he was referring to only a fraction of its lands and peoples. He dismissed “those hundreds of millions of our Indian and native fellow-subjects for whom we have become responsible” from the vision of the British Empire he wished to portray. These non-white imperial subjects were to be given good government and their lands developed, but they would not stand as equal partners with Britain and the settler colonies until some distant future point. What mattered now, Chamberlain insisted, was “our relations to our own kinsfolk, to that white British population that constitutes the majority in the great self-governing colonies of the Empire.” In 1903, this population totaled approximately 10 million, only a fraction of the 40 million who resided in Britain. But the colonies were rapidly growing, and the balance would one day change, as the United States had already demonstrated through its own meteoric rise. The empire’s population would inevitably grow as well. As such, Chamberlain urged his audience, “to consider the infinite importance of this, not only to yourselves but to your descendants. Now is the time when you can exert influence. Do you wish that, if these ten millions become forty millions, they shall still be closely,

37 Ibid., 2:129.
intimately, affectionately united to you? Or do you contemplate the possibility of their being separated, going off each in his own direction under a separate flag?"

Chamberlain sought to emphasize the manifold possibilities that the development of the settler colonies offered, but whether that development would see the rise of new, independent nations or constituent parts of a global British nation remained in the balance.

At last, Chamberlain turned to the question of “trade and commerce” between the parts of the empire. He argued, with startling candor for the Colonial Secretary of the past seven years, that “Unless that is satisfactorily settled, I, for one, do not believe in a continued union of the Empire.” The British people needed to turn away from the ‘Little Englander’ perspective, which neglected colonial trade because it was less than foreign trade. Chamberlain insisted that trading only for the sake of profit was wrong-headed, adding that “I say it is the business of British statesmen to do everything they can, even at some present sacrifice, to keep the trade of the colonies with Great Britain; to increase that trade, to promote it, even if in doing so we lessen somewhat the trade with our foreign competitors.”

Chamberlain would frequently return to this theme of sacrifice. The former Birmingham industrialist argued that short-term gains from foreign trade must not be allowed to overshadow the patriotic necessity of building, strengthening, and unifying the empire for the sake of the future of the British people.

Chamberlain contrasted the self-centered profit-seeking of “Little Englanders” with the gallant sacrifices colonial soldiers made in defense of the empire, and argued that such patriotism represented the true ideal of empire. The colonists had rushed to Britain’s aid without any great stake in the controversies which had brought on the war, nor any expectation of a material

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38 Ibid., 2:130-131.
39 Ibid., 2:131.
reward. Chamberlain fully expected the colonies would do so again, even the newly-annexed Boer republics, and even if faced with a formidable alliance of enemy powers. It was thus essential to preserve and strengthen “the community of interest, and, above all, that community of sacrifice on which alone the Empire can permanently rest.”\(^{40}\) This was, in Chamberlain’s mind, the core of British imperialism and the source of both its strength and inspiration. Neither the acquisitive mercantile empire of the eighteenth century nor the lonely island nation of the nineteenth century would suffice in the modern day. Rather, Britain’s future depended on drawing together a community of peoples that, although scattered across vast geographical distances, nevertheless was bound together by a shared sense of identity and eager to work together. In effect, for Chamberlain the British Empire and the British nation were the same. In this, Chamberlain was hardly a new and innovative thinker, except in his willingness to commit his political career to a definite call to action.

At last, Chamberlain brought his audience to the policy of preferential tariffs, summarizing how the colonies’ battlefield sacrifices had been matched by generosity in commerce. It also provided an insight into why any further delay in reforming Britain’s imperial outlook would be dangerous. Pointing to Canada, Chamberlain explained how its decision to grant Britain preferential tariff rates in 1898 and again in 1900 had provoked a hostile response. Germany had promptly retaliated against the Canadian preference, levying punitive tariffs against Canadian goods unless the preference was abandoned. This had critical implications for the empire’s integrity. As Chamberlain framed the issue, “you and I are agreed that the British Empire is one and indivisible….But, unfortunately, Germany thinks otherwise.” Fiscal arrangements between Britain and Canada were synonymous, he argued, with agreements

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 2:133.
between Hanover and Bavaria in Germany. German retaliation against Canada was tantamount to “treat[ing] Canada as though it were a separate country. It refuses to recognize it as a part of one Empire, entitled to claim the privileges of that Empire.” The threat of imperial disintegration was thereby laid before the Birmingham audience in stark form. A failure to act on colonial overtures not only risked demoralizing imperial patriots in the colonies, but in effect would signal to foreign powers that Britain would not defend the political or diplomatic unity of the empire.

Inflexible and doctrinaire adherence to free trade was what stood in the way of responding to such attacks. But Chamberlain contended that what Britain followed was not free trade at all, but instead an extreme interpretation perpetuated “by a small remnant of Little Englanders of the Manchester School, who now profess to be the sole repositories of the doctrines of Mr. Cobden and Mr. Bright.” Chamberlain urged upon his audience the need for an inquiry and a renewed debate, to reject dogmatic conformity to antiquated assumptions in favor of an honest and open-minded appraisal of the state of Britain’s trade and empire. But with no specific policy to offer his audience, Chamberlain was proposing a debate between opposing ideals, which he defined in terms of uncompromising free trade and the future union of the empire. He insisted, “If we raise an issue of this kind, the answer will depend…upon whether the people of this country really have it in their hearts to do all that is necessary, even if it

41 Ibid., 2:137-138.
42 Ibid., 2:139. The Radical politicians Richard Cobden and John Bright founded the Anti-Corn Law League, whose work was instrumental in dismantling British protectionism in the 1840s. “Cobdenism” had become synonymous with laissez-faire tree trade ideals in British politics by 1903.
occasionally goes against their own prejudices, to consolidate an Empire which can only be maintained by relations of interest as well as by relations of sentiment.”

The Birmingham speech immediately roused intense public interest. The Times editorialized on May 18 that “Mr. Chamberlain’s great and stirring speech…has awakened echoes throughout the civilized world. The friends of England everywhere hail it with admiration, with hope, with an uplifting of the heart, and with thankfulness for a man great enough to formulate an Imperial policy.” For a younger generation of Unionists, the speech was like a call to arms. In his memoir, Leopold Amery reminisced that it was “like the sudden awakening out of a nightmare – the summons of a new day to a new and glorious task in the world of politics.”

But Chamberlain had no reform plan to offer the country yet, and his precise intentions were unclear, leaving many to speculate what he might have planned. Indeed, while Chamberlain had given his speech in Birmingham, Prime Minister Arthur Balfour had delivered a speech of his own in London to a deputation of agriculturalists protesting the repeal of a wartime corn tariff. The juxtaposition of these two speeches gave some observers the impression that Chamberlain was maneuvering to topple Balfour’s government and make a gamble for the premiership himself.

Neither Chamberlain nor Balfour viewed the speech as an attack on the Prime Minister, and it is likely that they instead coordinated their actions. Writing to the Duke of Devonshire,

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43 The Times, May 16, 1903. This section of the speech is not included in Boyd’s compilation, but was reported by the contemporary press.
44 The Times, May 18, 1903.
45 Amery, My Political Life, 1:236. Amery recounts an incident on May 16, in which Leo Maxse, editor of the National Review, burst into his office at the London Times and proceeded to dance with Amery as he “poured forth a paean of jubilation at the thought that, at last, there was a cause to work for in politics.” Amery, My Political Life, 1:237. Maxse’s wildly enthusiastic support for tariff reform is noted also in Amery’s diary from the time. See Leopold Amery, The Leo Amery Diaries, 1896-1929, ed. John Barnes and David Nicholson (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 1:35
Balfour explained, “Chamberlain, if you remember, took the occasion to observe that he proposed to say at Birmingham much the same as what I proposed to say at the Deputation, only in a less definite manner.”

Regardless, there were several discrepancies between the two speeches that added to the intense political speculation. Chamberlain was seemingly unprepared for the scale of the public reaction. His actions in the days after May 15 show him “unsure and ill-prepared” and he had taken no action to prepare for the inquiry he had just demanded.

Chamberlain did, however, use the opportunity to begin laying the groundwork for a future political campaign. In a Parliamentary debate one week after his speech, he implied that social welfare reform, particularly old-age pensions, could be funded from the revenue generated by tariffs. A more protracted Parliamentary debate ensued on May 28, during which Chamberlain conceded that tariffs on raw materials used by British industry would be impractical, leaving taxes on food imports as the only reliable source of revenue. Already, the battle-lines of the controversy were being drawn. Liberals and free trade Conservatives alike excoriated the idea of food tariffs, while Balfour offered tepid support for the idea of a change in fiscal policy. After this initial burst of debate, the controversy remained largely dormant over the summer. The Prime Minister promised his own private inquiry into the question, and the party was subject to a gag rule to forestall further internal dissension. Matters finally came to a

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49 *Hansard*, 4s, 123: 141-98 (28 May 1903).
head in September, when Chamberlain resigned from the Cabinet, and Balfour summarily expelled his free trade ministers.\textsuperscript{50}

Freed from his responsibilities as a representative of the Government, Chamberlain prepared to take his arguments directly to the British public. He planned a series of speeches in rapid succession during October, each designed to develop a specific theme of his overall reform plan. Chamberlain’s October 1903 program would become the core of the mainstream tariff reformers’ plans for years to come. These so-called ‘whole-hoggers’ regarded tariff reform as a panacea for the myriad issues confronting the nation. They combined rhetoric of hope of imperial greatness with renewed national prosperity. But these two elements were not necessarily in harmony. The twin platform – imperial preference and protectionism – confronted tariff reformers with a difficult balancing act; the former aimed at developing the empire and the latter at revitalizing a lagging national economy. Both promised desirable results, but they also threatened to contradict and counteract each other if either policy was taken to extremes. In the enthusiasm to advocate for the various merits of tariff reform, the moderation and restraint required to maintain the balance was sometimes lacking. In this respect, the two principles underlying the tariff reform program, imperial patriotism and British nationalism, remained complementary but only just, under pressure in the ways that threatened to subsume one for the other.

Chamberlain began his speaking tour in Glasgow on October 6 amidst great fanfare. After months of controversy, private inquiry, Cabinet and inter-party tension, and ministerial resignations, the public would at last hear the former Colonial Secretary’s plan of action.

\textsuperscript{50} The three members dismissed were Charles Ritchie as Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Hamilton at the India Office, and Lord Burleigh as Secretary for Scotland. The Duke of Devonshire, Lord President of the Council, resigned days later in protest.
Chamberlain’s address to the crowd in Glasgow lacked much of the Birmingham speech’s rhetorical power and struggled to maintain the same logical train of imperialist reasoning of the necessity of tariff reform. Chamberlain was almost apologetic for having to speak in specific and sometimes technical terms about tax rates and trade figures rather than in generalities of imperial grandeur and national necessity. He also deliberately bifurcated his argument. The first half pertained to the “selfish” side of tariff reform, his concern for Britain’s domestic industrial well-being. This, Chamberlain warned, was in grave danger. Referencing the sudden collapse in 1902 of the famous Campanile in Venice, he compared Britain to the decline of the Venetian merchant republic. “I see signs of decay [in British trade]” Chamberlain warned, “I see cracks and crevices in the walls of the great structure; that I know that the foundations upon which it has been raised are not broad enough or deep enough to sustain it.”

Unfair foreign competition imperiled British manufacturing, and the country’s current fiscal policy did nothing to prevent it. As a small island nation, this was a matter of life and death for British power. “Our existence as a nation,” he argued, “depends upon our manufacturing capacity and production.” Without a manufacturing base, millions of workers would lose their jobs and the country would have nothing but a dwindling wealth to export to the rest of the world. Describing the free trade policy of the previous thirty years as one of drift, Chamberlain argued that the country had allowed foreign powers to supplant vital British industries over time; guarded by high tariffs, Americans and Germans had constructed powerful industries that coalesced into powerful “trusts” of unprecedented scale that dwarfed the British competition.

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51 Boyd, *Mr. Chamberlain’s Speeches*, 2:144. Chamberlain’s repeated use of building metaphors was part of an allusion to the collapse and total destruction of the famous St. Mark’s Companile in Venice in July, 1903.
52 Ibid., 2:146.
The colonies were the foreigner’s next targets: “We allowed matters to drift. Are we going to let them drift now? Are we going to lose the colonial trade? This is the parting of the ways.”\textsuperscript{53}

Chamberlain claimed a moderate, flexible tariff policy would have mitigated much of the past damage. He contended such a policy could still be the best remedy for the future. Declaming any tax on imported raw materials, which were essential to manufacturing, Chamberlain admitted the only alternative was a tariff on imported food. His proposal called for a balanced alteration of British tariffs: a two-shilling per quarter duty would be levied on all corn except for maize, and a corresponding tax on foreign flour to provide the colonies with a preferential market and stimulate the local British milling industry; a five percent duty on foreign meat and dairy products, except bacon. Balancing these increases, Chamberlain proposed to give the colonies a preference on existing wine and fruit tariffs, and lower the tariff on tea by seventy-five percent, and sugar, cocoa, and coffee by fifty percent. Chamberlain assured the audience, based on government estimates, that the cost of living for the average agricultural laborer and urban worker would actually be lowered by these changes.

Chamberlain designed the second half of his plan to address the resulting budget shortfall. To both recoup the decreased revenue and provide assistance to British industry, Chamberlain proposed a general tariff on all foreign manufactured goods. The rate would be higher for finished products requiring skilled labor, resulting in an average tariff of ten percent. Whereas the food tariffs would result in a £2.8 million deficit, the industrial tariff would produce at least £9 million. Here Chamberlain mused on the possibilities of such a surplus, assuring the audience that the new Chancellor – his son Austen – would know how to use it. He suggested that the new revenue could be used for “the further reduction both of taxes on food and also of some other

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 2:151.
taxes which press most hardly on different classes of the community.” Any reference to the possibility of social welfare, which Chamberlain had offered in May, was notable by its absence. Now, Chamberlain emphasized providing and protecting employment as the best way to help British workers.

Employment and tax revenue were useful and beneficial. But Chamberlain was adamant that the tariff’s true purpose was to strengthen the empire. He preferred to depict British imperialism as a form of sacrifice and solemn duty rather than a material economic boon. Having explained that tariff reform could provide employment, revitalize decaying industries, and lower taxes on the poor, he argued that tariff reform would be worth undertaking even if none of those advantages would occur:

I appeal to you as fellow-citizens of the greatest Empire that the world has ever known; I appeal to you to recognise that the privileges of Empire bring with them great responsibilities. I want to ask you to think what this Empire means, what it is to you and your descendants.

Chamberlain marveled at the scale of the British Empire, observing that with “decent organisation and consolidation” it could achieve unprecedented self-sufficiency. But even without that binding structure, the empire still fostered a shared sense of identity and common loyalty. The vast distances separating the parts of the empire had not prevented the self-governing colonies from coming to Britain’s aid in the South African war, and he predicted they would do so again. Even the “hundreds of millions of men born in tropical climes, and of races very different from ours…would be in any death-throe of the Empire equally eager to show their loyalty and their devotion.” The shared sentiments of loyalty, duty, and sacrifice

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54 Ibid., 2:162.
55 Ibid., 153.
moved all of them, and Chamberlain confidently argued, “That is the result of Empire.”\textsuperscript{56} He asked the crowd if the traditions and sentiments which birthed this devotion were not, ultimately, worth preserving for future generations, even at some small cost in the present. Truly great nations were those which rose about “petty parochialism” and Chamberlain, now calling himself “a missionary of Empire,” urged for the people to realize that “all that is best in our present life, best in this Britain of ours, all of which we have the right to be more proud, is due to the fact that we are not only sons of Britain, but we are sons of Empire.”\textsuperscript{57}

The Glasgow speech was a rhetorical success. Despite its emphasis on statistics and tax rates, Chamberlain held the audience’s attention for over an hour and forty minutes. The \textit{Times} reported “the applause, almost wild in its enthusiasm, which followed his last words, showed that the missionary had not…failed in the first act of his mission.”\textsuperscript{58} Beneath the rhetoric, though, Chamberlain had erred on several points, which his critics eagerly pointed out. To illustrate the alleged stagnation in British trade, he compared trade returns from 1902 with 1872, an unusually prosperous year when trade had flourished as a result of the turmoil of the Franco-Prussian War. Chamberlain’s attempt to correct his mistake was hardly any better. On October 7, he said, “I use figures as illustrations. I do not pretend that they are proofs. The proof will be found in the argument, and not in the figures. But I use figures as illustrations to show what the argument is.”\textsuperscript{59} Beneath the circular logic of such statements, many critics wondered aloud if the one-time Birmingham industrialist’s business savvy was slipping, or if the country could trust an economic argument founded on shaky economic statistics.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} The \textit{Times}, October 7, 1903.
\textsuperscript{59} Boyd, \textit{Mr. Chamberlain’s Speeches}, 2:169.
A more serious concern stemmed from the former Colonial Secretary’s description of the new preferential trade between Britain and the colonies. Here he had implied that tariff reform could be used to dissuade the colonies from developing their industries, keeping them captive as producers of raw materials and food alone.\textsuperscript{60} The imperialist free-trade \textit{Spectator} dubbed this “tied-house imperialism” and “the old Colonial system in its worst form,” equating tariff reform to the restrictive mercantile system of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{61} Although Chamberlain had no control over any part of colonial economic policy, and little desire to halt the growth of colonial industry, such missteps reflected the difficulty in balancing of the two sides of tariff reform. Despite the modest scale of his proposals and his charismatic enthusiasm for the empire, Chamberlain’s Glasgow program was contradictory on several points. The preferential half of the program aimed for the establishment of reciprocal tariffs and expanding trade relations, suggesting the replacement of foreign imports for colonial alternatives. The protectionist half, with its general tariff on manufactured goods, was intended to generate revenue and buttress struggling domestic businesses. Though there was no realistic prospect of the growth of domestic sugar, coffee, or tea production, wheat, dairy, and meat farmers would find foreign competitors simply replaced by their colonial counterparts, and domestic manufacturers eventually faced with competition from emerging colonial manufacturers, themselves shielded behind prohibitive tariffs walls. If, on the other hand, the new tariffs would provide a sufficient aid to domestic business and give the British worker employment, inter-imperial trade would remain unchanged and perhaps even decline.

\textsuperscript{60} See Amery, \textit{The Life of Joseph Chamberlain}, 5:468.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{The Spectator}, October 10, 1903.
At its core, Chamberlain’s perception of the domestic side of tariff reform was based much more on his interpretation of long-term trends than annual trade figures. He criticized free traders’ fixation on the importation of cheap food. In a speech at Greenock, he told his audience, “your loaf may be as big as a mountain and as cheap as dirt, but you will be in the long run the greatest sufferers.”62 These attitudes reflected his concerns about the national distribution of wealth. The working classes earned their living from wages in factories and workshops producing industrial goods exported abroad. Even though industrial exports were declining – thus threatening working-class employment – free traders were content with the current system because the aggregate national income continued to grow, with the decline in exports offset by the increased returns on capital investment abroad made chiefly by Britain’s wealthiest.

The contrast was encapsulated by the exchange of letters between Chamberlain and the Duke of Devonshire during the summer of 1903. Devonshire, whose income derived chiefly from interest on investments, remained unbothered by the stagnancy in exports. As long as the wealth of the nation continued to grow, so the Duke argued, it made little difference whether the nation’s wealth derived from manufacturing or finance and services.63 In a speech to the Birmingham Jeweler’s Association, Chamberlain asked his audience to imagine a future Britain sustained entirely by its banking and investments, its industry long since lost to cheap foreign competitors. He conjured the vision of an English village, its inhabitants now all servants catering to the tastes and lifestyle of a lavish estate. Chamberlain argued, “A single millionaire might increase the returns from income-tax more than they would be diminished by the destruction of a whole industry of Birmingham. But, for reasons of difference in national

62 Boyd, Mr. Chamberlain’s Speeches, 2:174.
63 Marsh, Joseph Chamberlain, 571.
character and position, you may be richer, but not greater.” To preserve a healthy, vibrant economic and social life required the defense of the nation’s manufacturing.

While the protectionist elements of tariff reform offered a strong electoral appeal to a combination of business owners, agriculturalists, and industrial laborers, Chamberlain never allowed it to overshadow or preempt his ideal of a preferential tariff arrangement with the colonies. Indeed, on July 7, 1906, in one of the final speeches of his political career, Chamberlain renewed his call for the people of Britain to take every opportunity to strengthen the connection between the metropole and colonies. In his eerily prophetic conclusion, Chamberlain told his listeners, “To secure [a united empire] is the highest object of statesmanship now at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, if these were the last words that I were permitted to utter to you, I would rejoice to utter them in your presence and with your approval.” The importance of the empire in Chamberlain’s conception of Britain’s future international power and prestige remained the overriding theme of his tariff reform plan from beginning to end.

Even after his departure from active politics, imperial preference retained its central place in the tariff reform movement for years. Chamberlain consistently sidestepped the contradictions between preference and protectionism, not only because it was convenient for his political strategy, but also because his conception of British nationalism and imperialism did not make it a contradiction. Echoing the ideas of John Seeley, whose Expansion of England lectures had inspired his imperialism, Chamberlain’s whole premise was founded on the need to treat Britain and the settler colonies as an indivisible whole. Chamberlain had spoken at length, both

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64 *The Times*, January 12, 1904.
65 Boyd, *Mr. Chamberlain’s Speeches*, 2:372
66 Thompson, ‘Tariff reform, an imperial strategy.’
during and before the tariff reform campaign, of developing a self-sufficient and self-sustaining British Empire. The growth of industry and commerce in a colony at the expense of foreign businesses, even if it meant competition with British business, would still be a gain for Greater Britain as a whole, the unit of organization and identity that Chamberlain was most concerned with building.

Radical Moderation: The Case of Arthur Balfour

Joseph Chamberlain’s political reputation and charisma ensured his oversized prominence as leader of the tariff reform movement. This has often led historians and even a number of contemporary Britons to forget that ultimately Chamberlain was beholden to the political whims of another figure in British politics. This man was Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister from 1902 to 1906, leader of the Conservative Party, and oftentimes a greater obstacle to Chamberlain’s reformist ambitions than the most ardent free trade critics. Balfour was also the architect of an alternative reform policy, which, when combined with his strong hold of the party leadership, ensured the tariff reform movement would remain divided for years to come. Ironically, Balfour’s alternative policy was itself an effort to maintain unity within the Conservative Party, driven by an ultimately futile effort to placate the committed tariff reformers and the reluctant free traders at the same time. Balfour’s effort to avoid a party schism was ultimately unsuccessful, as Unionist free traders ran as spoiler candidates in many constituencies in the 1906 general election. But while his actions during the tariff controversy were heavily motivated by tactical political considerations, Balfour was an original thinker, and engaged in the tariff debate with greater depth of thought and intellectual rigor than Chamberlain ever did.
Entering Parliament in 1874, Balfour had by 1902 acquired an impressive record of political experience, acting as leader of the House of Commons during the premiership of Lord Salisbury, his uncle. When Salisbury resigned in 1902, Balfour was the obvious successor and took office without opposition, though many made light of the transfer of power within the “Hotel Cecil.” A lifelong bachelor, an avid golfer, an easy socializer, and a skeptical philosopher, Balfour was physically and temperamentally opposite to Chamberlain. Balfour had published several works on the issue of scientific truth and humans’ capacity for objective knowledge, most notably his 1878 *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt*. Balfour maintained his philosophical inclination throughout his career, even at the height of the tariff debate. His aversion to dogmatism was reflected in his willingness to consider positions that challenged conventional political wisdom; in 1888, he had served on the Royal Commission on Currency and supported abandoning the gold standard in favor of bimetallism. This, in one historian’s assessment, “was indicative of his acceptance that all was not right with Britain’s economy, especially the agricultural and manufacturing sectors.” As such, when Chamberlain raised the possibility of imperial preference, Balfour was receptive and sympathetic to the idea of challenging free trade, which had by 1903 become tantamount to orthodoxy in British political

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67 Besides the succession from uncle to nephew, Arthur Balfour’s brother Gerald was also in the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade, and Balfour’s cousin, the 4th Marquis of Salisbury joined the Cabinet in 1905. There were calls for Chamberlain to become the next Prime Minister; for example, Henry Birchenough, ‘Mr. Chamberlain as an Empire Builder,’ *The Nineteenth Century*, March, 1902; and An Englishman, ‘A Tribute to Mr. Chamberlain,’ *The National Review*, March, 1902. However, Julian Amery notes that, with his history of Nonconformist Radicalism, Chamberlain remained unpalatable to the majority of Conservatives. See Amery, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, 5:68.

68 The differences in public perception of Chamberlain and Balfour will be examined in Chapter 4.

69 On August 17, 1904, Balfour delivered an address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Cambridge entitled “Reflections Suggested by the New Theory of Matter,” in which he criticized the way scientists applied “teleological categories, for which Science itself could supply no proof.” See Arthur Balfour papers, British Library, London, Add. MSS 49856-218.

economy. But precisely because free trade had become established wisdom, Balfour was also acutely aware of the practical political obstacles to reform.

Although a perceptive and talented parliamentary debater, Balfour was never a charismatic public speaker, and never truly understood the workings of popular public opinion. According to one biographer, Balfour’s leadership demonstrated his “inability to mould, or even to sense, national opinion and to function effectively as head of a popular government.” Many contemporaries agreed that Balfour was ill-suited to the new era of mass democracy. Balfour’s first biography, published in 1903, noted “The country recognises in him a ‘safe’ Minister…not likely to be of a firework description, full of splendour at one moment but threatening every instant to plunge the nation into a European war.” In its review of the biography, the Radical Daily News likened Balfour to a brilliant royal minister of the ancien régime, “a type of leader of a pre-revolutionary age, an age in that last scepticism that always precedes revolution,” but ultimately a leader facing “forces…arising which he does not even comprehend, and has no power to combat. After the next dissolution he is not likely again to be chosen to rule the new England that is developing unseen.” In the wake of the electoral defeat in 1906, in which Balfour became the only party leader in British history to lose his parliamentary seat, he dismissed the result as a byproduct of socialist agitation, “the same movement which has produced massacres in St. Petersburg, riots in Vienna, and Socialist processions in Berlin.” Although a philosophical skeptic eager to challenge political preconceptions, Balfour remained essentially an upper-class Tory in his attitude and beliefs.

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73 The Daily News, May 15, 1903.
74 Quoted in Zebel, Balfour, 143.
In the wake of the controversy stirred up by Chamberlain’s Birmingham speech, Balfour took the lead in conducting a private inquiry into the state of British fiscal policy, searching for a means to mollify both the reformers and free traders within his party. In September 1903, he unveiled his conclusions to the Cabinet, and published the results for public consumption in the form of a pamphlet entitled *Economic Notes on Insular Free Trade*. Balfour’s approach in *Economic Notes* was not propagandistic or polemical, but took the form of a thought experiment. The Prime Minister attempted to present his work as a study, and hoped to prevent the debate from evolving into a political contest of wills. He wrote that “There is indeed a real danger of the controversy degenerating into an unprofitable battle of watch-words, behind which there is nothing deserving to be called independent reflection at all. Popular disputation insists on labels; and likes its labels old.”

Balfour began his experiment by elaborating on three basic premises: first, he accepted that in an ideal economic world, labor and capital would move without cost or obstacles to where it could be used to its maximum profitability and productivity; second, that such movement “would evidently be inconsistent with national life as we understand it. Nations could not be maintained, at least in their present shape”; finally, he concluded from these two premises that nations emerged from a peoples’ inability and unwillingness to act only in their best economic interests. Guided by these premises, Balfour proceeded to reject *laissez-faire* liberal arguments against interfering with free trade. Citing examples of beneficial government intervention in workplace conditions, housing, education, and more, Balfour argued that free traders’ refusal to even contemplate a change in tariff policy on the basis of pure doctrine was untenable.

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76 Ibid., 4.
Blind faith in free trade theory, Balfour contended, had resulted in British statesmen making a series of mistakes since the middle of the nineteenth century. The transformation from a predominantly agricultural to an industrial society had brought with it myriad social problems, but these changes were acceptable because manufacturing had guaranteed Britain the manpower and wealth “required for her imperial mission.” Unfortunately, the dogmatic adherence to free trade – which the rest of the world had largely rejected – left Britain in a doubly vulnerable position, not only “bearing all the burden, but enjoying only half the advantages, which should attach to Empire,” while finding itself in a state of what Balfour dubbed “insular free trade.”

The Prime Minister described this insular free trade as a condition where the country, its boundaries fixed by the seas and its resources limited, was dependent on imports from abroad to maintain its economic activity. Balfour proceeded to consider three hypothetical nations in a world where all other nations but the island nation in question had abandoned free trade. The first of these he likened to the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, which imported all necessities of life and grew sugar for export. Unable to sell its produce at a profit, the island is ruined and eventually “returns to a state of nature from which it had surely been better that it had never emerged.” The second island in his thought experiment would be the opposite, large enough to be practically a continent in its own right, whose prospects for growth were nearly endless, comparable with the United States.

Balfour next turned to the example of a middling-sized island, endowed with sufficient resources and adequate amounts of capital and labor but with finite limits on what could be produced from its own resources. Prosperity under insular free trade required open markets in order to sell the island’s produce to pay for the resources it needed. Thus, in a fully protectionist

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Ibid., 7-8.
world, the island would eventually be impoverished and fall into ruin. Only three things stood in the way of Britain enduring a similar fate: the nation paid for its trade deficit with the profits from its investments, could still compete in countries that had not yet imposed tariffs, and still conducted a limited trade with protectionist countries. But this was a fragile basis of economic security. Considering the risk, Balfour wondered how “small armaments, small responsibilities, a small empire, and a large external trade should ever have been considered as harmonious elements in one political ideal.” Blind faith in the theoretical superiority of free trade had not been enough to convince Britain’s competitors to abandon protectionist tariffs, and now the country’s economic prosperity was in jeopardy.

Balfour concluded with his solution to the dilemma of insular free trade. Since appeals to theory and ideals had not changed the minds of Britain’s competitors, Britain must instead force them to change. As the Prime Minister described it, Britain could “do to foreign nations what they always do to each other…to use fiscal inducements.” If a foreign nation maintained prohibitive protective tariffs on British imports, the British government must have the power to retaliate and raise tariffs of its own, establishing a basis of negotiation for a joint reduction of tariffs for the mutual benefit of both parties. In this way, Balfour argued, the policy of retaliatory tariffs would in actuality further the cause of free trade by inducing protective countries to remove barriers to trade. In closing, Balfour brought his reader to the closest thing to a slogan throughout his pamphlet, declaring “What is fundamental is that our liberty should be regained.”

78 Ibid., 18.
79 Ibid., 31.
Balfour presented his *Economic Notes* to the Cabinet in September, and in his speech on October 1 at the Conservative party conference in Sheffield announced retaliation as his official stance on the fiscal question. Public reception was mixed. The Prime Minister’s dialectical approach confused the public and many within his own party, who were uncertain about what Balfour actually intended to do. Furthermore, although Balfour and Chamberlain maintained a friendly relationship, the Prime Minister’s position was an unmistakable rebuff of Chamberlainite imperial preference. Balfour flatly rejected the idea of food tariffs. Not only would raising retaliatory tariffs on food imports be counter-productive, Balfour’s argument was based on the assumption that any new tariffs would eventually be lowered through negotiations with foreign governments.

Tariff reformers consoled themselves with the fact that Balfour had spoken sympathetically of the ideal of closer economic ties with the colonies, and only doubted their practicality in the moment. They hoped that beneath the surface Balfour was secretly in favor of Chamberlain’s program, and only adhered to a moderate, compromise position to avoid a schism within the party. Free traders were also suspicious of Balfour’s true intentions, in particular his insistence that his program of retaliation would increase free trade. They speculated that, once Balfour raised tariffs, foreign states would respond with their own retaliatory tariffs, thus providing the Prime Minister the justification to erect a comprehensive system of protectionism. Interpreted in this way, Balfour’s allegedly moderate position was fundamentally more radical in its protectionist character than the Chamberlainite program, offering up as it did the prospect of a whole range of retaliatory tariffs with only the partial chance of their ultimate reduction.

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80 The fullest account of Balfour’s attempt to preserve party unity remains Gollin, *Balfour’s Burden*.
Balfour, however, was not a protectionist. Unlike Chamberlain, who accepted protectionism as an acceptable cost for imperial preference, Balfour was not willing to adopt protectionism for the sake of winning votes for preference. But one of the chief reasons that so many of Balfour’s colleagues remained unsure of his true intentions was that, however logical the premises of *Economic Notes*, the blueprint for reform he unveiled at Sheffield made little political sense. In contrast to Chamberlain, who presented a specific set of alterations to tariff rates, Balfour spoke repeatedly and vaguely of regaining the liberty to negotiate, without ever specifying what would actually be done with that liberty. Moreover, as a Prime Minister with a significant parliamentary majority, it was difficult for some to understand what additional liberty Balfour needed. Speaking at Sheffield less than two weeks after Balfour, the Liberal leader Lord Rosebery noted that “if they had the courage of their opinions they would not hesitate to do it next Session in any treaty in which they may be engaged.” Thus, many concluded that Balfour did not mean what he said, exacerbating the division he was attempting to mend and causing both sides of the controversy to grow suspicious. Free traders within the party wondered if Balfour was secretly in favor of protection, while tariff reformers feared he was not truly on their side.

Certainly, Balfour was deeply invested in maintaining party unity, as much from personal temperament as from political expediency. He interpreted his role as leader of the Conservative Party as a trustee, duty-bound to bequeath intact to future generations and held to that attitude to the end of his career. Comparing himself to Robert Peel, the Conservative Prime Minister who had split his party after adopting free trade and repealing the Corn Laws in the 1840s, Balfour commented, “I never can hear Peel praised with patience. He twice split his Party…twice to

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82 *The Times*, October 14, 1903.
throw over its strongest convictions, twice to break it, twice to get office.” But Balfour held to his course well after any semblance of cooperation had disappeared between the Unionist free traders and tariff reformers, even to the point where his compromise policy threatened to undermine his leadership. In such circumstances, it is likely that Balfour maintained his position for so long in the face of such pressure because he actually believed in the arguments laid out in *Economic Notes*, and that the Chamberlainites were misguided in their uncompromising agenda and reckless horse-trading of protective tariffs, social welfare, and more.

Fundamentally, Balfour objected most to the way conventional British free trade failed to account for the power of nineteenth-century nationalism. At Sheffield, Balfour asserted that Richard Cobden, hero and icon of British free traders, had predicted “a world in which national divisions might, indeed, remain but with their emphasis largely diminished.” On the eve of the 1906 election, he echoed his earlier assessment, noting Cobden’s shortcomings “as a national economist.” Cobden’s predictions of a universal peace had proven wildly inaccurate, and Britain had not adapted its commercial stance in response to the reality of growing foreign competition. Balfour’s concern for a far more national fiscal policy was shared by many of his Conservative colleagues, and given far more eloquent and detailed expression by another member of his Cabinet, the Irish Secretary George Wyndham. Delivering a lecture at the University of Glasgow’s rectorial address in November 1904 entitled “The Development of the State,” Wyndham laid out a Conservative vision of the origin of nations and the duty of the state.

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84 Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism*, 40.
86 Balfour at Leeds, 18 December, 1903, in ibid., 271.
States had emerged out of the chaos of the state of nature, or “primordial individualism” where each person existed alone and served only their own interests. History had shown repeatedly that attempts to unify humanity under a cosmopolitan state failed and collapsed like the Roman Empire. Cosmopolitanism, in which differences between individuals and peoples, Wyndham argued, were doomed, and “spells death to the State and to the virtues of citizenship.” Wyndham elaborated that a durable state needed to find a way to balance a respect for the rights of different groups to celebrate their heritage and traditions, while also bringing those groups together for a common purpose. “The ideal State,” in other words, “must have one grandeur of political design illuminated by diverse glories of race achievement.”

Strong and growing states expressed their dynamism through the incorporation of additional territories and new peoples within itself. This process, in which the state simultaneously expressed the interests of a common people and sought to incorporate identifiably different peoples within its borders, Wyndham described as “an organic Empire-State.” Drawing on the ideas of the British sociologist Herbert Spencer, Wyndham therefore compared the nation-state to a biological organism. Growth, in the form of added territory and increased prosperity, reflected a healthy state; but it also indicated a responsibility on the part of the state to act to ensure the well-being of the individuals and groups which made up the whole of the body politic.

In effect, Wyndham was developing a theoretical framework of nationality to fit the composition of the United Kingdom. The English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh had united to strengthen the whole, but without sacrificing their unique cultural and historical characters in the process. At its center, Wyndham’s conception of nation and state was racial in nature, but a

88 Ibid., 47.
conception in which race was not an immutable and unchanging identity marker. Looking over the course of the history of the British Isles, Wyndham could not seriously consider a single, pure race whose lineage reached back into ancient times. Appealing to his Scottish audience, he asked “Were the Picts exterminated? Did not any Aryan invader at any time marry a woman from the races whom he and his clansmen overthrew? Many invasions of these islands are recorded in history. Others are…adumbrated in legend.” The historical fact of the intermingling of peoples throughout British history, therefore, made it easy “for us to avoid the danger of undue insistence on a narrow interpretation of the Race idea.” The union which had given shape to Britain could once again be enacted throughout the empire, drawing together its disparate communities without eliminating regional differences.

Wyndham’s articulation of an “organic Empire-State” reflected political theories common among many other tariff reformers. First and foremost, their outlook remained avowedly national, even as they spoke of their aspirations of merging Britain into a global imperial federation. The history of the union of Britain and the sheer vastness and variety of the empire afforded the space and flexibility for an imaginative reconstruction of British nationality that did not involve outright erasing preexisting ethnic heritage. At the same time, the empire’s sheer diversity kept racial attitudes in a state of tension. Relationships with the settler colonies were cordial enough to be articulated in familial terms. Chamberlain himself repeatedly described the white populations of these colonies as kin or children, presenting Britain as the “mother country” of these fledgling nations. At the same time, the tariff reform movement remained uncertain at best of what was to be done with the crown colonies and especially India, which together comprised the vast majority of the empire. For his part, Chamberlain’s Glasgow

89 Ibid., 52-53.
plan was silent as to the future of the non-white colonies, and Wyndham’s warnings against the
dangers of “cosmopolitanism” implied sinister consequences should the boundaries of British
nationality be widened too far. At best, tariff reformers intended to maintain the avowedly
custodial relationship between Britain and the non-white colonies, while putting off until some
distant future time the moment when the imperial relationship could be reevaluated, with no
clear conception of what that new state would be.

It is unlikely that Chamberlain ever contemplated deeply the philosophical and
theoretical significance of his call for reform. His imperial doctrines flowed almost entirely from
the imperial doctrines espoused by John Seeley in his *Expansion of England.*
90 At the same time,
his tenure in the Colonial Office was dominated by affairs with the settler colonies, and his entire
public persona was that of a man of action and practical business sense, with no pretense to the
type of reflective thought displayed by Balfour. As a result, Chamberlain had no definite plan of
comprehensive imperial restructuring, and his ideas of a globe-spanning national identity
remained inchoate at best. Nevertheless, his rhetorical skill and his political perception allowed
Chamberlain to tap into numerous undercurrents of political thought and economic theory that
dissented in varying degrees from prevailing Victorian political attitudes and values amongst his
many new followers.

**The Economics of Tariff Reform**

From the very start of the tariff reform campaign, Chamberlain drew a number of
dedicated adherents. Though he was their leader, and enjoyed an oversized prominence in public

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90 Chamberlain claimed to have been so impressed by Seeley’s lectures that he insisted his eldest son Austen attend Cambridge so that he would learn from the professor in person. See Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain*, 176.
perception, Chamberlain developed few, if any, of tariff reform’s ideas or policies himself.
Instead, he was reliant upon the advice and insights of a group of sympathetic economists and
experts in political economy to provide him with the statistical information and analytical rigor
to give the movement a concrete set of economic proposals. These economists embraced the
historical method of economics, criticizing not only of much of the traditional British free trade
policy, but also the intellectual and academic traditions which underpinned them.

Tariff reform’s call to overturn the policy of free trade ran counter to decades of
conventional, orthodox thought in British political economy. The academic descendants of Adam
Smith, and the political legacy of the Cobden Club, had by the beginning of the century
developed Britain’s free trade policy into a political article of faith. In his memoirs, Leo Amery
wrote, “It is not easy…to realize the atmosphere of universally accepted legend and theory with
which Chamberlain had to contend, and the immense change in deep-rooted intellectual
prepossessions which had to be effected before his policy could hope to succeed.”

The weight of academic opinion against tariff reform was demonstrated by a letter to the *Times* in August
1903, signed by fourteen of the most distinguished professors of economics and political
economy from universities across the country. Written almost two months before Chamberlain’s
Glasgow program, the letter was a criticism of protectionist and preferential tariffs in principle,
based on doctrinaire grounds of classical liberal economic theory.

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91 Amery, *My Political Life*, 1:240. Frank Trentmann has argued that the mythology of free trade cultivated in the
Victorian era constituted something approximating a national identity in Great Britain by the Edwardian period. See
Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 2008).

92 On the “manifesto” of the “fourteen professors,” see A.W. Coats ‘The Role of Authority in the Development of
College, Oxford, wrote a second letter explaining his refusal to cosign the manifesto. Langford explained, among
other things, that his colleagues could not properly address the issue until presented with a concrete set of tariff
reform policies. See *The Times*, August 15, 1903. Price soon came out in support to tariff reform.
William Ashley was one of the first academics to offer the tariff movement his assistance. Ashley was serving as Dean of Commerce at the University of Birmingham, which had been established in 1900 in large part as a result of Chamberlain’s enthusiastic advocacy. Ashley’s determination to lend the tariff reform movement his academic support ran against widespread resistance in British academia to protectionism, but was motivated by a combination of personal, intellectual, and political considerations.93 Born in 1860 to a working-class family in the London slums, Ashley’s childhood was a visceral counterpoint to the narrative of the uplifting effects of free trade and the merits of classical economic theorizing. After his death, Ashley’s daughter wrote, “Industrial conditions were no abstract study to one who in after years looked at the grating which alone admitted air and daylight to the basement room…where his father had worked, and wondered how far it was responsible for the asthma which disturbed his later years.”94 Despite his background, Ashley climbed out of poverty through his academic talents. He attended Oxford University, where he studied under the constitutional historian William Stubbs and the economic historian Arnold Toynbee, a prominent critic of British free trade, both of whom emphasized the importance of careful, analytical interpretation of evidence and sources for particular case-studies, in contrast to broad generalizations and universal theorizing.

Skeptical of the deductive method of applying universal economic laws to government policy, Ashley embraced the historical school of economics, which stressed the need to study a country’s particular history and conditions over time in order to adequately understand its economic development. Soon after the Birmingham speech, Ashley wrote to notify Chamberlain that he was already working on a study of tariffs and offered it as a potential scholarly aid for the

94 Anne Ashley, William James Ashley, a Life (London: P.S. King, 1932), 17.
fledgling movement. The Colonial Secretary seized upon the opportunity and replied with suggestions on what elements of the economic question this new study should take, though Ashley took pains to emphasize his independence in order to avoid accusations of simply producing propaganda in a political controversy.95

Ashley soon finished *The Tariff Problem*, publishing it in the autumn as a prelude to Chamberlain’s speaking tour. The Colonial Secretary praised the work as “the best manual we have from the economic point of view.”96 The book was an exercise in the historical method of economics, seeking to assess the state of the British economy in relation to tangible conditions and foreign competitors rather than to what extent it adhered to classical economic principles. Ashley did not attempt to invalidate free trade as an ideal state of affairs or to refute the legend of free trade as a key element of Britain’s Victorian era commercial predominance. Rather, Ashley argued that conditions had changed sufficiently to justify significant reforms. He contended that the classical model developed by Adam Smith and David Ricardo had become outdated; the banker and merchant had been replaced by the industrialist and factory-owner as the primary catalysts for economic growth and national prosperity. Over the course of the Industrial Revolution, fixed capital in the form of factories and manufacturing equipment had become the chief focal points of economic activity, making modern economics much more a question of the creation of national productive capacity than the cosmopolitan exchange of goods between individual merchants.97 Ashley pointed to several critical developments, including the rise of protectionism and the growth of competitive manufacturing industries in all other major

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95 Peter Marsh contends that Chamberlain’s direction was the primary impetus behind the creation of Ashley’s study. See Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain*, 564-565.
96 J Chamberlain to W Ashley, 26 April 1904, Joseph Chamberlain Collection (hereafter JC), University of Birmingham, 19/7/2.
Western states, as well as and the development of the cartels and trusts in Germany and the United States. Ashley criticized the orthodox free trade principle of relative advantage; in his view, the notion that Britain would always enjoy a natural competitive advantage in at least some industries was too naïve and simplistic in the face of the realities of industrialized business. As Ashley observed, “as the world is constructed, those advantages are the balance of all the conditions created by national policy and business organisation….And this reflection is by no means comforting to Great Britain.” American trusts and German cartels, with monopolistic influence and gargantuan economic power, defied the old strictures of free trade theory and left British business hopelessly outclassed.

The effectiveness and influence of such large-scale economic entities had been demonstrated amply in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In Ashley’s analysis, the rise of trusts and cartels signaled the futility in continuing to study political economy as though the global market was comprised of individuals and atomized companies. It also underscored the degree to which Britain was unprepared for the economic realities of the 20th century. The repeal of the Corn Laws, he argued, “was the most signal triumph of the movement towards political and industrial individualism; towards the removal of restraint; towards what its critics called Atomism and Cosmopolitanism.” Against such cosmopolitanism, Ashley favored a turn to a policy of national economics. Large-scale industrial entities were not individuals and independent actors, but rather appendages of their particular nation’s power and influence. American and German trusts were forces at the disposal of the American and German states, enriching and empowering those nations at Britain’s expense. Ashley’s analysis reflected

98 Ibid., 99.
99 Ibid., 1.
mounting anxieties about Britain’s strategic vulnerability; the true danger of foreign
protectionism lay not in the possibility, as Chamberlain warned, of the destruction of Britain’s
manufacturing sector, but in the possibility at some future point where foreign countries could
choose to simply deny Britain the imported resources it needed to function.\footnote{Ibid., 100.}

Ashley concluded that a national problem required a national solution. The economic
development of the empire offered the surest means of escaping the perilous dependence on the
whims of foreign states. In his concluding remarks, Ashley turned from economic analysis to
geo-politics, predicting that the future would be dominated by a handful of superstates. The
Russian Empire and the United States, each holding sway over territory on a continental scale,
were all but guaranteed to be among their number. To this, a third superstate was possible: the
British Empire, forged into a unified state, if adequate action was taken:

I can understand that state of mind of those who would have England
contentedly live on its memories and its scenery, and become the Switzerland
or Holland of the twentieth century. But I, for my part, am loath to see the
English people surrender their share of guiding the destinies of the world. With
all our faults, we have, I would fain to believe, something in our traditions, our
institutions, our conceptions of duty, which should be valuable elements in the
world politics of the future.\footnote{Ibid., 200.}

In Ashley’s mind, the ideal of a unified empire was worth striving and sacrificing for, despite
the challenges inherent in such a project. The transition in The Tariff Problem from the
technical to the rhetorical, and from economics to geo-political strategy reflected his inclination
as a political economist. For Ashley, the issues of great power rivalries were inextricably bound
up in the development of the national economy. The two were mutually reinforcing; a
particular state’s actions and policies determined its economic makeup, which in turn set the parameters for how a state could realistically act on the world stage.

Ashley’s contributions lent a degree of academic legitimacy to the tariff movement in its early days as it struggled to overcome the ingrained skepticism of British political economy.\textsuperscript{102} But \textit{The Tariff Problem} remained largely inaccessible to a general audience with little training or inclination to ponder the intricacies of economic theory and policy. The tariff reformers received another boost in that respect thanks to the assistance of the economist William A.S. Hewins. Whereas Ashley largely took shelter in his academic independence, Hewins resigned from Sydney and Beatrice Webb’s Fabian Society and his position as the first Director of their London School of Economics in order to become Chamberlain’s chief economic advisor. Like Ashley, Hewins embraced the historical school of thought while studying at Oxford. In his autobiography, he described proper economics as “a study of the actual life of the country….It involved the scientific examination of its structures and organisation, its history, customs, laws and institutions, the relations between its members.”\textsuperscript{103} Hewins recollected that in his early years, “I knew none of my generation in any party who found satisfaction in the economics, social philosophy, or politics of the Victorian era” and hoped to overturn the ideas of the so-called Manchester school of laissez-faire free trade. Hewins believed the individualism of Victorian liberalism was no longer adequate, insisting that the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution required collective action, guided by government intervention. Reflecting on the upheavals that followed in the wake of the First World War, Hewins was convinced that “building up a constructive system under which men and women can satisfy their legitimate


\textsuperscript{103} Hewins, \textit{Apologia of an Imperialist}, 4.
aspirations” was the only enduring way in which “the revolutionary movement which is by no means confined to one party is to be checked.”

Even before the tariff reform campaign, Hewins recognized that the empire could facilitate a “constructive” policy for Britain. In 1900, he lectured on the competing schools of imperial thought in Britain, identifying three classes of imperialists. The first were “laisser faire” imperialists guided chiefly by liberal theory, who advocated for the organic development of the colonies into full nations and, eventually, independent states. Hewins considered this approach both intellectually incoherent and dangerously naïve. Hewins observed how liberals presupposed that self-interest was the basis of all human activity and political organization, yet liberal imperialists regarded sentimental, shared identity as the only force necessary to hold Britain and the colonies together. The second category Hewins dubbed political imperialists, those who sought to maintain the empire, but only in order to extract the maximum material benefit to the United Kingdom itself. Such insular and selfish interest would only last as long as the colonies remained too vulnerable and undeveloped to assert their independence, or until a large-scale war broke the empire apart.

Hewins aligned himself with a third group, the adherents of constructive imperialism. Imperialists with this outlook regarded the British Empire as the first basis for the development of public policy. The interests of individuals, particular social classes, or even individual colonies and the United Kingdom itself, should be subordinated as merely component parts of a larger whole. Whatever policies benefited the empire should be favored first and foremost. Like many of his contemporaries, Hewins’ vision of a national imperial community was

104 Ibid., 34.
105 Ibid., 53-55.
106 Ibid., 56.
restricted to the relationship between Britain and the settler colonies. Moreover, his rhetoric demonstrated that Hewins’ conception of Britain was synonymous with England. As such, though he wrote and spoke of the empire as a single, cohesive unit, he had no clear explanation for how the empire’s hundreds of millions of non-white subjects were to be incorporated. Whether or not Hewins realized it, in failing to provide a solution to this dilemma, constructive imperialists would fall victim to precisely the same mistakes of the laissez-faire and political imperialists.

As both Director of the London School of Economics and a key figure in the Fabian Society, Hewins had already established himself as a notable economic authority by 1903. Chamberlain welcomed his economic expertise, and throughout the summer, Hewins contributed pro-reform letters to the *Times* under the pseudonym “An Economist” and provided supportive articles in the conservative *Morning Post*.\(^\text{107}\) Hewins believed that, for tariff reform to be successful, it needed to present the electorate with a set of specific tariff proposals that were both economically sound and responsive to actual economic conditions. Toward that end, Chamberlain announced the formation of the Tariff Commission in November 1903, with Hewins as Secretary. Modeled on royal commissions, its goal was to collect and analyze economic data from Britain’s most important industries in order to construct rational, effective tariff policies. With Chamberlain serving as only an honorary president, the Tariff Commission was not designed to propagandize.\(^\text{108}\) The Commission released seven reports over the course of

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\(^{107}\) Coats, ‘Political Economy,’ 188.

\(^{108}\) Each report released by the Tariff Commission began with a brief statement of objectives and methods. The possibility of applying tariffs in each field were to be examined, “having regard to the general interests of the community.” The conclusions of each report were to be made after gathering “a complete and impartial description of the conditions” in British industries. See, for example, Tariff Commission, *Report of the Tariff Commission, Vol. I. The Iron and Steel Trades* (London: Tariff Commission, 1904), Tariff Commission Papers, London School of Economics Special Collections, 1-1-1.
its existence, covering separate fields such as steel, agriculture, and textiles. In retrospect, Hewins was proud of the Tariff Commission’s work, boasting that its structure and methods were subsequently copied by businesses and foreign governments, all of them desirous of gaining access to the same kind of detailed economic data.\footnote{Hewins, \textit{Apologia of an Imperialist}, 83.}

The support economists of the historical school gave the tariff reform movement reflected both their own dissatisfaction with the state of the British economy and the broader condition of national policy-making created by the dominance of classical liberal economic theory at the turn of the century. More than simply a dispute over correct scholarly approaches to the study of economics, tariff reformers like Hewins and Ashley recognized that mounting tension between the great powers meant reform took on an added urgency; a failure to adapt to changing times could have dangerous, perhaps irreparable, consequences in the event of war. In his memoir, Hewins argued “these deficiencies have been one of the causes of the overthrow of governments and the breakup of parties, and indirectly of what is incalculably more important, the loss of thousands of lives in the Great War.”\footnote{Ibid., 85.} Only an objective assessment of the empire’s economic conditions, unshackled from blind faith in free trade doctrine, and placing the interests of the nation at large above all else, would avert potential disaster.

**The Radical Tariff Reformers**

Many of tariff reform’s critics dismissed the movement, with its taxes on food imports, as merely a reactionary urge to return to the mercantilism of the Georgian period and the dominance of the aristocracy and agricultural interests. But while tariff reform found many ready
allies amongst farmers and country landlords, Chamberlain’s most devoted and active advocates were a group of young middle-class ideologues, convinced of the need for a radical renovation of British politics and the structure of the empire as a whole. Three of the most outstanding and vocal individuals of this group were Leopold Amery, Leopold Maxse, and James Garvin. Coming of age in the late Victorian period, these men saw myriad flaws in the political structures, economic conditions, and social arrangements in British society. These radical tariff reformers were fully convinced that a bold program of active collectivist reform was necessary, and were confident that the power of the state could be wielded to that end. Stridently nationalistic in their outlook, they saw continued adherence to individualist, *laissez faire*, free trade principles as a direct threat to the safety and security of Britain. These individuals stood at the vanguard of what has sometimes been described as radical Unionism, an effort to transform the Unionist and Conservative parties into vehicles of social change to act as a genuine alternative to backward-looking conservatism, status quo liberalism, or the revolutionary peril of socialism.\footnote{Alan Sykes contends that the tariff reform movement as a whole represented the conflict between the factions within the Unionist party, characterizing it as a realignment of the British political landscape along ideological lines following the distortions created by the Home Rule crisis of the 1880s. See Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics*. Similarly, Ewen Green has interpreted tariff reform as an effort at political reinvention and innovation by conservatism in the new age of mass politics. See Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*.} Amery, Maxse, and Garvin held no government positions or offices during this time, instead building their influence and shaping public opinion through their writings and the press, often in close cooperation with one another. The political lives of this triumvirate constantly intersected, operating within the complex, unofficial network of the British political sphere. Tariff reform was their opportunity to make their aspirations come true, their chance to remake Britain in accordance with their vision.
Leopold Amery was perhaps tariff reform’s most convinced and dedicated supporter. In his memoir, Amery described Chamberlain’s Birmingham speech with a hyperbole that has lent itself to quotation by nearly every account of the tariff reform movement: “a challenge to free thought as direct and provocative as the theses which Luther nailed to the church door at Wittenberg.” Amery was born in Gorakhpur, India in 1873, his father a colonial official. Amery spent much of his childhood abroad, either in India or Germany, and distinguished himself academically at Oxford, gaining a position at The Times where he worked as a war correspondent during the Boer War. While in South Africa, Amery deplored the state of the British army and ridiculed the abilities of a number of its generals. He soon became a vocal commentator on military affairs and cultivated a reputation as an expert on the issue of army reform.

Although Amery did not hold political office until his election to Parliament in 1911, in the century’s first decade he was an extremely active political specialist and a zealous Chamberlainite, lending him an informal influence in Unionist circles. An operator and agent moving through the British political scene, Amery’s name was repeatedly connected with a variety of important moments in the tariff reform controversy. Using the pseudonym “Tariff Reformer,” he editorialized frequently in The Times and delivered an effective but polemical rebuttal to the manifesto of the “fourteen professors.” Nor was he shy about attacking free traders inside his own party. In his memoir, he claimed credit for loudly heckling Arthur Balfour

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112 Amery, My Political Life, 1:236. Amery would repeat this phrase repeatedly over time, including in Parliament and the press.

113 Ibid., 1:246
during his Sheffield speech introducing the policy of retaliation. More substantively, Amery became part of a secret society of extremist tariff reformers dubbed the Confederacy, whose purpose was to purge Unionist free traders from through political blacklisting and the threat of running spoiler candidates in local elections. Robert Cecil, one of those singled out by the Confederates in the press, much later described the Confederacy’s methods as skirting the edge of totalitarianism. Amery and many like him were absolutely convinced of the necessity of tariff reform.

Amery’s devotion to tariff reform and Chamberlain combined his dissatisfaction with traditional British economics and his imperial patriotism. He elaborated his economic perspective in the book *Fundamental Fallacies of Free Trade*. Amery argued that “capital” represented not only discrete quantities of disposable currency, but the sum total of a nation’s productive capacity, including its raw materials, physical infrastructure, and the population’s skills. The development and expansion of this capital was the responsibility of every patriotic, statesmanlike politician. Amery thus closely sympathized with the national perspective of the historical school of economics. He also credited the nineteenth century German economist Friedrich List as his economic mentor. List’s national model, Amery believed, had been adopted successfully by Bismarck in Germany, and contributed substantially towards its unification.

114 Ibid., 1:261. As Balfour announced that “A man who…is called upon to lead a party must lead it, and as I am in that position I mean to lead it,” Amery shouted “What about Joe?” According to newspaper accounts, this “cry” resulted in “some interruption.” See *The Times*, October 2, 1903. Julian Amery explains that the “interruption” consisted of “cheering and countercheering” over the course of five minutes, “and the effect of Balfour’s speech was largely lost.” See Julian Amery, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, 5:442.

115 See Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *All the Way*, 91. For his part, Amery dismissed any sinister motives on the part of the Confederacy, claiming in his memoir that the group merely resulted in “a few of us getting together from time to time, usually over dinner, as particular constituency problems cropped up.” See Amery, *My Political Life*, 1:274. The Confederacy’s precise membership and activities remained a public mystery, which only added to its reputation as a vehicle for political coercion. See Gollin, *Balfour’s Burden* 224-5 and Alan Sykes, ‘The Confederacy.’

Whereas economists like Ashley and Hewins had been willing to concede that free trade had been a wise policy for the mid-nineteenth century, Amery lamented its influence on the course of British history. Even at an early phase in the tariff campaign, Amery speculated that “if we had gone in for Imperial Preference in the [1840s] we should now be a second United States in many respects both as regards prosperity and as regards armaments.” Amery was convinced, both in the Edwardian period and half a century later, that free trade liberalism was an economic dead end, offering only eventual industrial stagnancy and national suffocation through growing taxation to pay for welfare programs required by that stagnancy. As he argued it, “Free Trade seemed to me ineluctably to involve the growth of confiscatory socialism and of a consequent division of parties on class lines.” Unflinching resolve was needed to address the problems in British society. Tariff reform was only the first step in a series of policies, including conscription, “the demolition of the Treasury…the construction of an Imperial Council and the putting of the House of Commons into its proper place.” Fully convinced of the corrosive influence of free trade, Amery showed scant reverence for the traditions and institutions of the Victorian era.

Amery’s hope for Britain’s future lay in the cultivation of its imperial possessions. He regarded the empire as a fundamental part of the British nation. In his memoirs, Amery explained, “The starting point of all my political thinking, from school days onwards, had been the British Empire or Commonwealth conceived as a unit and as the final object of patriotic emotion and action.” In order to draw the empire together into a cohesive federation, he was convinced from the start that an economic union would need to be forged prior to any renovation

117 L. Amery to A Milner, 20 June, 1903, quoted in Amery, Diaries, 1:47.
118 Amery, My Political Life, 1:254
119 L. Amery to A Milner, 26 February, 1904, quoted in Amery, Diaries, 1:50.
of the British constitution to share political power with the colonies. Amery’s view of the colonies as a means to alleviate Britain’s economic and strategic threats was balanced by at least in part by a paternalistic idealism of the empire’s beneficent influence in the world. In a 1910 essay, Amery laid out his vision of empire which incorporated not just the Dominions and settler colonies, but the vast “dependent” territories in Asia and Africa as well. He argued that it was essential for Britain and the colonies to be “indissolubly bound together” for the benefit of all within “a common civilisation.” Although Amery called for the maintenance of a racial hierarchy within the empire, with the British inevitably serving as the governing class, he nevertheless insisted that imperial citizenship belonged to all the empire’s inhabitants. The various national communities within the British Empire, in the Dominions and the Crown colonies alike, were not to be simply homogenized and assimilated, or worse, but molded into a harmonious union. More fundamentally, Amery situated the British Empire as a crucial force within a dialectical conception of Western history. The Roman Empire and medieval Christendom had each imposed a hegemonic worldview of a single, universalizing community where nations, classes, and individuals were forced into a rigid hierarchy by divine providence. The early modern period had witnessed a revolutionary reaction against this; sovereign nations asserted themselves against the dominance of Rome, and the individual had been liberated from religious superstition by scientific inquiry. The pendulum had swung fully in the opposite direction, and in the nineteenth century the rights of the individual against state power had reached its apogee. But this period had also witnessed the rise of nationalism, a corollary in the struggle for rights against the divine right of kings and absolute monarchy. But the two ideals, individualism and

120 Amery, My Political Life, 1:253
nationalism, were wholly incompatible. In Amery’s reckoning, nationalism gained ascendancy because it mirrored an essential part of every individual’s core being. “Race-instinct or patriotism,” he argued, “are as much natural emotions as hunger or self-interest.”122 Instead of a vast galaxy of free individuals, Europe was by the start of the century a collection of efficient, organized states bristling with huge arsenals and empowered to meddle in the lives of their citizens far more directly than the absolutist monarchs of the eighteenth century.

Though universal individualism was a hopeless dream, Amery warned that the complete triumph of nationalism would be disastrous. Endless conflict and a global race war would ensue. The British Empire symbolized the potential of balancing individual rights with national aspiration, “the highest existing development of the ideal of the free, self-governing nation-state.”123 A solidly organized and federated global British imperial state stood as a microcosm of the old universalist ideals of Rome and medieval Christianity, encompassing many races and societies within its borders. But spread out across the entire world, its interests and security were tied to the stability and welfare of every region. Thus, a united British Empire would serve as a guarantor of world peace, too powerful to defy but with only noble interests at heart. Amery’s idea of empire functioned as both an ideological realization of an epochal dream of world peace and human unity, and a pragmatic means of solving the immediate domestic concerns of British prosperity and national security. Tariff reform was to be the dramatic parting of the ways from the mistakes of the Victorian past.

This perception that the course of world affairs would be decided by the outcome of the campaign to unify the empire motivated the intolerance to opposition or compromise that many

122 Ibid., 13-15
123 Ibid., 16.
tariff reformers exhibited. And few tariff reformers were as intolerant of compromise as Leopold Maxse, chief editor of the arch-Conservative monthly journal *The National Review*. Acquiring the journal in 1893, he lent his voice to political debates as a trenchant defender of Unionism and imperialism. From 1903 onward, he embraced tariff reform unreservedly and adopted a role akin to an inquisitor, branding critics and compromisers with contempt and scorn in the pages of his journal. As early as 1898, Maxse had set his sights on free trade. He blamed the “pig-headed attachment to a spurious form of Free Trade” as the root causes of the dramatic economic decline of the Caribbean colonies.  

Again in the run-up to the 1902 Colonial Conference, the *National Review* ran a series of articles by Vincent Caillard advocating an imperial tariff system, a precursor in some respects to the plan Chamberlain presented the following year.  

While Maxse was a convinced Conservative and Unionist, he loathed the tendency among politicians to adhere to tradition for its own sake, and railed against bureaucratic inertia. Established politicians and entrenched interests were anathema to his politics, guilty of cowardice and lethargy. Maxse routinely labeled them as British ‘mandarins,’ an amorphous shifting collective of opponents embedded deep within the institutions of the British state. Maxse summed up the political credo of these mandarins as, “A system good enough for my grandfather is surely good enough for me.” Maxse immediately seized upon Chamberlain’s Birmingham speech as a bold new departure in the political landscape, and was enraptured by the possibilities

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124 *The National Review*, September 1898, 147.
127 *The National Review*, August 1903.
of tariff reform. In a letter to Alfred Milner, Amery described Maxse as “radiant with joy and hope, walking on air with visions of the temple of Mandarindom being broken into on every side.” Reform offered the chance to break from the ossified traditions of the past and push into the future with a rejuvenated political vitality.

Even as he prepared to do battle with any critics of the tariff reform movement, Maxse was equally impatient with the many Unionist moderates who sympathized with Balfour’s effort to preserve party unity. After the party conference in Sheffield, he reported to Chamberlain that Balfour’s speech on retaliation was “generally regarded as unsatisfying if not positively discouraging.” Balfour’s philosophical and cautious approach, and his mastery of parliamentary procedure, made him the embodiment of the mandarin status quo. Maxse grew increasing hostile towards Balfour, and was an enthusiastic member of the Confederates. His dedication to the cause took him to the point of even contemplating turning against Chamberlain himself. As early as September 1903, he worried that Chamberlain might compromise with Balfour or the free traders, writing that “What I most dreaded was that Joe might, for the sake of harmony, be induced to sacrifice some vital feature of his policy.” In the wake of the Unionists’ historic electoral defeat in 1906, Maxse told Bonar Law, “the comparative inactivity of Tariff Reformers…is largely due to the unfriendly, not to say treacherous attitude of Balfour and Co., who are doing all they can to damp down and destroy our movement. I cannot help feeling, however, that there is another discouraging element which few of us have yet recognised,

128 L. Amery to A Milner, 20 June 1903, quoted in Amery, Diaries, 1:47.
131 L. Maxse to J Garvin, 18 September, 1903, James L. Garvin Papers, University of Texas, 60.6.
viz. a certain East wind blowing from Birmingham itself.”¹³² Ultimately, Maxse conveyed rather than developed ideas or policies, and exhorted rather than implemented, because he never sought or held public office. Nevertheless, he fitted well to the role of inquisitor, holding politicians and allies to a rigorous ideological standard, and unflinching in his willingness to ensure that the principles of tariff reform were maintained in their fullest, pure form.

While Maxse and his National Review set the standard for party purity, it was James L. Garvin who emerged as perhaps tariff reform’s most powerful, perceptive, and influential supporter in the British press. Many of his colleagues and allies singled out Garvin as their greatest asset. In Amery’s words, “Garvin was the outstanding journalist of his generation. He had all the journalist’s gift of instinctively divining what…was the most interesting and important happening of the moment, and of then giving it a transcendent interest of real knowledge, of economic facts, of literature, and not least of poetry.”¹³³ Walter Long wrote to Garvin that the cause of Unionism and imperialism “have not got a more brilliant or a more loyal exponent than we have in yourself.”¹³⁴ Born to Irish Catholic parents in Birkenhead, England, in 1868, Garvin pursued a career in journalism and entered politics as a convinced Irish nationalist, gaining notice for his coverage of Charles Stewart Parnell’s funeral in 1891. Four years later, he distinguished himself as an anonymous contributor to the Fortnightly Review and in 1895, the Irish leader John Redmond offered Garvin the chance to run the London office of the Irish Daily Independent.

In 1899, Garvin took a position at the Daily Telegraph, and over the next several years his political outlook changed. Disillusioned by Parnell’s fall, he abandoned Irish nationalism and

¹³³ Amery, My Political Life, 1:266.
¹³⁴ W Long to J Garvin, 25 November, 1910, James L. Garvin Papers, 58.5.
embraced both Unionism and imperialism in its place, developing a keen interest in foreign affairs and the British Empire’s global strategic position. Writing under the pseudonym Calchas in the January 1901 edition of the *Fortnightly Review* Garvin penned an article entitled “Will England Last the Century?” which painted a sobering picture of foreign perils, a British army in disarray, and looming disaster. In Garvin’s assessment, three countries – the United States, Germany, and Russia – were powers “whose future must be indefinitely greater than their present.” Whereas France was a country fading in power and importance, lost in “decided decadence,” Britain’s future remained uncertain. Through reform and concerted effort, Britain could restore its status as one of the first-rank powers; adherence to the status quo would instead bring about the collapse of British power.135 Before 1903, Garvin sympathized with the “national efficiency” movement, a reform package to eliminate waste and maximize Britain’s resources.136 Garvin treated Britain’s population in terms of their productive capacity and usefulness in the national interest. He argued that, in order for Britain to retain even the second or third place in world power, “the average efficiency of its units must be not lower but higher than in other countries, and its Government not less but more vigorous and alert than theirs.” Garvin compared Britain’s military position after the Boer War with Prussia after its defeat at the hands of Napoleon, two countries whose reputations had been tarnished by failure in war, and in a position to either rise back to newfound strength or sink deeper into irrelevance.137

Garvin offered a systematic critique of the entire apparatus of the British state. He admitted that some of his criticisms struck at several of the nation’s most cherished traditions,

137 Like Amery and Maxse, Garvin was also invited by the Webbs to join the Co-Efficients Club.
“some which it is considered sacrilege or insanity to discuss.” But the security and welfare of the state brooked no quaint sentimentality. In particular, a policy of free trade and laissez faire was no longer possible. Nations were “becoming complete economic organisms and it is nation against nation in the international struggle for existence.” Garvin presented a neo-mercantilist view of diplomacy and economics, positing that one country’s gain was invariably a loss for its rivals. Economic power was an essential part of national strength, so it was the responsibility of the state to interfere in economic life to increase the nation’s power. Garvin had no specific policies to suggest at this point, but insisted on the principle of “a thinking, initiating, stimulating Government” equivalent to the headquarters of an army or a brain directing the rest of the body.\footnote{‘Calchas,’ “Will England Last the Century?” Fortnightly Review, January 1901, 28.}

In geo-politics, Garvin predicted that over the course of the century, great powers would raise ever-larger armies and construct navies powerful enough to threaten Britain’s maritime preeminence. To meet this challenge, Garvin urged expanding the navy to a “three-power scale,” large enough to equal the next three largest navies combined. The state of the army was even more dire. Its deficiencies and ineffectiveness had been laid bare in the Boer War. The British army needed to be both expanded and transformed into a disciplined, efficient fighting force. Garvin called for conscription, or what he termed “universal defence duty.” The army would be remade into a large-scale force comparable to European militaries. Conscription would, in Garvin’s estimation, also be a social and economic boon. Based on the German example, Garvin predicted British workers would gain “smartness and physique” from military training, transforming the average “hooligan” through “a single year’s course of soap and discipline” into a patriotic, responsible citizen. To military service would be added a slew of social reforms.
Universal public education, slum clearance, and temperance reform would each in their own way contribute to the strengthening of each of the nation’s citizen “units.” These would-be soldiers and workers, however, mattered only for their ability to contribute to national power. For Garvin, the state’s goal was the transformation of society into a powerful machine, an expression of the will of the nation designed to protect itself from external dangers and aggrandize itself at their expense.  

Like Amery and Maxse, it was the early drama of the Birmingham speech that converted Garvin to the cause of tariff reform. Garvin soon produced a series of supportive articles for the Telegraph. These were later reprinted in a single volume under the title Imperial Reciprocity, which earned him a place as one of the foremost voices of the movement. The Conservative MP Henry Chaplin described Imperial Reciprocity as “the ‘Bible’ of the movement.” Reflecting the close working relationship which was now developing between Garvin and Maxse, a revised version was printed in the National Review in a special supplement titled “Economics of Empire.” Maxse wrote to Garvin describing an encounter with Chamberlain: “Joe caught sight of me as he was driving away…stopped his carriage, jumped out and said ‘This Supplement is splendid. I have been asking the Duke and the Prime Minister to read it. If we can’t win on these lines, we can’t win at all. I have read it once and shall read it again.’”

Imperial Reciprocity was a synthesis of the principles Chamberlain espoused in his Birmingham speech with Garvin’s world-view of national efficiency and geo-politics. It argued

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139 Ibid., 29-30.
140 Later in life, Garvin explained that the German government’s decision to raise retaliatory tariffs against Canada in response to its preferential rates towards Britain was what converted him to the movement. David Ayerst, Garvin of the Observer (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 51.
141 L. Maxse to J Garvin, 3 October, 1903, James L. Garvin Papers 60.6.
142 Quoted in Ayerst, Garvin of the Observer, 53.
that the goal of imperial federation could only be achieved through a fiscal union with the colonies. The economic realities of foreign tariffs, unfair competition, and closed markets also supported this need for change, leaving the colonies as the most natural and sensible outlets for British commerce. But unlike in 1901, Garvin’s alarmism was much sharper, stressing the need to embrace reform to avoid “a future of stagnation for you and your children, with loss of fortune, loss of empire, loss of honour, loss of all.”¹⁴³ Much more than Chamberlain, but like Amery and Maxse, Garvin saw tariff reform as a kind of spiritual movement, a rejection of enervating dogma and traditions. Tariff reform was a kind of rejuvenation because it was a policy of action, of change, and progress. As he presented it, “Confidence in enterprise is the very life of commerce. If the nation allows itself to be permeated by this fatal spirit of philosophic surrender, there must be an end of our success.”¹⁴⁴ As with many tariff reformers, political conviction and pragmatism combined in the firm belief in the possibilities of tariff reform.

But Garvin’s ideological conception of tariff reform differed from other radical Unionists in an important respect. Whereas Amery’s belief was girded by a teleological idealism and faith in a uniquely British tradition of freedom and tolerance that prevented the world from sinking into perpetual conflict, Garvin accepted this conflict as inescapable and natural. Nations and races were engaged in a primordial struggle for survival, acquiring and marshalling resources in the name of defense. Much of this explained Garvin’s acute interest in foreign affairs. In a letter to Lord Northcliffe in late 1906, he laid out this viewpoint in broad strokes:

I know more of foreign affairs as a whole than anybody in this country except [Times foreign affairs chief Valentine] Chirol. They were my first passion and deepest study for many years, and the tariff, financial and Imperial theories all branched off from the prolonged concern with foreign policy. Even social reform, in which I most ardently

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 108.
believe, is to me chiefly a means of making a stronger, and better organized people that the empire may now surely hold its own against exterior pressure. Of socialism, on the other hand, I am the deadly enemy,…because it is anti-national, moonstruck and perilous upon all serious problems of Imperial Consolidation and defence.¹⁴⁵

Unsentimental and concerned with the state of British power, Garvin fixated upon what measures would increase that power. His portrayal of British citizens as mere “units” to be upgraded and rendered more efficient tools of production or manpower appeared repeatedly in his writings during the Edwardian period. In a 1906 article for the collected volume *Empire and the Century* celebrating the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar, he wrote of the deplorable ramifications of British emigration to America in these terms: “every man employed in raising a quarter of what on colonial soil, instead of on foreign soil, will be a man who can fight, a man who can pay. He is a civic as well as an economic asset.”¹⁴⁶ Here Garvin expanded on his earlier geo-political survey. The United States and Germany, growing larger every year, were a constant challenge. In 1901, Russia had been the third great danger, but with its disastrous defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, an Asian menace now took its place. The so-called “Asiatic renaissance” had given Britain temporary advantages but threatened danger in the long term. Although Japan “is happily our ally in arms [it] must be our rival in trade, the most formidable of all competitors in the East Asiatic market.”¹⁴⁷ Even when allied for mutual benefit, foreign relations was a perpetual conflict, expressed in different forms and carried out in varying levels, but one in which there were clear winners and losers. The stakes were nothing less than national survival.

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¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 98.
Conclusion

The commencement of the tariff reform movement completely upended the political climate of Edwardian Britain. It exploded upon an unsuspecting public, disrupting the relatively placid and calm political atmosphere with a deep and bitter controversy that was to drag on for years. The Unionist coalition was rent apart, and political debate was transformed into a discussion of the fate of the nation and the empire. At the same time, the ideas brought to the forefront of the debate were not wholly new. Rather, they were manifestations of growing dissent at a myriad range of perceived weaknesses in politics, economy, and society of the late Victorian period. The disastrous British performance in the Boer War of 1899-1902 gave tangible evidence of these perceived failings. But the war also offered hope that a solution could be found. A multitude of observers, polemicists, experts, and reformers looked to the empire as the means by which British society could be remade, restored, and perfected. These sentiments had been expressed with growing force and frequency for decades, first popularized by the writings of scholars like John Seeley. Now, confronted by military embarrassment in South Africa and the rising economic might of foreign rivals, the impetus behind this turn to empire was growing stronger. More and more, politicians and experts saw no other alternative for Britain to keep its preeminent place in the world than to forge a new kind of state from its scattered, motley empire.

Joseph Chamberlain’s tariff reform campaign was the first to give voice to these concerns in a manner that seriously threatened to upend the British political consensus inherited from the Victorian era. Chamberlain’s national prestige and imperial expertise provided eager reformers one of the first plausible opportunities to see their hopes and aspirations put into action. As a rally cry for a whole host of critics of the late nineteenth century, tariff reform was wildly
successful; in a matter of months, protectionism, imperial preference, and tariff reform had captured the majority of the Unionist coalition. It inspired loyalty and enthusiasm almost to the point of fanaticism. It did this because it appeared as a kind of panacea, the answer to virtually all of Britain’s modern ills. More than that, it promised action, a constructive plan of growth and development through a clear statement of policy, after years of seeming idleness.

More fundamentally, tariff reform was an ideological and spiritual challenge to many of the most ingrained traditions in British political, economic, and social thought. The universalist beneficence of *laissez faire*, free trade, individualist liberalism was attacked to its very foundations. In its place, tariff reformers hoped to develop a new ideology founded on principles of nationalism, collectivism, and imperialism. In particular, nationalism and imperialism became intertwined ideals. For some, the empire was the field in which Britain could find a solution to its many problems. But for others, the tariff reform movement was the opportunity to abandon a limited, parochial view of Britain, and instead broaden the horizons of political consciousness and accept that Britain was only a single part of a greater community, that of the British Empire. When leaders and thinkers talked of imperialism or the British Empire, in many respects their conceptions of nation and empire were identical. Though they spoke of an imperial union with the colonies, tariff reformers from Chamberlain on down, generally did not mean the empire in its entirety, but only the fraction of colonies containing identifiably “British” populations, fellow Protestant, English-speaking white communities. Salvation was to be found in integrating Canada and Australia, not India or Africa, into the fabric of the British state. Few tariff reformers even attempted to create a coherent vision of imperial unity that actually involved unifying the vast majority of the empire. India and the many Crown colonies simply were not fitted into the
equation, and were instead dismissed as a question to be addressed at some far-distant future time.

Any analysis of the imperialism of tariff reform must recognize the ambivalent, contradictory, and ever-shifting place of the empire in British society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For tariff reformers, the empire stood as a long-neglected monument to British greatness, the means by which society could be remade and the problems of the present rectified. In this respect, Chamberlain’s description of himself as a “missionary for Empire” was perfectly suited. But even these tariff reformers, utterly convinced of the importance of empire, still managed to ignore and exclude the vast majority of its territory and population, their imagination extending little beyond the recreation of Great Britain in a “Greater Britain” union of British peoples in a British nation. At the same time, tariff reform’s critics were rapidly preparing the defense of free trade, and with it, alternative visions of the empire founded upon the ideals of liberal imperialism.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CASE AGAINST TARIFF REFORM AND THE EMPIRE OF FREE TRADE

The controversy over tariff reform, imperial preference, and protectionism surprised the political opposition just as much as it did the Unionist coalition. Early signs of a possible adjustment to the nation’s fiscal policy had been debated in the press in 1902 when a tax was
imposed on imported corn, but Chamberlain’s sudden demand for an inquiry and the proclamation of a new reform movement was of an entirely different scale. It now appeared that the entire edifice of Britain’s traditional policy of free trade was under attack. While Chamberlain’s bold call for reform organized a large body of committed followers, it also produced a reaction of perhaps even greater strength. Nor was this a surprise to Chamberlain’s supporters. In its various expressions, tariff reform would reverse a half-century of established economic policy as the first phase of a broader renovation of the economic and political life of the British nation.

The tariff reformers’ lofty plans to secure the 20th century as a new golden age for a united British Empire were matched only by the deep convictions of their free trade rivals that tariff reform would destroy the empire and demolish the very foundations of British power. The free trade reaction to Chamberlain came from across the British political spectrum. Not just members of the Liberal Party, the traditional bastion of free trade liberalism, but Conservatives, Whigs, trade unionists, and socialists as well all joined in the defense of free trade. Together, they viewed tariff reform and protectionism as a profound threat to the economy and the ideals of British democracy and the fabric of imperial unity. Setting aside their myriad political disagreements, free traders of all stripes came together in an effort to save Britain from the disastrous implications of tariff reform.

The free trade case against tariffs was multi-faceted and diverse. This chapter considers the many and varied intellectual and ideological alternatives articulated by free trade’s defenders. Many rejected tariffs purely on the grounds of political economy, convinced that the proposed tariff program would hurt the people’s interests. But many deemed inadequate a purely negative
campaign of reaction to tariff reform, and offered up their own visions of the British nation and empire. Electoral plans were devised to renew British liberalism after almost a quarter century of electoral defeat. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, trade unionists and socialists presented a new way for Britain as the only true path to prosperity. For some critics, the rise of tariff reform needed to be stopped because it threatened the cornerstone of British democracy. In their view, the loss of free trade would not be a first step into a golden age, but the descent into corrupt tyranny of privileged interests, class conflict, and militarism; the purity of British politics relied upon the preservation of free trade.

Opponents also ridiculed the tariff reformers for their pretensions to being the true advocates of imperial patriotism. Contrary to the accusations of their rivals, free traders and liberal imperialists insisted that patriotism, imperialism, and liberalism were not only compatible, but inseparable. Indeed, for them, the true nature and ideals of modern British imperialism were encapsulated in the policy of free trade and all it had produced for the empire. But like its tariff reform counterpart, the liberal vision of empire struggled to match its ideals of an open, free, peace-making empire with the scale and diversity of the British Empire in reality, and the global pressures which strained and tested the integrity of the bonds of empire.

Combining these various lines of criticism and opposition, the dissent which rose against the Unionist Party’s acceptance of a tariff reform policy culminated in the Unionists’ historic electoral defeat in January-February of 1906. In 1903, the Liberal Party had been in a state of open feuding between its principal leaders, Henry Campbell-Bannerman and former Prime Minister Lord Rosebery. By 1906, the Liberals achieved its largest parliamentary majority ever, augmented by the Labour Party’s first significant electoral successes. In contrast, the Unionist
coalition was humiliated; the triumphant Liberals proclaimed the 1906 election results to be a conclusive public judgment against tariffs. On March 13, 1906, the new Parliament passed a resolution promising to refuse any imposition of tariffs in recognition that “the people of the United Kingdom have demonstrated their unqualified fidelity to the principles of free trade.”

The literature on the course of the tariff reform campaign has largely echoed the Liberal contention that the movement ceased to play a significant factor in British politics after the verdict of 1906. Frank Trentmann has argued that the tariff reform movement, though briefly threatening to overturn free trade, merely produced a powerful backlash demonstrating free trade’s durability and continued strength. He argues that free trade formed a vital component of British national mythology, informing how the British people identified and differentiated themselves from the outside world, and that this identity was at its zenith in the Edwardian period and declined under the pressures of the First World War and the interwar period.

But while free trade undoubtedly served as a vitally important pillar in British society, its almost hegemonic grip on the minds of the British public should not be exaggerated. The nature of the British electoral system distorted the Liberal Party’s parliamentary representation well out

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148 *Hansard*, 4s, 153: 1124-88 (14 March 1906).
149 Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*. Analyzing the situation from the Conservative side, Ewen Green premises his concept of the “crisis of conservatism” on the presumption of tariff reform’s national unpopularity. See Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*. Duncan Bell also contends that Liberalism experienced a “recrudescence in the wake of Chamberlain’s tariff reform campaign.” See Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3. In his recent survey of 19th century Britain, David Cannadine noted, tariff reform “ceased to be practicable politics for the foreseeable future” and Britain “was too much engaged with the wider world…for tariff reform to work.” Cannadine, *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom, 1800-1906* (New York: Viking, 2017), 482-484.
150 The bulk of scholarly accounts of the tariff reform movement have focused on its emergence in the Unionist Party and the role of individual leaders like Chamberlain and Balfour in shaping its evolution. These accounts take almost for granted the presence of a powerful, broad-spectrum free trade opposition. They emphasize not the resurgence of free trade in the face of a new challenge, but the emergence of a large-scale, influential movement that legitimized protectionism in British political discourse and, by the interwar period, finally toppled unrestricted free trade. Rather, British liberalism underwent a period of evolution and reinvention, driven in large part by the need to offer an updated response to tariff reform’s challenge. See Stephen Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846-1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*. 
of proportion to its share of the overall vote, and the many blunders, scandals, and shortcomings of the Unionist Party must at least partially qualify the Liberal claim that 1906 was a final verdict on free trade and protectionism. Even with the disastrous electoral losses of 1906, tariff reform gained a greater, not lesser, hold on the Conservative Party, and even the advocates of free trade sought new means of addressing the issues and anxieties which it was increasingly clear free trade was no longer adequate to solve. The forcefulness with which free traders proclaimed its virtues are indicative, arguably, of the anxiety that Britons needed to be convinced.

In many respects, it is true that the British people needed to be persuaded again to accept free trade and the values, both economic and political, that went with it. Chamberlain presented tariff reform as a new national policy for the modern age. Free trade persevered through to the end of the Edwardian period thanks to more than hazy memories of the victories of the 1840s. Its champions insisted that free trade was a central to their new and reinvigorated ideological visions of Britain’s future, visions that ran counter to the tariff reformers’ beliefs and aspirations. In particular, what differentiated the battle of free trade and protection in the first decade of the century from the parallel controversy of the 1840s was the new imperialist context.

Chamberlain’s call for imperial unity was his final contribution to the imperial federation debate that had unfolded in Britain for nearly thirty years. The historian Duncan Bell argues that the late Victorian conversation on the possibilities of establishing an imperial federation required a sustained dialogue about the empire’s relevance to Britain’s increasingly uncertain future. In turn, this necessitated an imaginative reconceptualization of how Britons identified themselves and their nation in relation to distant colonial lands.¹⁵¹ Years of debate among imperialists had failed

to achieve a consensus; Chamberlain’s demand for a grand first step forward on the path of unification and federation was a gauntlet thrown down at the country’s other schools of imperialist thought that they could not allow to go unanswered.

Diverse thinkers and politicians, be they Conservative, Liberal, or socialist, used free trade each for their own ends, lending it added durability and strength. Tariff reform was not the only reform movement at work in Britain; free traders were just as eager to address the country’s many ills, and used this moment of debate to offer the British people alternative paths into the future. At a deeper level, the free traders fought tariff reform with such intensity because the two policies represented fundamentally different outlooks on British society, what their empire represented, and what future they believed could and should lay ahead of them.

The Mythology of British Free Trade

May 15, 1903 was a busy day for British politics. While Joseph Chamberlain sounded his call for tariff reform and Prime Minister Arthur Balfour gave his ambiguous justification for tariffs in some distant future, the Liberal Party leader Henry Campbell-Bannerman addressed the annual conference of the National Liberal Federation at Scarborough. Remarkably, while Chamberlain’s speech broadly laid out the lines by which the tariff reformers would argue their case to the country, Campbell-Bannerman was already presenting the outlines of what would become the main free trade response to tariff reform. In his speech, the Liberal leader condemned the 1902 corn tax even as it was being repealed. While castigating the tax as an added burden on the working poor and the British economy in general, he also condemned it on imperial principles, as a return to a “medieval feudal ideal,” of metaphorical castle walls dividing
up the land and driving communities apart in armed hostility. Worse, the erosion of free trade imperiled the British Empire itself. “In what respect,” he asked his audience, “would this great and memorable and unexampled commonwealth of free nations – because that is what our Empire is – be strengthened by leaguing itself against the other nations of the world.”¹⁵² This theme, in varying levels of detail over the next several years, would appear repeatedly during the tariff debate. Free trade’s defenders were ready even before the controversy began.

The arguments came readily and almost fully-formed because free traders could draw upon decades of experience with a free trade policy that had become central to British political orthodoxy. In 1850, Conservative leader Benjamin Disraeli judged “Protection is not only dead, but damned,” a phrase which would appear frequently during the debate.¹⁵³ By the beginning of the twentieth century, free trade had coalesced into a kind of conventional wisdom in British politics. Since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, several interest groups and reform movements had tried unsuccessfully to restore protectionist tariffs.¹⁵⁴ In the wake of Britain’s Victorian economic ascendancy, a powerful mythology emerged crediting the rise of free trade. The combination of free trade, *laissez faire* non-intervention, and fiscal retrenchment had contributed substantially to international peace, social tranquility, and a dramatic increase in national wealth and living standards, carried to fruition by the vision and integrity of a generation of reform-minded politicians, including Prime Ministers William Gladstone and Robert Peel, and statesmen and co-founders of the Anti-Corn Law League John Bright and Richard Cobden.

¹⁵⁴ The most concerted attempt was the “fair trade” movement of the 1880s, which condemned the import of cheap goods produced by low-wage foreign labor. Though the Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury appointed a royal commission, it concluded that free trade was in the nation’s best interest and Salisbury repudiated the fair traders. See Benjamin Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain, 1881-1895* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); Zebel, ‘Joseph Chamberlain and the Genesis of Tariff Reform,’ 135-6.
Richard Cobden in particular had by the beginning of the century assumed an almost legendary status in the rhetoric and imagination of British free-trade political economy, the term Cobdenism and his “Manchester school” of economic thought synonymous with Victorian liberalism.\textsuperscript{155} As Frank Trentmann illustrates in his study of free trade, the depth of Cobden’s legacy on British liberalism was reflected in the centenary commemoration of his birth on June 6, 1904. Henry Campbell-Bannerman delivered the keynote address, paying tribute to Cobden’s legacy. The Liberal leader explained that before Cobden swayed the British people to free trade, protection had weighed down the nation with a system “founded upon fear, prejudice, privilege, greed, and all the anti-social instincts by which humanity was cursed. Cobden found that that system was contrary to common sense and to nature, and that the cure for it was freedom.”\textsuperscript{156} Like a prophet bringing salvation, Cobden had offered Britain free trade, and with it a golden age of economic preeminence, peace, and social and political growth.

This image of Cobden had been carefully cultivated over time by the work of the Cobden Club, established in 1866, the year after his death. Chamberlain sarcastically dismissed the group in his May 15 Birmingham speech as a collection of dogmatic free traders, “a small remnant of Little Englanders of the Manchester School, who now profess to be the sole repositories of the doctrines of Mr. Cobden and Mr. Bright.”\textsuperscript{157} In this, Chamberlain was perhaps more describing things as he wished they were, as the Cobden Club continued to take an active part in contemporary political debates. Unsurprisingly, the club intervened heavily in the tariff controversy with books, pamphlets, and public lectures on the virtues of free trade. While frequently scholarly and academic, these publications also ranged on the side of propaganda,

\textsuperscript{155} Trentmann, \textit{Free Trade Nation}, 130.
\textsuperscript{157} Boyd, \textit{Mr. Chamberlain Speeches}, 2:139.
offering the British public a singular interpretation of Britain’s nineteenth century history and economic development.

This depiction of Britain before free trade was given its starkest portrait in the 1904 book *The Hungry Forties*. Produced by Jane Cobden Unwin – Richard Cobden’s daughter – she dubbed the book a collection of “descriptive letters and other testimonies” of “life under the bread tax,” promising a harrowing story of poverty and privation in rural communities recounted by those who had endured it. Unwin explained that the collection was inspired by the former Liberal Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, who suggested in a letter to the press that the most effective argument against tariff reform would be the testimony of those who remembered life under the Corn Laws, as one generation passing down its wisdom to their descendants. The ensuing chapters presented a multitude of personal stories filled with descriptions of impoverishment, low wages and sporadic employment, and shortages of food and other goods. The final chapter, written by the Fabian socialist Frederick John Shaw, concluded that “the foregoing chapters read like the records of a besieged city….in which the tragedy of poverty had become nearly universal, in which the ‘submerged’ tenth of our own day was nearly co-extensive with the nation. Upon the whole, we are convinced our country has never passed through so terrible a time before or since.” Shaw characterized the protectionism of the first half of the nineteenth century as an expression of the greed and close-minded self-interest of a privileged ruling class. The decades of conflict with revolutionary France had produced wartime shortages and high prices, which had enormously profited exploitative landlords. With the war ended, steps had to be taken to artificially perpetuate the situation. “In other words,” Shaw explained, “the

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159 Ibid., 253. Shaw wrote his chapter under the pseudonym Brougham Villiers. Shaw was a member of both the Fabian Society and Independent Labour Party, and became secretary of the Cobden Club in 1912.
island, since it was not now besieged by its enemies, must be besieged by its rulers. Tariffs must undo the mischief wrought by the peace and make dear the produce of the land.”

In its totality, The Hungry Forties was a polemical exaggeration of social conditions in early-Victorian Britain. The editor of Tariff Reform League’s monthly newsletter was perhaps justified in criticizing the book as “a means of harrowing the feelings and exciting the political prejudices of unthinking electors.” Nevertheless, The Hungry Forties offered, albeit in extreme form, an image of the liberal and Cobdenite understanding of the history of free trade and its importance in British life. This view of history wove its way through the fabric of the tariff reform debate. Articles, books, and speeches were filled with accusations of “shibboleths” and outdated dogmas, comparisons between Chamberlain and Peel, of allusions to the free trade “big loaf” and protectionist “little loaf, and other tropes of the Anti-Corn Law League. Prime Minister Arthur Balfour wrote with justifiable sarcasm that “Popular disputation insists on labels; and likes its labels old.”

The Cobden Club mythology that free trade delivered the nation out of a dark age of famine and poverty oftentimes left free trade appearing to be an article of faith rather than an empirical set of economic policies. Free trade as almost the work of providence was often expressed by British politicians, particularly in the early days of the controversy when tariff reform had yet to be formulated into a specific program. In the first Parliamentary debate of the tariff controversy, on May 28, 1903, the Radical Liberal Charles Dilke said of Charles Ritchie, Chancellor of the Exchequer, “It is true he has a ‘past’ concerning a certain heresy on this subject, but I am glad to welcome him as a convert of many years standing.”  Later in the same debate,

160 Ibid., 255.
161 Monthly notes on tariff reform, December 1904, 316.
162 Balfour, Economic Notes on Insular Free Trade, 3.
David Lloyd George referred to Chamberlain’s speeches as “several shades in the new heterodoxy.” Similarly, Lord Rosebery created a storm of when he described himself as “not a person who believed that free trade was part of the Sermon on the Mount, and that we ought to receive it in all its rigidity as a divinely-appointed dispensation.” Nor were economists immune to this process. The Cambridge economist Langford Price deprecated his colleagues’ “odium theologicum which could discern no via media between economic salvation and damnation.” It was thus not entirely out of proportion for tariff reformers like Leopold Amery to equate Chamberlain’s call for tariffs with Martin Luther’s attack on the Catholic Church. But while such statements were, like The Hungry Forties, primarily exaggerations, they nonetheless reflected the deep hold free trade policy held on British politics.

The Crisis of British Liberalism

While the free trade arguments came readily in 1903, many liberals and free traders felt a deep sense of anxiety about the future of their political creed. By 1903, a Unionist-Conservative government had been in power since 1886, with only a disappointing three-year Liberal interlude. Yet allegations of Unionist corruption, militarism, and its general failure to pass substantial reform seemed to have no effect on voters. In 1899, many liberals had been outraged by the outbreak of war in South Africa, convinced that the conflict was a mere pretense to seize of the Boers’ valuable diamond mines. Others still were horrified by the enthusiastic, patriotic outbursts which accompanied the war, and were discouraged by the major defeat in the so-called “Khaki

163 Hansard, 4s, 123: 141-98 (28 May 1903).
164 The Times, May 20, 1903.
election” of 1900. Discouraged by these results, liberals feared that free trade would be sacrificed to the cause of imperial consolidation. Writing in the *Fortnightly Review*, John Hobson predicted free trade’s end would be cloaked in the guise of an imperial customs union, a scheme which had long been considered as a possible course for imperial federation. While many liberal thinkers contemplated uneasily imperialism’s corrosive effect on Britain’s nascent mass democracy, John Hobson’s seminal 1902 study most eloquently linked exploitative capitalism to colonial expansion. Hobson argued that “Imperialism, with its natural supports, militarism, oligarchy, bureaucracy, protection, concentration of capital and violent trade fluctuations, has marked it out as the supreme danger of modern national States.” Only a true democracy, one responsive to the will and interests of the people would be able to counter this pervasive autocratic tendency. But Hobson was both skeptical that Britain was prepared yet for such a democratic system and expecting the forces of reaction to employ “what ingenuity is requisite for the perversion of the public intelligence, or the inflammation of the public sentiment” toward imperialist ends.

Two years later, liberal political theorist Leonard Hobhouse published his own critique of democratic government in *Democracy and Reaction*. Hobhouse focused his study on the “reaction” of the previous decades against liberalism, and its ramifications for the future of British freedom and democracy. In his analysis, the previous half-century had been marked by two starkly contrasting phases in British political life. The first was a period of progress and...

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166 In the 1895 election, the Conservative-Liberal Unionist coalition secured 411 seats to the Liberals’ 177. In 1900, the result was 402 and 183 respectively, but the Unionists increased their share of the total vote.

167 John Hobson, ‘The Approaching Abandonment of Free Trade,’ *Fortnightly Review*, March 1902. By the beginning of the 20th century, British imperialists had engaged in a prolonged debate about the possible federation of Britain and the colonies, which will be examined in detail in Chapter 3.


169 Ibid., 382.
reform, with Cobden’s political creed in the ascendant. Protectionism was cast aside, more fair and equitable government secured, and the right to vote given to a large share of the population. Yet mass-suffrage defied the reformers’ expectations. Hobhouse grimly recorded that “the Liberalism of Cobden’s day was in a state of disintegration. The old cry of peace, retrenchment and reform had for many years ceased to awaken any response.”\textsuperscript{170} Instead of strengthening liberals’ hold on government, it had dramatically weakened it. Instead of electing liberals committed to peace, fiscal retrenchment, and moral and secular reform, voters had for nearly a generation empowered a Tory government responsible for near-constant colonial wars, profligate spending and new taxation, and who resisted temperance reform and created a system of sectarian public education.\textsuperscript{171} Since the voting public had failed to act as liberals anticipated, it was now necessary to consider whether mass democracy was doomed to result in an inevitable “cheapening and vulgarization” of political ideals and standards.

Like Hobson, Hobhouse concluded that the emergence of the new imperialism, rather than any defect in the politics of late Victorian liberals, was the chief cause of the decay in British liberalism. He observed with irony that this new era of imperialist expansion was itself the by-product of the victory of mid-century liberalism. The British Empire, with the more harmonious relations between the metropole and the self-governing colonies, and the commitment to the uplift and civilization of the Indian people, rendered empire an immensely appealing political project. Hobhouse summed up imperialists’ reasoning: “‘You may say that Empire means force, aggression, conquest. That may have been so in the past, but we live in an age when Empire is free, tolerant and unaggressive, and if we still acquire territory we acquire it

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 50-52.
not for ourselves but for civilisation.”\textsuperscript{172} The progression was logical and straightforward; liberalism, emphasizing self-government, liberty, and a commitment to progress, rendered the British Empire ethically acceptable, even desirable. Imperialists then argued that the empire’s extension over new territories would increase the lands and peoples who benefited from its beneficent influence. But, Hobhouse argued, this only resulted in a reversion back to the traditional form of empire, mired in militarism and autocracy. “Under the reign of imperialism,” Hobhouse argued, “the temple of Janus is never closed. Blood never ceases to run.”\textsuperscript{173} War, oppressive colonial rule, racial prejudice, and intolerance had become the hallmarks of empire once more, reverberating back upon the British political body and stultifying any further liberal reform.

Hobhouse did not go as far as recommending dismantling the new empire, but he did argue for the need to restore a liberal form of empire. Democracy and imperialism, he wrote, were fundamentally opposing systems; the former was the people’s rule over themselves, the latter the rule of one people over another. But a liberal empire, “in the sense of a great aggregation of territories enjoying internal independence while united by some common bond,” was possible under a system of federal governance that allowed local self-government with a shared allegiance to a higher governing body.\textsuperscript{174}

Hobhouse was also more optimistic than Hobson. His study was written more than a year after Chamberlain began the reform campaign, and Hobhouse was buoyed by the strong defense which had risen to protect free trade. Going further, he predicted that “It may be that this activity is the beginning of a new life. Indeed, it is not impossible that the year 1903 will be regarded by

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 156-7.
historians as marking the end, and therefore also the beginning of an era in political thought.\textsuperscript{175} In Hobhouse’s characterization of events, British politics was unfolding in the way laid out in his book. The wave of democratic reform of the middle third of the nineteenth century had resulted in a reactionary regression in the century’s closing days. With the attack on free trade, the reaction had reached its limit, and the forces of progress were rallying to renew the advance of reform again.

The sense of ambivalence for the state of modern life was a recurring theme in Liberal writings at this time. In his review of Hobhouse’s book, the liberal politician and historian John Morley articulated this vague sense of unease. “It is no mere platitude,” he insisted, “that we have reached the threshold of a new age. Democracy, nationality, socialism, the constitution of the modern State, the standing of the churches – all have come within the attraction of forces heretofore unknown.”\textsuperscript{176} Industrialization and the progress of scientific discovery had drastically reshaped the world and the interaction between peoples and nations, Morley observed. But the consequences of those changes, and their implications for the future of both liberalism and Britain were far from certain. Liberals acted out of both fear for liberalism’s waning political fortunes and eagerness in the belief Chamberlain had fatally miscalculated by embarking on tariff reform.

**The Principles of Free Trade Theory**

The defense of free trade was fought on several fronts, but chief among these was a purely negative reaction against tariff reform, echoed in countless books, pamphlets, essays,

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{176} *The Nineteenth Century and After*, April 1905, 530.
articles, speeches, lectures, and more. The proposals expounded by Chamberlain, Balfour, and others were criticized, refuted, and just as often mocked. This negative opposition was not strictly based on political or ideological grounds. Instead, free traders depicted their arguments as practical, common-sense expressions of economic facts. Whatever else might be said against it, free traders saw tariff reform as bad policy. Whether in its protectionist or preferential guises, tariff reform would hurt British businesses, raise unemployment, slow down trade, and reverse the flow of wealth into the country. A host of other, even more dire social and economic symptoms would soon follow the inevitable downturn. This scathing critique of tariff reform was, at its heart, based on orthodox liberal economic theory dating back to Adam Smith. The proponents of free trade insisted that its benefits were confirmed by fundamental scientific fact and a straightforward understanding of the laws of supply and demand.

The weight of scholarly and academic opinion in support of free trade received its clearest expression in the circular letter of the so-called “Fourteen Professors” of economics and political economy published in the Times in August 1903. Although the tariff reformers had not yet laid out any specific policy proposals, the professors opted to denounce Chamberlain’s campaign in the abstract.¹⁷⁷ A significant number of politicians dutifully accepted such economic maxims. In Parliament, Hugh Cecil, a prominent Conservative and son of the former Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, rejected tariffs because, “I believe that the fundamental propositions which were laid down fifty years ago were propositions of a scientific character, and had relation to abiding principles lying in human nature.”¹⁷⁸ With open borders and free exchange, Britain could purchase food and essential raw materials wherever it was sold most cheaply, fueling its

¹⁷⁷ See The Times, August 15, 1903.
¹⁷⁸ Hansard, 4s, 123: 141-98 (28 May 1903).
industrial society. In turn, competition between businesses seeking to sell in the British market would force prices down, while tariffs, a tax on imports, would only cause prices to rise. Immutable laws of supply and demand proved free trade’s superiority, and deliberately raising prices where they were cheap was foolhardy.

The principle of cheapness stood at the core of a pragmatic argument against the tariff reform campaign. As early as May 29, 1903, Chamberlain admitted in Parliament that imperial preference would only work if Britain imposed taxes on food imports. Amidst the cheering from the Opposition benches, he quipped, “I make [the honorable] Gentlemen opposite a present of that.”\(^{179}\) Chamberlain could not avoid this point, because raising prices was precisely what tariffs were designed to do; taxes on foreign food would make those imports more costly, allowing domestic and colonial producers to raise their prices in order to profit from the drop in foreign competition. But while Chamberlain went to great lengths in his Glasgow plan to offset the proposed price increases, free traders hammered the point relentlessly. Henry Campbell-Bannerman condemned the tariff as an attack on the well-being of Britain’s lowest income earners. Food was a vital necessity; thus, a tax on food disproportionately burdened the poorest. Citing recent and highly-publicized studies of urban poverty and living conditions by Charles Booth and Benjamin Rowntree, the Liberal leader frequently asserted that a third of the British population was suffering from malnourishment or on the verge of starvation.\(^{180}\) “We used to hear of a submerged third,” he said in allusion to the Cobdenite mythology of the ‘Hungry Forties,’ “We now know of a submergeable third. The effect of taxing the food of the people would be to

\(^{179}\) Ibid.

turn the submergeable third into the submerged third.” The Liberal leader’s warning was simple and direct: the cost of higher tariffs would invariably fall upon those least able to pay it, with serious repercussions for the welfare of the country. A propaganda war on the question of food prices rapidly ensued, bringing with it cries of the “people’s bread” and the “dear loaf,” images and allusions to bare cupboards and overflowing grocers’ windows, comparisons of the diet of the British and foreign working classes and more.

Such tactics, however, cut both ways. Many tariff reformers eagerly grasped hold of the Liberal leader’s “submergeable third” remarks as a rhetorical blunder. The specter of twelve million working-class Britons on the brink of starvation was hardly an inspiring testament to fifty years of free trade. But Campbell-Bannerman did not backtrack, arguing instead that just the fact that free trade was not a panacea for urban poverty, did not justify tariff reform. Unfortunately, others were not so circumspect; numerous free traders insisted there was in fact nothing wrong with the country’s economy and free trade was working as well as ever before. For some, Chamberlain’s warnings of a declining economy were almost inexplicable. In her diary, the Fabian economist Beatrice Webb paraphrased a conversation between Hugh Cecil and Margot Asquith as, “Why change the present state of things – all is well.” Others did not share tariff reformers’ seeming obsession with industrial manufacturing interests and export figures. Some like the Duke of Devonshire believed that, even if British exports were declining, so long as the sum total of national wealth increased, all was well. During a long correspondence with

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181 *Hansard*, 4s, 123: 533-88 (10 June, 1903). Campbell-Bannerman first made this claim in a speech at Perth. See *The Times*, June 6, 1903.
182 The imagery employed in the propaganda campaigns will be explored in detail in Chapter 4.
Chamberlain in the summer of 1903, the Duke observed that “if...our Imports were balanced by our shipping receipts and by the interest on our foreign investments, the country would be just as much better off than it is now, as a man who lives on invested capital is better off than the man who has to work with his hands.” Where Chamberlain and other tariff reformers viewed the growing emphasis of banking, finance, and shipping to British economic prosperity with trepidation, many free traders accepted it as a natural and inevitable evolution to a more sophisticated level of economic development.

During the summer of 1903, a number of free trade organizations emerged in order to combat the attacks on free trade’s record, seeking to refute tariff reformers with statistical analysis and economic facts. The first was the Unionist Free Food League, a parliamentary group which at its height included about 60 MPs, but which rapidly floundered into insignificance. The most significant and influential of the new free trade organizations was the Free Trade Union. In late July 1903, the Free Trade Union launched its weekly newsletter *The Free Trader* with Leonard Hobhouse as its editor, as a resource for public speakers. In its first volume, Hobhouse explained, “The object of the ‘Free Trader’ will be to supply accurate information on all matters bearing on the question of Free Trade and Preferential Tariffs.” Each volume contained extracts of speeches, analysis of commercial statistics, and expert commentary, all useful for rebutting tariff reform’s claims about the state of the British economy.

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186 The weakness of the Free Food League in mobilizing support is examined in Rempel, *Unionists Divided*. See also Neal Blewett, ‘Free Fooders, Balfourites, Whole Hoggars’.
187 These organizations and their tariff reform rivals are analyzed in Chapter 4.
188 *The Free Trader*, July 31, 1903.
189 Along with Hobhouse’s editorial supervision, the periodical boasted regular contributions from John Hobson, and the economists Chiozza Money and George Armitage-Smith. Armitage-Smith in 1903 published *The Free Trade Movement and Its Results*, in which he argued that the unity of the empire would be damaged by tariff reform,
production and trade figures industry by industry, they showed again and again that Chamberlain’s gloomy forecasts were alarmist or exaggerated, indicative of elementary misunderstandings of economic theory. Against tariff reformers’ fears of unfair competition, they argued instead that, “From the Free Trade point of view this is no injury to us.” If foreign businesses flooded the country with cheap goods, Britain should welcome the opportunity to profit, “at her expense if she is so foolish as to do so.” Access to cheap goods provided by less-developed foreign states was a blessing, not a curse. With these, Britain was able to both feed its crowded islands at low cost and focus its entrepreneurial spirit on more complex and sophisticated industries that were the true markers of British prosperity and economic power.

The critique of the tariff reform argument and this negative defense of free trade reflected not simply a disagreement over how best to nurture a strong British economy, but a more fundamental disagreement of what precisely constituted a strong economy. For Chamberlain and the tariff reformers, economic strength flowed from a vibrant manufacturing sector, fueled by the foodstuffs and resources drawn from British colonies as part of a self-sufficient British Empire. To free traders, the source of economic strength was at once both simpler and more complex. Not long after Chamberlain’s Birmingham speech, books and pamphlets on the virtues of free trade were published by a number of respected liberal economists and statisticians targeted for the general public to remind the nation of the true nature of economic prosperity.

One of the more influential of these was Elements of the Fiscal Question, by Chiozza Money. With a chart of British trade statistics serving as the frontispiece, Money aimed to refute tariff reform’s alarmism from cover to cover. While it was undeniable that Britain had a

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190 The Free Trader, November 20, 1903.
significant imbalance in its “visible” imports and exports, the deficiency was made good by the scale of Britain’s “invisible” exports, constituting earnings from shipping, interest on foreign investment, and banking transactions. Individually, shipping receipts and investment returns each amounted to £90 million in 1902 alone, equal to almost a third of the cost of imports.\textsuperscript{191} Money was also unworried by the development of foreign industries, pointing to the concept of the division of labor. He argued, “A wise fiscal policy can, at best, enable a nation to make the most of its natural advantages. In the long run, industries must come to be carried on in those parts of the world best suited to them, and commerce must flow chiefly in the great highways which Nature has fashioned.” Freedom to buy and sell without manmade restraints, as Money described it, was akin to “The processes of natural selection,” allowing the British people to excel in the areas they were best-suited and the nation’s commerce to flow unimpeded.\textsuperscript{192} Elements of the Fiscal Question was a direct rebuttal to William Ashley’s book The Tariff Problem, published earlier the same year. Whereas Ashley looked at the growth of foreign industries behind tariff walls as future threats to Britain’s prosperity, Money looked to the past with optimism. He noted that, despite growing, Britain’s exports in these fields had still grown over time, a reflection of the interrelationship between supply and demand.\textsuperscript{193} For Money, it made little difference whether the wealth flowing into Britain was earned by manufacturing or the City’s financial transactions. So long as wealth was growing, there was no cause for alarm, and no cause to risk a far greater disruption by erecting tariffs.

\textsuperscript{191} L.G. Chiozza Money, Elements of the Fiscal Problem (London: P.S. King, 1903), i.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 1-2.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 214.
A similar argument was deployed by Thomas Brassey, an imperialist writer and active participant in the federation movement, in his 1904 pamphlet *Fifty Years of Progress*. For years, Brassey had opposed the idea of establishing a customs union or *zollverein* as a viable path for federating the empire, and he opposed tariff reform in the same way now. He worried that tariffs in any form would reap negative consequences. Like Money, he pointed that there was no great economic depression to justify rash action, and added that the unintended consequences of imposing tariffs would reverberate far and wide. Brassey insisted that Britain’s economic position was uniquely suited for the maintenance of free trade. For one, the geography and climate of the British Isles dictated that the bulk of its supply of food and resources come from abroad. Moreover, he argued in some respects a return to protectionism would be impossible, observing that “We have built up on the system of free imports a gigantic and complicated industrial fabric, on a scale never yet reached in any other country,” and tariffs would disrupt that network of industrial life. Like other critics, Brassey noted that taxes on food imports would hurt the poorest strata of society most, but his arguments extended beyond political economy. Echoing fears among many Britons about racial degeneration and eugenics, he observed that “At a time when the necessity of promoting the physical vigour of the people is becoming more and more urgent, it is not statesmanship to check the consumption of wholesome food.” Brassey thus embraced a broader scope in his critique of tariff reform, one that began to consider geopolitics and international relations.

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194 Thomas Brassey, *Fifty Years of Progress, and the New Fiscal Policy* (London: Longmans, 1904). An updated and expanded edition of Brassey’s pamphlet was published in 1906 under the title *Sixty Years of Progress* and again in 1914 as *Seventy Years of Progress*. While the elder Thomas Brassey was a committed free trader, his son, also Thomas Brassey, was an enthusiastic supporter of Chamberlain’s agenda. See The Free Trader August 7, 1903, and T.A. Brassey, “Steps to Imperial Federation,” *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, vol. 34, 1902-3.

195 Brassey, *Fifty Years of Progress*, 58.

196 Ibid., 30.
Leaving aside any question of tariffs disrupting relations with the colonies or foreign countries who might be compelled to retaliate against British action, Brassey asked the reader to contemplate the ramifications should Britain abandon free trade. Free trade was a progressive force for peace and progress in the world, and in this respect “England has been in the van.” Backsliding into protectionism would stifle international commerce and create friction between rival powers. “A bond of union between nations will be weakened,” he added, “Political consequences may follow which the whole civilized world may have reason to deplore.” The defense of free trade by these and other liberal thinkers and writers produced a strange inversion in some aspects of the political environment in Britain. Tariff reformers, predominantly aligned with the Unionist parties, decried the debilitating economic losses of a generation of unrestricted free trade policy overseen by their party, while liberals offered effusive praise for that very same policy.

**Free Trade and Reform: The Alternatives to Tariff Reform**

Because of this peculiar inversion of party agendas, many Liberal and socialist politicians recognized that a purely negative response to tariff reform was inadequate from an electoral point of view. Reflecting on Chamberlain’s October speaking tour, Beatrice Webb worried that “Chamberlain would make headway, in spite of his bad arguments…because he had a vision, desired to bring about a new state of affairs and was working day and night for a cause.” Doing nothing because all was well could hardly galvanize voters. Appeals to Campbell-Bannerman’s “submergible third” were not a sound basis for any argument that the country

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197 Ibid., 58.
needed no reform. That tariff reform would be worse than doing nothing was not enough. Rather, Liberals called for a new period of reform to offer the country a relief from the burden of twenty years of Unionist government, and an alternative to tariff reformers’ promises.

As Chamberlain traveled the country in October 1903, H.H. Asquith followed in his wake to deliver the liberal rebuttals to each facet of the tariff reform program. In a speech at Cinderford on October 8, Asquith dismissed Chamberlain’s appeal to working class voters as “the sneers and gibes and almost hysterical dumpophobia of an oration.” Asquith accepted as fact that free trade and cheap imports had been the root cause of British prosperity, but he assured his audiences that the Liberals’ defense of “the citadel of free trade” was not to be “a policy of folded hands.” Asquith adhered to the ideas of ‘national efficiency,’ a program of reforms in order to eliminate wasteful and unproductive practices and policies in British society. Dramatic but foolish policies like tariff reform were to be avoided, in favor of gradual, incremental improvements that held true to the precepts of liberal ideology. Asquith encapsulated his plan as “Better education, better training, better methods, a larger outlook.” Asquith and others like him argued that German and American competition was made possible by advanced technologies and better business practices, girded by government support for universities and technical schools for highly skilled labor, not tariffs.

The Liberal Party political strategy after 1903 combined two arguments, although they were not always fully complementary. The first asserted that tariff reform was economically

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199 Herbert Henry Asquith, *Trade and the Empire: Mr. Chamberlain’s Proposals Examined* (London: Methuen, 1903), 16.
200 Ibid., 30-31.
201 On the national efficiency movement, see Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency*.
202 Asquith, *Trade and the Empire*, 31. Ironically, Chamberlain himself was a proponent of the cause of ‘national efficiency,’ which served as much of the impetus for the creation of the University of Birmingham. In a speech on October 27, 1903, he commented, “I shall be very glad of Mr. Asquith’s assistance in establishing Charlottenburg schools in every city in the Empire.” See Boyd, *Mr. Chamberlain’s Speeches*, 2:212.
impractical at best and harmful at worst, while free trade continued to benefit the nation. The second argument warned that reform was necessary in order to clear away the legal and institutional iniquities which had exacerbated sectional and class conflicts, pursued by the Unionist government during its long administration. Henry Campbell-Bannerman was confident that this dual argument would resonate with voters. In a speech at Bolton on October 16, 1903, he presented the official Liberal response to Chamberlain’s Glasgow program. With an unshakeable faith that free trade increased the nation’s wealth, the Liberal leader vowed that the party had not given up its tradition of addressing the nation’s social ills. In his view, “bad laws, bad customs, bad institutions, bad social conditions, or…careless and extravagant administration” were the chief causes preventing “the wholesome distribution of wealth.” First, he proposed the imposition of a land value tax, designed to charge landlords for undeveloped or underutilized holdings, in order to encourage the construction or renovation of tenant homes and the development of local infrastructure. Next, Campbell-Bannerman promised to amend the 1902 Education Act, removing mandatory local board fees for religious instruction which had outraged Nonconformist and other non-Anglican sentiment. Licensing laws were to be amended, so local communities could impose temperance restrictions on public houses. Finally, new laws would be promulgated to overturn the 1901 Taff Vale court decision, which had ruled that trade unions could be held liable for damages suffered by employers during strikes.

The program marked a notable departure from traditional laissez faire liberalism. The land value tax flirted at the edges of Georgism, the land nationalization theories of American

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203 Spender, Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, 2:121. Spender was himself a prominent critic of tariff reform, serving as editor of the strongly Liberal Westminster Gazette in 1903.
204 Speeches by Henry Campbell-Bannerman, 121.
thinker Henry George; \textsuperscript{205} likewise, the proposed liquor licensing laws and denunciation of Taff Vale ran counter to the classical liberal defense of the rights of property. Such departures were a recognition that the progressive impulses of Victorian liberalism needed to be rejuvenated to meet new social and economic conditions, but without abandoning the main pillars of free trade Cobdenism cherished by more traditional liberals. \textsuperscript{206} Free trade would be maintained in its entirety, allowing the common man and British industry to continue benefiting from access to cheap imports and avoid the disruptions tariffs would inevitably produce. At the same time, the Liberals would show that action could still be taken to alleviate many of the pressing inequalities and tensions that still remained in the fabric of British society.

Though the Liberal Party comprised the most significant opposition to tariff reform, it was not the only intellectual or ideological critique. In particular, though socialists in general felt no principled allegiance to free trade, most leftist and trade unionist groups decisively rejected the tariff reformers’ appeals for support. Instead, they presented their own socialist doctrines as viable alternatives to tariff reformers and free traders alike. From the very beginning, Chamberlain knew success depended on the attitude of the British working classes. In Parliament on May 28, 1903, the Colonial Secretary insisted that “I am prepared to go into any workman’s house” and victory in the next election would be decided there. \textsuperscript{207} Tariff reformers made the case for stable employment, high wages, and social welfare, and argued that the Cobdenite ideal was incompatible with contemporary working conditions and trade unionism. Yet Chamberlain’s attempt to bring tariff reform into workers’ homes received an overwhelming rebuke from an

\textsuperscript{205} In his 1879 work \textit{Progress and Poverty}, George argued that inequality was inherently rooted in private ownership of land, and proposed a comprehensive tax on economic rent derived from land. 
\textsuperscript{206} Howe, \textit{Free Trade and Liberal England}, 192. 
\textsuperscript{207} Hansard, 4s, 123: 141-98 (28 May 1903).
early stage. The *Free Trader* crowed over the “crushing reply” to the “specious appeals to trade unionism”; the Cobden Club gleefully published a letter signed by 940 “Labour members, Trade Union and Co-operative officials” urging the working class “to resist every effort…to destroy or impair the Free Trade system.”

Writing for the *Free Trader*, George N. Barnes, General Secretary of the Amalgamated Iron and Steel Engineers union and future Labour Party MP, condemned tariff reform with a Marxian flair “Workers have everything to lose and nothing to gain by taxation of food.”

Hostility towards tariff reform was shared by several of the most prominent socialist political groups and trade unions in the country. The Independent Labour Party’s response to the controversy was laid out in several pamphlets by Philip Snowden and a book by Ramsay MacDonald entitled *The Zollverein and British Industry*. Rhetorically, MacDonald welcomed the national debate of fiscal and industrial questions as an opportunity to present the socialist alternative to outdated doctrines of either Tory protectionism or Cobdenism. MacDonald rejected both, the former for its “inefficiency and timorousness” and the latter for being a “bald dogma.” The nation had been enriched by free trade, but it had patently failed to create a more just and equitable distribution of wealth, or to eradicate long-standing inefficiencies in the organization and management of British industry. Writing before Chamberlain had laid out his

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208 The Free Trader, September 11, 1903. The newsletter emphasized that the signatories represented a majority of the leaders of the largest and most influential “governing bodies of the two great industrial movements.” This included 12 of 13 Labour, “Lib-Lab,” and independent labor MPs, 37 of the 44 Directors of the Co-operative societies, 71 of the 80 members of the Central Board of the Co-operative Union, 9 of the 13 members of the TUC Parliamentary Committee, and 13 of the 16 committee members of the General Federation of Trade Unions.


211 Ramsay MacDonald, *The Zollverein and British Industry* (London: Grant Richards, 1903), 19-20. Ironically, it was MacDonald’s “National” coalition government in 1932 that finally repealed free trade, with Joseph Chamberlain’s son Neville overseeing the measures as MacDonald’s Chancellor.
Glasgow program, MacDonald tore holes in the tariff reform rhetoric, ridiculing the contradictions inherent in promising to fund social reforms like old age pensions with the profits of tariffs while also presenting it as a means of increasing colonial imports with no added increase to the working man’s cost of living.

Up to this point, the socialist and Liberal critiques were largely aligned. Raising tariffs was, from the socialist and workers’ perspective, unacceptable if it raised the cost of living. MacDonald estimated a comprehensive preferential tariff scheme would cost working-class families an additional two to three pounds annually, at a time when forty percent of workers lived in poverty and “999 members out of every 1,000 die without accumulated property.”

Certainly, such critiques echoed the liberal allusions to the “submergeable third,” but the two groups rapidly parted ways on the question of an alternative reform program. Rejecting the Cobdenite legend of the repeal of the Corn Laws, MacDonald argued that the haphazard and laissez faire growth of industry in Britain had been the real cause of severe urban poverty in the 1840s. While agreeing that free trade must be maintained, MacDonald insisted state intervention in the economy was required to address poverty. In his view, “British industry is being strangled by British landlordism.”

To combat social inequality, MacDonald proposed price ceilings on tenant rents and land values, the abolition of royalties on mining rights, and sharp cuts to railroad rates. Finally, major industries should be nationalized, followed by their restructuring into large-scale state monopolies comparable in size to Krupp and Standard Oil. American trusts and German cartels posed serious competitive dangers to the more disorganized and inefficient British industries, but they also, MacDonald argued, pointed the way for Britain. But rather than

\[212\] Ibid., 81.
\[213\] Ibid., 151.
becoming vast concentrations of wealth and industrial power wielded by self-interested capitalists, British trusts would be organized for public ownership and the benefit of the working class. MacDonald envisioned this as the next phase of Britain’s economic life. “Co-ordination, organization, public control, democratic Trusts,” he urged, “are as necessary to British industry now as Free Trade was three-quarters of a century ago.”

As the official statement of the Independent Labour Party in the early stages of the tariff reform debate, MacDonald’s work was reaffirmed in the various party conferences which took place in early 1904. In February, the Labour Representation Committee held its annual conference in Bradford. In his opening remarks, committee Chairman John Hodge condemned the tariff reform movement as a scheme of privileged classes to mislead workers. According to Hodge, Chamberlain “appeals to the workmen, and immediately his platform is filled with dukes, earls, barons and lords too numerous to mention.” He added that “Protection will not solve the problem of poverty; Free Trade has not solved it,” and thus it was the duty of British socialism to provide the country a better way. Philip Snowden proposed a resolution condemning tariff reform in no uncertain terms, declaring that “it will do nothing in England to relieve the unemployed, improve wages, or return people to the land, but that, on the other hand, it will enable the landlord classes to exact a heavier toll than ever from the labour of the nation.”

Echoing the lead taken by MacDonald the year before, Snowden admitted that free trade was the best fiscal policy for the country for the moment, but must be complemented by a series of reforms eliminating “capitalistic tolls” including mining royalties and rail rates, as well as greater

214 Ibid., 160.
215 Ibid., 165.
access to free public education, and the regulation of the liquor trade. The sole voice of dissent was registered by Edwin Smith, general secretary of the union of Operative Printers’ Assistants, who tabled an amendment to the resolution offering conditional support to tariffs on specific goods in industries where foreign competition was especially acute. Noting the damage foreign imports caused to domestic paper companies, Smith maintained that “Some Protection was absolutely necessary in this and other trades.” Smith’s motion was handily defeated by a vote of 27,000 to 965,000 and Snowden’s original resolution passed unanimously.217

The ILP effectively repeated the LRC’s denunciation of tariff reform during its annual conference in April 1904 in Cardiff. The ILP’s National Administrative Committee remained sanguine that socialist alternatives were gaining popularity against tariff reform and Liberal policies. Building on earlier resolutions, the committee reiterated their support for the reduction of royalties and tolls, along with a sweeping nationalization of land, railways, mines, and industrial monopolies, alongside support for modernized technical education and new income and land value taxes.218 The ILP hoped to gain significant advantage from the tariff controversy at the ballot box. Expecting the Unionists to be soundly defeated by the Liberals at the next election, the ILP was also convinced that the Liberals ultimately had no constructive legislative agenda. The committee’s report concluded, “mere opposition to reaction affords no food for the earnest reformers, and when the election is over, and the demand for action supersedes indignant re-action, there is certain to be great movement in our direction.”219

Though the ILP’s plan of nationalization was easily as drastic as anything Chamberlain or the tariff reformers put before the country, there was little chance such a scheme would sway a

217 Ibid., 41-2.
219 Ibid., 11.
significant portion of the British electorate in the short-term. The more gradualist, reform-minded socialists of the Fabian Society offered their own answer to tariff reform in a pamphlet by George Bernard Shaw. *Fabianism and the Fiscal Question* attempted to position the British socialist movement as a moderate, constructive force, firmly between the two extremes of the debate. Shaw argued that the ease with which Chamberlain resurrected the issue of protectionism, one that most politicians had accepted as settled, was testimony, “that the triumphs of modern commercial civilization…were and are rotten at the foundation.” Whether a nation used tariffs or accepted free imports was less important than the ideals which informed fiscal policy. Shaw suggested that socialism was, in the abstract, “ultra-Protectionist” insofar as it meant the state’s role in correcting distortions in the economy to ameliorate social issues.

“But what Socialist has ever dreamt of demanding a tariff of taxes on imports as a panacea for social ills?” Shaw continued. German and American protectionism served, in his view, as perfect examples of how tariffs could enrich capitalists and nobles at the expense of the working classes.\(^{220}\) Shaw also rebutted the Cobdenite mythology of individualist free-trade liberalism as the cause of British prosperity. Economic improvement and the rise in living standards had come not from the repeal of the Corn Laws, but a host of “Collectivist measures” mandating labor and working standards and regulating the operation of industry. “The nation,” he warned, “is tired of the Cobden Club.”\(^{221}\) The true debate was therefore not between tariffs or free trade, but socialist democracy or plutocracy; without a socialist remedy to inequality, “nothing will be of any use: we shall simply go to the devil with our eyes open.”\(^{222}\)

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\(^{221}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^{222}\) Ibid., 23.
Shaw proceeded to elaborate on a set of gradualist and collectivist policies to alleviate the side-effects of foreign competition, and contribute to the consolidation of the empire. Noting the vast distances separating the colonies and the barriers this created, Shaw simply asked “Well, why not abolish them?” It would be as easy to abolish freight and shipping charges on ships moving between British and colonial ports or carrying their goods “as it was to make Waterloo Bridge toll free.” Since the colonies could already call upon the battleships of the Royal Navy to defend them, it would be a simple matter to put the nation’s merchant marine at their disposal as well. Shaw expected such shipping discounts would cause resentment among inland manufacturers. Therefore, the next step was to subsidize transportation costs or even nationalize the railways. Expanding port facilities, freeing access to British traders, establishing national highways, cutting postage on mail, telegraphs, and letters, all of these were methods the state could intervene in the economy and foster inter-imperial trade without resorting to taxation of the poor.223

As British socialists and liberals fought back against tariff reform and both sides endlessly appealed to the legacy of the “Hungry Forties,” it is striking that Irish nationalists, arguably far more deeply shaped by the economic experience of the 1840s, remained silent on the question. Like its British counterparts, the Irish Daily Independent reported that a great and momentous speech had been given on May 15, not by Joseph Chamberlain, Arthur Balfour, or Henry Campbell-Bannerman, but by George Wyndham, the Irish Secretary, on the passage of an Irish land act through Parliament.224 Even months later, as tariff reform became the all-consuming topic of discussion across Britain, Irish politicians and commentators remained

223 Ibid., 25-27.
224 Irish Daily Independent, May 15, 1903. Most other Irish newspapers also did not cover Chamberlain’s Birmingham address.
almost completely uninterested in the potential consequences the controversy might have on Ireland. Everything else was of secondary importance next to the Wyndham Land Act, which the Independent Unionist leader Thomas Russell described as “one of the most extraordinary transformations in the political history of a country which has of late years been the theatre of revolutionary changes.”

Even after the land act had passed into law, the nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party, with a contingent of 76 seats in Parliament, took no official position on the debate. Early in the controversy, Chamberlain attempted to provoke a response from William Redmond, brother of the IPP leader John Redmond, saying that “his own country has suffered perhaps even more serious injury than England.” Redmond merely replied, “I offered no opinion.” This, in essence, would be the IPP’s strategy throughout the debate. In the wake of the autumn speaking tours, John Redmond wrote, “I do not intend to make any pronouncement in public one way or another for the present on the Fiscal Question and I intend to advise my colleagues and friends to follow the same course.

Irish nationalist apathy towards both tariff reform and the entire controversy in general was justified by the fact the vast majority of tariff reformers were Unionists, and by the way in which tariff reformers failed to integrate Ireland into their proposals. Indeed, the Tariff Reform League’s speaker’s guidebook failed to make any reference to Ireland, and few of the major

225 Northern Whig, March 10, 1903. The land act authorized the British government to provide Irish tenant farmers subsidized loans in order to buy out the landlords’ estates. By 1920, approximately 9 million acres of land had been purchased.
226 Hansard, 4s, 123: 141-98 (28 May 1903).
figures in the movement took account of Irish sentiments. But Irish nationalists’ silence was motivated primarily by the belief that the fate of Britain’s fiscal policy was irrelevant to Ireland, or soon would be. For years, Irish nationalists had striven for Home Rule, and with it, the domestic autonomy to detach the country from British fiscal policy and raise tariffs against British trade. Arthur Griffith, a radical nationalist and vocal advocate of Irish self-sufficiency, was adamant that “So far as Mr. Chamberlain’s proposals are concerned, they are not intended to benefit Ireland….and it is mere waste of time for Irishmen to discuss them.”

Griffith’s attitude was shared by many Irish nationalists. Any benefits Ireland might stand to gain from a return to protectionism would be incidental, a ripple of changes in the British economy. Moreover, the Irish Parliamentary Party could ill afford to join the Unionist tariff reformers without alienating the Liberal Party and, in the process, jeopardizing the chances of Home Rule legislation. Rather than considering tariff reform and free trade on its economic merits, the IPP looked to exploit the controversy for political gain. In private, John Redmond hoped for an early election, which he predicted would result in “an equalisation of the English Parties.” With Liberals and Unionists evenly split, “they would be dependent upon us,” and willing to grant Irish nationalism the concessions they sought. Though many Irish Unionists eagerly supported tariff reform and Chamberlain’s message of imperial unity, the Irish nationalist position thus left the country in an ambiguous position, broadly sympathetic to tariffs in principle but opposed in practice to the effects of British fiscal policy, desiring the same

228 Numerous editions were published to keep the guide up-to-date, but each was equally silent on the status of Ireland. See, for example, Tariff Reform League, A Short Handbook for Speakers and Students of the Policy of Preferential Tariffs, 4th ed. (London: Tariff Refeorm League, 1907); A Handbook for Speakers and Students of the Policy of Tariff Reform and Imperial Preference, 6th ed. (London: Tariff Reform League, 1910).

229 United Irishman, October 24, 1903.

230 J Redmond to J Clancy, 2 March, 1904, John Redmond Papers, MS 15/243/4.
political autonomy from Britain enjoyed by the settler colonies, as Unionists strove to unite the empire.

Together, many different groups joined in opposition to tariff reform; Irish nationalists sought to separate their country from Britain, while socialists offered electorate an alternative to both liberal and tariff reform policies. The proposals of the political organs of organized labor called for dramatic, even revolutionary, changes in the structure of the British economy. Cooperation between Liberals, socialists, and the Irish brought great success in the 1906 general election, but collectively they formed at best an alliance of convenience. Liberal adherence to free trade was fundamentally one of political and economic principle. For socialists, it was an acceptable policy only for as long as it benefited the common Briton. Both saw a return to protectionism as an attack upon the well-being of the most vulnerable segments of British society and a threat to general prosperity. Liberals hoped that after almost twenty years of disappointing electoral results, the party and indeed the very creed of liberalism could be revived, demonstrating to the world that it was still an active, viable force for good in the nation’s life. Socialists, though, believed they were approaching the moment when they could replace both the capitalist individualism of the liberals and the privileged traditionalism of the conservatives as the dominant ideologies in British politics and augur in a new phase in the democratization of national life.

The Ethical Critique of Tariff Reform

Opponents of tariff reform criticized the movement on both ideological grounds and on the basis of practicality and political economy. But the vehemence with which they denounced
Chamberlain underscored an outrage at the alleged ethical failures of the Unionist government. According to this view, the reintroduction of protectionist tariffs was the culmination of years of rampant corruption and the erosion of democracy by the party of ‘the classes.’ Tariffs were taxes on the consumer and the buyer which could only enrich the producer and the owner; free trade, on the other hand, favored no one group or class over another, allowing the fair play of competitive business in an open market. Indeed, tariff reform itself was seen as a form of corruption, an attack upon the purity of British political life. The defense of free trade was thus not only a defense of the benefits of cheap imports and low prices, but a defense of political purity and a resistance to privilege, class conflict, and plutocracy.

Fears of the power wielded by industrial capitalists and privileged landlords in British politics deeply shaped the writings of John Hobson and Leonard Hobhouse, and certainly was a core assumption in socialist and trade unionist political discourse. But a central piece of the Cobdenite mythology of free trade was the idea of fairness. According to this narrative, British mercantilism had been established and maintained by certain classes in their own self-interest, enriching particular segments of the nation’s economy at the general public’s expense. Speaking in 1904 at the centenary celebration of Cobden’s birth, Campbell-Bannerman proclaimed that Cobden “exploded the economic basis of class government and class subjection.”\textsuperscript{231} In contrast, free trade allowed consumers to act freely and favored no particular commercial competitor or rival over another, foreign or domestic; nature, not politics, would decide who succeeded and prospered. A return to protectionism thus threatened to erode the vitality of British enterprise and resourcefulness. Instead of innovating, British business would simply lobby the government to shut out foreign competition. One writer predicted that, even if a customs union could be

\textsuperscript{231} Speeches by Henry Campbell-Bannerman, 152.
established with the colonies and economic self-sufficiency attained, “there would be a paralysis of energy…listless labourers, a want of heart and hope, a diminution of effort on the part of employers, and a less keen search for new methods on the part of inventors, even admitting a rude plenty of the commoner necessaries and comforts of life.”  

Free trade was a statement of confidence and dynamism, and tariffs a confession of a declining nation, “declining in energy, enterprise, and intelligence, and failing to secure the success which is their natural result.”

Politically, the impartiality of free trade was also under assault by tariff reform. The return of tariffs would mean particular industries benefited while others did not, which would lead to the return of self-interested classes attempting to influence and pervert the course of politics. This concern was repeatedly espoused by critics of tariff reform in both its imperial and domestic dimensions. Under free trade, British society enjoyed “equality of privilege,” argued the *Westminster Gazette*. Chamberlain’s plan would upend this social harmony. The tariffs on corn, flour, meat, and dairy laid out in the Glasgow program would only benefit particular groups in particular colonies, bestowing an uneven and unequal economic boon. The *Manchester Guardian* predicted that under tariff reform, Parliament, “will be eternally beset by the agents of the various colonial producing industries, each arrogating final authority…and each competent to prove that justice will not be satisfied nor the regard of his colony for the Empire maintained.”

Rather than drawing the empire together, it would commence an “infinite querulous solicitation from sectional colonial interests, Canadian petitioning against Australian, and one Australian

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233 Ibid., 102.

234 *Westminster Gazette*, May 16, 1903.
trade against another.” In private, the Duke of Devonshire echoed these fears, writing to Balfour that “this is and must be a fight between Free Trade and Protection, and that no such compromise is possible between them.” Once imposed, colonial preferential tariffs would be raised more and more until a comprehensive protectionist system was built up. Chamberlain’s program would be the thin end of the wedge leading to the demise of free trade.

Tariff reform’s potential disturbance of the relationship between business and politics stoked free traders’ political fears. In their view, the smallest deviation from free trade would cause an avalanche of change. Even if tariff reform proved ineffective, it would rapidly become too entrenched in the British political system to be purged. Speaking in the House of Lords, the Duke of Devonshire pondered that, while Balfour’s policy of retaliation could be tried at the country’s leisure, the same could not be said of imperial preference. Once fiscal and imperial policy became linked, they could not be unwoven without disrupting the Empire. The Duke said, “a policy which would be either irrevocable, or, if reversed, the reversal must be attended with the most serious and grave consequences.” With tariffs riveted in place by imperial policy, the domestic political system would be under constant pressure and irrevocably transformed. The young and rising Conservative MP Winston Churchill warned, “This move means a change, not only in historic English Parties, but in the conditions of our public life.” Churchill feared that if tariff reform were accepted, the Conservative Party, “with its religious convictions and constitutional principles, will disappear, and a new Party will arise like perhaps the Republican Party of the United States of America – rich, materialist, and secular – whose opinions will turn

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235 Manchester Guardian, June 2, 1903.
237 Quoted in Holland, The Life of Spencer Compton, 2:314.
on tariffs, and who will cause the lobbies to be crowded with the touts of protected industries.”

Tariff reform thus not only imperiled the livelihood of millions of impoverished British subjects, but also threatened to cause a steady, even unstoppable, descent into a mire of class-based politics. Principles and ideologies would be set aside for petty squabbling between entrenched interest groups hoping to wrestle as much profit out of their paid statesmen, all at the expense of the general welfare.

Within a year, Churchill crossed the floor and formally joined the Liberal Party in protest to tariff reform. Churchill had been part of the “Hughligans,” a small group of like-minded Conservative MPs led by Hugh Cecil, the youngest son of the Marques of Salisbury and another rising star in the Tory ranks. Cecil offered a prolonged resistance to the abandonment of free trade in both its preferential or retaliatory guises. In 1906, Hugh Cecil lost his seat to the Liberals, but his older brother Robert, another conservative free trader, defied the general trend of the 1906 election and was elected to Parliament for his first time.

Robert Cecil, much like his brother, opposed tariff reform and survived as perhaps the last Unionist free trader of any note. The Cecil brothers, as well as other Unionist free traders, became the target of the secretive “Confederates,” a group of zealous tariff reformers determined to purge free traders from the party. Writing almost half a century after the events, Robert Cecil characterized the controversy as a decisive turning point in the Conservative Party’s character.

“The change was complete,” he remembered, “The dominance of the landowner was at an end,

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239 The course of Hugh Cecil’s career, in particular his disputes with the party over tariff reform, and his failure to achieve high office, is explored in Richard Rempel, ‘Lord Hugh Cecil’s Parliamentary Career, 1900-1914: Promise Unfulfilled,’ *Journal of British Studies* 11, no. 2 (May 1972): 104-130.
and his place was taken by the business man.” For Robert Cecil, this represented more than an alteration of the social makeup of the party leadership, but also a change the nature of Conservative principles. The party had once been moved by a traditional sentiment, harkening back to feudalism, that land and property were held in trust, with their responsibility to defend and improve it for posterity. In contrast, “the new doctrine was that a man had a right to what he could get, so long as it was honestly come by and…could do what he pleased with it.” Such conservatives imagined tariff as more than bad policy, but also symbolic of crass materialism, acquisitiveness, and greed which could corrupt the British heart. Indeed, even the electioneering strategies tariff reformers used to sway voters confirmed these suspicions. Targeted by the “Confederates” for intimidation and running spoiler candidates in his constituency elections, Cecil likened these tactics to the tyranny of totalitarian extremism of the interwar period. 

Liberals took these fears of political and ethical corruption even further. The entrenchment of privileged classes, some Liberals argued, was a threat to the very future of British democracy. In response to Chamberlain’s Glasgow program, Campbell-Bannerman called the fiscal controversy “a test of the patriotism, and the good sense, and the insight of a man.” Free trade benefited every part of the community, or at least did not benefit one part at the expense of another. Industries and businesses that once were healthy and enriched the nation would transform “into parasitic industries sapping its vitality.” Monopoly and privilege were to follow from protection, a theme the Liberals continued to develop for years. After becoming

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Cecil, *All the Way*, 88

Ibid., 91. While Hugh Cecil’s political career lost momentum after 1906, Robert Cecil carved out a reputation for himself as a respected voice of moderation in domestic politics and for his outspoken advocacy for the League of Nations after the First World War. He was also regarded as something of a singular figure, a lone, principled symbol of the values and ideals of a bygone era. See Gaynor Johnson, *Lord Robert Cecil: Politician and Internationalist* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

Speeches by Henry Campbell-Bannerman, 115.
Prime Minister in December 1905 on the eve of the general election, Campbell-Bannerman laid out the Liberal critique of a decade of Unionist government in a speech at the Albert Hall. Using the theme of corruption, he weaved together Balfour, Chamberlain, and the tariff reformers’ policies into an amalgam of moral failure and authoritarian drift. “Militarism, extravagance, protection are weeds which grow in the same field,” he explained, “and if you want to clear the field for honest cultivation you must root them all out.”

Campbell-Bannerman warned his audience that “all that we Liberals hold dear is at stake….we are fighting against those powers, privileges, injustices, and monopolies which are unalterably opposed to the triumph of democratic principles.” Whether these anxieties about the future of British democracy were sincere or merely rhetoric to galvanize the public, opposition to the proposals of the tariff reform movement was as much an ethical as a practical opposition. Revulsion against tariff reform and associations with inequality, privilege, corruption, and class conflict stoked the fire of controversy. Liberals, anxious of their recent electoral defeats and immersed in a narrative that idealized the British political system as a point of national pride, were primed to see tariff reform as a reactionary backsliding toward autocracy and ruinous partisan conflict.

The Liberal Imperialist Response to Imperial Preference

The defenders of free trade attacked Joseph Chamberlain’s campaign for imperial reciprocity and preferential trade with the colonies for myriad political and economic reasons. Yet, at its core, Chamberlain’s movement was a drive of imperial unification, the binding of Britain and the self-governing colonies into a more cohesive and integrated global state. Even if

243 Ibid., 181-3.
tariffs raised the British workman’s cost of living or stifled the flow of trade, Chamberlain was certain any such “sacrifice” would be worth the long-term prize of a unified British imperial nation. Therefore, for as often as the tariff reform debate descended into a quarrel over statistics, trade returns, and economics, it was ultimately a debate about the nature of British imperialism in the world. Tariff reformers presented a vision of the empire as the source of Britain’s salvation in the future. Welded together by the bonds of economic interdependence, Britain and its former colonies – the components of a federated state – would stand together to ensure Britain’s preeminence on the world stage. Failure to take up the opportunity would lead inevitably to the disintegration of colonial loyalty and signal the fall of the entire British Empire. But while tariff reformers insisted their policy was essential, critics viewed tariffs as a strike against the very pillars which maintained the empire.

At the start of the twentieth century, imperialism enjoyed broad support across the political spectrum in Britain. But beneath such generalized feeling, agreement was far from unanimous. What the empire was, what it represented, and what direction it would take into the future were questions very much up for debate. Tariff reformers saw the loose autonomy of the settler colonies and sentimental bonds as something to be reinforced with tangible, materialistic bonds of interests. To liberal imperialists, these “sentimental” bond was precisely the heart of the imperial connection, to be protected from the corrosive influences of economic conflict. In this way, the debate on tariff reform exposed a deep cleavage within the British political and intellectual community on the nature of British imperialism and the importance and meaning of the British Empire in how it could, or should, shape the life of British society.
The clash between the liberal free trade and tariff reform visions of the British Empire was fundamentally part of the same intellectual and ideological debate about the social and political makeup of British society. In the last third of the nineteenth century, a growing number of British statesmen and thinkers looked to the empire, particularly the self-governing colonies, for the solution to the new problems of industrial society and international competition. Doing so required, as Duncan Bell describes it, “wrestling control over the dominant evaluative concepts and languages structuring political discourse within a community.” The boundaries between home and away, empire and nation, and the spatial and temporal awareness underpinning them, had to be reimagined and reassembled before British imperialists could contemplate the idea of the global federal union of Britain and its colonies. These imperialists gravitated towards the writings of several mid-Victorian writers and thinkers like the historians John Seeley and James Froude. Both writers, in their effort to popularize the importance of the empire in the history of England, had placed emphasis on the establishment of recognizably English – or British – communities in the self-governing colonies of Canada, Australasia, and South Africa. Liberal imperialists, just as much as tariff reformers, were captivated by the visions of a global British community laid out in these writings, but they drew far different conclusions as to how this vision was to take shape.

In his work Oceana, James Froude explored the potential for a vast, globe-spanning English commonwealth. Froude narrated a history of incompetence and short-sightedness by a succession of British statesmen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who derailed this grand project. “The American provinces had been lost by invasion of their rights,” Froude argued,

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244 The evolution of the question of imperial federation in the 19th century is examined in Chapter 3.
245 Bell, The Idea of Greater Britain, 265.
“The rest were to be thrown away as valueless.”246 The challenges of forging this global nation of Oceana were at the same time trivial and daunting, because they challenged the people of Britain to look beyond their shores and parochial self-interest to a wider set of ideals. Oceana, Froude warned, could never be an empire, a state in which the people of the British Isles exerted autocratic dominion over its scattered colonies. Froude offered out the hope that a new nation, “held together by common blood, common interest, and a common pride in the great position which unity can secure – such a commonwealth as this may grow of itself if politicians can be induced to leave it alone.”247 The British Empire envisioned by Froude was thus not one which encompassed India, Africa, or the various Crown Colonies, but rather the autonomous settler colonies only. Distance kept them separated, but he remained confident that national ties of race, culture, and religion could draw them back together once more.

Froude depicted the settler colonies as blossoming branches of the same tree of Anglo-Saxon dom. Perception of the cultural and racial linkages, the “family of nations,” between Britain and its “daughters” or “sisters” grew in the latter half of the nineteenth century, though with little thought given to the indigenous populations these growing settler communities were violently displacing.248 This sentiment found succinct expression in the term Greater Britain, popularized by Sir Charles Dilke’s 1869 travelogue of the same name. Though he would become a fierce critic of tariff reform, Dilke throughout the late nineteenth century stressed the importance of a union between Britain and the empire for nation’s future. Like Froude, Dilke’s imperial union was envisioned in racial terms. Dilke did, however, show greater imaginative

246 James Froude, Oceana, or England and her Colonies (London: Longmans, 1886), 6. Chamberlain’s narrative of the history of British imperial policy is virtually identical. See Boyd, Mr. Chamberlain’s Speeches, 2:1-6.
247 Froude, Oceana, 10-11.
248 Bell, Idea of Greater Britain, 115.
flexibility in his willingness to contemplate a reunion with the United States as part of his vision of a global Anglo-Saxon state. In the concluding passages of *Greater Britain*, Dilke employed a rhetoric of “dearer” and “cheaper” races in a way later tariff reformers and free traders described loaves of bread. The expansion of the United States and the growth of the settler colonies marked a history of racial conflict standing between the English and their “universal dominion.” But Dilke ominously predicted, “the dearer [races] are, on the whole, likely to destroy the cheaper peoples, and that Saxondom will rise triumphant from the doubtful struggle.”  

Dilke spoke hopefully that the inhabitants of the British Isles still had much to offer their Australian and American cousins despite being “morally, as well as physically, the least powerful sections of the race.” English law, English governance, and the cultural heritage of the whole Anglo-Saxon race would ensure that any future alliance would be for the mutual benefit of all.

Dilke’s original work was only tangentially relevant to Victorian debates on imperial federation. But in 1890, he returned to the subject with the publication of *Problems of Greater Britain*. Dilke remained confident that geo-strategic considerations still remained in Britain’s favor. The size and scope of the British Empire and the United States – which Dilke continued to link to his vision of Anglo-Saxon dominion – gave nearly unlimited horizons for growth and development. Erstwhile European rivals like Germany and France would be eclipsed; instead, Dilke predicted the Anglo-Saxon’s only true competitors in the future would be the Russian and Chinese races, who controlled vast territories of their own. Dilke envisioned the British Empire of the future as a global network or alliance of comparatively smaller British nations,

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250 Ibid., 348.
who collectively would act as the linchpin in world affairs. Once more, the United States was key to Dilke’s global vision. He explained that “although the official positions of the British Empire and of the United States may be so distinct as to be sometimes antagonistic, the peoples themselves are – not only in race and language, but in laws and religion and in matters of feeling – essentially one.” India and the Crown colonies fitted into Dilke’s imperial schematic as instruments for the union of Anglo-Saxondom. These lands and people were not to be incorporated into a framework of imperial citizenship, but rather would serve as sites for Anglo-Saxons to play out their obligation to provide good governance and civilization to the “cheaper” races. In both works, Dilke emphasized the idea of the colonies as racially, religiously, and culturally recognizable populations that would almost instinctively draw together in mutual self-interest and to strengthen their shared British identity. Economic links, like those to be forged by tariff reformers, were ignored, something to emerge organically out of this pre-existing racial community.

The conception of the British Empire as a union of culturally and racially linked communities scattered around the world was an extremely popular theme among Liberal imperialist thinkers and politicians. This strand of imperialist thought was embraced and popularized in particular by Lord Rosebery, former Prime Minister and leader of the imperialist faction of the Liberal Party. In an October 1898 address at the University of Edinburgh, Rosebery urged his student audience to dedicate their careers to imperial service. Like other liberal imperialists, Rosebery focused on the settler colonies, “the outer Britains…the great

\[252\text{Ibid., 1:5.}\]
\[253\text{Ibid., 2:578.}\]
commonwealths outside these Islands which own the British Crown.”  

Rosebery cautioned that patriotism was more than military service or colonial administration. The Liberal leader explained, “methods of welding the Empire together, and even of welding the English-speaking races together” would also be the work of “social methods, literary methods…and even athletic methods.”  

Rosebery urged a “higher and broader conception of the Empire” beyond the simple acquisition of land. Nor was the empire simply to be the vehicle for the accumulation of wealth through trade and industry; “trade…can never be the foundation of an Empire. Empires founded on trade alone must irresistibly crumble.”  

Rather, the empire was to be expanded, solidified, and even glorified by the cultivation of the cultural ties between the disparate British communities of the globe. Rosebery rejected cynical, materialistic motives to imperialism. Land, markets, and raw materials were transitory and unstable foundations for empire. The cultural development of the nation glorified empire, enriching the British heritage that served as the strongest bond of unity. Rosebery sought to show his audience the potential that would be unlocked by deepening this connection. If a shared feeling of community were established, the unification of Greater Britain would follow naturally and painlessly.

Liberals rapidly developed this line of imperialist thought as they attacked tariff reformers. Liberal imperialism provided an avenue to attack the central pillar of Chamberlain’s credibility, his expertise as the nation’s foremost imperialist and his promise that preference

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255 Ibid., 20-21.
256 Ibid., 22.
would unify the colonies and mother country. The opposition warned that, quite to the contrary, preferential tariffs would decisively undermine the foundations of imperial unity. Chamberlain initiated the debate with a warning that the empire stood at a crossroads between consolidation and disintegration. Liberal imperialists agreed, but where tariff reformers saw consolidation, liberal imperialists saw only disintegration. John Strachey, editor of The Spectator, wrote, “I meet Mr. Chamberlain’s declaration ‘No Preference no Empire’ with the contra declaration ‘No Free Trade no Empire.’”

Liberal imperialists wrote and spoke at length on this theme, offering to the country their own vision of the basis of British imperialism. In previous decades, this unifying bond had been described in cultural or racial terms, in 1903 liberal imperialists referred to the bonds of “sentiment.” Sentiment was the opposite of “interest,” the tariff reformers’ basis of empire. If sentiment were replaced with interest, so liberal imperialists argued, the consensual nature of membership in the British Empire would be destroyed, and the shared identity which held the colonies in common loyalty would be undone.

The flaws in Chamberlain’s proposals also left tariff reform open to criticism on other fronts. As the debate progressed, Chamberlain persistently failed to provide any coherent answer to the issue of the status of India and the Crown Colonies in either an imperial tariff system or a future imperial federation. Charles Dilke recognized this omission very early in the controversy. On May 28, 1903, Dilke spearheaded the first debate in Parliament. He criticized the way that Chamberlain fixated upon the welfare of the forty million British imperial subjects, but “[t]he remaining 350,000,000 he shut out not only of his speech…but of the whole policy which is now being developed as regards the trade, finance and future of the Empire.” Dilke added that “The people of this country are not going to permit a monstrous injustice to be done to the people of

257 Goldman, The Empire and the Century, 144.
India which this suggested policy would involve."\textsuperscript{258} Nor did this neglect improve with time. In March 1904, British businessman and Liberal Unionist Edward Sassoon wrote, “the case of India appears so far…to have gone by the board. No sort of authorised exposition of her destiny under the foreshadowed dispensation has yet seen the light.”\textsuperscript{259} Even as late as 1907, by which time the tariff policies of all British political parties had fully solidified, critics continued to mock the movement’s inability to fit India into its proposals.\textsuperscript{260} The purpose of these criticisms was not only to emphasize tariff reform’s deficiencies as a fiscal and economic policy, but also to attack the notion that Chamberlain’s movement was even imperialist in nature, when it failed to even acknowledge the existence of four-fifths of the population of the British Empire.

The liberal imperialist appeal to the welfare of India was driven, at least in part, by a sense of obligation for those non-white populations the empire ruled. These colonies had, in years past, been forced to adopt a rigorous policy of free trade; a failure to integrate them into a new tariff system would both be unfair and violate Britain’s ethical obligations to its imperial subjects. The liberal tendency to equate free trade with fairness and impartiality was crucial in sustaining this sentiment. The unrestricted flow of imports was proof that the metropole favored no colony or group of colonies over another. Demonstrated the metropole’s efforts to avoid favoritism or privileges toward any one or group of colonies. As Thomas Brassey explained, the empire was too large and diverse for a single, coherent tariff system. At the same time, it was impossible “to set up an imperial customs union on terms which would be just and equal to

\textsuperscript{258} \textit{Hansard}, 4s, 123: 141-98 (May 28 1903).
\textsuperscript{259} \textit{The Nineteenth Century and After}, March 1904, 444.
\textsuperscript{260} See S.M. Mitra, “India and Imperial Preference” (London: Cobden Club, 1907). Peter Marsh contends that Chamberlain’s failure to incorporate India into tariff reform was the result of his continued preoccupation with the settler colonies, reinforced by the administrative separation of the India and Colonial Offices. Marsh, \textit{Joseph Chamberlain}, 571.
all.”²⁶¹ Free traders linked this imperial idea of equity with their fears of the rise of a general tariff policy, worrying that more tariffs than those initially proposed by Chamberlain would need to be erected in order to benefit the colonies.

Brassey was not alone in his concern for colonial feeling. As part of his campaign against Chamberlain the autumn of 1903, Asquith developed the theme further. He asked his audience, “what tie of material interest have you got with South Africa by the fact that you give a preference to Canadian wheat or Australian mutton?” He warned of “a new and perpetual source of heart-burning, rivalry, jealousy, and discord” between “the component members of this great partnership.” If one colony benefited from tariff reform more than another, jealousy and resentment would begin to simmer. Tariffs and protectionism caused animosity, exclusion, and privilege; free trade, in contrast, meant that “One shall not be preferred to another and that equal justice shall be done to all.”²⁶² Earlier in the year, the editor of the Westminster Gazette had dubbed this policy the “equality of privilege.”²⁶³ No colony would feel mistreated or neglected if the British market was open to all on a level playing field. British businesses and customers would buy from whoever was willing to work hardest to sell the best products at the best prices. If one colony or colonial industry experienced decline, it was certainly not the fault of Britain, but rather the weakness of colonial business acumen and competitive spirit.

Even the act of negotiating commercial treaties could potentially produce disastrous results. Speaking at Newcastle on October 24, 1903, Asquith regaled his audience with descriptions of the complexities of a hypothetical imperial congress that would be assembled to devise an empire-wide customs union. Statesmen and diplomats from all parts of the empire

²⁶¹ Brassey, Fifty Years of Progress, 42.
²⁶² Asquith, Free Trade and the Empire, 27.
²⁶³ Westminster Gazette, May 16, 1903.
would need to be gathered, alongside expert statisticians, bureaucrats, representatives of all the various industries, and the leaders of unions and labor organizations, chambers of commerce, and more. With so many people, so many interests at stake, the fates of entire industries and livelihoods in the balance, Asquith concluded, “in the name of the country and the Empire, ‘Hands off!’”\(^{264}\) In private, even Lord Rosebery, shared these doubts. Decades of consistent British fiscal policy had shown the colonies Britain’s determination to preserve free trade. The colonies accepted this state of affairs, just as Britain accepted the colonies’ protectionism, and both were policies suited to their particular circumstances. “But now Mr C[hamberlain] has upset all this….the colonies will always be hankering for his scheme which is a bounty to them without any return from them.”\(^{265}\) The British façade of unanimous adherence to free trade had cracked open, raising the specter of endless lobbying from colonial leaders, determined to extract favorable concessions from Britain.

To a degree, the insistence that trade agreements were simply too complicated to understand, and the fear of colonial resentment at the unequal blessings of tariff reform bordered on the farcical. But, beyond this amount of unreality, both elements of the argument were based on an understanding of inter-imperial relations and domestic economy fiercely at odds with the tariff reformers. The fixation on distributing equal benefits to all the self-governing colonies derived from the understanding of the settler colonies as extensions of the British nation, the “sister” or “daughter” states of Greater Britain. The colonies were not foreign powers whose commercial jealousies and ambitions could be safely disregarded. Few, if any, would have argued that each part of the United Kingdom had benefited equally from the last half-century’s

\(^{264}\) Asquith, *Free Trade and the Empire*, 52.

experiment in free trade, nor would there have been any expectation that it would. There was no
equivalent of imminent secession from Kent, or Cornwall, or even Scotland, over the next
economic controversy in domestic politics. Yet liberals were also acutely aware of the position
of Ireland within the union. As the tariff controversy unfolded, Campbell-Bannerman also
declared his support for Irish self-government in November 1905. Local autonomy was, he
argued, “the only way of healing the evils of Ireland, of solving the difficulties of her
administration and giving content and prosperity to her people, and of making her a strength
instead of a weakness.” Within the liberal view of the British Empire, Home Rule and colonial
autonomy were facets of the same idea. Geography and historical developments had rendered it
expedient to grant the colonies self-rule to avoid unrest and rebellion. Ireland, with its own long
history of unrest and rebellion against British misrule, would be given justice in the same way.
Tariff reform threatened to undermine the basis of what liberal imperialists believed kept the
empire stable and harmonious, by converting the colonies from content populations of fellow-
Britons into a collection of Irelands.

Fundamentally, liberal imperialists believed that the fabric of the empire was maintained
by the shared identity between Britain and the settler colonies. This was the essence of the liberal
conception of empire, and formed a major component of their attacks on the tariff reform
campaign. It also goes far in explaining the impassioned hostility the controversy generated.
Defense of free trade was combined with a defense of empire, culminating in a defense of the
institutions the people of Britain held sacred from the dangers of protectionism. The Spectator,
typically an enthusiastic supporter of Chamberlain’s actions, held to a motto of “imperium et
libertas” – empire and liberty – and insisted to its readers, “We are imperialists first and Free-

266 Speeches by Henry Campbell-Bannerman, 171.
traders afterwards….If, then, we thought that by abandoning the policy of the free and open market…we could prevent the decay of the Empire…we should not hesitate to sacrifice the principle of Free-trade.” While some critics of tariff reform may have shared this sentiment, for many more the two were inextricably bound together. To remove one was to undo the other, and free trade imperialists had no intention of allowing Chamberlain and his allies to destroy the British Empire.

In this respect, it is hardly surprising that Chamberlain’s critics were eager to challenge his monopoly on imperialist rhetoric. The Radical-leaning Daily News blasted Chamberlain for his use of the phrase “Little Englander” to slander his opponents. They charged that “For now it is clear that everyone…is a ‘Little Englander’ who cares at all about England….to prove your wide capacity for world-business by going bankrupt in your own affairs – that is Mr. Chamberlain’s latest version of Imperialism. It is the delirium of megalomania.” The leaders of the colonies were themselves, the paper went further, equally “Little Canadians” and “Little Australians,” who looked to the development and prosperity of their countries foremost. The empire would be strengthened if Britain strengthened itself. Asquith repeated this idea in his national tour. Chamberlain and other tariff reforms had spoken of a small sacrifice in trade and taxation for the sake of unity, but Asquith contended, “Any one who strikes a blow and the root of the prosperity of the United Kingdom is doing the worst service which can be done to the Empire.”

Free trade imperialists anxiously questioned the consequences of preferential tariffs on the course of colonial development. The Glasgow program assumed foreign imports would be

267 The Spectator, May 23, 1903.
268 The Daily News, May 18, 1903.
269 Asquith, Free Trade and the Empire, 17
replaced in time by growing colonial trade, which in turn would encourage the colonies to lower their tariffs on British manufactured goods. In effect, this would create a neo-mercantilist imperial relationship, smothering the fledgling colonial industries with competition from the metropole. Liberals eagerly condemned this element of Chamberlain’s proposal. Chamberlain had asked his audiences to contemplate the future, when the 10 million Britons living in the colonies grew to equal the population of the British Isles; free trade imperialists asked their audiences to imagine the same thing. “Can he really suppose,” asked the *Westminster Gazette*, “that these forty millions would consent to have their industrial development arrested…or that even the existing eleven millions will accept this as a lofty and inspiring idea?” The colonies would not consent to the bankruptcy of their industrial development by British competition as part of a large-scale imperial tariff and trade bargain, nor should Britain desire such an outcome. It was certainly curious how Chamberlain and tariff reformers like him placed so much emphasis on Britain’s manufacturing sector, yet deny the colonies the very same thing. In contrast, the liberal imperialist, the true imperialist, would treat the growth of large, sophisticated, and competitive colonial manufacturing industries as a cause of celebration and symbols of the fruits of British imperialism.

Beyond these arguments of economic development and trade, however, free trade imperialists were horrified that the victory of tariff reform would mean the transformation of the empire’s basic binding force. Tariff reformers, with their calls for inter-imperial trade, looked to create an economic incentive to propel imperial unification. But this would only lead to the

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tension and controversy involved in intricate commercial negotiations, and resentment and lobbying of colonial interests for additional advantages and privileges. Even worse than the corrosive effects of such bickering, it would mean replacing patriotism and loyalty as the foundation of British imperialism with the so-called “sordid bonds.” Liberal economist Arthur Pigou, writing months before Chamberlain’s Birmingham speech, anticipated the tariff reformers’ imperialism and warned of converting the colonies from “a lofty devotion to Britain’s name into a sordid grabbing for her gold.” Campbell-Bannerman was even harsher in his characterization, making clear his disdain for “any such squalid bonds.”

Perhaps one of the most thoughtful articulations of this sentiment of imperialism was provided by the young philosopher Bertrand Russell, who in the winter of 1903-4 volunteered to write and speak out against tariff reform. In a review of William Ashley’s pro-tariff book, Russell coupled the rejuvenation of British liberalism with the defense of free trade and the empire. He was particularly repelled by the incipient xenophobia in much of the protectionist arguments, which he blamed as a side-effect of the expansion of the empire. “It would be cowardly to ignore the fact that so-called Imperialism has an ugly side to it,” he wrote, and “It has encouraged the belief, now accepted as almost axiomatic, that whatever benefits one nation must harm another.” While Chamberlain and others like him treated exports and imports as a catalogue of battlefield victories and defeats, Russell urged his readers to remember that the foreigner was not evil, and hatred of the other was no basis for an enduring empire. He insisted that replacing sentiment with interest would lead to eventual secession, because “Where the spirit

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271 *The Fortnightly Review*, March 1903, 554. *Speeches by Henry Campbell-Bannerman*, 105. Tariff reformers were keen to rebut this characterization of their agenda. In December, 1904, the official newsletter of the tariff reform movement commented that “We have heard a good deal about the ‘sordid bonds’ of Colonial preference from the Radical leaders.” *Monthly Notes on Tariff Reform*, December 1904, 301.

of monopoly is rampant, union among the different interests and classes rests on as precarious a basis as honour among thieves."  

More than that, to remove the concept of freedom – such as the freedom to trade – as the basis of the empire, would make the empire unworthy of Britain. Russell concluded by declaring, “Nothing but a steadfast adherence to the ideal of freedom can preserve our Empire; nothing else can make it worth preserving.”

On the same day Chamberlain delivered his Birmingham speech, Campbell-Bannerman at Scarborough described the British Empire as a “great and memorable and unexampled commonwealth of free nations.” The British Empire was, and should remain, a free association of British communities, working in harmony and exercising full autonomy in their internal affairs. Campbell-Bannerman’s vision of the consensual basis of the empire flowed readily from his general theme that the Unionist government was both corrupt and antidemocratic. Just as Prime Minister Arthur Balfour and the Conservative Party revealed themselves to be the bought hirelings of privileged, wealthy interests in their domestic policy, so too in their imperial and commercial policies.

Others did not go so far as Campbell-Bannerman’s full socio-political critique of the Unionists’ record, but were nevertheless ardent in their belief that the only sure basis for the future of the British Empire was to be found in preserving “sentiment” rather than material “interest.” Metaphors and allusions to family appeared frequently; families could be harmonious or they could be discordant, and rarely were families more discordant than when they squabbled over money. The same could happen, free trade imperialists worried, between Britain and the colonies – the “mother-country” and the “daughter” or “sister” states. Chamberlain and many

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273 Ibid.
274 Ibid., 215.
275 *The Times*, May 16, 1903.
tariff reformers had spoken of the need for imperial unity, even if tariff reform proved economically costly. But free traders expected the poor and working-class of Britain would grow to resent the increased cost of living and the rise in unemployment brought about by food tariffs and trade conflicts. Richard Haldane, a prominent Liberal imperialist, warned that tariffs on food would “so gall our own people as to endanger that cause of the unity of the Empire which most of us to-day have strongly at heart.”

Having been forced to pay for the continued maintenance of the empire, the masses in Britain would start to consider whether keeping the empire was worth the cost in their daily lives. Free trade imperialism neatly avoided this conflict, allowing for harmony rather than conflict between patriotism and self-interest.

Along similar lines, the tariff reformers spoke of establishing “bonds” to keep the colonies from seceding, or “binding” the empire together. Liberal imperialists rhetorically jabbed at such terms by distinguishing between bonds that united and bonds that restricted. Edward Grey aptly described the sentimental view of British imperialism as “the consciousness of kinship, the consciousness of a common blood, and a common-sense of duty, a pride of race and history. These are the links of Empire, bonds which attach, not bonds which chafe.” Liberal and free trade imperialists wished to maintain and strengthen the “bond” of loyalty keeping the colonies united in spirit with Britain. Their conception of the bond was that of national identity, something which they saw as transcending material interests. Interest was transient, prone to disruption, and crassly cynical in a way that could not stir the hearts of British subjects to patriotism. Speaking in the House of Lords in July 1903, Rosebery starkly insisted that even if

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277 Quoted in The Spectator, July 4, 1903.
tariff reform brought the wealth and prosperity it promised, it still needed to be fought on its consequences for the empire:

You may increase the wealth of the Empire, as you promise to do; you may improve our fiscal condition, as you promise to do; you may raise wages, as you promise to do; but the Empire you create by these means will be a very different Empire from the one you know at present.278

The “sentimental” bond of empire was to be preserved from the tariff reformers’ short-sightedness. Sentiment ensured not only the loyalty of the “daughter” states, but gave British imperialism its idealistic and inspirational characteristic. The empire could be preserved and should be preserved because it existed for the benefit of all its inhabitants, to allow them to live with the fullest degree of freedom and self-rule possible within a larger state framework. The colonies had rallied behind Britain and dispatched soldiers to fight in South Africa not because of promises of gold and trade concessions lured them away, but out of a sense of duty, devotion, and loyalty towards the British Empire. Without a shared identity, inevitably the whole imperial edifice could crumble once it was rocked by some crisis. In a dramatic and provocative snub to Chamberlain, Winston Churchill argued this point in the Birmingham Town Hall. “British dominion…could not endure for a year, perhaps not for a month, if it was founded upon a material basis.” The young politician continued, “The strength and splendour of our authority is derived not from physical forces, but from moral ascendancy, liberty, justice, English tolerance, and English honesty.”279 The British Empire held together because its populations were British, and proud to remain British as they developed their local communities with the full freedom guaranteed by the British cultural and political heritage and

278 Hansard, House of Lords Debate, 124: 1145-68 (July 2 1903).
the protection the imperial aegis provided. These bonds of imperial unity lacked tangible, quantifiable form, but liberal imperialists were adamant they were no less real or strong than anything which could be welded by the cold, economic calculations of the tariff reformers.

**Conclusion**

On its surface, the tariff reform controversy appears as another battle in a long clash between British parties. It was a contest to decide Britain’s commercial and fiscal policies, an economic and statistical argument over trade, employment, and tax rates. But squabbles between politicians, economists, and philosophers over the balance of imports and exports, shilling duties on hundredweights of corn, prices and wages and more, belied a deeper political struggle in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. The fiscal controversy surrounding imperial preference with the settler colonies was, after May 1903, the arena in which this struggle played out. As the Unionist Party’s unity crumbled and its electoral dominance waned, both the Liberal and fledgling Labour Party surged to new life and purpose. The intensity of the passions stirred and the bitterness with which arguments were aired on relatively trifling new taxes on imported foreign foodstuffs indicate that more was at stake than simply an adjustment to British commercial policy. The tariff controversy began with Chamberlain’s stark warning in May of 1903 that the country stood at a fateful crossroads. Countless politicians, writers, and thinkers reiterated this sense of consequence, as much from tariff reform’s supporters as from its detractors. Tariff reform’s critics were just as certain that the movement’s success would portend the collapse of the British Empire, and with it, the nation. This was not because minor adjustments to tax policy would explode the imperial edifice in a crisis of secession and
industrial ruin. Instead, the fight over tariff reform was the manifestation of a larger contest between two starkly opposing ideological visions of Britain, British imperialism, and the nation and the empire’s future course.

While tariff reformers adopted the mentality of crisis and urgency inherent in Chamberlain’s warning that “you have an opportunity, you will never have it again,” British liberals and free traders at the turn of the century were already deeply imbricated with a sense that liberalism was facing a crisis of identity and conscience. Lofty hopes that the advent of mass democracy would precipitate the steady march of progress and reform into a more free and just society had been dashed by the string of Unionist-Conservative victories since 1885. Instead, the masses appeared susceptible to the dazzling allure of territorial aggrandizement and military adventurism in the mad scramble for colonies at the end of the nineteenth century. This narrative reached its climax with the Boer War, which many liberals saw as the most brazen manifestation of imperialism as a corrupt bargain between the state and entrenched economic interests to pillage a land of its resources. The consequences of the war – high taxes, reckless spending, military occupation of foreign lands, unrestrained demagoguery, and most of all the human costs – were the antithesis of the democratic and progressive values so many liberals cherished as Britain’s political heritage.

Liberals and free traders perceived the attempt to subvert free trade with imperial preference as the final assault by antidemocratic, antiegalitarian forces of privileged classes and their lackeys in Parliament and the press to undo a half-century of liberal progress. By the beginning of the century, free traders had cultivated a durable mythology that linked the rise of free trade in the 1840s with the nation’s era of economic dominance and political integrity. Free
trade enriched the nation and shielded domestic politics from corruption and lobbying, ensuring that everyone enjoyed the fullest freedom to better themselves without arbitrary restriction. Reversing free trade meant reversing progress, destroying prosperity, and corrupting the very soul of British society with the established of a plutocracy of the wealthy and privileged. Ideological fears blended with tangible concerns that the poor, already at the brink of poverty, would suffer from taxes on their bread. The liberal defense of free trade was not only economic, political, and ideological, but moral as well.

Here, at least, socialists and liberals were able to band together in their shared rejection of Chamberlain’s proposals. The sense that tariff reform was a plot by the wealthy to exploit the working-class poor motivated them to cooperate, reflected most tangibly in their electoral pact for the 1906 general election. But whereas Liberals held free trade as a central ideological tenet, socialists only accepted free trade as a matter of convenience. The tariff controversy was, in their view, an opportunity to illustrate the inadequacies of Britain’s predominant political parties and to offer socialism as a viable national alternative path to national harmony, prosperity, and democracy. Free enterprise and *laissez faire* economics were to be replaced by a concerted government effort to benefit the masses, through social welfare programs, the abolition of many capitalistic privileges, and broad nationalization of key industries. While socialists and liberals held diametrically opposing ideological visions of the makeup of their nations and societies, they nevertheless rallied together to defeat the vision of the country’s future they saw in tariff reform.

At the beginning of the century, the Liberal Party had been wracked by division over the party’s future. While some looked upon imperial expansion as symptomatic of a disease within the body politic, the so-called liberal imperialists were convinced that, whatever might be said of
Unionist mismanagement, Britain’s future was inevitably tied to the growth of the empire. Yet Chamberlain’s call for imperial unity found no support among their ranks, and some of the tariff reformers’ most articulate, effective, and persistent critics were those who insisted that Chamberlain’s imperial preference was a blueprint for imperial disintegration. Free trade imperialists warned the tariff reformers’ vision of empire harkened back to the disastrous mercantilism of the eighteenth century, which had sparked colonial rebellion and nearly destroyed the empire completely. They feared tariffs would drive divisive wedges between the colonies and the metropole, while also breeding resentment among working-class Britons whose food would be more expensive all for the profit of distant colonial businesses. Liberal imperialists also insisted that Chamberlain’s imperialism was not imperial at all, exemplified by his inability to consider the status of India and the many other non-white territories under British dominion. How, they argued, could Chamberlain and his followers claim to be working for the empire, when they remained silent on how tariff reform would apply to the vast majority of the empire’s inhabitants.

Yet on this point, imperialists on both sides were not as different as their rhetoric made them appear. Both sides of the fiscal controversy traced their imperialism’s lineage from the same sources: historians like Seeley and Froude, and a collection of statesmen and activists from the late Victorian period such as Rosebery and Dilke; even Chamberlain’s service as Colonial Secretary was subject to praise from free trade imperialists on occasion. Despite the size and diversity of the empire, on which imperialists of all parties so often waxed lyrical, British imperialists were remarkably blind to vast swaths of the empire they held so highly in their political visions. Free trade imperialists were eager to point out that Chamberlain and the tariff
reformers would not – perhaps simply could not – coherently incorporate India or the many other African and Asian colonies into the unified imperial framework they hoped to construct. Yet India appeared no more frequently in liberal visions of empire. Because liberal imperialists were content with the status quo, to do nothing and leave the empire as it was, the omission was much less glaring.

Fundamentally, free trade imperialists characterized the British Empire as a globe-spanning collection of autonomous British or English states, each community aligned with the others by a shared allegiance to the Crown and a reverence for their cultural, historical, linguistic, and racial heritage. Liberal imperialists spoke of an empire of liberty, a free association or family of nations, able to pursue their national aspirations with the absolute minimum of interference from a distant, autocratic central authority. “Sentiment” rather than force or “interest” kept the empire together. Colonial subjects remained loyal to and proud of the British flag because they recognized themselves as constituent parts of an overarching community. Tariff reform, these free trade and liberal imperialists feared, would replace sentiment with interest as the binding force of the empire. Rather than a transcendent appeal to culture, history, and blood, the empire would be maintained by greed, which in an increasingly uncertain world could be all too fleeting.

Given this “sentimental” imperialism, it is understandable that India and many other colonies would become such glaring blind spots in the rhetoric and imagination of liberal imperialists. Non-white, non-English, and practicing foreign religions and cultures, it was simply inconceivable that the vast majority of the British Empire’s peoples could be incorporated into their vision of the British Empire. Because liberal imperialists could not square this circle, because the reality of the empire did not comfortably fit into the idealistic, politically alluring
rhetoric of British imperialism, the vast majority of the actual empire was effectively absented from the public mind. In effect, the British Empire was to be synonymous with a global British nation. In describing the relationship between Britain and Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as a commonwealth of nations or a free association of British peoples exercising full local autonomy, it is difficult to see what, if anything, was imperial about the British Empire. When the Liberal Party was returned to office in the wake of the 1906 election, they would finally have their opportunity to prove the tariff reform imperialists wrong, and to put into practice their conception of British imperialism.
On March 31, 1897, Joseph Chamberlain was the guest of honor at the annual dinner of the Royal Colonial Institute at the Hotel Metropole. The Colonial Secretary proposed a toast, praising the work of an earlier generation of imperial patriots. Chamberlain said, “although they must have known that few of them could live to gather the fruit and to reap the harvest….their faith has been justified by the result of their labours, and their foresight must be recognised.” Chamberlain’s tribute to the men of the Colonial Institute was a reminder that, despite his public prominence, Chamberlain was but one imperialist among many who had laid the foundations of British imperial sentiment before him.

In much the same way, the ideological battle between free traders and tariff reformers that opened in May 1903 was a continuation of disputes which had bedeviled British imperialists for decades. The tariff reform controversy was an escalation of disagreements about the correct manner of transforming the empire, but both Chamberlain’s policies and the liberal imperialists’ rebuttals would have been just as familiar in 1893 as 1903. In the 1880s and 1890s, the Imperial Federation League was the largest and most prominent group working for imperial unity. But

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although the League boasted numerous successes that seemed to bring them closer to the ultimate goal of federation, the group tore itself apart in a series of bitter disputes over the best, most proper policies for binding the empire together. When Chamberlain went public with his demand for reform, the Colonial Secretary was in effect committing himself and his followers to one of the factions of this older debate.

Chamberlain’s open support gave the advocates of tariffs and imperial economic union a sudden prominence that inevitably provoked a reaction from imperialist thinkers and organizations that had long been mired in these disputes. They quickly stepped forward to offer the British people policy alternatives to tariff reform, insistent that there were still other avenues for imperial consolidation besides the divisive question of preferential tariffs. In particular, the Pollock Committee rapidly developed into an extremely effective pressure group, clearly organizing its objectives, effectively garnering attention in the press, and cultivating a series of contacts within the government. Their scheme of non-controversial, bi-partisan imperial reorganization briefly offered a stark contrast to the tariff reformers mired in internecine party feuds and fierce public arguments with free traders. Yet the Pollock Committee eventually failed in its goals, raising new doubts about whether the empire could truly be refashioned in the way imperialists dreamed.

The tariff reform debate was also a catalyzing moment for a collection of new imperialist thinkers and activists, members of a younger generation who were simultaneously inspired by the rhetoric of empire and frustrated by the countless setbacks and obstacles suffered by their imperialist forefathers. Some, like the writer Richard Jebb, saw the changes unfolding in the fabric of the empire and recognized that imperial reformers would need to adapt as well. Even
then, they frequently disagreed amongst themselves about the precise nature of the reforms they
would carry out. Whatever their position on the question of free trade versus imperial preference,
they were activists dedicating their careers to the business of building a new, more enduring
British Empire.

In the previous two chapters, the tariff reformers, free traders, and their conflicting
visions of the future of the British nation and empire were examined in opposition to one another.
This chapter places the debate within a broader context, emphasizing that the empire which they
dedicated so much attention to was changing around them. The tariff reform movement had
intruded on a wider Edwardian debate about the empire, one with a history stretching back
decades, and one that would be carried forward by another generation of British imperialists after
them. At the same time, the legacy of this longer history of halting, incomplete reform had
crucial consequences that an otherwise insular fixation on the arguments on tariff reform
overlooks. Domestic studies of tariff reform often present Chamberlain’s Birmingham speech in
May 1903 as the beginning of the campaign.281 But the 1902 Colonial Conference, during which
the colonies urged the British government to consider preferential tariffs, was at least a major
impetus behind Chamberlain’s decision.282

But the 1902 Colonial Conference was also a watershed moment, an indicator that the
empire was evolving while British reformers squabbled amongst themselves. In 1902, the

281 See Zebel, ‘Joseph Chamberlain and the Electoral Genesis of Tariff Reform’; Sykes, Tariff Reform in British
Politics, 1903-1911. Ewen Green argues that though “tariff reform must be seen as the product of a dynamic
relationship between questions of decline and the questions of Conservative identity,” these are largely presented as
domestic dynamics, with the empire being something for imperial reformers to act upon, rather than key players in
the reform process as well. Green, Crisis of Conservatism, 14.
282 See Amery, Life of Joseph Chamberlain, vol.5 Ewen Green argues that though “The nature and timing of the
tariff campaign owed a great deal to the…1902 Colonial Conference,” it was chiefly because Chamberlain could use
the example to strengthen his case for the British public. Green, Crisis of Conservatism, 75.
delegates agreed that a new conference would be convened in 1906. This decision arguably represented one of the most important steps in the organization of the British Empire in decades. The 1907 Imperial Conference gathered the prime ministers of the self-governing colonies in London to sit as equals in consultation with the British government on matters of shared interest. Slowly, the symbolic significance of this system of conferences between governments dawned on imperialists. The Dominion colonies had grown from frontier settlements into nations with aspirations and ambitions distinct from those of the mother country. At the same time, this new colonial nationalism was not a cause for concern. Because the self-governing colonies were peopled by fellow Britons, sharing a common cultural heritage, the growth of new British nations within the empire represented a new phase in imperial development. The idea of federation gave way to the idea of alliance, or cooperation, between otherwise sovereign nation-states, bound together by the sentimental ties of their shared British world.

The proceedings of the 1907 conference were an intersection of many different elements of the Edwardian imperial climate, testament to the vibrancy and variety in British imperial thought and imagination at the turn of the century. The conference system itself was a legacy of the work of the Imperial Federation League, which had originally developed the concept in the 1880s. The work of the Pollock Committee was a key question of the conference’s agenda, and

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283 The conference was delayed until 1907 as a result of the British general election. Due to the change in government, the new administration required additional time to organize the conference, which would have required the colonial prime ministers to be absent while their parliaments were in session.

284 In particular, the British World methodology emphasizes the evolution of a diffuse identity grounded in the conception of a shared Britishness. See Bridge and Fedorowich, *The British World*. British world historians emphasize the importance of networks, of trade, communication, and migration in sustaining this identity, and in facilitating the malleability of this sense of Britishness. See, in particular, James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). The British world is not without its critics, who have raised serious concerns about the lack of analytical precision and coherence of ‘Britishness.’ See Bright and Dilley, “After the British World” and Kennedy, *Imperial History Wars*, 74-81. These concerns aside, British and colonial imperialists nevertheless believed they shared a common identity, even as they struggled to adequately define it.
so too was the question of preferential tariffs. Moreover, following the landslide 1906 election, the Liberal Party was once more in office for the first time in over a decade; the conference was the embodiment of every liberal imperialist ideal, a demonstration of disparate communities of British peoples coming together freely to cultivate the bonds of unity through discussion and consensus.

The easy compatibility between liberal imperialism’s rhetoric of sentimental bonds and the principle of the conference system ended there. In practice, the 1907 conference presented the new Liberal government with a dilemma. It was clear that the colonial premiers had their own agendas for the empire, and chief among them was preferential tariffs. With the Liberals’ unswerving commitment to free trade, there was no room for compromise, and the conference threatened to become a colossal embarrassment for the liberal imperialists. With few options available to them, the British government turned the spirit of liberal imperialism on its head. Refusing to accept the colonial urgings for tariffs, the British delegates’ talk of freedom – in this case, the freedom to ignore the colonies – was used to recapitulate metropolitan privilege.

The continued failure of imperial reformers, even those not aligned with Chamberlain’s tariff campaign, to advance the cause of imperial federation points to the fact that the dawning of the century marked as much a continuation as it did a departure from the past. Duncan Bell has argued that the Edwardian period witnessed the ascendancy of “visions of a multinational commonwealth” at the expense of older ideas of a grandiose unitary imperial state, marking a key distinction between Victorian and Edwardian conceptions of imperial federation.\(^{285}\) To the degree that Edwardian imperialists ever shared a collective vision of British imperialism, this characterization threatens to exaggerate the extent of the break with the past, and diminish the

degree of division within the movement. In the case of the Pollock Committee, the differences between Victorian and Edwardian imperialists were primarily tactical, a recognition that progress was slow while remaining hopeful that time had not run out. On the other hand, imperialist thinkers like Richard Jebb urged reforms to accept the reality of colonial nationalism and autonomy.

Tariff reform complicated this question, cleaving imperialists who might otherwise have acted as a unified pressure group, and blurring the lines between domestic and imperial matters. Edwardian imperialism was too divided and inchoate to be fitted neatly into categories. Certainly, tariff reform was the dominant issue of these years. But just as focusing only on tariff reform’s domestic elements obscures its true imperial scope and nature, so too focusing only on tariff reform obscures the true scope and dynamism of British imperial thought at the beginning of the century. Tariff reform existed in and interacted with a constellation of imperial ideas and organizations suffusing British politics. Beyond the intellectual debate and political controversy, tariff reform played a key role in the practice and policy of British imperialism.

The Royal Colonial Institute and the Imperial Federation League

When Joseph Chamberlain inaugurated the tariff movement in Birmingham, he was committing his political career to the policy of imperial reform through economic union. Tariff reform embraced the principle that Britain and the self-governing colonies could be drawn together by increasing trade between them, a goal he had supported for years. At both the 1897 and 1902 Colonial Conferences, Chamberlain’s hopes for some great gesture towards imperial consolidation had been disappointed by colonial indifference. Chamberlain concluded that
economic union was the only avenue that might appeal to them, and thus the only way forward on the path to federation. Chamberlain was taking a position on a controversy which had already divided British imperialists for decades. Although a self-proclaimed “missionary of empire,” his impassioned belief in British imperialism was that of a recent convert, compared to colleagues like Lord Rosebery and Charles Dilke. At the same time, despite Chamberlain’s public prominence, his connections and associations to the leading imperial organizations of the day were limited. By 1903, these institutions already boasted of long years of energetic public outreach, disseminating and popularizing their ideas about imperial reform throughout Britain and the wider empire. A whole generation of British politicians and thinkers had planted the seeds of imperial sentiment that Chamberlain harvested in 1903.

The first and most enduring of these organizations was the Royal Colonial Institute. Originally named the Colonial Society, the Institute was founded in 1868 with the Viscount Bury as president. From its inception, the Institute was to be nonpartisan, its executive committee containing both Conservatives and Liberals. It quickly received royal approval and by 1870 renamed itself the Royal Colonial Institute. At the first council meeting, Viscount Bury envisioned the Institute as both a social nexus and repository for information on all parts of the Empire, “some centre of attraction” where British imperialists and colonial visitors could interact. Early financial constraints forced the Institute to locate its headquarters in an inauspicious office above a London storefront on the Strand, but in 1878, the Prince of Wales

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286 The Colonial Society’s inaugural dinner included the Viscounts Bury and Monck, the Duke of Manchester, the Marquis of Normanby, and the MPs Chichester Fortescue, and Robert Loyd-Lindsay. For a full list of those present, see *The Times*, February 25, 1869.
287 In the preface of the first volume of *The Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, the Institute’s secretary explained the change in name was to avoid confusion with the Royal College of Surgeons when abbreviated. See *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute* (London: Royal Colonial Institute, 1870) 1:iii.
288 *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, June 1869, 2.
became honorary President and in 1882 a royal charter was granted. The Institute’s eventual financial security was reflected in the purchase in 1885 of a new building on Northumberland Avenue for £20,000.\textsuperscript{289}

In addition to a gathering place, the Institute’s founders hoped to create a reading room, library, and museum. Though the museum failed to materialize, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Institute’s library had become a preeminent repository of publications on the empire. In 1907, the Institute’s editor Archibald Colquhoun, formerly the first administrator of Southern Rhodesia and head of several exploration expeditions in Southeast Asia, boasted that the library contained more than 70,000 volumes “covering every possible field of interest or research in the Colonies….The Institute is prepared to answer the queries of members on all subjects of Colonial interest, nor is it niggardly in this respect to outsiders.”\textsuperscript{290} Combined with its monthly paper-readings and discussions groups, the Institute had evolved into a substantial vehicle for fostering intra-imperial dialogue and public awareness.

The RCI was primarily an educational and social organization. In the 1880s, those interested in imperial reform worked to establish a political organization to lobby for change. This effort culminated in the foundation of the Imperial Federation League in late 1884 under the leadership of William E. Forster, Chief Secretary for Ireland in Gladstone’s second government. Like the Colonial Institute, the IFL was avowedly cross-party; following Forster’s death in 1886, Lord Rosebery and the Conservative Edward Stanhope served as president interchangeably until

\textsuperscript{289} Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, January 1907, 121. Volume 32 of the Institute’s journal, covering the period December 1901 to November 1902, includes a sketch drawing of the Institute’s exterior, as well as photographs of the interior, including its library, newspaper, writing, and smoking rooms, all contributing to the overall impression of the Institute as an established center of authoritative learning and knowledge on the colonies.

\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.
1893. In addition to prominent politicians, the League was joined by many writers and public figures, including both John Seeley and James Froude, as well as James Bryce, and Lord Tennyson. Colonial leaders were also key figures in the IFL; Charles Tupper and Alfred Deakin, the future Prime Ministers of Canada and Australia respectively, also joined the League.

From the start, the IFL’s goal was “to secure by Federation the permanent unity of the Empire” but the founding resolution emphasized that “no scheme of Federation should interfere with the existing rights of local parliaments as regards local affairs.” At the same time, the League urged that “any scheme…should combine on an equitable basis the resources of the Empire for the maintenance of common interests, and adequately provide for an organised defence of common rights.” The League’s founding principles reflected both its strength and weakness, what historian John Kendle has characterized as the desire “to preserve harmony by stressing the general lines favoured by all rather than by elaborating definite schemes.” This approach resulted in significant ambiguity and vagueness, a fact reflected in the IFL’s conception of “imperial federation”. Forster admitted, “We want to convey the notion that ultimately, hereafter, there must be a union, in some form or other, of England with her Colonies….and I do not know any word which will better expression that notion than the word ‘Federation.’” The issue of precisely what “imperial federation” meant would linger throughout the IFL’s existence. In its early years, however, the League focused on building political momentum for the principle

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291 Stanhope resigned the League’s presidency upon becoming Colonial Secretary in 1886, but resumed the position when he was transferred to the War Office the following year. Likewise, Rosebery resigned in 1892 after becoming Foreign Secretary. Colin Matthew observes that by the late 1880s, only 6 of the 83 MPs affiliated with the IFL were Liberal. However, Duncan Bell notes that Matthew does not distinguish between Unionists and Liberal Unionists. H.C.G. Matthew, The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 163; Bell, Idea of Greater Britain, 17.

292 United Empire: The Royal Colonial Institute Journal, April 1915, 263.


294 United Empire, April 1915, 264.
of reform, in whatever shape it would ultimately take. In 1886 the League achieved its first notable success, convincing the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury to call a conference to discuss federation and other topics of mutual interest between Britain and the colonies.

Despite many colonial officials already present in London for Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, attendance at the 1887 Colonial Conference was uneven. Only three of eleven colonial prime ministers attended: Samuel Griffith of Queensland, John Downer of South Australia, and Robert Thorburn of Newfoundland. The remaining colonial delegates were comprised of an array of cabinet ministers, agents-general, legislators, and retired statesmen. In addition, nearly three dozen “gentlemen connected with Crown Colonies” attended as observers by invitation. Reflecting the League’s broad interpretation of imperial federation, Stanhope’s invitation promised “the discussion of those questions which appear more particularly to demand attention at the present time.” Though Stanhope singled out imperial military organization as the chief topic on the agenda, he also encouraged discussion of commercial and social relations, postage and telegraph communications, and promised that the British government would not broach the subject of “political federation” and would do nothing to infringe colonial autonomy.

Nevertheless, with both the Prime Minister and a sizable part of the Cabinet in attendance, the 1887 conference was a testament to the rapid growth of the IFL’s influence, as well as the political popularity of imperial rhetoric in British politics. While the conference was purely consultative, perhaps the most significant outcome of the conference was the decision by the Australian colonies to subsidize the cost of a Royal Navy squadron for their defense.

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296 Ibid., vii-viii.
297 Kendle, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 7-9.
importantly, the 1887 Colonial Conference established an important precedent, a quasi-official
venue in which the British and colonial governments could consult one another on imperial
policy. Some of the conference’s delegates quickly grasped the conference’s potential to
circumvent the Colonial Office and bring grievances directly to the Prime Minister. In particular,
Alfred Deakin, then serving as Chief Secretary for Victoria, used the occasion to condemn the
“natural vis inertia of the Government department specially charged with Colonial concerns,”
which blocked colonial initiatives and frustrated the development of a common imperial
policy.298 Reminiscing on the experience years later, Deakin believed his “unrestrained vigour
and enthusiasm” had convinced Lord Salisbury to abandon plans to cede the New Hebrides
islands to France against Australian protests.299 In the face of colonial difficulties with the
Colonial Office, Deakin and other colonial statesmen could appreciate the value of dealing
directly with the British Prime Minister.

The League regarded the 1887 Colonial Conference as a major first step in creating a
mechanism for summoning a congress from across the empire to enact federation. But after this
early success, progress quickly stalled. The IFL was stymied by Lord Salisbury’s refusal to call a
second conference; the Prime Minister insisted he could not justify a new conference unless a
concrete set of proposals were on the agenda. As a result, the initiative passed to the League,
which had so far avoided making specific commitments on the federation question in order to
maintain its internal consensus. Disputes immediately broke into the open, and the IFL was
effectively divided into three main groups: those who advocated federation by political union,
empire-wide military organization, or a customs union. Even these opposing camps were divided

298 Walter Murdoch, _Alfred Deakin, a Sketch_ (London: Constable, 1923), 112.
299 Alfred Deakin, _The Federal Story: The Inner History of the Federal Cause_ , ed. Herbert Brookes (Melbourne:
Robertson & Mullens, 1944).
within themselves; advocates of political union disagreed between establishing a fully-fledged imperial Parliament or an intermediary consultative body with colonial representatives. And those in favor of a customs union debated either full free trade within the empire – the so-called *zollverein* method – or preferential tariffs.

Consequently, the League’s attempt to develop a blueprint for federation was crippled by internal dissension. In November 1892, the League finally published a report of its recommendations for federation. The report embodied a series of compromises that attempted to balance the competing factions by remaining as ambiguous as possible. But the report failed to rise to the standard set by Salisbury’s requirement for concrete proposals. The League recommended the establishment of a “Council of the Empire” and colonial contributions to a unified imperial military force, but failed to define the council’s powers or the means of levying a military tax. The question of preferential tariffs was meanwhile consigned to the report’s appendix.³⁰⁰ Despite the report’s deep flaws, on April 13, 1893, the IFL sent a deputation led by Thomas Brassey to Prime Minister William Gladstone, urging a second conference. The *Times*’ assessment was scathing. Gladstone’s response to the report was “conveyed in such a prodigious quantity of mellifluous phrases that its members apparently did not at once grasp the fact that their request had been entirely ignored….so far as its avowed object was concerned, the deputation might just as well have remained at home.” The *Times*’ editorial added, “until public opinion here and in the colonies is sufficiently matured to enable general principles to be formulated and the main outlines of a working arrangement to be sketched out, it would be

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unwise to take any official steps to bring about what would necessarily be a discussion in the air.”

The Aftermath of the Imperial Federation League

The attempt to reach a consensus policy for achieving imperial federation broke apart the League. The government’s decisive refusal to call another colonial conference left the IFL with little remaining purpose. In November 1894, after only a decade in operation, the League was dissolved and its membership separated to form competing successor organizations. The same year, the Imperial Federation (Defence) Committee was established, and in 1895 the British Empire League. A third organization, the United Empire Trade League, had already formed in 1891. Each group represented a competing vision of how imperial federation was to be achieved.

The Defence Committee’s activities were shrouded in secrecy, and the group maintained the anonymity of its membership throughout its existence. Its periodic statements of policy were presented to the press by the Committee’s honorary secretary, Arthur H. Loring, though other members of the committee would at times publish articles, pamphlets, and public statements on issues of imperial reform. Despite its secrecy, the Committee presented itself as carrying on the IFL’s imperial principles, and urged the necessity of establishing a unified imperial military force. In its own founding resolutions, the Defence Committee asserted that a shared defense,

301 The Times, April 14, 1893.
302 The IFDC persisted in presenting itself with the parenthetical “(Defence)” officially throughout its existence. See, for example A.H. Loring, ‘The Imperial Federation (Defence) Committee: 1894-1906.’ United Empire, May 1915. In contrast to either the Defence Committee or British Empire League, the United Empire Trade League was not included in the “Kindred Societies” series.
303 No full roster of the IFDC’s membership has survived, though membership in the group can be gleaned from memoirs and various publications. The jurist Frederick Pollock, future Minister for War H.O. Arnold-Forster, the naval expert John Colomb, emigration advocate Frederick Young, and writer Francis Blake Crofton were also likely members of the IFDC. At times, the IFDC described itself as “entirely non-party, containing several members of Parliament from both sides of the House.” See The National Review, July 1894, 593.
particularly naval forces, was “the primary necessity common to all” but no common system yet existed. The IFDC determined that, once the empire possessed a single military force, political and administrative institutions necessary to organize the military and collect taxes would follow. The Defence Committee reasoned that with a common imperial military, federation would be achieved in every practical sense. In contrast to its predecessor, which boasted a large colonial following, the IDFC focused on shaping British opinion. The group hoped to “induce” the British government to present the colonies with plans to integrate them into imperial military policy-making and taxation. The colonies were to at long last enjoy the advantages of joint governance of the empire, and share in the obligations that came with it.

The IFDC’s pretensions of being the true heir of imperial federation provoked angry attacks from other quarters, underscoring the deep divisions and petty squabbling among British imperialists that had broken the League. Howard Vincent, Secretary of the United Empire Trade League and formerly a member of the IFL, caustically criticized the IFDC’s arrogance “to convey the impression that it stands in the position of heir-at-law and residuary” to the IFL. Vincent accused the anonymous members of the Committee of destroying the League. He argued that “It was largely due to a few whose watchword was ‘Make the Colonies pay.’ They were deaf to the common sense of the majority.... Prejudice and obstinacy have before now annihilated armies. So it was in this case.”304 Instead of military integration, Vincent urged Britain to follow the path to federation laid out by the colonies. Citing Canadian-Australian resolutions in support of measures to expand imperial commerce, Vincent was confident that some measure of preferential tariffs would be the best step towards federation.305

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305 Ibid., 28.
In contrast to its counterparts, the British Empire League charted a far less confrontational course, one that avoided open feuding. At the inaugural meeting in January 1896, the Treasurer Sir John Lubbock, a Liberal MP and former head of the Imperial Federation League’s London chapter, echoed the IFL’s original goal “to secure the permanent unity of the Empire.” Like United Empire, the BEL believed periodic conferences between the empire’s governments could serve as a venue for discussing and organizing closer commercial integration. But Lubbock rejected the potentially controversial issue of tariffs in favor of streamlining commercial and financial regulations inside the empire. He also stressed the strong cultural ties that bound the colonies to Britain, expressing optimism that union was inevitable. Further distancing the group from controversy, the new Chairman and former Colonial Office undersecretary, Robert G.W. Herbert, stressed that union could only occur through mutual consent, and promised the BEL would not push for “certain fixed contributions” advocated “by some well-intentioned gentlemen.”

Ultimately, the British Empire League was most interested in the general propaganda work of nurturing imperial patriotism. Writing in 1916, C. Freeman Murray, the BEL’s first Secretary, explained that the BEL existed largely due to “the importance of the continuance of the movement to secure the permanent unity of the Empire.” In light of the nature of the IFL’s dissolution, this aversion to specific reform agendas was an attractive alternative. But this approach also meant that Murray could boast of few accomplishments. The League had organized entertainment and public events for the colonial delegations during the imperial

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307 United Empire, June 1915, 431.
conferences, and raised funds for a statue to the explorer Captain Cook on the Mall in London.\textsuperscript{308} Less impressively, Murray also credited the League for organizing a charity concert that raised only £3,600 for the widows and orphans of soldiers killed in the Boer War in 1900, and contributing to the establishment of the Franco-British Exhibition in 1908.\textsuperscript{309} Ultimately, its effort to avoid engaging in the more grandiose and thus controversial debate on imperial federation left the BEL without a defining issue or agenda. Instead, its members preferred a nebulous advocacy for imperial unity which defied any easy definition or tangible results. Its activities were wide-ranging and inoffensive, but also erratic, unfocused, and at times downright paltry compared to the seemingly monumental task of building a new globe-spanning federal state out of the British Empire.

The disagreements between the Imperial Federation League’s successors lingered into the new decade. Yet, by 1902, imperialists were optimistic that the union of the empire was still on the horizon, their hopes buoyed by the federation of the Australian colonies, the contribution of colonial military contingents to fight in South Africa, and Joseph Chamberlain’s exemplary tenure as Colonial Secretary. Chamberlain, sympathetic to the imperialists’ agenda but untouched by the bickering which had destroyed the IFL, approached both the 1897 and 1902 conferences willing to advocate any of the three main paths to federation. In 1897, Chamberlain presented the conference as an “informal discussion of many questions of greatest colonial interest.”\textsuperscript{310} There, Chamberlain and the colonial premiers discussed what federationists might describe as preliminary steps towards a unified state. Rejecting the possibility of a two-chamber Imperial Parliament as premature, Chamberlain offered instead the idea of an Imperial Council.

\textsuperscript{308} Ibid., 435-438.
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid., 437.
\textsuperscript{310} Quoted in Kendle, \textit{The Colonial and Imperial Conferences}, 23.
with colonial plenipotentiaries or representatives, as well as an empire-wide customs union or zollverein, and briefly considered a so-called kriegsverein through increased colonial financial contributions to the Royal Navy.\textsuperscript{311}

Although the 1897 Conference produced no significant practical results, these “informal discussions” laid the groundwork for Chamberlain’s effort to build colonial support for union. Like Salisbury a decade earlier, Chamberlain left the conference convinced that colonial sentiment needed to be changed slowly or else risk an embarrassing and potentially disruptive negative reaction.\textsuperscript{312} At the 1902 Colonial Conference, Chamberlain again attempted to establish some concrete steps on the path to federation. Like in 1897, the Colonial Secretary had no qualms about offering all three main reform plans for the colonial premiers’ consideration. Despite his tactical flexibility and openness on the question, the results were once again disappointing. Colonial skepticism of the principle of federation, not the particular form it would take, was the main impediment to progress.

While Chamberlain’s failure to achieve a breakthrough in imperial reform led him to embrace preferential tariffs as the only viable means forward, it also led to soul-searching within the wider community of imperial activists. Although the conference’s proceedings were never published in full, it was obvious that no substantial step towards federation had taken place. Imperialists continued to debate the form and means of federation, but with an increasing recognition that colonial resistance needed to be understood and addressed. The transition, however, did not occur at once, and only unevenly. The monthly gatherings of the Royal

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{311} For the 1897 Conference, see Proceedings of a Conference Between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Premiers of the Self-Governing Colonies (London: Darling and Son, 1897); Garvin, The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, 3:186-92. Richard Jebb, The Imperial Conference: A History and Study (London: Longmans, 1911).  
\textsuperscript{312} For Chamberlain’s efforts between 1897-1902, see Kendle, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 31-38.\end{flushleft}
Colonial Institute offer an illustration of both the division and evolution underway in the imperialist debate. Speaking in June 1902, on the eve of the conference, Archibald Colquhoun, editor of the Institute’s monthly periodical, delivered the essay, “Our Future Colonial Policy.” In it, Colquhoun urged a synthesis of the three main federation schemes. He suggested that a customs union might be created in order to provide funds for the empire-wide military from the tax on foreign imports. Likewise, such taxation and military consolidation would require, or be required by, the inclusion of colonial leaders in the empire’s governing institutions. Colquhoun hoped that these questions could be considered without partisan bias, and to “see the birth of a truly national spirit, and we must remember the old motto, none the less true for being a platitude: ‘United we stand, divided we fall.’”

Colquhoun’s paper elicited sharp objections from his audience. The Canadian imperialist writer George Denison denounced the idea of a general tariff for imperial defense expenditure as unfair to the colonies, and lambasted Britain’s attachment to free trade. Horace Tozer, Agent-General of Queensland, dismissed the assertion that the colonies did not contribute enough to imperial defense, citing the Australian contribution to the fighting in South Africa, and believed any formalized imperial governing body would spoil the voluntary alliance between Britain and the colonies. John Colomb, a Conservative MP, in turn asked Tozer what good the Australian army would be if the Royal Navy was too weak to control the seas. Alexander Wilmot, visiting from the Cape Colony, disagreed with the metaphor of the bundle of sticks, insisting that “We have a bundle of sticks united by the best of all bonds – mutual affection and love.” To this, Liberal Unionist MP John Cathcart Wason urged, “If the time for Imperial Union is ever to come,
surely a time like the present will hardly arise again.” Bringing the discussion to a close, the Earl of Jersey could not help but comment, “I do not feel myself in complete unison with all that has been said.”315 This at least was something all present could agree on. The argument was a microcosm of the previous fifteen years; imperial unity was crucial for Britain’s future, a desirable end-point any patriotic Briton should strive for. But anything having to do with how that unity was to be achieved produced little more than a circular argument, as each debater offered up their preferred path to unity and explained the myriad objections to any other alternative.

Slowly, the Institute’s membership adapted to the changing reality of imperial relations. In a sign of the Institute’s continued relevance to British imperialists, the Liberal Imperialist and future War Secretary, Richard Haldane, presented his thoughts on imperial relations in a June 1903 paper entitled “The Cabinet and the Empire.” Haldane began by urging British imperialists everywhere to temper their hopes and expectations. The heady expectations of sweeping changes had dimmed since 1902, and questions of constitutional reform had been overtaken by the tariff controversy. Haldane considered premature action, not lack of movement, as the greatest danger to imperial unity, confident that the empire would sort itself out in time. As he explained, “It is the plan of a wise guardian not to exhibit stimulants, but rather to remove obstacles to the work of Nature herself.”316 Haldane faulted the imperial federation movement generally for its fixation on replacing the unwritten, organic constitution of Britain and the Empire with a uniform set of laws and institutions formalized in a written compact. Instead, the Liberal Imperialist proposed an empire-wide advisory council. The council would be in form and practice a second Cabinet

315 Ibid., 327.
316 Ibid., 325.
and privy council, incorporating councilors nominated by the colonies and possibly with rights to speak in the Commons or sit in the Lords.

Haldane’s plan was not a repetition of the old idea of an Imperial Council developed by the IFL. Rather than replacing or renovating the imperial government, Haldane’s council was designed to streamline it. The formation of the Committee of Imperial Defence by Arthur Balfour to coordinate imperial military questions gave Haldane a useful precedent. In similar fashion, Britain could empower an imperial court of appeals to draw the domestic and colonial legal systems into greater harmony. While he received several compliments for daring to put forward a definite proposal, Haldane’s essay was roundly criticized by the audience. Thomas A. Brassey, serving as chairman for the evening, dismissed the council as inadequate and urged the establishment of an empire Parliament. Sir Frederick Young, a founding member of both the Institute and the IFL, commented with some thirty-years’ experience on Haldane’s caution at setting too quick a pace for reform. Colquhoun concurred, for while hasty movements were dangerous, “we have to be sure that we are moving at all.” The mood of impatience among the audience was driven further by Joseph M. Orpen, Surveyor-General of Rhodesia; Orpen remarked that “For more than a third of a century in this Society people have delivered lectures on the subject of the promotion of the unity of the Empire.” While its educational value was clear, the Institute had failed “to endeavour to cause some practical step to be taken in the Legislatures which must have the controlling voice in determining these affairs.” Fully aware that Haldane

317 Thomas A. Brassey was the son of Lord Thomas Brassey, co-founder of the IFL. As noted in Chapter 2, the elder Brassey was an advocate of free trade, while his son joined the tariff reform movement. In November 1902, the younger Brassey had recommended federalism in Britain, in addition to stripping Parliament of its control of domestic legislation so it could fully focus on governing the empire. See Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, November 1902.

318 Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, June 1903, 338.
was both a prominent Liberal MP and a privy councilor, Orpen urged him to actually propose such changes in Parliament, or to urge someone like Lord Rosebery to take similar action in the House of Lords.\footnote{319}

Orpen’s comments emphasized the predicament facing imperial activists at the beginning of the century. For much of the latter third of the nineteenth century, the Imperial Federation League and Royal Colonial Institute had popularized imperial ideas in the British political consciousness. In the process, they helped to make imperial federation a serious political topic. But the practical and symbolic scale of the project of renovating the Empire into a federal Greater Britain sorely tested the movement’s unity. How precisely federation was to take shape destroyed the IFL and reduced its successor organizations to bickering over the inheritance, handicapping them to such an extent that they played little part in the great questions of imperial reform tariff reform reignited in 1903. Meanwhile, the Colonial Institute continued to grow, providing many of these venerable imperial reformers a continued home to deliberate on their ideas. But old ideas and schemes passed away slowly, for fear that the opportunities of federation, and all the benefits in offered Britain, would pass away with it.

**The Pollock Committee and ‘Imperial Organisation’**

After May 1903, the tariff reform controversy dominated political debate and became an overriding preoccupation for imperial thinkers and reformers. Joseph Chamberlain, the nation’s most visible and influential imperial statesman, offered a stark choice as he warned preferential tariffs were the only viable path for advancing imperial unification. Chamberlain based his conclusion on his experiences at the Colonial Conference of 1902, when his attempts to present

\footnote{Ibid., 342-344.}
each of the three conventional proposals for federation were blocked by colonial objections. But Chamberlain was not the only British imperialist to draw conclusions from the disappointing results of the conference. Responding to the tariff reform campaign, a sizable group organized with the goal of placing the federation movement back on constructive lines. This group would become known as the Pollock Committee, named after their most prominent public representative, the jurist Sir Frederick Pollock. The committee believed that while the door had shut, perhaps forever, on the Victorian dream of a federated empire, the scattered sections of the empire could still be drawn closer together. They dubbed their proposals “imperial organization.” In 1904-5, the Pollock Committee developed into a well-organized and effective pressure group with influence on government decision-making that allowed them to set the agenda for Britain’s imperial policy in a way neither the Imperial Federation League nor even the tariff reform movement ever did.

At the same time, new voices like those of Richard Jebb, one of the most zealous tariff reformers, and the founders of the Round Table Movement joined the debate over the British Empire’s imperial future. These members of a younger generation challenged the established wisdom of the older imperialists’ vision of the relationship between Britain and the colonies, departing from the ideas associated with the IFL, its successors, and even the Pollock Committee. This new wave of activism makes it clear that, while tariff reform became the dominant issue of domestic and imperial reform, alternative visions of imperial reform remained very much alive after 1903. At the same time, it bears emphasis that these new voices were outgrowths of and reactions to the 1902 Colonial Conference, not Chamberlain’s tariff movement. Indeed, the relationship between these groups and tariff reform was ambivalent and shifting, complicated
even further by the dramatic change in electoral fortunes following the 1906 general election and the preparations for the next conference scheduled in 1907. Thus, the ideas and debates among British imperialists in the Edwardian period were not simply a continuation of the organizations and arguments of the late Victorian years, but a transitional moment in which the boundaries and meanings of empire were subjected to deep reappraisals.

After the many disappointments and setbacks suffered by the IFL and its successor organizations, the Pollock Committee’s rapid progress was remarkable. Although the Pollock Committee in the end struggled to implement its reforms, in the span of just a few years they had succeeded in bringing their ideas to the attention of major colonial leaders and influencing a change in policy at the Colonial Office. Even when compared to the tariff reform movement, the Pollock Committee was arguably the most effective and influential imperialist group of the first years of the century.

The group was named after its public spokesman, leader, and ostensible founder, Sir Frederick Pollock, editor of the *Law Quarterly Review* and one of the most respected jurists of the day. The Committee’s precise origins and membership are difficult to determine, the result of a deliberate policy of enforced anonymity intended to ensure the group could debate pressing imperial issues without fear of political or social constraints. According to Sir Howard D’Edgville, the committee first took shape as a result of a proposal Pollock made to his colleagues on the Imperial Federation (Defence) Committee’s executive board in early 1903.\(^{320}\) In an address to the Royal Colonial Institute in April 1905, Pollock explained that the committee was “the outcome of more than three years’ consideration, and of active discussion extending

over about a year and a half, in which about fifty persons holding almost every kind of opinion in politics, and representing many different professions and interests, have taken active part."  

The group shied away from constituting themselves into a new manifestation of the IFL with a formalized declaration of policy or organizational structure. The committee’s one unifying belief was in the importance of the empire to Britain’s future and the desirability of solidifying the colonial relationship on a more permanent footing. As a result, the Pollock Committee was comparable to discussion groups like Sidney and Beatrice Webb’s Co-Efficients or Leo Amery’s Compatriots Club rather than the IFL or its successors. Its goal was to take voices from across the political spectrum and, in contrast to Chamberlain’s tariff movement, establish a consensus for a slate of uncontroversial proposals for imperial consolidation that could be supported by all parties.

After a year and a half of dinner gatherings and private discussions, Pollock published the committee’s conclusions in a memorandum in the *Times* on October 17, 1904. The committee believed that continued hopes of a federated empire with a constitutional structure like the United States was “chimerical”; the colonies would not accept infringements on their internal autonomy, and the British public would not accept any reduction in Parliament’s power. The committee determined that the best hope for “an effective addition to the Councils of the

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321 *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, April 1905, 288. In his address, Pollock acknowledged the Liberal Imperialist Richard Haldane, New Zealand Agent-General William Pember Reeves, and the pro-imperial federation Canadian George R. Parkin as contributors. Geoffrey Drage, a Liberal Unionist MP and former chairman of the Royal Commission on Labour, was Pollock’s most active lieutenant, and the group’s honorary secretary was the otherwise obscure Pitt Kennedy. See *Nineteenth Century and After*, December 1905, 909. Leading politicians such as Arthur Balfour, Alfred Lyttelton, George Wyndham, Winston Churchill, Edward Grey, Alfred Milner, the military expert Spenser Wilkinson, and civil servant Francis Hopwood also participated in Committee discussions at various points. See D’Edgville, *Imperial Defence and Closer Union*, 222 and Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences*, 57.
Empire” was an innovation of the Privy Council. Pollock saw two openings for reform: the creation of a Council of Imperial Affairs that brought colonial representatives and imperial experts together to advise the Crown on empire-wide issues; and the invitation of colonial statesmen into the British Cabinet. Pollock believed such an Imperial Council would be useful in harmonizing and rationalizing imperial organization in several fields, including shipping regulations, copyright and patent, bankruptcy, citizenship, immigration, and marriage licensure, as well as establishing a single high court of appeals in legal matters. To collect and synthesize the information needed for such work, a secretariat would be formed and placed under the Prime Minister’s supervision. Perhaps just as importantly, the council would carry on the agendas ratified by the colonial conferences, which after 1902 were scheduled to meet at 4-year intervals.

Pollock insisted an imperial council of colonial representatives and qualified experts would offer badly-needed attention to imperial matters neglected by a Parliament preoccupied with partisan politics and domestic controversies. Pollock opined that “The power of the so-called Imperial Parliament to legislate for the entire Empire, while alive in theory, is largely dead in practice.” Much like Haldane, Pollock believed the council could be established immediately and without disruptive constitutional innovations. For inspiration, he looked to the recent Committee of Imperial Defence, an ad hoc advisory group established by the British

322 Richard Haldane’s influence on the committee’s proposals is clear here, as the October 17 memorandum is similar in most respects to Haldane’s “The Cabinet and the Empire” paper. See Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, June 1903.
323 The Pollock Committee repeatedly insisted on the need for a committee or bureau for gathering information for the rationalization of imperial commercial laws. See Geoffrey Drage, “Imperial Organisation from a Business Point of View,” The Fortnightly Review, December 1905.
324 The Times, October 17, 1904. This view was repeated, in greater detail and with a general summary of the Committee’s work, in Frederick Pollock’s RCI address. Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, April 1905.
325 The Times, October 17, 1904.
Prime Minister to provide counsel and expertise on questions of critical importance to the safety and well-being of the British Empire.

Following the letter to the Times, the Pollock Committee distributed their proposals to a number of colonial associates for review. As a result of feedback, Pollock and his cohorts published an amended proposal on February 9, 1905. Two months later, Pollock presented the group’s findings to the Royal Colonial Institute in April 1905. In these two public statements, Pollock deemphasized innovations to the Privy Council. Colonial commentators had feared that an Imperial Council as a new appendage of the Privy Council would grow to infringe on the internal autonomy of the colonies. In particular, colonial governments would be obligated to adhere to decisions made by colonial representatives who, by virtue of their presence in London, were no longer truly representative of their colonies and could not be called to account for their actions.  

As a result, the Pollock Committee focused on the proposed council’s function as a permanent secretariat for the Colonial Conferences. A functioning secretariat would ensure constant communication between the various governments, accurate collection of information, and the preparation of agendas for the conferences. In addition, Pollock’s revised scheme called for the conferences to be taken out of the hands of the Colonial Office, with the new council, committee, or secretariat being placed under the control of the Prime Minister in the same manner as the Committee of Imperial Defence. “Nothing will serve,” he argued in the second Times memorandum, “short of a Department of Imperial Intelligence free from the

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326 William Pember Reeves, a member of the Pollock Committee, argued that the prime ministers must be admitted before any such extension of the privy council was acceptable to colonial opinion. The British Empire Review, February 1905.

327 The Times, February 9, 1905. See also, Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, April 1905.
ordinary administrative routine of Government offices and attached directly to the Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{328}

The Pollock Committee’s work attracted a great deal of attention and their public announcements quickly proved able to sway government policy.\textsuperscript{329} The Colonial Secretary, Alfred Lyttelton, was intrigued by the idea of an imperial council and regarded it as an important step in transforming the conference system into a linchpin of imperial administration. After securing Balfour’s approval, Lyttelton dispatched a circular to the colonial governments on April 20, 1905, which embodied the substance of the Pollock Committee’s recommendations. The Colonial Conference would become a new Imperial Council, complete with a secretariat composed of representatives appointed by the colonial and metropolitan governments to gather information and serve a consultative and advisory role on imperial matters. The colonial premiers would retain their ultimate power to set the agenda, but with the recognition that the realities of distance and time rendered their constant involvement impractical. “It is therefore desirable,” Lyttelton wrote, “that subjects which they may agree to discuss should be as much as possible prepared beforehand by a body on which they could be represented, and should be presented to them in as concise and clear a form, and with as much material for forming a judgment as possible.”\textsuperscript{330} Colonial reactions were mixed; while Australia and New Zealand supported the circular, the South African colonies gave a mixed reception, and Canada was conspicuously silent.\textsuperscript{331}

\textsuperscript{328} The Times, February 9, 1905.
\textsuperscript{329} After the first public memorandum, Pollock wrote the Times editor to announce he had “already received more letters on this subject than I can answer separately.” See The Times, October 25, 1904.
\textsuperscript{330} Quoted in Edith Lyttelton, Alfred Lyttelton, an account of his life (London: Longmans, 1917), 310.
\textsuperscript{331} Kendle, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 64-69.
As the empire’s oldest, largest, and most powerful self-governing colony, Canada’s approval was critical to the success or failure of any reform. Confident that domestic opinion was on their side, the Pollock Committee turned its attention to the colonies, and Canada in particular. On August 7, 1905, Pitt Kennedy announced in the Times his intentions to travel to Canada for four weeks in September and October with Pollock and Drage on an inquiry into local opinions on imperial reform. At this point, the work of the committee began to unravel. Pollock himself was part of the problem. Though ostensibly on an independent inquiry, Pollock apparently envisioned himself as a kind of imperial missionary. Yet Canadian Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier was clearly skeptical, having delayed more than five months to reply to the Lyttleton circular. Laurier believed that this British visitor was acting with the connivance of both the British government and the imperialist faction of the Liberal Party, and was wary of Pollock’s intentions. Worst of all, while Pollock was an eminent legal scholar and had a keen intellectual mind, by many accounts he was a poor spokesman. One writer opined that Pollock’s nearsightedness was responsible for his “shyness and awkwardness of manner.” Although Pollock was a “brilliant after-dinner speaker,” he would recite his lectures and essays without looking at his audience, in a manner “somewhat slow and hesitant and almost destitute of anything which one may describe as ‘life’ or ‘fire’.” As a result, he left a poor impression on audiences across the Dominion, forcing Governor-General Lord Albert Grey to apologize for “the ill-mannered Pollock, who has succeeded in establishing a record in the number of people

332 Ibid., 70-71
335 Ibid., 239.
anxious to be friendly whom he has antagonized.” Consequently, the chances of Pollock swaying Laurier and his government to support the Committee’s vision of a restructured conference system dwindled as the visit unfolded.

While Pollock and his compatriots were traveling the country, Canada played host to several other British imperialists simultaneously in late 1905, in particular Chamberlain’s chief economic advisor on tariff reform, William Hewins, and the young imperialist author and pressman, Richard Jebb. Hewins’ journey to Canada originated from an interview between Chamberlain and the Canadian Labour Minister William Mulock in July 1905. During the interview, Mulock, asked Chamberlain how upcoming revisions to the Canadian tariff might be used to benefit the cause of tariff reform in Britain, and indicated he was acting on behalf of the Canadian government. With Hewins presiding over Chamberlain’s Tariff Commission, Mulock considered him perfectly equipped to meet Laurier to work out the blueprint of a trade agreement.

Whereas Pollock went to Canada amidst significant publicity, Hewins sailed for Canada in secret in October. By this time, Chamberlain was no longer a member of the Cabinet and Hewins himself had no official position of any kind; with a general election almost certainly imminent, the announcement of negotiations between the Canadian government and Chamberlain’s chief economic advisor could potentially be construed as meddling in Britain’s domestic politics at a crucial time. Armed with a substantial library of statistical data, Hewins

336 E Grey to A Lyttelton, November 6, 1905, quoted in Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences*, 73.
337 ‘Notes of an Interview between Mr. Chamberlain and Sir W. Mulock, with Mr. Hewins present,’ 21 July 1905, JC20/2/35.
338 To maintain his cover, Hewins sent telegrams to Chamberlain under the name “Wilhelm Tarcom” and used a crude cipher to keep his dealings private. See W Hewins to J Chamberlain, 12 October, 1905, JC20/2/19.
339 Arthur Balfour resigned on December 4 and a new Liberal government was formed under the leadership of Henry Campbell-Bannerman prior to calling the election.
met with Laurier and the Finance Minister William Fielding several times during his visit. The economist formed a glowing impression of the Canadian Prime Minister, describing him as “Extremely courteous, of great dignity, with a mind keenly appreciative of subtle distinctions.” Although Hewins believed Laurier was a Canadian patriot first and foremost, he recognized that “Canada could obtain her highest development within the British Empire.”

Hewins came away from the negotiations convinced that Canada was ready to expand its tariff preferences toward Britain in exchange for reciprocity. He was also optimistic that a trade deal could be brokered in short order. Hewins was emphatic on this point in his subsequent reports of the meetings to Chamberlain. Writing from Ottawa on November 7, he informed Chamberlain that Laurier “stated that provided we gave Canada reciprocity he would take his coat off and fight for preference.” Writing again immediately after returning to Britain, he reiterated with a renewed urgency that “there is no doubt that if we were in a position to go straight ahead with the negotiations we could realize your aims. If a Liberal Government is in power and to meet the Imperial situation starts an inquiry on lines the Liberal Imperialists specify the opportunity for a preferential arrangement will go by.” Hewins rushed back to Birmingham confident a new announcement on the tariff question could be prepared before the beginning of the election campaign. In his mind, a dramatic revelation of the existence of a “colonial offer” of preferential tariffs would discredit liberal imperialists and turn the tide of popular support back in favor of the Unionists. Chamberlain, however, was more skeptical about both Laurier’s commitment and the extent of Hewins’ success, much to the economist’s

340 Hewins, Apologia of an Imperialist, 1:117.
341 W Hewins to J Chamberlain, 7 November, 1905, JC20/2/26. Hewins admitted that Mulock likely exaggerated the extent Laurier’s government was willing to go on reciprocity, as both Laurier and Fielding believed that ever since 1902 the initiative for new tariff proposals should come from Britain, not Canada.
342 W Hewins to J Chamberlain, JC20/2/29.
Though Chamberlain had seemingly accepted a Unionist electoral defeat as inevitable, the Canadian government had demonstrated its continuing enthusiasm for preferential trade with Britain.

In contrast to the discussions with Hewins, Laurier and his government showed none of the same enthusiasm for the Pollock Committee’s work. Notably, Hewins was present when the two finally met, his negotiations with Laurier having run long. From the outset, Laurier was dismissive of the value of the Imperial Council. Apparently, Laurier was under the impression such a council would replace rather than augment the conferences, and thereby infringe Canadian autonomy. Despite such wariness, “someone less irritating than Pollock might have been able to persuade the Canadian Premier” that Pollock’s imperial intelligence department and secretariat posed no danger to Canadian freedom. The discussion went poorly. Hewins judged that “The conversation was exceedingly discursive, rambling from one subject to another in a very pointless manner.” As Pollock recited the myriad advantages of his intelligence-gathering committee, Laurier categorically dismissed each point as inconsequential; any problems created by discordances in British and Canadian law, in Laurier’s opinion, could simply be handled on a case-by-case basis through bilateral negotiations. A body of appointed and unaccountable officials would simply be an unnecessary and meddlesome addition to an already entirely adequate means of inter-governmental discussion. Laurier conclusively shut the door on Pollock’s hopes to persuade the Canadian government to accept the idea of an Imperial Council.

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345 Hewins, *Apologia of an Imperialist*, 1:120-1
In spite of Laurier’s discouraging response, Pollock’s public account of his journey painted an optimistic picture. From what Pollock observed and the discussions he conducted, Canada was a colony proud of its place in the British Empire and open to closer ties. He was also sure that a majority of Canadians supported the general spirit of the Committee’s proposals, and that both the secretariat and information-gathering bureau should still be established. But Pollock’s conclusion was at odds with the original intent and purposes of his fact-finding mission; he now believed that the British government could not wait on proposals from the colonies, in part because there was no mechanism or forum for them to do so. The only qualified body was the British government, who Pollock urged should enact these proposals unilaterally, and then simply “notify the Colonial Governments forthwith of its intention.”  

Unfortunately for the Pollock Committee’s plans, in the meantime the Unionist government had resigned in December 1905 and the Earl of Elgin replaced Lyttelton at the Colonial Office. As the first Liberal to hold the position in over a decade, Elgin struggled to adjust to the Colonial Secretary’s relatively greater prominence in the British political landscape and relied on his permanent staff for guidance. Unsurprisingly, Colonial Office officials were unenthusiastic about Pollock’s suggestions to renovate the conference’s administration, which implied a reduction of their ministry’s role in colonial affairs and a criticism of their handling of the conferences up to this point. Perhaps most damning of all was the official Canadian response to the Lyttelton dispatch that finally arrived in November 1905. First, the Canadian government stated that any changes to the conference must come from the conference itself. An imperial ‘Council’ implied a formal body with powers that might override colonial autonomy,

347 Kendle, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 78-79.
348 Ibid., 66-67. Of the Colonial Office’s staff, only one of the five under-secretaries supported the Lyttelton dispatch.
whereas a conference was merely a gathering for discussion, negotiation, and consultation with no powers beyond those already possessed by its participants. Consequently, Canada could not agree to any proposal which threatened to interfere with Canadian self-rule.\textsuperscript{349}

After the Canadian tour and the disastrous Laurier interview, the Pollock Committee’s influence over the imperial reform agenda dwindled. While the Committee would continue to operate and spread its ideas, lobbying especially in the lead-up to the 1907 Colonial Conference, it had reached the limit of its ability to achieve substantial progress. For the previous three years, the Pollock Committee had demonstrated an impressive ability to mobilize support and garner attention for enacting political change. Unlike the IFL or its successors, or the diffuse network of imperial enthusiasts in Britain, the Committee had organized itself quickly and effectively, establishing internal consensus over objectives, articulating a clearly-defined agenda, publicizing itself under the leadership of a notable and respected spokesman, and successfully lobbying for the support of influential politicians who could carry out their designs.

In spite of all this, the Pollock Committee wrought no changes or reforms to the British imperial structure, owing as much to a failure to understand colonial opinion as to the stubbornness of a Canadian government jealous of its internal autonomy. The juxtaposition of Laurier’s reactions to Pollock and Hewins demonstrated that it was Chamberlain’s tariff reform, not the Pollock Committee’s institutional adjustments, that sparked colonial enthusiasm. Yet it was precisely because tariff reform remained so controversial in Britain that the Pollock Committee had looked to ‘imperial organisation’ as an alternative. Pollock himself was a free-trade Liberal Unionist, and several of the committee’s most active members were as well. But they insisted that they held “many different opinions and shades of opinions in the fiscal

\textsuperscript{349} Ib. \textit{Ibid.}, 75-76.
controversy, but ‘agreed in deeming the unity and welfare of the British Empire above party.’”

However, this approach of non-partisanship and consensus was still, ultimately, an insular British outlook. What reforms British imperialists could reach consensus on could not overcome the ambitions and aspirations of the self-governing colonies.

Richard Jebb and the Rise of Colonial Nationalism

As Laurier was negotiating with Hewins and Pollock, Canada also played host to the British imperial scholar and writer Richard Jebb. Perhaps more than any of his peers in Britain, Jebb recognized the emerging national aspirations of the self-governing colonies. Born in 1874, Jebb developed a keen interest in the development of the British Empire while studying at Oxford. After his father’s death in 1894, Jebb used his inheritance to support himself as he traveled across the empire, visiting Canada and Australia between 1899 and 1901. During the tour, he developed a network of contacts that provided a window into the currents of colonial opinion, which he put to use in his first and most successful work, *Studies in Colonial Nationalism*. Jebb argued that British imperialists had failed to recognize a crucial development underway in the colonies in the closing years of the century. Canada and Australia in particular were no longer the fledgling frontier settlements of old; now they were vigorous and

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350 *The Times*, February 9, 1905. In a letter to the *Times*’ editor, Pollock denied claims that his committee was attempting to supplant the tariff reform agenda with their own, boasting that suspicious tariff reformers would be amazed that the committee was supported from leaders across the political spectrum. See *The Times*, August 16, 1905.

351 Jebb began his circuit of the empire by traveling from Britain to Canada. Crossing through the United States to reach Vancouver, he sailed on to Australia. His plan to continue on to South Africa was interrupted by the outbreak of war with the Boer republics.

352 Jebb’s early career was also helped by the fact he shared his name with his uncle, the renowned classicist Richard Claverhouse Jebb. The elder Jebb, a Liberal MP for Cambridge, was frequently mistaken for his nephew when the younger Jebb wrote in support of the tariff reform movement, much to their mutual amusement. R Jebb to R Jebb, 3 October, 1904, Richard Jebb Papers, Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, University of London, 116/A.
growing new states, proud of a new sense of national identity distinct from their British origins. Contrary to the imperial federationists, who praised the unity of sentiment within the empire, Jebb insisted that “there is not, in fact, any growing consciousness of a common nationality, but exactly the reverse.” Jebb identified a common trend among the settler colonies, “all four countries are traveling the same road – the road from the colonial to the national status.” While these colonial nationalisms emerged from the well-spring of British racial and cultural heritage, they were distinct from Britain. The logic followed that imperial federation was impossible; for all their affection for the mother-country which had birthed them, the colonies would never tolerate the subordination of their nationhood within a British world-state.

Jebb, however, did not regard emergent colonial nationalism as fatal to the British Empire’s existence. Instead, the colonies’ transition into nations pointed the way to the next phase of imperial development. In his analysis, federation or any other formalized, institutional consolidation were no longer practical. Instead, the empire must evolve into what he dubbed an imperial or “Britannic” alliance. Rather than Britain overseeing the affairs of the colonies as satellites with subordinate ambitions constrained by the limits imposed by the imperial structure, the new British Empire would be a close, cooperative alliance for the advancement of the overlapping but distinctive interests of otherwise sovereign, independent nation-states. Jebb’s vision of an alliance of British, or Britannic, states dovetailed with his support for tariff reform. An ardent Chamberlainite, Jebb maintained that tariff reform was a program of imperial reform only by “mere accident.” Preferential tariffs with the colonies were desirable primarily for the economic benefits a trade pact would bring to the British and colonial economies, not because it

354 The terminology of a ‘Britannic’ alliance does not appear in Jebb’s work until his 1913 The Britannic Question, but carries the same meaning as his earlier “imperial alliance.”
would lead to federation. In sum, the British Empire would not be held together by devising new institutional frameworks to bind colony to metropole, but by a recognition of the interests shared by friendly nations.

Jebb’s vision of the future of imperial relations earned him a sympathetic hearing among colonial leaders like Laurier and the Australian Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin. The concept of an empire-alliance received a far less sympathetic hearing from Pollock. During their simultaneous tours in Canada, Jebb took the opportunity to critique the Pollock Committee’s scheme for imperial organization. Jebb’s criticisms “drew blood” and provoked Pollock to “wade into [Jebb]” before his Canadian audiences at times. Their confrontation continued in London as well. In a written response to a paper Jebb presented at the Royal Colonial Institute, Pollock expressed impatience with what he saw as the young imperialist’s fractious quibbling. In Pollock’s opinion, “alliance seems inadequate. Perhaps partnership…is the best word for the present. I do not believe we are tending to anything resembling any known form of federation, but to a form of political combination which will be new…for which posterity will have to find the proper names and forms after it has been made.”

Though at a surface level Jebb appeared to be fixated on semantic differences with the Pollock Committee, they reflected his fundamentally divergent imperial principles. In Jebb’s view, federation, union, and even Pollock’s use of “partnership,” indicated an intention to guide

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356 Deakin’s correspondence provided Jebb with continued insight into colonial opinion which he put to use in his fledgling editorial career at the Morning Post. Laurier would also take an interest in Jebb’s contributions to the Morning Post and “in any child God-fathered by him.” Kendle, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 75.
357 F Hamilton to R Jebb, 22 October 1905, Richard Jebb Papers, 116/A.
358 Emphasis original. Richard Jebb, “Notes on Imperial Organisation,” Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, November 1906, 33-34. Drage, who was present at the reading, spoke to reemphasize the practical value of an imperial intelligence bureau and insisted that “we are apt to lay too much stress on names and machinery.” See Ibid., 22-24.
the empire toward consolidation, infringing upon the sovereignty and independence of its constituent states. While Jebb agreed with Pollock on the need to introduce some kind of organizing body to give the colonial conferences greater life and continuity, he objected to the ultimate goal in mind. While Jebb saw the conferences as a gathering of the chief executives of several nation-states, Pollock and his allies perceived it as the one avenue for imperial consolidation not yet closed by colonial objections. The danger, then, was that imperialists like Pollock would only exacerbate colonial mistrust and spoil the conferences’ potential.

In this respect, Jebb saw Pollock’s repeated comparison of an imperial secretariat with the Committee of Imperial Defence as dangerous. He argued that “To British constitutionalism the Committee is a monstrosity.” The CID was staffed entirely at the discretion of the British Prime Minister, who could invite British and colonial officials alike in any number, guaranteeing a favorable outcome for British policy. Because its proceedings were a state secret, any colonial objections to the decisions made by the Committee could not be made public record without compromising national security; instead, the public would be presented only with decisions made by the full Committee, with the seeming approval of the colonies by virtue of their participation. Jebb predicted that any attempt to bind the Dominions to Britain through bureaucratic sleight of hand would only drive them away. Instead, by acknowledging the inevitability of colonial independence, Britain could preserve good feeling and build an enduring spirit of cooperation with its colonies-turned-nations.

360 Jebb’s suspicions were born out by the British government’s decision in the wake of the 1911 Colonial Conference to transfer the discussion of foreign policy from the conferences to the Committee of Imperial Defence, which he provocatively labeled a ‘coup d’etat’ by the forces of ‘British Ascendancy’ against the allies of ‘Britannic Equality.’ See Ibid., 41-48.
Jebb leveled similar criticisms against the new generation of activist Edwardian imperialists who would gather together as the Round Table movement. The Round Table was founded in 1909 by a group of young Oxford-educated men who had served in South Africa under High Commissioner Alfred Milner, Lionel Curtis and Philip Kerr the most prominent of their number. Milner’s so-called ‘kindergarten’ was responsible for the reconstruction efforts in the annexed Boer republics and laying the foundations for the Union of South Africa. Through much of the Edwardian period, and particularly following Joseph Chamberlain’s departure from active politics in 1906, Milner acted as a patron for a new generation of British imperialists, including Leo Amery as well as Richard Jebb.\(^{361}\) Milner, like his protégés, was a committed British imperial patriot and a firm believer in the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon people, as well as the responsibility to spread the beneficence of British civilization throughout the world.\(^{362}\)

In preparing South Africa for federation, the ‘kindergarten’ drew inspiration from the writing of Frederick Scott Oliver, in particular his biography of American founder Alexander Hamilton. Exploring Hamilton’s role in the creation of the United States’ constitution, Oliver focused on how an enduring federal union was forged out of thirteen disparate states. Though economic links and a fledgling sense of shared national identity contributed to the American union, Oliver concluded that “The test of union is the utter sovereignty of the central government, which must be free and able to act directly upon, and to touch, without the favour of any intermediary, the humblest of its citizens in the remotest corner of its dominions.”\(^{363}\) Despite

\(^{361}\) Amery was offered a position on Milner’s staff in South Africa, but declined due to his commitment to writing the *Times* history of the South African war. See Amery, *My Political Life*, 1:150. Jebb, a critic of Balfour’s leadership of the Conservatives, looked to Milner to become “Joe’s successor.” R Jebb to A Atkinson, 17 January, 1907, Richard Jebb Papers, 116/A

\(^{362}\) Milner’s political and ideological views are elaborated in the collection of speeches, *The Nation and the Empire: Being a Collection of Speeches and Addresses* (London: Constable, 1913).

shared economic interests and wartime experience, it was not until the American confederation was replaced by a strong federal government, forged by the decisive leadership of a handful of visionary leaders, that an enduring national union was formed.

Leo Amery, who also took credit for instigating Oliver’s project, lauded Oliver’s book as the Bible of Milner’s kindergarten. “Few men of my time,” he recollected, “have by their writings exercised a greater indirect influence on public life through their effect on a few individuals.” The lessons found in *Alexander Hamilton* resonated with imperial officials struggling to forge a union out of the divided white population of South Africa. It also provided a blueprint for how a small group of extremely committed patriots might at last overcome the obstacles that continued to stymie imperial union for generations. When Curtis, Kerr, and the other South African administrators returned to Britain, the Round Table began lobbying for the creation of a similar empire-wide governing body.

Initially, Jebb regarded the Round Table favorably, believing that *Studies in Colonial Nationalism* had partly guided their attitudes on South African federation. But he rejected Oliver’s arguments and the conclusions the so-called ‘Hamiltonians’ drew from it. Like the Pollock Committee, the Round Table recognized that colonial reluctance prevented imperial consolidation, and local national aspirations would need to be sufficiently accommodated. Such accommodations would be entirely acceptable, so long as a central governing sovereignty existed to act as a centripetal force within the empire. Thus, while Jebb and the Round Table largely

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agreed in their analysis of the present condition of the empire, they fundamentally disagreed on
the course of the evolution of imperial relations.\footnote{366}

Amery eventually conceded that Oliver’s arguments and the Round Table’s work hindered efforts to develop more effective cooperation between Britain and the Dominions. He admitted that Jebb’s writings provided “A truer insight” and “dealt realistically with the outlook of the younger nations.”\footnote{367} Jebb’s perceptiveness, however, did not lend him the same degree of influence or prominence enjoyed by those he criticized. On the contrary, his habit of attacking otherwise sympathetic allies on comparatively minor points of doctrine left him an increasingly marginal figure. Chamberlain’s lieutenant James Garvin dismissed Jebb as one of many “querulous asses…devoid of an atom of practical political faculty.”\footnote{368}

When the First World War began, the influence Jebb enjoyed as a scholarly writer and editor for the \textit{Morning Post} evaporated.\footnote{369} Though he continued to write on imperial relations, Jebb’s work failed to have the same impact as his early publications. In part, his removal from London and decision after the First World War to focus on local county affairs in Shropshire contributed to this marginalization. But at the same time, his unswerving belief in the inevitability of colonial nationalism and the efficacy of the alliance system of imperial organization ensured that with each successive publication he had less and less to say. Men like Leo Amery and Lionel Curtis forged relationships they used to propel them to higher office or

\footnote{366 See Ibid., xviii-xxxiv. The publication of Jebb’s \textit{The Britannic Question} was largely inspired by his continued and deepening disagreement with the membership of the Round Table and their desire for a centralized, consolidated federated empire. See John Kendle, \textit{The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 125.}

\footnote{367 Amery, \textit{My Political Life}, 1:270.}

\footnote{368 J Garvin to L Amery, 30 November, 1907, James L. Garvin Papers, MS-1553.}

\footnote{369 Although deemed unfit for service on the front, Jebb was reactivated as a captain and instructor of his local Shropshire Territorial Force. J.D. Miller, \textit{Richard Jebb and the Problem of Empire} (London: Athlone Press, 1956), 22-23.}
embraced reform programs that required tireless lobbying. But Jebb’s role was that of the critic by negation, whose imperial vision did not require Britain to do anything more than wait for the inexorable rising tide. In later years, Jebb regretted that the country had been unable to accept that the world was changing, and the empire with it. He believed the years between the beginning of the century and the outbreak of war in 1914 had been decisive, that “the post-1945 disintegration was actually determined in those crucial years, not later.” Chamberlain, who “now stands out as a giant indeed among party pygmies,” had been unable to make the nation heed his warnings.370 This, however, did not represent a late change of heart in Jebb’s imperialism. The choice, in his analysis, had never been between consolidation and disintegration, but between what form the disintegration would take. The adoption of tariff reform, the delegation of military and foreign policy responsibilities, and the rationalization of the conference system would have ensured that when the empire did evolve, it would be a durable and dynamic alliance of sovereign equals that took its place.

The 1907 Colonial and Imperial Conference

With the imperial federation movement’s failure to substantially advance their reform agenda during the 1902 Colonial Conference, the conference system itself received more and more attention. As the fiscal controversy unfolded, both tariff reformers and free traders alike recognized that the conferences of colonial prime ministers could still serve as a viable avenue for consolidation. The Pollock Committee’s work, the Lyttelton circular of 1905, and the writings of imperialist thinkers like Jebb and the Round Table all reflected the growing hopes in future conferences. Such optimism was based on several significant results of the 1902

Conference. The first was the conference’s decision that subsequent conferences would be held at least once every four years. From its origins as the brainchild of the Imperial Federation League and adjuncts to royal events, the conference was now to be a systematized gathering of British and colonial statesmen to deliberate on empire-wide issues. The second major development of the 1902 Conference was the resolution passed by the colonial premiers in favor of strengthening preferential trade relations. The colonial governments had declared, “the principle of preferential trade…would, by promoting the development of the resources and industries of the several parts, strengthen the Empire.” The resolution further read “That the Prime Ministers of the Colonies respectfully urge on his Majesty’s Government the expediency of granting in the United Kingdom preferential treatment…by exemption from or reduction of duties now or hereafter imposed.” The text of this resolution had been quoted endlessly during the tariff reform debate; on the one hand, tariff reformers believed the resolution embodied the colonies’ desire to build a system of preferential tariffs within the empire. Free traders, in contrast, argued that the repeal of the corn duty in 1903 had fulfilled Britain’s obligations to the letter of the resolution. The Liberal Party’s commitment to free trade rendered the resolution a moot point.

A confluence of factors ensured that the 1907 Colonial Conference would be an eventful moment in British politics and imperial development. The Liberal Party’s return to power – reinforced by a strong contingent of Liberal Imperialists in the Cabinet – after more than a

371 This provision was subject to change. As noted earlier, the 1906 conference was postponed until 1907. Subsidiary conferences were also called on specific elements of imperial policy, such as the defense conference held in 1909. See Hansard 5s, 9: 2310-2313 (26 August, 1909); Proceedings of the Imperial Conference on naval and military defence (London: 1909); Jebb, The Imperial Conference, 2:82.

372 Papers relating to a conference between the Secretary of State of the Colonies and the Prime Ministers of self-governing colonies, 1902, ix-x.
decade in opposition, the continuing tariff controversy, and the attention paid to the conference by imperialists, all intersected in potentially explosive fashion. After years of fierce debate with tariff reformers, the Liberal Imperialists had an opportunity to use the conference to prove the superiority of their conception of an empire of freedom.

Given the subjects on the agenda, however, it was obvious that preferential tariffs would be the conference’s principal subject. But the Liberals had emphatically rejected any idea of preference since 1903. The Unionist opposition therefore went to great lengths to embarrass the government. Their approach was abetted in part by the sympathy and even connivance of the colonial premiers. Such meddling was possible because the colonial prime ministers enjoyed an anomalous position in British public discourse. The frequency and force with which British leaders had valorized the empire rendered the elected leaders of the self-governing colonies publicly unassailable; any politician or party found guilty of offending colonial sentiment or stymieing the conference would be in mortal political danger. As a result, the 1907 Colonial Conference was also a peculiar moment of inverted power dynamics within the British imperial system. The collision of partisan agendas in this sensitive moment of heightened imperial discussion tested how deeply many politically active Britons held to their espoused devotion to the empire, and how far they were willing to compromise their imperialism for the sake of short-term political gains.

Both sides made concerted efforts to exploit the conference for political gain at an early point in time. In his interview with William Mulock in July 1905, Chamberlain suggested that if the Liberal government excluded preferential tariffs from the agenda, Canada should refuse to
Although Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman and the new Colonial Secretary Lord Elgin accepted all the colonies’ proposed agenda items, several colonial Prime Ministers remained anxious to see some progress towards preferential trade. Alfred Deakin, now the Prime Minister of Australia, wrote to Chamberlain in March 1906 in the wake of the general election about using the conference to push for substantive reforms. “We are not suppliants for favours,” Deakin wrote, “but are making a proposal…to the advantages of both parties.” Chamberlain responded at length on both the causes of the Unionist electoral defeat and his hopes that the setback was temporary. After reassuring Deakin that there was nothing untoward in coordinating with either him or Arthur Balfour, Chamberlain explained how the colonial premiers could benefit the Unionist opposition. Although “no practical result can be expected at present, the offers and opinions of the Colonial representatives will be followed with the greatest possible interest” by the electorate. For years, the Liberal Party had insisted that the “colonial offer” of preferential trade agreements was either nonexistent or vague and ill-defined, Chamberlain believed tariff reform’s public support would be strengthened by clear, unambiguous resolutions by the colonies in favor of preference. Chamberlain suggested a resolution be tabled calling for the establishment of a committee of experts for the purpose of drawing up reciprocal tariffs. While certain the Liberals would reject any such resolution, “it…would pave the way for the final solution whenever the country should decide to give a mandate to a new Government on the question.”

373 “Notes of an Interview,” JC20/2/35.
374 In particular, Alfred Deakin, Joseph Ward, and Leander Jameson, the Prime Ministers of Australia, New Zealand, and Cape Colony respectively.
376 J Chamberlain to A Deakin, 26 April, 1906, JC30/4/361.
The British government was well aware it would be embarrassed if the colonies came out strongly for tariff reform. Winston Churchill, now Undersecretary of State for the Colonial Office, worked urgently to neutralize the threat. Aware that Deakin would likely be the tariff reformers’ strongest ally, Churchill recommended to Elgin that the Australian state premiers be invited to the conference, in spite of the fact they had not been invited to the 1902 conference following Australia’s federation in 1901. Churchill warned Elgin that the conference would “simply be turned into a demonstration of the Tariff Reform League. The State Premiers would ipso facto have gone the other way. Divide et impera!” Elgin wisely chose to ignore his young subordinate’s advice, but Churchill’s attitude towards the conference remained unchanged.

Reflecting on his behavior, Amery commented, “[Churchill’s] one idea seemed to be that the Colonial Prime Ministers should be given a good time and sent away well banqueted, but empty handed.”

Churchill’s last attempt to shield the government unfolded on the eve of the conference. Arriving in London early, Deakin, Leander Jameson of the Cape Colony and Joseph Ward of New Zealand attempted to coordinate the colonial negotiating strategy in order to present the British government with a united front. Laurier, however, was scheduled to arrive a day later. As Deakin recounted to Jebb, Jameson hurried to meet Laurier at the Euston train station, only to discover that Churchill had arrived first, intercepting the Canadian Prime Minister and rushing him to the Colonial Office for a closed-door discussion. In his history of the conferences, Jebb wrote caustically, “the hospitality of the nation required that the venerable Prime Minister of the

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senior Dominion...should be conveyed at once to receive a welcome in Downing Street before being suffered to take up his quarters.”

Whether the plots and counterplots swirling around the conference were a cause or effect of it, public attention was riveted on the gathering in April and May of 1907. The pro-Liberal Westminster Gazette noted that “London is interested in the Colonial Conference...as it has not been interested in any similar event in the past.” The press in no small part added to the sense of excitement with their own efforts to capitalize on the conference’s political value. The Gazette warned its readers “the feverish anxiety of the Tariff Reformers to use the occasion for the embarrassment of the Government may, we are confident, be left to tell its own tale.” Not to be outdone, the pro-tariff National Review opined, "unscrupulous influences will be at work to mislead the visiting Premiers as to the political situation in the mother-country from the moment of their arrival." In some cases, this involved exaggeration and mischaracterization. Such was the case with the arch-Conservative Daily Express, which repeatedly conflated Liberal opposition to preferential tariffs to an effort to sabotage the conference. The paper purported to reveal “a Government plot to kill the Colonial Conference” and filled its pages with headlines such as “Government Versus Premiers” and “Wreckers of Empire.” More egregious were outright fabrications, such as when the Daily Mail alleged that Churchill had gravely insulted Robert Bond, Prime Minister of Newfoundland, who stormed out of the conference in protest at his colony’s humiliation at the hands of the British government. Churchill remarked in

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379 Jebb, The Imperial Conference, 2:75; La Nauze, Alfred Deakin, 2:501.  
380 Westminster Gazette, April 15, 1907.  
381 Ibid., April 4, 1907.  
382 The National Review, April 1907.  
383 The Daily Express, April 3, 1907. The headlines appeared on April 2 and April 5, 1907 respectively.
Parliament “I cannot undertake, as a general rule, to correct misstatements appearing in journals of that class and character.”

In spite of the wild accusations of some of its more fervent critics, Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman’s government had no desire to “kill” the conference. Churchill’s machinations were exceptions, and the aversion to preferential tariffs did not mean that the British government was not interested in pursuing constructive discussion on other matters. The *Westminster Gazette* reminded readers that the colonial prime ministers were not oblivious to British domestic politics and understood the realities of democratic government. The Liberals had campaigned on a free trade platform. As such, “one would have supposed that all patriotic men, and especially all good Imperialists, would have endeavoured to turn the attention of the coming Colonial Conference to things which are practicable and which may conduce to harmony and good feeling.” Even if no major developments in imperial relations occurred as a result of the conference, it nevertheless did serve an important symbolic role, particularly with the attendance of Louis Botha as Prime Minister of the Transvaal, a mere five years after commanding Boer guerilla forces against the British army.

There was nevertheless a kernel of truth to Unionist imperialists’ fears about the government’s handling of the conference. In particular, the conference was seriously threatened by the antipathy shown by Wilfrid Laurier, who contemplated declining the government’s invitation. Laurier admitted that he “dreaded very much the voyage to England and the work that awaited me there.” As late as March 1907, less than a month before the conference’s start, Laurier remarked that while he “certainly hoped to go…certain things had occurred which might

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384 *Hansard*, 4s, 174: 953 (15 May, 1907).
385 *Westminster Gazette*, April 11, 1907.
lead him to cancel his passage. The matter, however, was still under consideration.”

Besides his personal dread of traveling to England, Laurier believed he had already made the Canadian position clear in 1902. As his interviews with Pollock and Hewins showed, he had little interest in growing the conference system into a policy-making body; if there were issues to be resolved, Canada would simply negotiate with Britain and the other colonies on a case-by-case basis. The Canadian government submitted no topics to the Colonial Office for the agenda. Despite both the colony’s preeminence and the fact he was the only person to have also attended the 1902 and 1897 conferences, Laurier was to play a passive role in the conference’s proceedings. Instead, Alfred Deakin took the lead as the most active and dynamic presence in the conference, spearheading the colonial arguments in favor of preference, as well as the arguments for creating an imperial council along the lines elaborated by the Pollock Committee over the previous four years. Aided by Leander Jameson, no friend of the Liberal Party since the eponymous Jameson Raid a decade earlier, and New Zealand Prime Minister Joseph Ward, Deakin was to prove himself a repeated thorn in the British government’s side and the two parties were to verbally spar throughout the conference.388

Despite the many difficulties and latent tensions in its run-up, the 1907 Colonial Conference opened on April 15, 1907, without incident. In an important gesture, Campbell-Bannerman delivered the opening address, marking the occasion not as a departmental affair of

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387 The Times, March 26, 1907. It was not until March 27 that Laurier confirmed his attendance, following the decision by the Canadian Parliament to recess while the Prime Minister and his cabinet were away. See The Times, March 29, 1907 and Kendle, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences, 91.

388 Deakin’s antipathy toward the British government was perhaps not helped by his portrayal in the Liberal press, such as when the Manchester Guardian misnamed him Albert Deakin. See Manchester Guardian, April 9, 1907.
the Colonial Office but a full congress between His Majesty’s Governments of the empire.\textsuperscript{389}

Setting British government’s tone and stance toward the conference, the Prime Minister both cautioned against unreasonable expectations and expounded on the principles of liberal imperialism. In an allusion to preference, he promised there would be full freedom of discussion, but cautioned that “His Majesty's Government cannot go behind the declared opinions of this country and of our Parliament. No more can you go behind the opinions and wishes of your communities and Parliaments.” Campbell-Bannerman continued, declaring, "We found ourselves upon freedom and independence - that is the essence of the British Imperial connection." In the Prime Minister’s conception, the British Empire relied on "Freedom of action on the part of the individual state, freedom in their relations with each other, and with the Mother Country. Anything which militates against that principal [sic] would be wholly contrary to the genius of our race and our political ideals, and would sooner or later be disastrous." In a rhetorical ploy, Campbell-Bannerman concluded his remarks by quoting Joseph Chamberlain’s opening speech in 1902: “The link which unites us, almost invisible as it is, sentimental in its character, is one which we would gladly strengthen, but at the same time it has proved itself to be so strong that certainly we would not wish to substitute for it a chain which might be galling in its incidence.”\textsuperscript{390}

Almost from the start, the British government’s approach caused consternation among the activists at the conference. Because a full account of each day’s deliberations was impractical,

\textsuperscript{389} While India Office officials were present throughout the conference, they held similar status to other British ministers, meaning that the Indian government was effectively not represented at the conference, remaining so until 1921.

\textsuperscript{390} Minutes of Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, 1907 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1907), 5-6. For Chamberlain’s original speech, see Papers relating to a conference between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Prime Ministers of self-governing colonies, 3.
the delegates decided that the Colonial Office would publish a précis each day of the conference’s proceedings. Deakin, Ward, and Jameson argued that if the public, both in Britain and the colonies, heard nothing of the issues discussed or the positions taken by the respective governments while the conference was in session, it would become isolated and lose its political force.\textsuperscript{391} But the brevity and wording of several of these press releases was a source of frustration to the colonial premiers. Deakin in particular made it known these précis were often “ludicrously inadequate.”\textsuperscript{392} The activist prime ministers believed they were being deprived of the opportunity of informing the wider British public of their ideas and agendas at the connivance of the British government and the Colonial Office staff. Unionists pounced on this issue, repeatedly demanding – unlike in 1902 – that a full transcript of the conference be published. Campbell-Bannerman had little choice but to promise “as far as I am concerned and my colleagues in the Government…we hope every syllable will be published.”\textsuperscript{393} From the very beginning of the conference, public outreach was a critical component of the colonial premiers’ strategies for effecting change in imperial organization. If the home government’s opposition could not be overcome, they at least hoped to exploit their prominent status as imperial representatives to sway the voters’ minds.

In the following days, the conference deliberated on the Australian and New Zealand proposals for the establishment of an imperial council. In effect, the debate that unfolded on April 17 and 18 was the culmination of the Pollock Committee’s work. Deakin and Ward called for the establishment of an Imperial Council, an advisory committee of colonial representatives coupled with a permanent secretarial staff directed by the British Prime Minister. Its purpose

\textsuperscript{391} The full debate on the method of publicizing the conference is found in Minutes of Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, 18-22.
\textsuperscript{392} A Chamberlain to M Chamberlain, 2 May, 1907, quoted in Austen Chamberlain, Politics from Inside: An Epistolary Chronicle, 1906-1914 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 78.
\textsuperscript{393} Hansard, 4s, 173: 896 (1 May, 1907).
would be to establish the conferences on a more permanent footing and ensure continuity between its quadrennial gatherings. As Deakin presented it, “unaltered in personnel or in procedure, except so far as we might…connect its several meetings…and provide for a more efficient means of keeping its members in touch with one another.”

In its proposed form, the Imperial Council was identical to the Pollock Committee’s scheme in 1905. It also suffered much the same fate. Deakin was confronted by Laurier’s firm opposition; Jebb, who was kept apprised of the progress of the conference by Deakin, believed the proposal had been “framed in the most clumsy terms and gratuitously damned by being called a scheme to establish an ‘Imperial Council’. This was a sop to the Pollock outfit.”

The connotation of an “imperial council” and its association with Pollock’s work proved a powerful obstacle to the activists. Laurier raised his familiar concerns about the dangers of usurping colonial autonomy. Laurier evinced the same confusion as he had with the Lyttelton proposal, believing that any advisory body, as Jameson put it, “under the direct responsibility of the Conference” and headquartered in London, would slip out of the prime ministers’ control the moment they left the country. As he admitted, “I understood from the moment it was placed before us by the dispatch of Mr. Lyttelton, that the staff was to be an independent body here, and under nobody’s control.” This required Jameson and Ward to repeatedly assure the Canadian leader that the secretariat would be responsible to the British Prime Minister while the conference was not in session.

But Deakin also confused the issue further by conflating the formation of the secretariat with a restructuring of imperial relations; Deakin wished to place the secretariat under the Prime

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395 R Jebb to J Willison, 23 April, 1907, Richard Jebb Papers, A/1.
Minister so that inter-imperial communications would be between the chief executives of their respective states, in effect removing the Dominions from the Colonial Office’s jurisdiction. In essence, the antipathy Deakin had shown for the Colonial Office at the 1887 conference remained undiminished. He argued that “representations of ours are met neither with an understanding of the real causes from which they spring or of our precise intention. Our responsible and representative governments are dealt with as you deal with a well-meaning Governor or well-intentioned nominee council.”

But the activists’ decision to model their proposal on Pollock’s scheme opened a division between them and Laurier, who in other circumstances might have been receptive to criticism of the Colonial Office’s handling of Dominion affairs.

Lord Elgin, understandably protective of his department’s existence, exploited the opening created by Laurier’s opposition and insisted that the Prime Minister was already too overworked to take on new responsibilities. The group compromised that a new secretariat would be created to carry on the business of the conference, but under the direction of the Colonial Secretary rather than the British Prime Minister. For Deakin, Jebb, and Pollock, the result was a disappointment, especially in light of the Colonial Office’s pointed neglect of the secretariat in later years.

Of greater significance, however, was the setback it represented for the evolution of imperial relations. The 1907 Imperial Conference could have laid an early foundation for the later Commonwealth, a formal venue for collaboration between British governments. Instead, the

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397 Ibid., 71.
398 The antipathy of the Colonial Office’s permanent staff, as well as the lack of interest by Elgin or the British government, ensured that the secretariat barely functioned in its first years. See Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences*, 107-125.
formation of a secretariat represented a minor internal reshuffling of the Colonial Office’s administrative machinery.

The Imperial Preference Debate and the End of the Conference

Following several days of debates on military expenditure, imperial migration, and legal reform, on April 30 the conference at last turned its attention to the colonial proposals for preferential trade. The colonial resolution was an amended version of the resolution passed in 1902. But now the final clause urged the mother country to recognize, “That it is desirable that the United Kingdom grant preferential treatment to the products and manufactures of the Colonies.” While the 1902 resolution already acknowledged that imperial preference was desirable in principle, this new resolution advanced the issue, urging Britain to actually implement a system of preference outright. Deakin again represented the activists’ case, addressing the delegates for the entirety of the session and a significant portion of the next day as well. Deakin argued that the economic benefits of preference were self-evident, validated by years of experience in all the self-governing colonies. Simply put, preferential tariffs would encourage trade between the parts of the empire, spurring on their growth and development, exactly as the 1902 resolution stated.

But these benefits were secondary to the effect imperial preference would have for the unity of the empire. Rising international competition meant that strength was best secured in greater numbers. "Henceforth," Deakin predicted, "the individual will become more and more dependent upon the social and national structure in which he finds a place. It makes all the difference whether you are grains of sand or the same grains compacted into solid rock."

\[399\] Minutes of Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, 6.
Australia wished to remain a constituent part of the British Empire; it was both a monument to “a higher stage of civilisation, giving great opportunities to the individual and greater strength to the nation to which he belongs,” and it also offered "the greatest future at present open to any people for that inter-action affording the fullest free play to individual energy and enterprise, and at the same time by willing consent uniting its peoples together for their great common ends of one national destiny.” The Australian premier’s address captured the essence of the Dominions’ emergent nationalism. Whatever objections Deakin and colonial nationalists like him might raise against specific points of British imperial policy, they still conceived of their nations as belonging within the empire, which had both shielded them against foreign powers and was a vehicle for cooperation between the community of recognizably British nations. Their nationalism did not conceive of separation as either desirable or inevitable, but instead complemented the imperial relationship.

Following Deakin’s speech, Jameson, Ward, and the premier of Natal, Frederick Moor, added their support for the preferential trade resolution. In a concession to British fears of increased cost of living for the nation’s poor, the colonial prime ministers went to great lengths to reassure the British delegates they sought only the reduction of preexisting duties; Jameson admitted that “we want, if possible, the principle established.” Throughout the exchange, the British foreshadowed the nature and tenor of their response. In one pointed moment, Ward commented that Joseph Chamberlain had “strongly” demonstrated the case for tariff reform. Henry Asquith, Chancellor of the Exchequer, bluntly replied, “I do not quite agree with him,” to which David Lloyd George added dryly, “Nor did the nation quite agree with him.”

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400 Ibid., 238.
401 Ibid., 291
particular repeatedly raised points of disagreement with the details of the colonial argument. It left no doubt that, from the very start, the British government was opposed to the principle of preference, even when it was cloaked in the guise of reducing preexisting tariffs.

The government’s response came in two parts. The first was delivered by James Mackay of the India Office, who explained that Britain could not consent to establishing a preferential trade system out of consideration for the interests of the subcontinent. India, in all its vastness and variety, could not fit easily into any scheme of preferential tariffs, even those proposed by Chamberlain and his allies. Having placed the Indian economy on a free trade footing decades earlier, Britain was now responsible for the colony’s welfare and prosperity. Mackay explained, “The interests of India are indissolubly bound up with the interests, not only of Great Britain, but also with those of His Majesty’s other Dominions.” He reminded the premiers that the colony’s welfare was not merely a metropolitan concern, but “It has come down with all its responsibilities from our common forefathers to the whole British race.” Imperial concerns thus prevented the adoption of tariffs, which would be a nothing but an economic burden to India.

The main part of the British rebuttal was delivered by Asquith. The Chancellor occupied his time less with any appeal to imperial responsibility than emphasizing the realities of metropolitan politics. Asquith pleaded that “if I were to yield to the seductive arguments of Mr. Deakin – which, of course, if it were a personal matter, I should be very glad to do…there is not a man who knows this House of Commons who does not know that such a proposition would be defeated by a majority of two or three to one.” Neither Deakin nor Jameson allowed Asquith’s arguments to go unchallenged, repeatedly interrupting the Chancellor and dismissing the Liberal
fixation on absolute free trade as a fetish. Asquith admitted that "It may be in time you will persuade the people of Great Britain that Free Trade is a fetish." "We think it is so now," Deakin replied. "Go and persuade the people of that, if you can persuade them, and we will have another Colonial Conference, and we will see what happens," the Chancellor answered, adding that "We may be an absolute set of lunatics, wandering in twilight and darkness - fiscal twilight," but the unalterable fact remained that the electorate had given the government a decisive mandate.\footnote{Ibid., 317.}

Under continued colonial pressure, Asquith's argument started fraying. The Chancellor concluded by declaring:

\[\text{…you will not agree with many of the things I am saying. You think, no doubt, other people are right, and that our economic system belongs to the age of the dodo or some other prehistoric period. You may think we are all wandering in Cimmerian darkness. But we are 43,000,000 people, still the richest in the world, still not afraid to speak with our commercial enemy in the gate, and convinced that no system of preference such as you have been advocating with so much ability round this board during the last few days can be adopted in Great Britain which does not involved taxation of our sources of supply...and a consequent enhancement in the cost of the necessaries of life and of industry, and a corresponding and necessary curtailment in the area and profitableness of the whole of our productive industries.}\footnote{Ibid., 322.}

Asquith's free trade rhetoric, honed from years of argument with tariff reformers, was far less effective as a response to the colonial Prime Ministers. Fear of a rising cost of living, a legitimate issue with the tariff reform program, was irrelevant to the question of reducing preexisting tariffs. Nor was the stirring appeal to Britain’s prosperity and unflinching fortitude in commerce likely to impress colonial leaders. The frank admission of the obstacles posed by the outcome of the 1906 election and the partisanship in Parliament were factors any of them...
could understand. But much of Asquith’s address was tailored as another condemnation of tariff reform instead of a response to the conference’s agenda.

Asquith’s address provoked a bitter rebuke from William Lyne, the Australian Minister of Trade, who gave expression to the colonial activists’ frustration. Lyne accused the British representatives of “treat[ing] us as though we were aliens” instead of “a part and parcel of the Empire.” He rejected Mackay’s attempt to include India in the question. He insisted that India could not be compared in any meaningful way to the Dominions, whose white, British populations could never be “brought down to the condition of the Indian people.” Whatever obligations Britain and the Dominions might have toward the native populations of other parts of the empire, they could not stand in the way of decisions made between the nations attending the conference. More fundamentally, Lyne decried the British government’s intransigence on the tariff question as insular stubbornness and ignorance of conditions in the colonies, both of which were corrosive to the broader sense of a shared British imperial identity.

Lyne described himself as “a strong Britisher” by blood, whose father and grandfather had been born in Britain. Sentimental bonds were not enough, however, because the British Empire lacked “that cohesion, those qualities of strength and unity of purpose which, welding the whole in a common destiny, afford an unbroken rampart to each storm and danger.” The challenges of the modern world required organization, consolidation, and cooperation among all parts of the British nation, or else dire consequences would result. He invoked the story of Thomas Macauley’s New Zealander as a warning to the British government if they refused to adapt their ideals:

Bearing in mind the implicit blind faith of the many in the policy of free

406 Ibid., 343.
imports, it is not difficult to imagine one of its adherents standing beside Macaulay's New Zealander on a broken arch of London Bridge amidst ruins of our Empire, self-confident and self-satisfied that in spite of wreck and ruin his faith remains supreme.\(^{407}\)

To Lyne, the British government was courting potential disaster, holding fast to outdated economic and political dogmas for political reasons which blinded them to approaching imperial relations in a productive and understanding light. Lyne and the Australian delegation had not sailed halfway around the world to listen to recitals of free trade orthodoxy. They sought a dialogue, one government with another, on how best to cultivate a system of partnership and cooperation to their mutual benefit, which the British government appeared determined to frustrate at every turn.

The exchange between Asquith and Lyne was the culmination of the preference debate and settled the course of the remainder of the conference. Further debate on tariffs continued for two more days.\(^{408}\) But with the irreconcilable differences laid bare, the discussion’s outcome was settled. Despite the activists’ best efforts, Deakin’s preference resolution was rejected; instead, the colonial premiers agreed to reaffirm the original 1902 preferential trade resolution, with the exception of Louis Botha of Transvaal, and Laurier, who was not present during the vote, with the British government once again dissenting. To the colonial activists, it was a disappointing result, and they promptly made their frustration public. Speaking at the Baltic Mercantile and Shipping Exchange on May 16, Jameson and Deakin criticized the British government’s approach. Jameson wryly joked the conference “had secured the alteration of one word, and

\(^{407}\) Ibid., 342.

\(^{408}\) On May 7, Winston Churchill addressed the conference on what he dubbed the political elements of the preference question, essentially repeating old Liberal arguments that the introduction of a tariff system in Britain would debase Parliament with corruption, lobbyists, and generate anti-colonial feeling among the populace. This provoked another frustrated Australian rebuttal, this time from Deakin, who asked “Is our party system to destroy everything except itself?” See Ibid., 418.
nothing more,” a reference to the decision to label all future conferences “imperial” rather than “colonial.” Jameson added, “Mr. Asquith and Mr. Lloyd-George never answered one of the arguments they put forward.” Deakin, in turn, chastised the government’s obsession with the “immutable laws” of free trade which the rest of the world and the rest of the empire had seemingly overlooked. Lyne was even more scathing. On May 17, addressing the London branch of the Australian Chamber of Commerce, he accused the government of being "negative from the start, with the view to negative everything that we wanted," and added "Without wishing any ill to the present Government, I hope, if they don't alter their attitude towards the Colonies, that they will be beaten."  

All of this was undoubtedly embarrassing for the government. The conference, for all the high expectations of major developments in the empire’s organization, had achieved few noteworthy results. The staunchly Liberal Westminster Gazette boasted lamely that the conference was indeed a success, because it had grappled with specific and practical issues, regardless of the fact no specific results had followed. Churchill managed to worsen the situation further. Speaking at Edinburgh on May 18, he proudly announced the government had “banged the door upon Imperial taxation of food. Yes, they have banged it, barred it, and bolted it.” Churchill’s words became emblematic of the conference as a whole, and tariff reformers and imperialists furiously attacked the government’s performance as the “banged door.” In his 1911 history of the conferences, Jebb heaped scorn on the government, juxtaposing the “inspiring breadth of view, manifest intensity of conviction, and spontaneous logic” of the

409 The Times, May 16, 1907.
410 The Times, May 17, 1907.
411 Westminster Gazette, May 9, 1907.
colonial prime ministers with the “always petulant and sometimes snappish” partisanship of Asquith and Churchill.\textsuperscript{413} Meanwhile, \textit{The Outlook}, edited by James Garvin, dubbed the Liberals as “the Party of stagnant or reactionary conservatism in all matters fiscal and Imperial.”\textsuperscript{414} Following the publication of the conference transcript, the Unionists tabled a vote of censure in the Commons, citing the government’s rejection of the colonial offer for closer imperial unity. Lyttleton introduced the motion, and called on Parliament to look beyond British shores: “the actual devotion of a man to his home, however strong, should not exclude, indeed should include, a comprehensive patriotism; his imagination should grasp the wider scope of the federation of the States of the Empire.”\textsuperscript{415}

In some respects, the condemnation of the Campbell-Bannerman government was just as partisan as the government was accused of being. For all the rhetoric of imperial patriotism and British unity, the colonial premiers were not mere voices of unanimous colonial sentiment. They traveled to Britain with particular agendas, with critics and political rivals of their own. Nor could they truly present a unanimous colonial appeal to the British government, as the attitude of Laurier and Botha showed. The coordination between the activist colonial premiers and the Unionist opposition was conspicuous and bordered on improper. The fact remained, the Liberals had swept into office with an overwhelming parliamentary majority in an election where the defense of free trade and the rejection of preference was their central pledge. A sudden policy reversal was patently unrealistic, and perhaps even anti-democratic. Despite rejecting tariffs, Lloyd George had striven throughout the discussions to encourage other economic and commercial measures, suggesting subsidies to shipping rates, penny postage, and streamlined

\textsuperscript{413} Jebb, \textit{The Imperial Conference}, 2:183-184
\textsuperscript{414} \textit{The Outlook}, July 27, 1907.
\textsuperscript{415} \textit{Hansard}, 4s, 178: 376 (15 July, 1907).
commercial regulations. But while such proposals were received more favorably by the colonial premiers than Asquith’s address, they also served to emphasize the unreasoning rigidity of the government’s free trade policy. If it conceded that government-funded shipping lines and commercial integration would foster greater imperial trade, the Liberal government was effectively conceding the tariff reformers’ arguments, making their rejection of the colonial requests to reduce preexisting tariffs appear irrational.

More fundamentally, the 1907 Colonial Conference exposed the tension between the ideals of liberal imperialism and the accelerating evolution of imperial relations in the Edwardian period. Liberal imperialism flourished on the principle of freedom of action and self-governance among populations of identifiably British peoples who nevertheless chose to remain under the aegis of the British Crown. Shared cultural, historical, and racial affinities, the “sentimental” bond of unity, held the empire together. In theory, the conference system fitted easily within this framework, a gathering of British governments to find areas of common agreement and mutual cooperation. Instead, the contradiction between colonial and metropolitan agendas, as well as the ensuing politicization of the conference for partisan gain, meant the conference instead turned liberal imperialism on its head. The resolutions presented by Deakin and the other activists sought to give reality to the idea of an imperial partnership or alliance. The reorganization of the Colonial Office and establishment of a secretariat under the Prime Minister implied a transformation of the Dominions from subordinate states under the control of a British minister into co-equal nations maintaining close ties for consultation and cooperation. Even the preferential trade resolutions reflected a willingness to give that cooperation more tangible benefits in the form of economic integration and mutual dependence. Asquith’s rebuttal to the
colonial “offer” drew upon the rhetoric of liberal imperialism but completely inverted its spirit. Invoking the principle of colonial autonomy from British meddling, the Chancellor justified Britain’s refusal to accept the colonies’ proposals. Thus, when finally put into practice in the context of 1907, liberal imperialism acted as a means of shielding metropolitan privilege from the aspirations of colonial leaders. The British Empire was founded on freedom; thus, Britain had the freedom to reject what the colonies wanted.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the 1907 Imperial Conference marked the end of a half decade of focused attention to the questions of imperial reform and organization. Though tariff reform, the conference system, and the various imperial reform movements continued, British politics increasingly came to be preoccupied with domestic controversies in the remaining years before to the outbreak of the First World War. Joseph Chamberlain’s failure in 1902 to enact some step toward imperial federation had forced the Colonial Secretary and other British imperialist thinkers to reconsider their objectives and strategies. For Chamberlain, tariff reform and imperial preference was the last, best hope for imperial consolidation. The Pollock Committee, in contrast, turned to the conference system to maintain the momentum of reform and conceded that sweeping constitutional changes and grand gestures like Chamberlain’s 1902 efforts must give way to a gradualist tactical approach. In response to these trends, a younger generation of imperialists like Richard Jebb stepped into public prominence, who believed that the changes underway in the empire were merely signs that Britons must adapt their conception of the
meaning of British imperialism to the new century. An alliance or partnership, not a centralized state, was to be the empire’s future.

All these divergent strands of imperialist thought intersected at the 1907 conference, combining with the agendas of numerous colonial statesmen and the intensely partisan atmosphere of the British political climate to curious and contradictory effect. The colonial prime ministers arrived in London to such fanfare and public interest that they were all but above reproach, even when they showed an excessive willingness to cooperate with the opposition to embarrass the British government. Any hopes for major alterations to the structure of the empire were quickly disappointed by a combination of metropolitan stubbornness, bureaucratic inertia, and the simple interplay of the various personalities at the conference. The conference’s conclusion reinforced the status quo, and disappointed imperialists who saw yet another opportunity for imperial consolidation slip out of reach.

Status quo in imperial organization, however, did not mean stasis. For all the reformist proposals rejected during the conference, the conference itself was a product of and mechanism for imperial reform of major significance. Since the foundation of the Imperial Federation League in 1884, British imperial thought had undergone an incremental change. Early aspirations for a global British superstate had fallen apart under the dual pressures of the divisions among the federationists and the enormity of the obstacles in their path. The conference was the only significant result of the IFL’s work, and following 1887 it evolved from an informal discussion held as a corollary to royal events into a periodic gathering of the chief executives empire’s self-governing states. This process coincided with the flowering of distinct regional national identities in the various self-governing colonies at the end of the nineteenth century, which
diminished the likelihood of ever being able to subsume the colonies within a globe-spanning federal state into a distant future. Consequently, by 1907, amidst all the controversy and debate surrounding preferential tariffs, imperial unity, and partisan brinksmanship, the empire continued to evolve along those increasingly autonomist lines. The British Empire envisioned by thinkers like Richard Jebb in particular, as a kind of alliance amongst British, or Britannic nations, was more and more becoming the reality by default.

Seen in this larger perspective, the tariff reform movement emerges as a component part of a broader community of imperialist thinkers, activists, and reformers with a history extending well beyond both Joseph Chamberlain and his movement. The tariff controversy challenged a number of core aspects of Britain’s nineteenth century liberal tradition and demanded a public consideration of empire’s centrality to British politics and society. But this challenge set the terms as a stark binary, and presented Chamberlain as a prophetic mind whose vision of imperial consolidation exploded to public attention in May of 1903. Doing so threatens to obscure the importance of 1902 as a decisive moment in the trajectory of British thinking about the empire. Imperial reformers were forced to come to terms with the reality that, eighteen years since the IFL’s foundation, they were no closer to convincing the colonies to join in an economic, political, or military union. At the same time, more and more of their number began to believe that the failure to unify would not mean the end of the British Empire.

This realization led to a reappraisal of the nature of the relationship between Britain and the colonies. Talk of a Great and Greater Britain receded out of the public mind, as imperialists increasingly recognized the national aspirations of their former colonial subjects. Fortunately for them, colonial nationalism did not equate to separatism. The strength of the “sentimental” bond
of shared heritage and race ensured that Britain was viewed as a potential partner in developing colonies like Canada and Australia into strong, vital nation-states of their own, as long as Britain could be convinced to shed its oftentimes clumsy and patronizing method of handling imperial relations. Even as tariff reform dominated the political space after May 1903, a significant number of imperialists continued to develop these ideas and bring these matters to public attention. They were also in many cases far more effective and implementing their reform agendas than tariff reform ever managed during the Edwardian period.

Yet at the same time it is important not to exaggerate the separation between the advocates of imperial unity and the tariff reformers. Many of the most vocal advocates of tariff reform, Richard Jebb especially, were also strident believers that the alliance or conference system of empire was the inevitable and true evolution of British imperialism. In particular, they seized upon the policy of imperial preference as a leading example of how the empire-as-alliance could be given substance, negotiating a series of trade agreements to spur mutual economic development. Tariff reform and the various imperial unity organizations like the Pollock Committee and the Round Table represented different facets of British imperial ideology, supporting and opposing one another in greater or lesser measure, but all seeking the same outcome: the unity and consolidation of the British Empire.

Similarly, there was at least one respect in which all British imperialists’ conceptions of the empire overlapped. Chamberlain, Pollock, Jebb, Deakin and Lyne, Asquith and others like them, all regarded the empire first and foremost as a union of British, or Britannic, peoples, white, Christian, and English-speaking. The presence at the 1907 Conference of a French Canadian like Laurier and the former Boer commando Louis Botha, neither of whom were much
swayed by effusive appeals to the majesty of British civilization, could nevertheless be incorporated within the imperial framework with varying degrees of ease. But the vast native populations of Britain’s crown colonies still had no place within Britain’s imperial vision, and their future within the empire remained frustratingly unclear even when imperialists attempted to study it. This was not a dilemma tariff reformers or Liberal Imperialists alone were forced to grapple with. Rather, it was a question all British imperialists had to reckon with and often ignored, and one which none of them could seem to answer.
On March 24, 1908, Britain’s political attention turned to the by-election in the small, south London borough of Peckham. In the 1906 election, the Liberal Party had gained a historic majority and now hoped to retain the constituency it had won by a comfortable 25-point margin. The Liberals selected Thomas Gautry as their candidate, while the Conservatives nominated Henry Gooch; the nascent Labour Party, fearing a split in the anti-Conservative vote, chose not to contest the seat. Both candidates had been actively involved in the community, having served on both the London School Board and London County Council for years.

Both parties poured significant resources into the contest, and work began early on the morning of the 24th to bring Peckham’s 14,615 registered voters to the polls. The Times reported that both parties had brought a surplus of election agents to the district, and quickly struggled to find enough work for everyone to do. Wealthy and influential party members and national politicians had procured more than forty motorcars to canvas voters and transport them to the polls, and buildings all throughout the borough were covered in posters, placards, and awash in the red and blue Conservative and Liberal party colors. Suffragettes stood in front of each polling station distributing literature and making speeches, both candidates repeatedly toured the constituency urging voters to the polls, while Peckham was bustling with street vendors selling “election favours,” performing musicians, processions of party faithful and singing groups of children. By evening, according to the Times, the whole proceeding had taken on “the appearance of a huge fair,” complete with music, colored magnesium lights, and even occasional
fireworks. Thousands gathered outside the town hall to witness the results, which were projected onto a large screen for all to see. In the end, Gooch defeated Gautry with a vote of 6,970 to 4,476, a stunning 23-point swing against the Liberal Party. The crowd erupted in cheers that were reportedly heard as much as a mile away, and triumphant Tory voters roamed the streets, singing as they went. The celebrants finally dispersed early the next morning, finally bringing an end to the electoral festival. Despite the excitement and heated emotions of the by-election, the *Times* announced that no serious injuries had been reported and “rowdyism” was much less than had been expected.416

Two years later, the social critic and Liberal politician Charles Masterman singled out the Peckham by-election as the embodiment of the decay of British democracy. Peckham marked a turning point, the rejection of a more civil and rational “old discussion by argument, commonplace posters, and literature,” for a demagogic mobilization of “the Crowd” with vulgar appeals to the common man’s emotions and prejudices.417 Anyone who wished to speak could simply climb on a soapbox and command an audience, as long as they spoke loudly and passionately; the average Briton wanted entertainment, not edification. Observing the excitement and fanfare taking place outside the Peckham town hall on election night, Masterman was struck most by the “extraordinary good-humour, the extraordinary stupidity, and the extraordinary latent forces, so concealed as to be unknown even to themselves, in these shabby, cheery, inefficient multitudes of bewildered and contented men and women.”418 In the end, Masterman was uncertain if the average Briton would ever vote the way he should.

416 *The Times*, March 25, 1908.
418 Ibid., 129.
Although the tariff reform controversy was at one level a clash of ideas among politicians, economists, and reformers, ultimately it was a political question to be decided by the electorate. British voters were the arbiters of who would hold power in Parliament and determine the country’s fiscal and imperial policies. Between 1903 and the outbreak of the First World War, they had several opportunities to render their verdict on the question; in three general elections – in 1906 and two in 1910 – as well as numerous by-elections, the question of tariff reform was a central electoral issue. The elections routinely offered voters stark, clear-cut choices between the maintenance of the traditional policy of free trade and a new plan of imperial preference and retaliatory tariffs. In order to win the public’s support, both sides of the debate worked tirelessly to disseminate their message as broadly and persuasively as they could. New pressure groups emerged after 1903, in particular the Tariff Reform League and Free Trade Union, to rally the British people behind their policies. They rapidly established themselves as major forces in Britain’s political discourse for the next decade, coordinating their propagandizing efforts and public outreach with the press and party organizations.

The result of these efforts was the dissemination of an enormous quantity of material on the question of tariff reform. The tariff reform debate was noteworthy for the intensity and oftentimes ferocity with which it split British politics. With the future of the empire and the nation seemingly at stake, it was all the more essential to win voters to the cause. Free traders and tariff reformers engaged in a war of words, images, and symbols, reducing what were large,

419 In 1906, approximately 98 percent of both Liberal and Unionist candidates mentioned the tariff controversy in their election addresses. In January 1910, all Unionist, 88 percent of Liberal, and 82 percent of Labour candidates mentioned tariff reform. In December 1910, the percentage had decreased to 91, 71, and 66 percent respectively, owing to the centrality of the issue of the House of Lords reform. For 1906, see Alan K. Russell, *The Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1973), 65-83. For the 1910 election addresses, see Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties, and the People: The General Elections of 1910* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 317-326.
complex, and often abstract debates between politicians, experts, and scholars into simple, memorable, and attractive messages for popular consumption. New, modern technologies and techniques were deployed alongside more traditional methods of British electioneering. The variety and volume of material produced for the fight between free trade and tariff reform—books, pamphlets, posters, songs, plays, poems, films, and more—was such that perhaps only the most determinedly apolitical Britons could remain untouched by the debate.

In his study of the decline of free trade in Britain, historian Frank Trentmann argues that the defense of Britain’s traditional commercial policy in the Edwardian period transformed free trade into a central component of “a genuine national and democratic culture.” Free traders’ efforts to preserve the nation’s open-door policy involved the preservation of an identity and set of values considered uniquely British. Unlike in the Victorian and interwar periods, free trade in Edwardian Britain “occupied the centre of the political imagination, defining people’s identity and shaping political communication.”

Although tariff reformers alleged that British free trade was an ossified relic of the past no longer suited for the twentieth century, free traders presented their beliefs as a vital component of a prospering and modern British nation.

But as David Thackeray notes, the emphasis on free trade as a central facet of the British national narrative overlooks the enormous efforts tariff reformers made in presenting the nation with an alternative vision that was perhaps just as compelling as the “culture” of free trade. While free traders certainly kept an abiding faith in their policy, millions of Britons seemingly felt no qualms about voting to replace it, even at the apogee of free trade’s supposed national

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421 See Anthony Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England*.
422 David Thackeray, ‘Rethinking the Edwardian Crisis of Conservatism,’ *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 1 (March 2011), 196. See also David Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age*. 
influence. The 1906 general election was undeniably a devastating reverse for the tariff reform movement, resulting in an unprecedented Liberal majority. But while free traders lauded this victory as a decisive – and final – repudiation of tariff reform, the scope of their success was exaggerated by Britain’s electoral system. With only 49 percent of the vote, the Liberals won 397 seats, compared to the Unionists’ 130 seats with 44 percent, and the Labour Party’s 30 seats with 5 percent. The Irish Parliamentary Party, though accounting for less than one percent of the total vote, held another 82 seats on account of its concentrated hold on Ireland. As noted previously, neither Labour nor the IPP felt any ideological commitment to free trade, regarding it at best as a temporary expedient that might one day be replaced. If 1906 was a referendum on free trade and tariff reform, then free trade enjoyed the support of only a slim majority of the UK electorate. This majority further dwindled in the two general elections of 1910, in which the Unionists won a plurality of the total vote but failed to achieve a parliamentary majority.

In this respect, to the extent that a national culture of free trade existed in Britain, it is equally the case that there was a countervailing culture of tariff reform. The ideological fissures between tariff reformers and free traders ran deep and produced sharp disagreements about the relationship between the individual and the state, the character of Britain’s national identity, and the nature of Britain’s place in the world. But while the political disagreements were severe, they did not fundamentally change the nature of British political culture and its long history of controversy and fractious public participation, on questions ranging from Chartism and mass

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Of the Unionist candidates, Russell estimates that only 15-20 were committed free traders. Russell, *Liberal Landslide*, 84. The Liberal Party and Labour Representation Committee agreed not to compete in the same districts, in order to avoid a split of the anti-Unionist vote. The IPP had repeatedly used such tactics when advising Irish voters in Britain.
suffrage to Irish Home Rule and the Boer War. The “cultural” differences between the two sides never reached the point where they considered themselves separate and different communities, though they came to dominate the public political discourse for many years. Both sides employed similar methods, drew upon the same symbols and meanings, reflecting many of the same values. Their battle was not for the sake of two separate communities, but out of a belief that their policies and ideologies best reflected what Britain truly meant.

For Chamberlain – the “missionary of Empire” – and his allies, the task at hand was converting the nation from its fiscal orthodoxy, while the proponents of free trade worked to reaffirm the people’s faith in established doctrines. To do so, it was necessary to speak directly to the people, disseminating their message and discrediting their opponents. The enormous amount of material produced during the campaign in 1903 and the years after points to the existence of a broad popular culture of fiscal politics that was accessible to virtually anyone in Britain in at least some form. In their efforts to win the hearts, minds, and votes of the British people, propagandists and politicians did not possess unlimited resources, and were forced to decide whom and how to target specific groups and constituencies most effectively, reflecting a curious mixture of attitudes towards gender and class.

These choices in turn raise questions about the nature of modern democracy and British leaders’ faith in the common man’s ability to make rational decisions at the polls. For years, historians have sought to analyze the evolution of Britain’s politics and, in particular, its political culture. The mass enfranchisements of 1867 and 1884 dramatically altered the scope and composition of the electorate, and new developments in printing and education paved the way

for new, large-scale types of electioneering. Some historians argue that, despite these changes, British politics retained many essential characteristics of local, democratic engagement. Some contend that these innovations instead eroded grass-roots participatory politics. Studies of British elections in this period are greatly aided by extensive election coverage in the press, including verbatim accounts of political speeches and candidates’ electoral addresses. It is thus possible to develop a very full picture of what politicians said and what parties did in order to curry favor with the public, and the lengths – or depths – they were willing to go to in order to win.

It is far more difficult to develop a clear picture of how voters responded to these efforts. Politicians, press commentators, and electoral agents all struggled to gauge public opinion and the conditions at the local constituency level. Trends in the economy, the appeal of particular issues, the strengths of individual candidates, and the constant push and pull of the parties’ outreach and propaganda often made predictions difficult even in the best of times. Even the results of elections, which involved the confluence of myriad factors in a binary choice between candidates, made for an uncertain answer. Only in rare cases have the voices of common people, as individuals, been preserved. One instance of this is a collection of letters sent to Joseph Chamberlain in 1903 by private individuals throughout Britain and the Empire, expressing their thoughts on the tariff question, as well as a number of other national and imperial topics. While accounts like these offer a window into the minds of an array of individuals...

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individuals, they fall far short of providing a comprehensive picture of popular responses to tariff reform. However, what does emerge from an analysis of the propaganda of both sides of the debate is a clear effort by politicians and activists to bring the tariff reform debate to the British public. Using a combination of innovative and traditional techniques and strategies, tariff reformers and free traders launched one of the largest and most concerted attempts the country had ever witnessed to educate, convert, and mobilize the British people to a political cause.

The Road to Propaganda War

The fierce electoral contests of the Edwardian period were the culmination of a number of political processes which had been gaining in strength since the late Victorian period. The Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 had grown the size of the British electorate enormously, from fifteen to sixty percent of Britain’s male population. The influx of millions of primarily working-class voters forced the major political parties to adopt new strategies and policies to remain competitive at elections. At the same time, the major political parties built increasingly centralized organizations and more complex infrastructures of outreach. A major component of this growth was the creation of publication departments and statistical bureaus intended to oversee the distribution of standardized party material. By 1903, regular edited volumes like the Tariff Reform League’s *Monthly Notes*, designed “for the use of speakers and debates, and of persons who desire to study in some detail the controversy,” were routine. At the same time, party candidates were given access to models and catalogues of standardized election materials, to ensure proper conformity to the rest of the party. One Conservative model poster demonstrated how to create a 17’ by 3’ series of colored posters spelling out “Vote for Balfour.”

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427 *Monthly Notes on Tariff Reform*, July 1904, 1.
It helpfully explained how many posters a candidate would need to order to spell out stock phrases like “Socialism Denies Liberty” and “Tariff Reform Means More Work.”

Impressive quantities of so-called election “literature” and other material were printed by these central party organizations for the voters’ consumption. In 1892, the Liberal Publication Department produced 10 million leaflets. By the January 1910 election, this number had grown to a dizzying 40 million, compared to 46 million leaflets by the Conservatives. With 6.2 million votes cast in the election, the two leading parties had printed more than 13 leaflets per vote. Poster-printing grew at an even more impressive rate; in 1910, the Conservatives and Liberals printed a combined 5 million posters, a tenfold increase over the decade.

More substantial pamphlets and books added to this volume of printed material. Alongside the material printed by the parties, the press and affiliated political pressure groups like the Tariff Reform League and Free Trade Union contributed their own “literature,” adding to the already vast quantities of paper deluging voters. Though officially independent from the Conservative and Liberal parties, in part to have freedom of action to focus exclusively on the tariff controversy and in part to exploit legal loopholes that limited candidates’ campaign expenditures, the TRL and FTU maintained close connections with their respective parties.

Unsurprisingly, the parties distributed the bulk of this material only during the election campaign itself, which typically lasted two months between the official dissolution of Parliament and the final elections of the season. In the 1906 election, the Liberals boasted of shipping

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428 ‘Poster Making Instructions,’ Political and Tariff Reform Posters Collection, London School of Economics (hereafter LSE), Coll Misc 0519/2.
430 In addition to a month-long campaign, prior to 1918, voting was carried out over multiple days, running for approximately 2-3 weeks before every constituency had voted. The December 1910 election was held only 15 days after it was announced, the shortest interval in British electoral history. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties, and the People*, 168.
more than 100 tons of literature from its over the course of two months.\footnote{Proceedings in connection with the Twenty-Eighth Annual Meeting of the National Liberal Federation (London: Liberal Publication Department, 1906), 27.} By comparison, the press estimated that the Unionists were distributing leaflets at a rate of 2.5 million a day.\footnote{Russell, Liberal Landslide, 64.} Pressure groups and activist organizations, however, appear to have printed political literature as often and in as great a volume as they could afford. Charles Vince, chairman of the Birmingham-based Imperial Tariff Committee, reported in July 1903 that he had already received orders for 3 million leaflets in the two months since Chamberlain’s speech.\footnote{Amery, The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, 5:302.} The sheer volume of leaflets, posters, and other election material in such a short time made for striking impressions among political observers. The political scientist A.L. Lowell described leaflets as part of a uniquely English political tradition, “scattered like leaves in autumn.”\footnote{Albert Lawrence Lowell, The Government of England (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 2:61.} Considering the sheer number of leaflets printed each election, the comparison may well have been literal.

The enormous quantities of propaganda and election material printed and distributed at the time are indicative of the intensification of British politics during the Edwardian period. Jon Lawrence notes that these elections “were more fiercely fought, more disorderly, and more shamelessly populist” than those before and after. Not only did parties, candidates, and pressure groups invest what was until then an unprecedented amount of money and manpower into elections, it also galvanized the electorate; in January 1910, voter turnout peaked at 87 percent.\footnote{Lawrence, Electing Our Masters, 73. Turnout for the December 1910 election is complicated by the fact the election was held before the electoral registry could be updated, effectively denying approximately 250,000 new voters the chance to cast their ballot. Blewett, The Peers, the Parties, and the People, 169.} Some political commentators regarded this level of voter mobilization with fear, worrying that British politics was becoming swamped in shameless demagoguery. Reformers and thinkers across the political spectrum were skeptical of both the ability of traditional British
institutions to function in the modern world, and the common man to vote in a rational and responsible manner. In his widely publicized 1908 study, *Human Nature in Politics*, the psychologist Graham Wallas rejected traditional assumptions that people formed their political attitudes on the basis of rational considerations of material interest. Rather, Wallas contended, beliefs were shaped by a collection of semi-conscious emotional experiences and impressions. In this respect, the “art of politics consists largely in the creation of opinion by the deliberate exploitation of subconscious non-rational inference.”

Wallas’ arguments about the inherent irrationality of political affiliation and voting behavior reflected the prevailing ambivalence in British politics towards the new mass electorate. Some like Masterman doubted whether it was ever possible for the average voter to critically engage with complex questions of state policy. Soon after his unprecedented loss of his seat in the 1906 election, the former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour explained away his defeat as not the result of his own unpopularity and voters’ agency, but abstract historic forces, “a faint echo of the same movement which has produced massacres in St. Petersburg, riots in Vienna, and Socialist processions in Berlin.” Writers like John Hobson and Leonard Hobhouse were similarly perplexed that the expansion of the franchise had not ushered in a new era of Liberal dominance, and dismayed by the seeming ease with which Britons’ political views were swayed by bread and circuses.

Yet in both a metaphorical and literal sense, the tariff reform debate was indeed an argument about bread. The price of bread and whether increased costs would be offset by other advantages were essential components of the political fight. Chamberlain, an outspoken advocate

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437 Quoted in Zebel, *Balfour*, 143.
438 For liberal disillusionment with mass democratic politics, See Chapter 2.
of the democratization of British politics throughout his career, was the first to acknowledge the
tariff question would likely be decided by who could make the best appeal to working class
interests. In the first parliamentary debate in May 1903, he admitted, “If [free traders] can show
that the whole of this business will mean greater cost of living to the working men and no
increase in income…I have not the least doubt whatever that all their most optimistic prophecies
will come true.”

Sympathetic observers on both sides of the debate acknowledged that
working class voters were more than capable of grasping the significance of the controversy.
Leopold Amery insisted that “the subject genuinely interested them,” as long as a speaker
avoided using opaque technical terminology or literary references. Similarly, Bertrand Russell,
who volunteered with the Free Trade Union to give public lectures, found his respect for the
working classes grow the more he interacted with them. Analysis of the backgrounds of
business owners and public figures indicates that there was significant correlation between
material interests and political affiliation. In the same fashion, it is possible that the common
voter was capable of consuming partisan propaganda and retaining enough perspective to vote in
what they believed to be their best interest, as consumers and as Britons.

These concerns about voters’ ability to make a sober and serious choice at the polls were
magnified by the perception, at least among Liberals, that tariff reform was the weaker argument.
Though there were notable exceptions, the bulk of academic opinion arrayed behind free trade.
Thus, if Chamberlain could not appeal to facts, the assumption was that he could only appeal to

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439 *Hansard*, 4s, 123: 141-98 (28 May, 1903).
443 Douglas Irwin, ‘The Political Economy of Free Trade: Voting in the British General Election of 1906,’ *Journal of
Law & Economics* 37, no. 1 (April 1994), 75-108. Trentmann shows that, at least among free traders, a great deal of
effort was taken to explain how much tariff reform would cost the average British consumer. Trentmann, *Free Trade
Nation*, 88-91.
emotions. But the propaganda war between tariff reformers and free traders was never a simple binary of demagoguery and intellectualism, but was instead a constantly shifting intersection of impassioned emotion and argumentative reasoning. While giving a speech in his Manchester constituency during the 1906 election, Balfour found himself at the mercy of a rowdy and vocal audience. With an unfortunate habit of posing rhetorical questions, Balfour was repeatedly interrupted and drowned out by the audience. Having suffered at length, Balfour lamented, “I do not think you are listening very well, some of the gentlemen at the back.” A voice shouted back “Buck up, we’ll soon be dead.” Waiting patiently, Balfour eventually gained the audience’s ear and engaged in something of a dialogue. Balfour even urged the audience to be quiet so a heckler they had shouted down could deliver a rebuttal to his Irish policy. The juxtaposition of the press accounts of the crowd’s “senseless interruptions” with a heckler’s ability to cite specific legislative details in front of the former Prime Minister reflect the contrasts in Britain’s political culture.444 Much like these kinds of public performances, the myriad election propaganda was part of an unfolding dialogue between politicians and the people. Propaganda certainly had the potential to sway the opinions and exploit the attitudes of their audience, but it is only one half of the nation’s political discourse. Propaganda, and all other political activity, was a constantly shifting process of action and reaction, not simply of voters reacting to being bombarded by tens of millions of leaflets, posters, and more, but also of politicians and propagandists reacting and responding to voters.

444 For an account of Balfour’s speech, including the rebuttal from “the interrupter,” see The Times, January 6, 1906.
Mobilizing for War

Soon after the commencement of the tariff controversy, adherents of free trade and tariff reform began laying the groundwork for a major political campaign. At the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, Arthur Chamberlain, himself a free trader, warned that his older brother was preparing “a raging, tearing propaganda.” Fearing Joseph Chamberlain’s growing popularity, in July Unionist politicians opposed to protectionism organized into a Unionist Free Food League with the Duke of Devonshire as its president and three former Chancellors – Viscount Goschen, Michael Hicks-Beach, and Charles Ritchie – as Vice Presidents. In an October 1903 manifesto, the League vowed to oppose the spread of protectionist policies by holding public meetings, circulating sponsored literature, and offering assistance to sympathetic Unionist candidates during elections.

Despite these aims and the stature of its leadership, the Free Food League served as little more than “a parliamentary committee with very meager resources.” By May 1904, the Free Food League had produced a speaker’s handbook and offered a catalog of free trade pamphlets, but the scope of their distribution was extremely limited compared to the national reach of more successful organizations. Moreover, the League’s leadership was only partially committed to the cause; Hicks-Beach in particular refused to cooperate with the Liberals, undermining their potential influence against the party. By October, he had publicly endorsed Balfour’s policy of retaliation. Worse, the League’s membership was decimated as the controversy unfolded. By

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447 Rempel, Unionists Divided, 46.
448 Ibid., 69-70.
1906, only 16 of the original 60 MPs remained in office, and by 1910, only one of the League’s four original leaders, Hicks-Beach, was still alive.

In contrast to the Free Food League’s modest political strength, the Free Trade Union emerged as the most active and far-reaching organization dedicated to British free trade advocacy during the period. In a letter to The Times, the FTU’s chairman Arnold Morley explained the group was formed “for the special purpose of meeting the dangers with which this country is threatened” by tariff reform. Morley promised a plan of “active propaganda” against the repeal of free trade.\(^{449}\) The Union mobilized rapidly in the following months. By the end of 1903, it was publishing a periodical, The Free Trader, compiling economic analysis, statistical information, and rebuttals to tariff reformers’ speeches, in order to keep free traders armed with relevant, up-to-date information. The FTU had also printed as many as 15 million pamphlets.\(^{450}\) Over time, the scale and variety of its literature grew, including an ABC Fiscal Handbook, the book 101 Points Against Tariff Reform, posters, song sheets, and a variety of “penny” books, and was augmented by new departments for information-gathering and organizing instructional lectures, in order to train a growing roster of public speakers. Despite sharing the cause with Unionist free traders, the FTU was effectively an auxiliary of the Liberal Party. Liberal MP Reginald McKenna and Leonard Hobhouse were the Union’s first secretaries, and the party’s chief whip Herbert Gladstone was a leading member of the executive committee. Moreover, all FTU material was printed in the National Liberal Federation’s Publication Department, leaving little doubt as to the Union’s political alignment.

\(^{449}\) The Times, July 18, 1903.
\(^{450}\) Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 102-103.
The Free Trade Union rapidly established a nation-wide influence. Millions of pamphlets and leaflets continued to be printed annually, though at a relatively flat rate. In contrast, its direct outreach grew enormously over time. By 1910, the FTU had more than 400 branch organizations, with many of these possessing multiple offices throughout a single constituency. These branches worked tirelessly to rally public support. In 1908, local branches held a combined 2500 meetings and nearly 5000 in 1909. In 1910, with the added urgency of two general elections, this number only grew; between May and December of 1910, 5,460 meetings were held, including 863 public lectures in rural districts, 106 women’s meetings, 87 for business owners and organizations, 37 for trade unions, and 6 for farmers associations, leaving 4,361 Free Trade Union meetings for general audiences. Another 2,558 public meetings were held during December alone.451

While the Free Trade Union carried out its work on a large scale, it also expanded the physical spaces in which they performed their outreach. During the summer of 1910, the FTU launched a speaking and lecture campaign at numerous seaside resorts and vacation towns, often in defiance of local regulations prohibiting political demonstrations. A plan to purchase a yacht with sails emblazoned with the words ‘Free Trade’ was abandoned. Instead, with a budget of £1,550, the Union employed 67 speakers for well over a thousand of seaside meetings.452 The Free Trade Union agent and organizer G. Wallace Carter explained the double-effectiveness of the campaign; free trade lectures and speeches served as an educational alternative to “the usual sea shore attractions” as well as being a sort of novel entertainment in its own right, pitting the

451 Ibid., 105.
452 The funds were donated by the manufacturer James Caird and organized by G. Wallace Carter of the FTU. See Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 109-113.
free trade speakers against hecklers and advocates of tariff reform determined to disrupt or refute the speaker.\textsuperscript{453}

The scale, intensity, and sometimes novelty of the Free Trade Union’s propaganda efforts were driven in large part by an accelerating rhetorical arms race with its political opposite, the Tariff Reform League. Founded in July 1903, the Tariff Reform League was the most influential and pervasive voice on behalf of protectionism and imperial preference. Due in part to the Unionist coalition’s infighting on the issue, the League lacked the same level of interlocking coordination that the Free Trade Union enjoyed with the Liberal Party. Though the League’s leadership was comprised exclusively of Unionists, they remained relatively marginal figures in politics and government.\textsuperscript{454} Chamberlain, however, was closely involved in the League’s operation, though he maintained an official distance in preference to his separate Imperial Tariff Committee. Nevertheless, it was clear that the League was unswervingly loyal; the 1905 annual meeting at the Royal Albert Hall included an address by Chamberlain, while the program featured a portrait of the former Colonial Secretary flanked by Parliament’s towers wreathed in clouds with both Chamberlain’s motto “Je Tiens Ferme” and his dramatic statement “The Day of Empires has come” printed below, with a second full-sized photograph of Chamberlain at his

\textsuperscript{453} Quoted in Trentmann, \textit{Free Trade Nation}, 111.
\textsuperscript{454} The League’s first president was the Duke of Sutherland, with Arthur Pearson, owner of the \textit{Daily Express} newspaper, as chairman of the executive committee. Pearson proved ill-suited to the role, and by July 1904 had been replaced by Viscount Ridley, taking instead an honorary vice-presidency alongside Chamberlain. The executive committee included 16 Unionist MPs, as well as several prominent tariff reformers, including Leopold Amery, Thomas A. Brassey, Charles Goldmann, and William Hewins. For the controversy of Pearson’s appointment as chairman, see Amery, \textit{My Political Life}, 1:239. A full list of the League’s early leadership can be found in JC C2/12/13.
Occasionally, Chamberlain directly guided the League’s operation in individual cases, particularly when it involved purging the Unionist coalition of free traders.\textsuperscript{456}

Despite Chamberlain’s ostensible distance, the Tariff Reform League commanded impressive resources for a political pressure group. By 1906, the League possessed an income of £6,200, more than half coming from donations and the vast majority of the remainder derived from member subscriptions. Two years later, income reached £12,100, £8,400 from subscriptions.\textsuperscript{457} In its first year of operation, the League founded 225 branch offices, which distributed printed material and organized public meetings. Arthur Pearson boasted that alongside the hundreds of meetings by these local branches, the League’s headquarters had arranged nearly a thousand of its own, with attendance sometimes as large as three and four thousand.\textsuperscript{458} In addition, a Trade Union Association and Women’s Association were established in 1904 in order to conduct more targeted outreach and broaden tariff reform’s popularity. In the following years, this rate of activity only increased, mirroring the growth of the Free Trade Union as it went. In July 1905, it was reported at the annual general meeting that the League’s 250 branches had orchestrated over 2,600 meetings with a combined attendance of 925,000.\textsuperscript{459} By 1909, the number of meetings had ballooned to 7,763, in addition to the printing of a staggering 50.9 million leaflets, 2 million pamphlets, 234,000 posters, as well as 161 “dump shops.”\textsuperscript{460}

\textsuperscript{455}JC C2/12/13
\textsuperscript{456}Perhaps the most telling example occurred in March 1905, when the incumbent free trader Hugh Cecil was rejected by his local party committee in preference of the tariff reformer Ion Benn. Balfour intervened on behalf of his cousin, prompting Chamberlain to order Ridley to direct the League to fully support Benn. Amery, \textit{The Life of Joseph Chamberlain} 6:668-9.
\textsuperscript{457}Chamberlain, \textit{Politics from Inside}, 131.
\textsuperscript{458}\textit{The Times}, July 22, 1904.
\textsuperscript{459}\textit{The Times}, July 8, 1905.
\textsuperscript{460}\textit{The Standard}, March 29, 1910.
The League’s nationwide presence and the frenetic pace of its outreach efforts made them a considerable force within the Unionist coalition and a major impetus to the Conservative Party’s rapid conversion to tariff reform. As one harsh critic of tariff reform argued, “The Tariff Reform movement could not have marched so long if this loud-mouthed League had not been yelling at its ear.” The League was willing to bring enormous pressure to bear on politicians and undermine them at the local level. The League made a powerful demonstration of its growing influence in the revenge exacted on Charles Ritchie, the former Chancellor whose intransigence had in many respects provoked the tariff reform campaign. In October 1903, a League branch was established in Ritchie’s constituency of Croydon. What followed was a systematic erosion of his hold on the local party apparatus. The TRL sponsored speaking tours by several prominent tariff reformers, a flurry of critical articles in the local newspaper, and a flood of half a million leaflets, and recruited the Croydon Unionist party committee into the League. In July 1904, Ritchie announced that he would not stand in the next election.

Much like with the activities of the Free Trade Union, the Tariff Reform League’s expanding propaganda machine was a combination of traditional political outreach and public-relations innovation. Breaking free trade’s spell on Britain’s political consciousness required more than littering the cities and towns with millions of pamphlets and covering every wall with posters. Tariff reformers also funded and produced a myriad of other kinds of propaganda that blurred distinctions between politics and culture, electioneering and entertainment. Public meetings combined speeches and fiscal lectures with lantern-light displays, plays, and songs. These theatrics were also deployed in numerous music halls throughout the country. Poems,

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plays and pantomimes were printed in newspapers alongside political cartoons and pictures, which were repackaged and sold as postcards and picture books, or used as illustrations in satirical comedy books. Subscribers to the TRL’s newsletter Monthly Notes could even purchase “Fiscal Reform” calendars, which boasted a photograph of Chamberlain on its front cover and promised “upwards of 365 quotations on the fiscal problem.”

In 1908, the League even began developing July 8 as a new holiday – Chamberlain Day – commemorating their leader’s birthday. The celebration immediately became an annual event, with the League’s newsletter proudly declaring that “‘Chamberlain Day’ may now be confidently expected to take its place as a permanent institution among our annual national festivals.”

Even films were produced, containing short allegorical demonstrations of the desirability of tariff reform, and making them among the first political films.

Like the Free Trade Union’s vacation tours, the League reached directly into communities, most tangibly in the form of hundreds of so-called dump shops. The dump shops were life-sized dioramas of the alleged perils of foreign competition. Designed to bring tariff reformers’ rhetoric to life, these storefronts were outfitted by League agents to display cheap, foreign-made goods, invariably priced below their British-made competition. The dump shops evolved out of earlier motorized “dumping vans,” that combined the display of cheap foreign imports with traveling theater troupes that featured short skits of a beleaguered John Bull driven from his store by an assembly of caricatured foreigners.

Established in large numbers in the

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463 Monthly Notes on Tariff Reform, December 1905, 411.
464 Ibid., August 1909, 61.
465 Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 116-117. The fiercely critical William Dowding, an agent employed by the FTU, asserted that the idea of the dump shop originated from a window display of toilets in the Stoke-on-Trent borough of Hanley in 1904, and the first full dump shop was set up in Nottingham in late 1909. Dowding, The Tariff Mirage, 216.
lead-up to the elections of 1910, dump shops were evocative visual demonstrations of the dangers of foreign-made imports to the worker’s livelihood; dump shops were invariably outfitted to reflect local conditions and directly connect tariff reform’s message to the viewer’s livelihood, with the imported products for “sale” matching the dominant industry of the community. The prominence and permanence of the dump shops also inevitably made them targets for electoral vandalism. Local FTU branches initially responded in a haphazard way. Some deployed agents to picket the storefronts, others sent hecklers and lecturers to dispute the authenticity of these “foreign” imports, and others established rival shops to highlight local products which outcompeted foreign imports.466 Ultimately, the FTU responded by outfitting a number of traveling displays to compare foreign and domestic products, with the aim of demonstrating the superior quality of British craftsmanship. Vincent Caird, a wealthy jute planter and generous Liberal donor, went so far as to suggest the establishment of free trade shops in the fashion of London’s great department stores, with alternating window displays on “the very best thoroughfares, well lighted and supplied with mechanical music.”467 Physical violence and vandalism were also not uncommon, especially on election day. One of the most dramatic incidents occurred in the town of High Wycombe on January 21, 1910. After breaking the windows of the local Conservative candidate’s offices, a crowd chanting ‘Dump’ descended upon the local dump shop, pushing aside police and smashing, looting, and burning everything inside.468

466 Dowding accused the League of deception, alleging that the imported products were priced inaccurately, or were in fact simply British-made goods posed as foreign imports. See Dowding, *The Tariff Mirage*, 216-217.
467 Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, 119.
468 Ibid., 81-82.
The disposal of both the Free Trade Union and Tariff Reform League’s papers and records following their dissolution prevents a full accounting of the scale of their efforts. Nonetheless, the fragmentary information that remains indicates an enormous, national propaganda effort of unprecedented scale in Edwardian British politics. The attention the Free Trade Union and Tariff Reform League gave to spectacle and entertainment as a means of garnering voters’ attention emphasizes the ambivalent place this propaganda had in Britain’s political climate. Some contemporaries grasped the peculiar effect of this ambivalence. The writer Stephen Reynolds observed the difference between “working-class political opinion and working-class party opinion.” He explained how, “Many a time I have heard a number of men agreeing perfectly together on some political subject, until a chance mention of Conservatism or Liberalism, or a party catchword, has instantly roped them into two groups, hotly opposed to each other.” In this respect, these movements were comparable to competing brands in an advertising multimedia campaign or rival sports teams.

Since the advent of mass enfranchisement, the major political parties had cultivated reputations for themselves that established connections between the party and British cultural norms. In much the same way, tariff reformers attempted to sway voters to adopt a set of tariff reform ideas, symbols, and rhetoric, while free traders sought to reaffirm Britons’ allegiance to the established doctrines of free trade. In the process, each sought to outdo the other, scoring

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469 For the destruction of the TRL’s records, see Andrew Thompson, ‘Tariff Reform: An Imperial Strategy,’ 1036n18. Trentmann asserts the FTU’s records were likewise eliminated. See Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 103.
points that, in the end, translated to winning the most votes. This contest manifested in many ways: volunteers and hired agents papering constituencies with posters and other party literature, speakers and hecklers dueling for rhetorical effect, political strategists devising new means of drawing crowds to rallies, contributing to the contentious and confrontational atmosphere of British politics before the First World War. Tariff reform and free trade were then not simply policy plans or ideological points of debate, but two competing communities maintained by a collective adoption of a set of symbols and beliefs, constantly reinvented and reimagined as tariff reformers and free traders fought to overcome one another.

The Imagery and Language of Tariff Reform Propaganda

Of the many forms of political propaganda produced during the tariff reform debate, pamphlets and leaflets were the most common. Hundreds of millions of these pieces of so-called election literature were printed annually. A precise accounting of how many copies were printed by all political groups in the nation is perhaps impossible, both because of the loss of official records as well as the contributions from unofficial sources. The TRL and FTU were only two of many such pressure groups operating at the time, such as the Budget League, Navy League, women’s suffrage groups, and many more. Moreover, individuals could pay from their own pockets if they had the resources necessary. Lady Rosalind Carlisle, for example, boasted to Henry Campbell-Bannerman of independently funding the printing of fifty thousand copies of one of the Liberal leader’s speeches in late 1903.473 The circulation of these materials outside of elections suggests that these were more than tools to bring voters to the polls, and instead part of

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a broader and more concerted effort to mould public opinion and define the scope of the debate in the public consciousness.

Regardless of their intended purposes, the sheer quantity of leaflets and pamphlets printed and distributed raises questions about their effectiveness in actually persuading voters or even capturing their attention. As noted above, the Liberal and Unionist parties combined printed more than 13 leaflets for every one vote cast in 1910. This proportion suggests that the average voter took little notice of such literature, or political agents were extremely inefficient in their distribution methods. Many contemporaries doubted as well: Winston Churchill wrote “I do not set much store myself by leaflets,” while Alfred Harmsworth was confident the *Daily Mail* had a greater influence on public opinion than leaflets, which “no one reads in these days.”

In extolling the virtues of the FTU’s seaside resort campaign, Wallace Carter argued the average middle-class voter had no spare time for politics at home. The average voter was “pressed with the affairs of his work or business.”

*Punch* expressed a similar sentiment about voter apathy; in the wake of the autumn political campaign, the paper depicted John Bull skimming the newspaper at his breakfast table with the remark “Well, I suppose they must fill the papers with *something*, when there’s no cricket news!” Despite these doubts, parties and political pressure groups continued to circulate pamphlets and leaflets at an accelerating rate, and congratulated themselves on being able to surpass their own records year-by-year.

In contrast to innovations in other areas, the political pamphlet remained virtually impervious to changes in electioneering technique. In contrast to leaflets, the pamphlet was generally a substantial piece of plain text, designed to argue specific points of policy and

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475 Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, 111.
476 *Punch*, December 23, 1903.
legislation, and could hardly be consumed quickly. In one extreme case, the Liberal Party’s pamphlet condemning the 1902 Education Act totaled 138 pages, containing a full critique of the act’s measures, a thorough history of the bill’s course through Parliament, and a copy of the bill’s full text.\textsuperscript{477} Not all pamphlets were quite so daunting; some amounted to little more than reproductions of prominent speeches or scholarly articles, much closer to ten pages in length than one hundred. The potential effectiveness of pamphlets was also limited by cost. The 38-page pamphlet \textit{Preferential Tariffs, Facts, Figures, and Arguments} could be purchased in a bulk order of one thousand copies for £4,10 shillings, just under one pamphlet per penny. Though exact costs varied with each pamphlet, publication on a scale large enough to reach a national audience would have been prohibitive. The very nature of the pamphlet defied the kinds of innovations underway in other parts of British politics. Lowell predicted that “The longer pamphlets are probably little read, except by speakers or others who must be posted about facts and prepare themselves to meet objections.”\textsuperscript{478} Designed for a restricted audience of active and engaged voters seeking to become informed on particular policy points, the pamphlet did not need to evolve to adapt to the new strategies of mass politics.

Leaflets were treated with far less restraint. As shown previously, by 1909 the Tariff Reform League alone was producing leaflets over pamphlets at a ratio of 25 to 1. Combined, the parties and major pressure groups were printing enough leaflets for the entire population of the United Kingdom several times over. Part of the reason for such an enormous preponderance of leaflets to pamphlets was relative cost. A standardized package of one thousand leaflets could be purchased from publishers for a few shillings, or approximately 25 leaflets per penny. Though

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\item[\textsuperscript{477}] See ‘The Education Act, 1902,’ \textit{Pamphlets and leaflets of the Liberal Publication Department, 1903} (London: Liberal Publication Department, 1903).
\end{itemize}
the precise size and length varied, leaflets were almost always shorter than pamphlets, often only one page or a double-sided sheet. Other leaflets, however, could be more substantial, as in the case of a 7-page leaflet containing excerpts from a speech by H.H. Asquith.\textsuperscript{479} In general, however, leaflets were far less substantive than pamphlets by virtue of these limits of space and size. To persuade the reader, the leaflet would need something more than thorough argumentation.

Unlike pamphlets, leaflets showcased far more variety in their format and strategies for catching readers’ attention. Whereas pamphlets enjoyed the luxury of dozens of pages to develop an argument, a leaflet needed to deliver its message in short, pithy statements. Publishers often experimented with variations of formatting, font, and color for select words or phrases. While many leaflets still contained several paragraphs of text, these variations allowed the leaflet to draw the reader’s attention immediately to the main point. Other leaflets used a more imaginative approach, attempting to entertain the reader with images, stories, or even doggerel and poetry. Several one-page leaflets were designed with a political cartoon on the top half, with explanatory text reserved for the bottom. These techniques were often combined, such as one Liberal leaflet containing a poem on “The very latest Social Programme. Made in-Birmingham” with lines like “Pay on everything you eat. Bread and sugar, tea and meat / Starve till you are 65. Then, if you are still alive / Thanks to Joe – his own invention – you MAY get an old-age pension.” On the reverse, it asked the reader to choose, “Clericalism and dear food or religious equality and free trade. Which?”\textsuperscript{480}

\textsuperscript{479} Leaflet 1920, \textit{Pamphlets and leaflets of the Liberal Publication Department, 1903}. The leaflet’s cost was also commensurate with its length. The leaflet 17 shillings 6 pence per 1000, or almost 5 pennies per leaflet.

\textsuperscript{480} Leaflet 1938, \textit{Pamphlets and leaflets of the Liberal Publication Department}. 
Yet despite efforts to build negative associations in voters’ minds, leaflets were rarely, if ever, reduced to the repetition of mere slogans and phrases. Even the most concise leaflets were still written in complete sentences, the ideas and arguments contained within still discernible even in abbreviated form. In this manner, there was a constant tension between the relative degree of sophistication of this propaganda and the propagandists’ expectations about voters’ capacity to engage critically with major issues. Sometimes, the result was plodding and tedious to read. One Liberal leaflet presented a parable of an overburdened donkey and its harsh master, who places a sack of corn that the donkey can no longer bear. “I’m quite sure…that you won’t feel it – it’s a mere nothing,” the owner says. The donkey replies, “I’m an ass, I know, but not such an ass as all that.” Faced with the donkey’s continued complaints, the master removes the corn sack and congratulates himself on his kindness. The donkey retorts that it was cruel to put the extra weight on to begin with. The leaflet concludes with the explanatory note, “The patient donkey is the British taxpayer and its Master the Tory Government; the moral is that the Tories could not in 1903 have taken off the Corn Tax if they had not first of all put it on in 1902.”

A similar example can be seen in a pro-tariff poster *A Free Trade Forecast*. The poster depicts a penniless, unemployed workman and a woman sullenly looking through the window of the free trade shop packed with foreign-made items. The woman asks, “Eh! John, but ain’t they cheap?” The man replies, “Don’t matter how cheap they are, my wench, if yer ain’t got the money to buy ‘em.”

481 Leaflet 1933, *Pamphlets and leaflets of the Liberal Publication Department.*
482 'A Free Trade Forecast,' LSE Coll Misc 0519/91.
Figure 1. Impoverished Britons, and their Jack Russell terrier, look enviously at cheap foreign imports, unable to afford them for lack of employment. Imperial Tariff Committee, *A Free Trade Forecast*: London School of Economics Library, Political and Tariff Reform Posters.

It is unclear why the authors of such material thought it prudent to compare their audiences to asses and wenches, why they would circulate leaflets requiring explanatory notes, or how readers reacted to such condescension. Political operatives like Charles Masterman were often vocal in their inability to comprehend the minds of many working-class Britons, or like Graham Wallas, skeptical of voters’ capacity for rational political choices. Indeed, the production of political literature did not necessarily mean it enjoyed an audience; in 1903, the Liberal writer Hilaire Belloc penned *The Great Inquiry*, a satirical “report” of Balfour’s governmental inquiry into the fiscal question, which only sold 35 copies. Consequently, while the volume of political propaganda circulated at this time was unprecedented, it does not immediately follow that it was effective or well-conceived.

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483 Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England*, 231n.5.
While free traders and tariff reformers circulated mountains of political material, the press was by no means an idle spectator in the contest for hearts and minds, contributing to electioneering and propaganda campaigns. Compared to the Tariff Reform League and Free Trade Union, newspapers commanded significantly larger audiences, and acted as sources of both information and entertainment often on a daily basis. Nowhere was the cooperation between political actors and the press clearer than Arthur Pearson and his arch-Conservative Daily Express. Pearson was among the first to commit to Chamberlain’s policy, serving as both the TRL’s first chairman and directing his papers to support the cause; Churchill described Pearson as “the champion hustler of the Tariff Reform League.” In addition to positive coverage, beginning in late September 1903 Pearson organized a wide-ranging pro-tariff campaign in the Express in anticipation of Chamberlain’s own nationwide speaking tour.

The Express published an impressive body of literature, including doggerel poetry, songs, and a fiscal pantomime. This production was the combined work of writer Bertram Fletcher Robinson and the young humorist P.G. Wodehouse. At its core was The Parrot, a series of 48 poems written between September 30 and December 21 of 1903, featuring a downtrodden parrot who could only speak the phrase, “Your food will cost you more.” In their first poem, Robinson and Wodehouse presented readers with stanzas such as “He’s a bird of solid tissue and he meets each fiscal issue / With the tiring repetition of a venerable bore. He never says ‘Explain to me’, or ‘Just repeat the same to me’ / He simply ends discussion with: ‘Your food will cost you

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more." The poems mixed Chamberlain’s rhetoric and current events with the ridicule of doctrinaire free traders embodied in the parrot’s incessant refrain. All but one of the poems appeared on the newspaper’s front page during its run, each of them employing the parrot’s incessant motto. The series concluded on December 21 with an announcement of the parrot’s tragic demise, unable to endure the ridicule of his favorite cry. Culminating with the victory of tariff reform, the ghost of the parrot appears at the poem’s finale, leaving readers with the ringing declaration “YOUR FOOD WILL NOT COST MORE.”

Robinson and Wodehouse also contributed a number of short stories. The satirical pantomime “Sleeping Beauty” depicted two boys – Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Michael Hicks-Beach – attempting to sneak past the terrifying Tariff Reform League dragon in order to wake the sleeping Duke of Devonshire. Along the way, they are treated to songs by Lord Roseberry, a Cobden Club member named “Herr Spoofheimer,” and the ghost of the late Parrot. After a long discussion filled with boasts of their plans to form a “Free Food League” to fight for votes across the country, a single roar from the dragon sends them fleeing.

Far more edifying fare could be found in the parable “Ye Fiscal Crusoe: A Story for Children and those Weak-minded Folk who may be Drawn toward the Follies of the Free Food League.” The story is framed as Robinson Crusoe’s diary account of an experiment in pure free trade on a desert island. Having taken stock of the island’s resources, Crusoe plans to pay a portion of coconut trees to Friday to build his house. Before the deal is settled, traders from another island offer to sell the building materials at a lower price than Friday asked for his labor. The process repeats itself again and again, until Crusoe lives lavishly and Friday perishes from

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486 The Daily Express, September 30, 1903.
487 Ibid., December 21, 1903.
488 Ibid., December 28, 1903.
neglect and starvation. Grieving over what his fiscal choices have done to his loyal servant, Crusoe moves to a new island and adopts Friday II. Once more, the foreign traders arrive with their wares, but Crusoe insists they pay a tariff of one coconut tree as part of the deal, which he gives to Friday II to keep him fed and to use to build himself a house. In the end, Crusoe may not live in as much luxury as on his first island, but in exchange he has given away less of his island’s bounty and helped his servant earn his livelihood. The story was an effective way of distilling tariff reform rhetoric, on the one hand addressing the interests of the working class who might find themselves, like Friday, unemployed and impoverished, while appealing to manufacturers and investors to look beyond the gains of short-term profit.

Robinson Crusoe and Friday enjoy the benefits of their tariff. ‘Ye Fiscal Crusoe.’ Daily Express newspaper, December 12, 1903.

The poems, stories, and other humor and entertainment in Pearson’s newspaper were part of the general war of ideas between tariff reformers and free traders. While reflecting the more substantial arguments articulated by politicians and experts, these artifacts of the debate relied far

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489 Ibid., December 12, 1903.
490 The use of metaphor of a desert island echoes the arguments made in September by Prime Minister Arthur Balfour in his Economic Notes on Insular Free Trade, which involved a comparison between three hypothetical islands of varying sizes.
more on visualizations, symbolism, and emotional response to win voters’ support. In many aspects of the debate, images rather than words were the defining elements of the debate, a kind of advertising for political branding.\footnote{On the development of advertising, see T.R. Nevett, \textit{Advertising in Britain: A History} (North Pomfret, VT: David & Charles, 1982). James Thompson argues that, while using similar methods, political propaganda and advertisement were fundamentally different in practice. Thompson, ‘Pictorial Lies’. In contrast, James Vernon contends that the impact of visual politics declined over this period. Vernon, \textit{Politics and the People}. Studies of film as propaganda have focused largely on the activities of the state during the World Wars. See, for example, Mark Wollaeger, \textit{Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900-1945} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) and Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe eds., \textit{Film and the End of Empire} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). On efforts by the parties to develop film as propaganda in the interwar period, see for example T.J. Hollins, ‘The Conservative Party and Film Propaganda Between the Wars,’ \textit{English Historical Review} 96, no. 379 (Apr. 1981): 359-369.} The British people were not only confronted with legions of public speakers and forests of pamphlets; they could also see the debate everywhere they looked, in the form of posters, cartoons, photographs, films, and more. The contest of images between tariff reformers and free traders had a life of its own, distilling complex debates of political economy and global trade between statesmen and parties into recognizable symbols and relatable stereotypes.

In the contest of imagery, the free traders were greatly aided by the services of Francis Carruthers Gould, a prolific caricaturist employed by the Liberal-aligned \textit{Westminster Gazette}. Gould’s illustrations were ubiquitous throughout the period, making up the core of the free traders’ visual propaganda. The \textit{Gazette}’s editor, J.A. Spender wrote that Gould’s “skill in simplifying complicated things and giving vivid and humorous expression to what in other hands were dreary generalities, has never been surpassed.”\footnote{J.A. Spender, \textit{Life, Journalism and Politics} (London: Cassell, 1927) 1:112.} Gould’s influence reached beyond the press; almost all of the posters printed by the Liberal Party and Free Trade Union used Gould’s work, whether reproductions of his work at the \textit{Gazette} or original illustrations.\footnote{Proceedings in Connection with the Twenty-Eighth Annual Meeting of the National Liberal Federation, 27.} He also provided his talents for several books; in 1904, he illustrated \textit{John Bull’s Adventures in the}
Fiscal Wonderland, the Radical MP and poet Wilfrid Lawson’s collected Cartoons in Rhyme and Line in 1905, and the 1908 F.C.G’s Froissart’s Modern Chronicle, a satirical history of the tariff reform campaign written in the style of a medieval ballad.


Gould regularly used Lewis Carroll’s famous work as a vehicle for his satire, with Joseph Chamberlain appearing as the Mad Hatter.494 Chamberlain’s use of misleading statistics and his tendency to change his rhetoric to suit his audience juxtaposed well with the Hatter’s nonsensical riddles and irrational math. Drawn with a sharply pointed nose and his chain perpetually upturned, Gould’s version of Chamberlain conveyed a sense of self-assured arrogance and aggressiveness which exaggerated his public persona. Wonderland served as a convenient backdrop for satirists, which transformed the conventional seriousness of Westminster politics into Carroll’s absurd surrealism. Gould was adept at using Carroll’s iconic figures to portray the

Gould’s work was particularly focused on mocking Arthur Balfour’s leadership. Although Prime Minister from 1902 to 1905, Balfour was often regarded as a subordinate figure in the debate. A lifelong bachelor and the author of several philosophical tracts on the subject of objective truth and subjective human perception, Balfour presented a stark contrast to the bold, businesslike Chamberlain. Where Chamberlain courted controversy, Balfour sought to paper over differences of opinion through rhetorical sleight of hand. Where Chamberlain was charismatic and projected energy and activity, Balfour was an aloof golfer and uncomfortable on the platform. As a result, Balfour was mercilessly assailed by satirists and cartoonists. The Prime Minister routinely appeared with slumped shoulders, drooping mustache, and drowsy eyes, the helpless or servile accomplice to the aggressive and domineering Chamberlain.

Shivering on the Brink and His Mandate, two of Gould’s many depictions of the Prime Minister as subservient to Chamberlain’s political whims. Westminster Gazette newspaper, June 5, 1903 and January 6, 1904.

The perception of a strikingly unequal power dynamic in the relationship between Balfour and Chamberlain was pervasive, even among the Prime Minister’s supporters. One postcard image depicted Chamberlain clad in knightly armor while a diminutive Balfour follows behind, dressed like an office clerk and armed with a broom. Another Conservative poster showed John Bull laying his hand on the Prime Minister’s shoulder with the exclamation that “He’s good enough for me!” These images were hardly a ringing endorsement of the party’s leader and magnified the perceived disparity between the two politicians. Chamberlain’s reputation was one of energy, strength, and honest integrity, which was immediately reflected in tariff reform propaganda. Chamberlain, a 67-year-old, monocle-wearing industrialist, appeared as a knightly crusader or an athletic football player in his supporters’ propaganda. Even Chamberlain’s critics accepted this motif, though usually exaggerating this masculine image into

496 JC MS821/101.
497 ‘He’s Good Enough for me!’ LSE Coll Misc 0519/11.
one of dishonorable aggressiveness and high-strung irritability, such as *Punch*’s rendition of Chamberlain delivering a bare-knuckled punch to a workman below the belt.498

Attacks on Balfour’s masculinity tended to be more direct, with the Prime Minister frequently appearing womanly in caricatures. Such attacks were not unique, with artists mocking prominent politicians in both political camps in this fashion. Gould drew several illustrations of Chamberlain as Mother Hubbard, explaining to a starving “Labour” dog why her cupboard was so bare of social reform.499 Similarly, the Liberal leader Henry Campbell-Bannerman was drawn arriving at the church in a wedding dress, finger resting coquettishly over his mouth and a child-sized John Redmond in tow, much to the surprise of her fiancé John Bull. Another portrayed “Mrs. Bannerman” concocting vile recipes in the kitchen from the ingredients of Liberal policies, causing John Bull to turn away in revulsion.500 But depictions of Balfour adopted more sexualized undertones. While Chamberlain and Campbell-Bannerman were old spinsters and rotund matrons, Balfour appeared as a frivolous young woman courting suitors, an allusion to his efforts to maintain the unity of the party, and perhaps also an insinuation of his lifelong bachelorhood.

498 *Punch*, July 1, 1903.
499 See “The Cupboard Still Bare,” LSE Coll Misc 0519/29. Several versions of Chamberlain as Mother Hubbard were used, both in the *Gazette* and in Liberal Party posters.
500 “An Awkward Relationship” and “Mrs. Bannerman’s Cabinet Pudding,” LSE Coll Misc 0519/3-4.
No Flirtations Allowed and Two Broken Strings, two Gould illustrations of Balfour as a flirtatious maiden. The former mocks the efforts of “Clara” to win over the former Chancellor Michael Hicks-Beach, the latter his efforts to keep both Chamberlain and the Duke of Devonshire in his Cabinet. Westminster Gazette newspaper, November 10, 1903 and October 7, 1903.

Balfour’s comparatively “soft” public image contributed to the tension between his social background and the expectations of a party leader in an era of fractious popular politics. At the same time, however, such imagery and propaganda never meant that Balfour’s critics escalated to outright accusations of socially unacceptable behavior. Nevertheless, the subversion of Balfour’s masculinity and political strength of will helped to undermine Balfour’s tenure in office, and fitted into the Liberal opposition’s overarching accusation of a decade of Unionist corruption and mismanagement. Observers in both political parties anticipated new elections as

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502 This restraint was motivated, at least in part, by a sense of ‘fair play’ in politics, whereas liars tended to be treated mercilessly by voters. See Patrick Joyce, Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On the dynamics of masculine gender identity, see Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds. Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800 (New York: Routledge, 1991); John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999); see also Jon Lawrence, ‘Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914.’
early at the summer of 1903, unable to imagine how such a weak leader could last for long. But the public personas of a strong Chamberlain and weak Balfour belied the true dynamics between the two.\textsuperscript{503} Balfour resisted calls for a new election until the end of 1905, and even after his party’s disastrous electoral defeat – in which he also lost his seat – Balfour retained the party leadership until 1911, while Chamberlain was enfeebled by a stroke on his 70th birthday in July 1906.

At the same time, tariff reformers and free traders did not ignore women in their propaganda appeals. Despite being unable to vote, women were nevertheless expected to participate in the tariff controversy. Indeed, because any change in tariff policy was likely to affect the price of food and cost of living, some believed that tariff reform chiefly concerned women more than men. Both the Tariff Reform League and Free Trade Union organized women’s associations and trained women as lecturers, public speakers, and election agents. In particular, the TRL practically merged female Unionists’ engagement in politics with participation in tariff reform; following the 1906 election, the League’s Women’s Association merged with the Women’s Liberal Unionist Association to become the Women’s Unionist and Tariff Reform Association, which after the war became the Women’s Unionist Organization. With a membership of at least 300,000 at its height, the WUTRA was perhaps the Unionists’ most effective and dynamic grass-roots organization.\textsuperscript{504}

\textsuperscript{503} Balfour’s ability to maintain his leadership and neutralize Chamberlain’s plans for the Unionist coalition reflected the powerful grip he held over the party apparatus and his skills at persuasion. See Gollin, \textit{Balfour’s Burden}.

\textsuperscript{504} For WUTRA’s membership, see David Thackeray, ‘Home and Politics: Women and Conservative Activism in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,’ \textit{Journal of British Studies} 49, no. 4 (Oct. 2010): 826-848. Thackeray argues that the WUTRA’s role in revitalizing Unionist electoral fortunes after the disappointing general elections has been almost entirely overlooked. See Thackeray, \textit{Conservatism for a Democratic Age}.
The strategy to win the support of women was two-fold. First, women who ostensibly controlled the domestic sphere and shopped for the family’s food, could be regarded as more qualified to speak on the consequences of changes to the price of food. One Liberal leaflet urged a voter, “Ask your wife what she thinks of Mr. Chamberlain’s proposals to tax food.”\textsuperscript{505} Secondly, if women were won over, they might be able to sway their husbands as well. Such was the case with one Unionist poster which simply read in bright-red lettering, “The Wife’s Appeal – Don’t Let the Foreigner Take my Man’s Job!”\textsuperscript{506} Free Trade iconography meanwhile drew on the motif of the woman as a shopper, waiting in line with baskets at the bountiful free trade shop or looking on in horror at the exorbitant prices at the tariff reform store. In this respect, the case for free trade could be doubly appealing towards British women. On the one hand, the emphasis on the price of food and cost of living appealed directly to women’s domestic role. On the other, the Liberal warning of tariff reform’s corrupting influence also played on the traditional expectation of women as models of virtue and apolitical citizens.\textsuperscript{507}

By focusing on the protection of working-class employment and promising higher wages, tariff reformers had substantially less flexibility in their appeals to women. Though the TRL boasted the slogan “Work for all,” it was clear this did not include women. Nevertheless, the prominence of the WUTRA illustrates that there was still a place for women in the movement. Tariff reformers appealed to women in a manner that emphasized the corrosive effects of unemployment on the home. The flood of cheap foreign goods into Britain meant the destruction of British industry and the loss of the working man’s job. Unemployment, in turn, meant

\textsuperscript{505} Leaflet 1939, \textit{Pamphlets and leaflets of the Liberal Publication Department, 1903}.
\textsuperscript{506} LSE Coll Misc 0519/73.
impoverishment and the devastation of family life. This anxiety was given life in one of the tariff reformers’ most widely-circulated images, “Free Trade” by the artist Thomas Benjamin Kennington, made in anticipation of the 1910 elections.

A depiction of poverty under free trade. Thomas Benjamin Kennington, Free Trade, 1910. Victoria & Albert Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

Kennington’s painting stands in stark contrast to the many brightly-colored posters designed to catch the eye and amuse the viewer, setting a dark tone and delivering its message succinctly. The image is a gloomy display of impoverishment, with a working-class man sitting brooding with his hat and tool bag laid at his feet. On the right, his daughter holds a baby and stares at her father, while his wife lays her head on her arm in despair. Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald called the poster “magnificent…full of human sympathy, which depicted the terrible condition of an unemployed workman,” though he insisted that “Tariff Reform would blacken the picture rather than lighten it.” Tariff reformers were convinced they had found a winning

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508 Hansard, 5s, 14: 256 (23 February, 1910).
image, going so far as to display oversized poster copies throughout the country. Unlike many posters and leaflets, which appealed to men and women separately, Kennington’s work allowed both men and women to insert themselves into the picture and imagine the paralyzing effect job loss would have on their lives. Impressions of fear, uncertainty, and failure permeate the image, affecting the entire family in different but no less visceral ways.

Tariff reformers frequently cultivated an anxiety of emasculation. The man in Kennington’s painting has failed as a husband and a father, stripped of his pride for his inability to provide for his family. Another pro-tariff poster produced by the Liberal Unionists used a similar theme, depicting a beggarly, gaunt-faced working man shivering as foreigners bring crates of imports through an open door. The open door also brings a draft of frigid air, which carries an image of the workman’s wife sitting with her head on her arm while their crying children sit on the floor and pull at her apron. The poster declares in bolded red text “The open door and the man who feels the draught.” The theme was also used in the reverse, with Chamberlain cast in the role of the defender of families. One postcard illustration showed a benevolently smiling Chamberlain holding a “protection” umbrella against the torrential downpour of “foreign dumping.” A workman sits at his side and looks into the distance where a number of shuttered factories can be seen, while his wife sits on Chamberlain’s other side, tending to three smiling, rosy-cheeked children who are eating from baskets of colonial food.

509 Unionists apparently favored sixteen-sheet versions of “Free Trade,” with each individual sheet 30 inches by 20 inches in area. The Daily Mail reported that 11,000 copies had been placed in two thousand locations, though it is unclear precisely how they were presented. See James Thompson, “Pictorial Lies?” 204 and Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 128.

510 Free traders, in turn, indignantly rebutted that the picture was an outrageous insult against women, dismissing the wife as “a slattern of the worst type….an obvious failure both as wife and mother.” Quoted in Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 128.

511 LSE Misc Coll 0519/61.

512 JC MS821/80.
Defense of the family was thus an underlying theme of much of this material. Whether propagandists railed against the price of food or the perils of joblessness, they were asking voters to consider what change would mean for their families and for their sense of self-respect as providers.

To be effective, propaganda often required a villain, someone or something responsible for the nation’s woes or standing in the way of a solution. When they were not being emasculated or ridiculed, politicians were frequently portrayed in such manner. Free traders routinely demonized their rivals, convinced that the tariff reform movement was a concerted effort by self-interested parties to enrich themselves at the expense of the general populace. Such was the theme behind one *Punch* illustration showing Chamberlain as a highwayman, pistol in hand and shaking his fist as the free-trade carriage hurries away unscathed.513 But apart from the leading politicians of the tariff movement, free traders had few ready-made villains to develop in their propaganda.

In contrast, tariff reformers seized upon several scapegoats for Britain’s problems, exploiting xenophobic sentiments that came easily to the campaign of protection against unfair international competition. Tariff reform propaganda was replete with images of caricatured foreigners inundating the country with their cheaply-made goods and ruining British industry. Often, this anxiety was expressed through an analogy of a store, with images of John Bull standing helpless has foreign vendors set up shop, or desperate foreigners clambering to get access to Chamberlain’s protected shop.514

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513 *Punch*, June 17, 1903.
514 JC MS821/79 and MS821/87.
Two political postcards depicting the helpless foreign trader under tariff reform, and the helpless John Bull under free trade. Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain Collection.

The motif of the foreign menace and the British store appeared repeatedly, and enjoyed some popular success when put to song. The most successful piece was “The John Bull Store,” written by Robinson and Wodehouse for the *Daily Express*. After appearing in the newspaper in October 1903, the song was performed for months at the Alhambra music hall in the West End, alongside magic lantern projections of Chamberlain’s image, and an expanded version was written in anticipation of the general election in 1906. The song began with a eulogy of Britain’s commercial supremacy and the victory over Napoleon, and lamented the fading of British power. It continued by exhorting the audience to “Buy! Buy! Buy! At the John Bull store / the Deutscher and the Yank we shall want no more; And the money we shall gain will in British hands remain / If we buy at the John Bull store.”

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515 For the song’s performance at the Alhambra, see *Punch*, December 23, 1903 and February 3, 1904. The periodical mocked the music hall for its dogged repetitiveness. For the expanded version of the song, see *The Daily Express*, January 6, 1906.
The song’s lyrics reflected the prevailing theme in tariff reform rhetoric that foreign competition was unfairly exploiting Britain’s free trade policy while they themselves hid behind prohibitive tariff walls. Accusations were leveled in particular against Germany, building on the same anxieties expressed since the ‘fair trade’ movement of the 1880s and Ernest Williams’ famous protectionist tract, *Made in Germany*. While tariff reform rhetoric ran in parallel with mounting international tensions with Germany, the two issues maintained a crucial degree of separation.\textsuperscript{516} Indeed, even the tariff reform caricature was less than menacing. The figure of “Herr Dumper,” a short, rotund man with bushy mustache, cap, and pipe, cheerfully selling his rubbish on the free market tended to be more a source of amusement, highlighting the foolishness of John Bull letting this man get the better of him at the marketplace. Herr Dumper’s unthreatening appearance was softened even more by an absurd accent and jolly demeanor which made him appear more bumbling than nefarious. Similar to Robinson and Wodehouse’s “Fiscal Pantomime,” the song “Herr Schmidt’s Advice” featured an exuberant German with lyrics such as “Ach, Cobden vos a vondrous man.” The Tariff Reform League recommended the song, alongside “Winston’s Telescope,” as a fitting piece of entertainment for concerts due to its humorous lyrics and music with “a good swing.”\textsuperscript{517}

But the foreign assault on British commerce was often portrayed as a group effort, with the German cooperating with the American Uncle Sam, a Russian with a thick beard and large fur cap, and a stereotyped Frenchman, to rob John Bull of his business and even his country. In

\textsuperscript{516} In his analysis of the 1910 elections, Blewett notes the panic related to the loss of naval supremacy and an alleged German attack were dealt with as defense issues, not as corollaries to tariffs. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties, and the People*, 125-128. On the growing Anglo-German rivalry, see Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* and Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*. The interplay of anxiety over security, Anglo-German relations, and popular perceptions is explored in Keir Waddington, “‘We Don’t Want Any German Sausages Here!’ Food, Fear, and the German Nation in Victorian and Edwardian Britain,’ *Journal of British Studies* 52, no. 4 (Oct. 2013): 1017-1042.

this respect, anti-foreign propaganda could convey foreign business competition in more aggressive, even violent terms, requiring an equally aggressive response from an aggrieved Britain. One pair of illustrated postcards depicted Chamberlain dreaming “through a monocle”, the first showing Uncle Sam and the German Herr delivering a kick and a shove that sends John Bull flying off the globe, “if free trade continues,” while the second depicts John Bull sitting triumphant atop the globe as diminutive foreigners cling desperately to his feet. Anti-foreign violence was cheered on in another postcard cartoon, which depicted Chamberlain behind the steering wheel of the “Empire” motorcar, plowing over a quartet of foreigners, while Balfour exclaims from the passenger seat, “That’s right Joe, cut the foreigners down. They’re always obstructing the Empire’s progress.”

Such rhetoric was another manifestation of the growing xenophobia and anti-Semitism in British society at the beginning of the century. Chamberlain and other tariff reformers repeatedly played on working-class fears of foreign immigrants arriving in Britain and depressing wages. At the same time, the push for fiscal reform and immigration restrictions were closely intertwined. The League’s president, the Duke of Sutherland, was simultaneously vice-president of the Immigration Reform Association, and the two organizations shared several

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518 JC MS821/62-63
519 JC MS821/99.
executive committee members. But while the fiscal debate was often framed as a clash between racially-motivated nationalists and cosmopolitan liberals, free traders’ propaganda tapped into nationalist sentiments and by no means rejected racial prejudice. Free traders cultivated working-class outrage over competition from Asian peoples, pointing to the importation of cheap contract laborers from China to reestablish the South African mines. Caricatures of Balfour and Chamberlain with Chinese queues were common; one Liberal postcard, its front painted yellow, depicted a cartoon version of “The Right Honourable Chowsephe Chamberstein,” with stereotypical Chinese dress and sinister expression. Tariff reformers, in comparison, were hesitant to exploit such “yellow peril” rhetoric, in part because the ratification of a military alliance with Japan was one of the Balfour government’s most notable foreign policy achievements. Rather, free traders tended to frame their nationalist appeals in more sentimental ways, as nostalgia for the mid-Victorian golden age and a determination to preserve Britain against the corruption of tariff reform, an importation of “foreign” ideas that were alien to the English political tradition. Both sides in the controversy were equally prepared to exploit racist and anti-Semitic sentiments for their political benefit.

Performing the Fiscal Debate

These different forms of media were all methods of distilling complex ideas and a complicated series of facts into easily digestible and highly politicized forms. But at the beginning of the century, pamphlets, leaflets, and posters were already familiar electioneering tools. In contrast, film offered a new means of conveying political messages on the technological cutting-edge. Films allowed political agents to repackage familiar themes and arguments in new ways. Between 1903 and 1910, at least five such films were produced in Britain on the issue of tariff reform, making them some of the first propaganda films. Despite their unabashedly political nature, they were not sponsored by either the parties or pressure groups. Instead, these were the result of a mercenary attitude among certain film producers, who offered their fare to both sides of the debate. During the 1910 elections, Léon Gaumont’s production company created both John Bull’s Foolish Hospitality and England Under Free Trade, shamelessly advertising the pair under the heading “Films for both parties.” Only a few minutes in length and without narration, the films were in essence pantomimes like those already seen at political meetings or in music halls. The very first of these films was John Bull’s Hearth, or John Bull’s Fireside, by George Albert Smith in 1903. The film begins with John Bull warming himself before a fire with a “Free Trade” sign above the mantelpiece. One by one, foreigners enter the room. John Bull eagerly greets them and offers each a place at the hearth until he has been completely pushed from the fire’s warmth. With John Bull in consternation, an Australian cattle driver steps into the room. Pointing at the free trade sign and shaking his head, the Australian unveils a drawing of Joseph Chamberlain, pushes the foreigners to the ground, and tears down

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524 The Bioscope, January 13, 1910.
free trade and replaces the sign with one marked “Fair trade.” As the film concludes, the two Britons sit contentedly by the fire as the foreigners look on helpless and stunned.525

The overtly political nature of these films was perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the 1905 film *International Exchange*, produced by Cecil Hepworth and directed by Lewin Fitzhamon. Unlike Smith or Gaumont, Hepworth and Fitzhamon openly supported Chamberlain. Fitzhamon reputedly owned a racehorse named Tariff and the duo also collaborated on an anti-immigration film title *The Aliens’ Invasion* the same year. International Exchange was also more substantial than the earlier *John Bull’s Hearth*, running to nearly four minutes and including multiple scenes. The film begins with five doors, each labeled with the name of a country and the word “Tariff,” with the exception of Britain’s door, which is open and brimming with goods for export. John Bull proceeds to knock on each door, paying the foreigner for the right to enter. But while his back is turned, other foreigners walk through Britain’s open door and help themselves to what they find inside. The process continues until John Bull is left with nothing and all the foreigners’ doors have been shut again. Growing irate, John Bull marches back to Britain and shuts the door. The foreigners gather around in bewilderment, and beg to pay John Bull for the right to enter. Restored to his prosperity, John Bull walks to two ballot boxes and cheerfully places his vote in “Fair Trade” to the delight of Britannia, a workman, and the “Fair Trade” fairy, while a “Free Trade” witch looks on in defeat.

525 *John Bull’s Hearth*, directed by George Albert Smith (G.A. Smith, 1903). British Film Institute. Smith also produced a pro-free trade film, *The Free Trade Bench* at the same time. Gaumont’s 1910 *John Bull’s Foolish Hospitality* follows along similar lines, replacing the hearth with a dinner table.

526 Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, 92.

Despite the pioneering nature of these films, even the more substantial *International Exchange* was simplistic when compared to Hepworth and Fitzhamon’s commercial productions during the same period.\(^{527}\) John Bull’s encounter with the foreigners is a single uninterrupted four-minute take, during which the set malfunctions several times; as the actors move about the stage, the doors to Germany and Russia are jarred open by the actors’ movements across the stage, perhaps spoiling the film’s message and forcing the actors to reach out from behind the set to close them. Despite the somewhat threadbare presentation, these films were still effective tools for conveying ideas to viewers, and appeared frequently at political gatherings. The novelty of the experience also attracted the viewer’s attention, while the ability to present these films alongside “slice of life” films added weight to the political messages the films contained. One Unionist election agent for Barnstaple in Devon vouched that they were effective “not only in the way of entertainment, but also for imparting instruction on political questions of the day.” Scenes

\(^{527}\) For example, *Rescued by Rover*, also produced in 1905, tells the story of a dog’s heroic effort to rescue a baby after being kidnapped by a beggar in the park. Though roughly the same length as *International Exchange*, *Rescued by Rover* incorporates multiple scenes, interior and exterior settings with actors and extras, as well as numerous stunts by a particularly well-trained dog.
of daily life were especially compelling, conveying documentary authority or authenticity which “needed few words to enforce their truths.” Audio recordings were also used alongside these films. Tariff reformers in particular recorded Chamberlain’s speeches and played his voice on gramophones for audiences, in an attempt to amplify his charisma and national fame to a wider audience.

**The Bread and Circuses of Tariff Reform**

The propaganda attempted to distill complex debates of political ideology, national trade, and fiscal policy into a form that would be comprehensible and digestible for the general public. The authors of these works strived to produce material that could appeal to the audience’s material interests and emotions, capture their attention, and project authenticity. While propaganda often focused on negative emotions, such as fear of or anger at lost employment or high food prices, they also cultivated positive emotions of hope and comfort, that all would be well if the correct candidate or party was voted into office. But to make sense of these emotions and harness them for electioneering required a narrative, a story establishing a plausible connection between voters’ anxieties and aspirations, and the candidate’s ideas.

In this respect, what was true was often more a matter of perspective than objectivity. In speeches, articles, posters, and many other formats, politicians and activists fought a duel of statistics, wielding trade returns, unemployment figures, and tax revenues as weapons to prove

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528 *The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal*, May 1905, quoted in Vanessa Toulmin and Simon Popple, *Visual Delights: Exhibition and Reception* (Eastleigh, Southampton: John Libbey, 2005) 2:136. Ironically, the Liberals not only held Barnstaple in the 1906 election but increased their share of the vote from 51 to 59 percent.

529 *Judd, Balfour and the British Empire*, 125. However, according to Arthur Pearson’s biographer, while Pearson urged the idea of a 30-minute recording of Chamberlain’s voice, he maintains that “Apparently Mr. Chamberlain did not like the gramophone suggestion.” *Dark, The Life of Sir Arthur Pearson*, 107.
whose policy was correct. When presenting audiences with opposing interpretations of the same sets of data, or even contradictory sets of statistics, authenticity and sincerity counted if politicians hoped to win votes. In an era before mechanical sound amplification and with a popular press still committed to printing verbatim reports of candidates’ speeches, personal oratory was a vital facet of any candidate’s campaign.\(^{530}\) It not only required a candidate to clearly and convincingly articulate his politics, but also an ability to master the crowd. Showmanship was thus an essential element, especially with tariff reformers who so closely linked the success of their agenda to the image and personality of Joseph Chamberlain.

Faced with this challenge, Chamberlain demonstrated a firm understanding of effective electioneering strategies. His charisma and image, honed over decades in politics, loomed large and his rhetoric largely defined the parameters of debate. He was also largely considered one of the most effective public speakers of the period. But Chamberlain was not always capable of converting his audiences. Speaking on January 5, 1905, on behalf of the Unionist candidate for Derby, Chamberlain’s speech was repeatedly interrupted by groups of hecklers, who created so much noise that even police intervention failed to restore order and Chamberlain cut short his speech. The *Times* was outraged by the crowd’s display, but no one was more outraged than the Unionist candidate, James Holford, who stepped onto the stage to exclaim, “cowards as you are, I will beat you next week….You are not fit to be Englishmen; you are only worthy to be starved out for foreign imports. Go away, and die of starvation in a ditch.” After vowing that Chamberlain would become the next Prime Minister, Holford added, to the cheers and laughter of the crowd, “Small children you are and as small children you will be smacked. If any of the

men in that corner will come to one of my meetings and stand up and say one-tenth of what you said to-night, I will make you wish you had never been born.”

The crowd’s laughter and cheering that followed from these threats illustrates the often shifting and unstable dynamic between candidate and voter. On the one hand, rowdy and uncooperative crowds might be won over by patience and courtesy, as Balfour showed at Manchester. On the opposite end of the spectrum was Ernest Morrison-Bell, a war veteran and Unionist candidate for the small Devon borough of Ashburton, who reveled in defying and “taming” the crowd, and boasted of his strength, including once throwing a man through a glass door during one particularly heated campaign meeting. For his part, Chamberlain developed a theme of plain-spoken frankness, trusting in the people’s ability to understand his policies and grasp their importance. Early in the controversy, he had conceded that no system of preferential tariffs would be viable without a tax on food imports. Many of Chamberlain’s opponents assumed this confession would destroy his movement before it even began. But Chamberlain reassured the public that the cost of living would remain unchanged, leading him to what became perhaps the most influential political stunt of the entire debate.

At a public meeting in Birmingham on November 4, 1903, in the course of a speech which lasted nearly two hours, Chamberlain complained of a series of posters free traders had placed around the city. The posters showed an enormous oversized “free trade” loaf of bread next to a shrunken “Zollverein” loaf under protectionism. He then told his audience he had arranged for two loaves to be baked, one to the current standard and the other reduced at the

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531 The Times, January 5, 1906. Holford lost the election by a margin of 21 points, as compared to a 5-point margin in 1900, when Geoffrey Drage, known here for his subsequent role on the Pollock Committee, stood as the Unionist candidate. Derby was a two-seat constituency, with both a Liberal and Labour incumbent.

532 Lawrence, Electing Our Masters, 92. According to Thackeray, the incident was invented by the Daily Mail. See Thackeray, Conservatism for a Democratic Age, 1.
same ratio as his proposed tax. Turning around and unwrapping the two loaves, he held them up to the crowd and asked if they could tell which was which. The crowd erupted jubilantly. According to the *Times*, “The whole 10,000 in Bingley-hall first shouted with laughter and then cheered at this master stroke of dialectics till they were hoarse.”

Outside Birmingham, reactions to Chamberlain’s theatrics were mixed. For his supporters, the two loaves became something of an idol, the event reenacted again and again in various formats. Perhaps realizing that his gestures had resonated, Chamberlain himself restaged the event for photographs. For their part, cartoonists drew the former Colonial Secretary standing atop mountains of bread, performing acrobatic balancing acts with loaves, or examining them beneath microscopes. One postcard showed a portrait of Chamberlain flanked by “The Empire Loaf” and “The Alien Loaf,” with a caption assuring audiences that “These are the actual loaves used by Mr. Chamberlain.”

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533 *The Times*, November 5, 1903.
534 JC MS821/143.
Against this, Chamberlain’s detractors mocked his performance as foolish and unbecoming for a respectable politician. In the illustration “What we are coming to,” *Punch* depicted Chamberlain stammering as he rummages around to unveil mismatched pairs of tea cups, babies, and agricultural laborers to his audience. Some artists teased Chamberlain’s comment that his eyes were not good enough to spot the difference between his two loaves, equipping his monocle with a new magnifying glass; in one postcard, Chamberlain studies a loaf of bread while a crowd of workers stands behind him, saying, “Yer can’t kid us!”535 Others equated the tariff reform proposals to an attack on the people’s daily bread, portraying a knife-wielding Chamberlain chasing a terrified loaf, while Gould turned his Mad Hatter into a bread thief.536


535 JC MS821/145. Gould used a similar theme in ‘Spectacular Deception,’ in which Chamberlain is holding a loaf small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, while attempting to sell magnifying glasses. A skeptical workman tells Chamberlain they are more interested in eating bread than looking at it. The cartoon, however, predates Chamberlain’s performance by almost five months. See *Westminster Gazette*, June 22, 1903.

536 JC MS821/159 and MS821/113.
Throughout the campaigning, images of the loaf of bread became a ubiquitous symbol, synonymous with prosperity and national livelihood. Among politicians, the loaf “figuratively sums up the Protectionist case and the opposition to it.” For free traders in particular, the juxtaposition of large and small loaves was a microcosm for their argument: tariffs meant more expensive food, and therefore less bread for the people. In principle, the argument was simple and effective, and one that voters could easily grasp. The public response to the prospect of more expensive food was usually and understandably negative, unless softened by other promises like old-age pensions or increased wages and employment. One Unionist MP opined that “I have found that, if the ingenious candidate suggests a tax on bread, the only question is whether he goes out of the door or window first.” At the same time, free traders’ fixation on the symbolism of big and small loaves failed to engage with the actual policies tariff reformers proposed. A maximum two-shilling tax on foreign grain, balanced by reductions in taxes on other goods, was simply too small to materially affect the price of bread. This intransigence contributed to a breakdown in the debate and closed the door on more substantive policy analysis. If free traders persisted in their use of the rhetoric of the ‘dear loaf’ like the eponymous parrot of Robinson and Wodehouse’s poems, tariff reformers could only respond with mockery of their own.

538 Ibid.
539 Under Chamberlain’s plan, foreign wheat would be taxed 2 shillings per quarter, and colonial wheat at 1 shillling. A quarter of grain produced an average 120 4-pound loaves of bread, meaning that even if the country continued to import exclusively foreign wheat, the price of bread would rise by less than a penny per loaf. See Tariff Reform League, *Speaker’s Handbook*, 183.
540 According to Friedburg, electioneering and party competition in the period were important impediments to full, honest discussions about the health of the British economy and contributed to an inadequate government response. See Aaron Friedburg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
By 1910, the free traders’ rhetoric on bread evolved into a form of anti-foreign sentiment of its own. Since 1903, tariff reformers had argued that the spectacular growth of industry in protectionist countries like the United States and Germany was proof of tariffs’ effectiveness, even as they fumed over the perils of foreign competition. Free traders responded by drawing attention to the enduring poverty and poor living conditions of the working classes in foreign nations. The imagery of the loaf and debates on foreign living conditions intersected, with free traders contending that German workers lived a marginal existence, subsisting on a diet of putrid black bread and meat from horses and dogs. Parodying Chamberlain’s stunt, Liberal MP Lewis Harcourt in December 1903 presented his audience with two loaves of German black rye, “to show what protection had done for the German peasant – and there was nearly a riot afterward to get hold of pieces of the loaves!” One Liberal poster depicted a British housewife shopping at a German-run tariff store with the advertisement “Bread Always Dear; Meat Still Dearer.” Stacks of bread, shaped like traditional British loaves but colored black, lie in bins. The shopkeeper tells the woman “I can give you a 3-lb. BLACK loaf if that will suit you” and is immediately followed with a narrator declaring, “But it won’t.” In 1910, James Branch, the Liberal candidate for Enfield in 1912 went so far as to parade his pet dog with a placard reading “Vote for Branch, and don’t eat Doggy.” White British bread developed into a symbol not just of Britain’s relative prosperity compared to its protectionist neighbors. It also came to stand as a mark of Britain’s advanced, even civilized state compared, the pure and wholesome white bread contrasted to the barbarism of hungry German masses desperate to find sustenance wherever they could.

541 Quoted in Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 95.
542 LSE Misc Coll 0519/30.
543 Trentmann, Free Trade Nation, 96. Unfortunately for his dog, Branch lost his bid in both elections that year.
Tariff reformers struggled to dispel these exaggerated horror stories of life in Germany. The Conservative leader Bonar Law insisted that German black bread was “eaten by precisely the same class in Germany as those who dine in London at the Ritz.” Others went to almost farcical lengths to distinguish between German “black” bread and more rhetorically palatable rye. In one particularly curious exchange in Parliament, Lloyd George and the Conservative MP George Faber debated the essence of bread: “Is it denied that they eat black bred? (An Hon. Member: It is rye bread”) Is it not black? (“No”) Really, hon. Gentlemen, amongst their other defects, are even colour blind. The Germans themselves call it black bread, and that is how you order it. (“No.”) Well, what is its colour?”

Amidst larger questions of national fiscal policy, the controversy momentarily devolved into a mania over German bread and sausages. In heaping so much attention on the condition of the German diet, the tariff argument reached to such basic aspects of daily life as the food Britons put on their tables. Free traders, eager to present themselves as protectors of the British way of life, frightened voters with the prospect that tariff reform would alter and destroy the people’s familiar habits and replace them with strange foreign alternatives.

Tariff reformers also responded to these charges of German poverty in more novel and substantive ways. In the spring of 1910, the Tariff Reform League sponsored so-called ‘tariff trips’ by delegations of British working-class men to tour Berlin and major German industrial centers in Saxony and the Rhineland. Between March and May, five tours were conducted involving several hundred participants, each lasting 12 days. These ‘tariff trippers’ were asked to record their observations and impressions of working-class living conditions for publication in a

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545 Hansard, 5s, 14: 450 (24 February, 1910).
series of lengthy reports by the League. In the preface of each report, the League explained its intent, noting “The vast majority of the electorate of the country are not in a position to travel and learn for themselves. Thus it is that working men…are liable to be misled by assertions…which can only be refuted by the exercise of common sense or by personal experience.”546 The results seemingly vindicated their hopes; the trippers returned with glowing accounts of prosperity and plenty wherever they went, a far cry from the tales of misery they had heard. The delegates’ first-hand accounts were placed alongside photographs, either taken by the ‘trippers’ themselves or by their guides, showing clean streets, bustling factories, and happy, well-fed German workers. As a piece of political stagecraft, the tariff trips were a success; tariff reformers demonstrated the depth of their confidence in the efficacy of their policies, and invited any who doubted to see first-hand what tariffs meant for life in Germany.

Unsurprisingly, free traders roundly criticized the reports and questioned their value as sources of evidence. Critics pointed to the many discrepancies and contradictions between the workers’ accounts, highlighting the conflicting assertions about wages, rents, and prices that the trippers observed. Others wondered whether a twelve-day trip from London to a half dozen German cities and back again was enough time for anyone to form an accurate impression of economic conditions in a sophisticated industrial nation, especially when few, if any, of the trippers knew German. In one instance, a skeptical commentator reported a story of a tripper in Stuttgart who attempted to buy tobacco from a local store without the aid of his guides. Proudly

546 Tariff Reform League, Reports on Labour and Social Conditions in Germany (London: Tariff Reform League, 1910) 1:v. The League borrowed the idea from earlier working-class commissions; in 1908, the Conservative candidate for Dewsbury co-sponsored one such excursion. And in 1906, the so-called Gainsborough Commission had funded a tour by six working-class men in December 1905 in anticipation of the election the following month. In both cases, the purpose of the tour was to show voters the living standards in a protectionist country first-hand. For the report of the Gainsborough Commission, see Life and Labour in Germany (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1906).
showing the tobacco box as proof of his ability to communicate with the shopkeeper, it was only after the group was on the train out of the city that the worker realized he had accidentally bought a tin of biscuits instead. “I am bound to say,” the critic remarked, “that the spectacle of a man…gravely passing judgment for the benefit of his fellow-countrymen upon extremely involved and complex economic and social problems strikes me as a trifle funny.”

For others, doubt turned into suspicion. Before long, the Tariff Reform League was suspected of committing an elaborate fraud. Free traders alleged that German authorities had hidden the embarrassing truth of living conditions behind proverbial Potemkin villages, perhaps even with the connivance of the TRL organizers. Fueling these allegations, a handful of the trippers turned against the TRL and alleged that the organization was guilty of coaching answers or offering bribes for favorable testimony, which the Free Trade Union duly published in their own scathing exposé. In some respects, the tariff tripper reports mirrored the autobiographies and reminiscences collected in Jane Cobden Unwin’s *The Hungry Forties*; just as the tariff reformers dismissed the accounts of Britons old enough to remember life in the 1840s under the Corn Laws, so too were the reports of the tariff trippers torn apart by unbelieving free traders.

The League repeatedly denied any wrongdoing and condemned any allegations of fraudulent behavior. They remained confident that whatever inconsistencies existed between the individual reports, the fact remained that the trippers left Germany with a generally favorable impression of life in a protectionist nation. Still, the highly critical response to the tours raised

547 MacNamara, *Tariff Reform and the Working Man*, 58.
548 Notably, the German government took note of the work of the Gainsborough Commission five years earlier, with the Kaiser himself “extremely interested” in the tour and eager to showcase his concern for the welfare of the German working class. See *Life and Labour in Germany*, xxii-xxiii.
sufficient doubt and uncertainty that, for those so inclined, the reports could be ignored as mere theatrics. In the face of this kind of behavior, of questioning and discrediting every source of information as unreliable, there was a distinct danger of disorienting and disillusioning voters. But some political observers began to perceive that years of propaganda on tariffs and trade had caused a change in working-class voters. Commenting on his experiences among the fishermen of Devonshire, Stephen Reynolds argued that “the working classes have been made aware of the existence of economics. Before the Tariff Reform agitation they were more than ignorant of economics; they were unaware of its existence. Still less did they understand its terms and arguments.”

Years of electioneering, leaflets, public meetings, and lectures had served as an education into a previously arcane and exclusive field. Reynolds added, “No amount of school education could so quickly have educated the people, and, still better, could have set them hard at work educating themselves….the lump is leavened.”

Amidst the fanfare, theatrics, lies, and insinuation, the British voter remained, if not experts in political economy, fully capable of judging for himself who to vote for.

But as the partisan battle lines hardened, the tendency to frame disagreements over policy as dishonesty grew more increasingly common. After developing arguments founded on principles of economic theory and derived from mountains of statistical data, it was easy and convenient for tariff reformers and free traders alike to portray their opponents as liars and charlatans acting out of personal gain or sinister motives. In the end, they not only worked to lay claim to powerful, emotive symbols of British life, but truth itself. Voting for tariff reform was not just a gesture of support for high wages and the workman’s sense of pride, and favoring free

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551 Ibid., 177.
trade meant more than a desire for cheap prices and the people’s daily bread. For both sides, it meant committing to truth over lies, facts against deception. Tariff reformers and free traders offered the electorate two contrasting visions of the future of British society, not simply one better suited to meet a challenging and uncertain future, but also to determine who was right and who was wrong.

**The Letters to Joseph Chamberlain**

While politicians and pressure groups worked frantically to disseminate their messages and generate voter sympathy, the effectiveness of this work is less clear. With only rudimentary polling and comparatively limited resources for the analysis of public opinion, election agents and the press were forced to rely on incomplete information and their personal impressions of the political climate. Even in constituencies with effective and knowledgeable party agents, or communities small enough for widespread canvassing, the thoughts and views of the ordinary Briton rarely emerged into the open. Certainly, this did not reflect voter apathy. The crowds who gathered at public meetings, demonstrators in parades and processions, or those who simply wore party ribbons and displayed a candidate’s name in their window, were all in some manner political participants. Nevertheless, in most instances, local constituents and potential voters only appear as a heckler in the crowd in a newspaper report or a tally in the final vote counts, their backgrounds, personalities, and viewpoints reduced to a single number. Their opinions on the tariff reform controversy – as well as their own contributions to the debate – have generally gone unrecorded.
Against this relative absence in the historical record, a collection of letters written by British subjects from around the world has been preserved in the papers of Joseph Chamberlain. More than five hundred in total, mailed to the Colonial Office between January and September 1903, the letters cover a wide range of political topics and questions. In particular, hundreds of these letters pertain to the issues raised by the tariff reform campaign, their authors nearly unanimously supportive of the proposed agenda. Some of these correspondents gave their support, others offered to volunteer their services, and some asked questions or provided information they considered relevant to the debate or useful to Chamberlain’s cause. Contrary to the patronizing attitudes of some political commentators and propagandists, they demonstrated a keen awareness of the potential consequences of reform. Their concerns show a thoughtful appreciation of tariff reform’s potential impact on the national economy and their own livelihoods. In this respect, the letters offer a window into the thoughts of a selection of politically conscious Britons, as well as an opportunity to consider how segments of the population formed and articulated their political views within such a heavily propagandized environment.

Although drawn from a wide range of class backgrounds, the letter-writers are not representative of the make-up of Britain in 1903. In general, they tended to be older and wealthier than the general population, and overwhelmingly male. They were also predominantly aligned to either the Conservative party or the Unionist coalition more generally, and sympathetic to Chamberlain personally; throughout the letters, expressions of admiration for the Colonial Secretary’s boldness, honesty, and foresight can be found repeatedly. James Small, of

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552 The imperial ideas and attitudes found in this collection are analyzed in Kevin Luginbill, ‘Penny Post Imperialists: Imagining and Experiencing Empire in Letters to the Colonial Office, 1903,’ *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49, no. 2 (Mar. 2021), 260-283.
the London suburb Acton and a self-described “conservative of 80 years,” wrote that “I cannot
tell you with what delight I read your Birmingham speech.” Writing only a day after the
speech, the chaplain W.H. Uilaner gave thanks, commenting that “Surely the Kaffirs were right
in their choice of a name for the present Colonial Secretary,” adding that “we must all hope and
pray that our great chief ‘Moathlodi’ may have the health and guidance to continue his peculiar
work to a finish.” More letters from British subjects around the world poured praise upon
Chamberlain for his inspirational call to action, an indication that some segments of the general
populace shared in his enthusiasm for tariff reform.

A significant number of the letters to Chamberlain reveal that the movement to revise
Britain’s free trade policy had already been underway for years. Some of the authors could be
said to have anticipated Chamberlain’s May 15 speech at Birmingham; John Hopkins, “a very
old writer on that point both in Australia and Canada,” wrote on May 9 to warn that Britain
would need to grant the colonies preferential trade status if they hoped to make any progress
toward imperial unity. Hopkins also attached copies of two letters he had written on the issue to
local newspapers during the South African war, illustrating that his interest in reform had not
been transient. From these writers’ perspectives, rather than instigating a new and unexpected
political movement, Chamberlain was joining them at long last. This was the attitude of Daniel
McLeish, a native of Perthshire, Scotland, whose travels over the span of four decades had taken
him as far as New Zealand and the Canadian frontier. He explained that “I began life as a
laboring man and could never write or speak well – but in my own way I have let my oppinions

553 J. Small to J. Chamberlain, 30 May, 1903. JC/30/6/73.
554 W. Uilaner to J. Chamberlain, 16 May, 1903. JC30/6/21. The word ‘moathlodi’ is a Swati term comparable in
meaning to judge. Chamberlain’s association with the title originated from his settlement of the border between
555 J. Hopkins to J. Chamberlain, 9 May, 1903. JC30/6/14-16.
[sic] be known.” Sharing his approval of the Birmingham speech, he added, “I have advocated every point you have touched on and a point or two more.” Though McLeish did not elaborate on these extra points, he did include a poem he had written in the 1880s entitled “The Future of Britain,” laying out in prose the vital importance of unifying the mother country and colonies. Lewis Ford confided that he had rejected free trade twenty years earlier, and volunteered his own hypothetical tariff scheme. Ford’s proposed a two-shilling tax on grain and a general ten percent duty on all other non-colonial imports, an idea largely similar to Chamberlain’s Glasgow program that October. Likely, many of these authors who boasted of forsaking free trade had previously supported the so-called “fair trade” movement of the 1880s, or aligned themselves with domestic agricultural interests. In this light, the enthusiasm with which some embraced Chamberlain’s sudden reversal emerges not as loyal supporters following their chief, but as members of a long-marginalized group seizing upon newfound prominence and influence offered by one of Britain’s leading statesmen.

With so many of the letter-writers in favor of tariff reform, many of them offered Chamberlain unsolicited aid. A significant number of these authors attached newspaper clippings, pamphlets, and books which they believed contained relevant information which might help Chamberlain build a stronger argument. Usually, though, there was a noticeable gap between what Chamberlain and these authors considered useful. To help manage his incoming correspondence, Chamberlain’s secretaries summarized each letter’s contents on an attached index card and recommended how to reply. In one case, the London solicitor L.N.S. Pasmore

556 D. McLeish to J. Chamberlain, 3 June, 1903. JC30/6/88-89.
557 L. Ford to J. Chamberlain, 12 June, 1903. JC30/6/170.
558 On the fair trade movement and other antecedents to Chamberlain’s tariff reform campaign, see Brown, Tariff Reform Movement in Britain.
wrote that tariff reform “has long been a cherished dream in my mind” and included a copy of a fair trade pamphlet he had published in 1886. Pasmore was confident in “Its complete applicability at the present time” and boasted, “to put forward a simple argument intelligible to the meanest capacity I refrained from the use of figures and statistics.”\textsuperscript{559} To this, Chamberlain’s secretary commented bluntly “the pamphlet is not interesting” and advised that Pasmore receive only a routine acknowledgement of receipt.\textsuperscript{560} Other writers were perhaps more self-interested. Arthur John Bacon, an unemployed 48-year old with an “immense interest” in fiscal reform, wrote on May 22 to inquire for job openings at a rumored “Empire Tariff League.” Listing his qualifications, Bacon testified to his “absurdly good health” and his grasp of the English, German, French, and Dutch languages, but lamented his “unfortunate complexion as I suffer somewhat from facial excema [sic].” The Colonial Office secretaries merely replied with the note, “I am to say that Mr. Chamberlain has no information respecting the League.”\textsuperscript{561}

Others proved more successful in eliciting substantive responses. Frederick Andrew, the chairman of an engineering firm in Lincoln employing 1500 workers and with business abroad, sought to impress upon Chamberlain that “the subject is of far greater importance to the real well-being of the country than all the other political questions of the day added together.” Chamberlain took a personal interest in Andrew’s letter, eager to learn more about the impact of free trade on a large business and the industry as a whole. He instructed his secretaries to make an inquiry for more information. “[Chamberlain] would like to know,” his secretary wrote, “whether your trade has lost here or in British possessions? Are foreigners doing better than we

\textsuperscript{559} L. Pasmore to J. Chamberlain, 17 June, 1903. JC29/5/14/48
\textsuperscript{560} JC29/5/14/47.
\textsuperscript{561} JC30/6/50-51. A. Bacon to J. Chamberlain. 22 May. 1903.
are? And similar information.”

While his responses were likely often disappointing to their authors, Chamberlain took seriously the messages of support and offers of assistance that poured in. Though an unequal and imbalanced dynamic, these letters formed part of an ongoing dialogue between constituents and politician, a way for the politically-active voter to express himself and be heard.

The letter collection also provides evidence that these writers fully appreciated the potential consequences of reform on the nation’s welfare and their own livelihoods. They wrote their letters with something more than a reflexive, uncritical partisan support in mind. Many letter-writers were certain that the truth was the best form of election literature at their disposal. G. Middleton of Stocksfield-on-Tyne confidently stated that the workers and the poor of Britain would rally to Chamberlain’s cause “if your spokesmen can only put the issue plain enough.”

The grocer Charles Barnard, who repeatedly and mistakenly addressed Chamberlain as “my lord,” vented his frustration at the partisan nature of the debate. Arguing that “the opposition to the Gov[ernment] do not admit any good points but harp on the bad ones,” he urged Chamberlain to take an honest and open position that both refuted the misinformation spread by free traders and acknowledged that tariff reform might be imperfect. Simply revealing the facts in a straightforward manner and speaking truthfully would, they were certain, sway the British voter.

Contrary to the assumptions of some political strategists and propagandists, the letter-writers were more than uncritical recipients of propaganda. S. James of London explained in a long letter that he felt it his duty as a patriotic Briton to participate in the national political

562 F. Andrew to J. Chamberlain, 12 June, 1903. JC30/6/171-173.
563 G. Middleton to J. Chamberlain, 27 June, 1903. JC30/6/270.
564 C. Barnard to J. Chamberlain, 23 August, 1903. JC30/6/426. Barnard had previously written on June 10. See JC30/6/140.
discourse, regardless of “my very humble station in life.” He proceeded to offer his insights into Chamberlain’s career, strategies for advancing the cause of tariff reform, as well as the potential diplomatic ramifications of tariff reform, demonstrating a grasp of the political debate as thorough as many politicians.\textsuperscript{565} John Clark of Nottingham, a self-described “working man,” presented Chamberlain with a detailed constitutional framework for an imperial Parliament. Clark’s blueprint called for the Parliament’s membership to be selected from the legislatures of each country, with full control over military forces, fixed terms of five or six years, and with a Prime Minister chosen by the King. With this new government in place, Clark predicted, “The Empire would then be one, and the peace of the world would then be almost secured.”\textsuperscript{566} Other correspondents interjected with their own detailed insights and knowledge of aspects of the tariff question they felt the press and politicians had neglected. Edward Meyer reminded Chamberlain of the unique commercial position of Hong Kong, W. Duncan recounted his memories of a speech delivered in 1845 by John Bright in favor of the repeal of the Corn Laws, and Howard Chapman, a wholesale fruit merchant from Kent, explained how French and American fruit imports undercut British producers with both lower prices and earlier harvest times due to more favorable climates. Each of these letter-writers followed the debate with interest, and sought to add their voices as it unfolded.

Many of the people in the collection wished to stay well-informed and engaged in the political conversation because they realized it would have immediate consequences for their jobs and financial security. This was especially the case for workers who felt relegated to the margins of the debate. J.J. Charles of Cork wrote of his “serious objection” that, with all the attention

\begin{footnotes}
\item[565] S. James to J. Chamberlain, 15 June, 1903. JC30/6/146.
\item[566] J. Clark to J. Chamberlain, 8 June, 1903. JC30/6/144.
\end{footnotes}
paid to wage-earning laborers, no one had yet explained what would be done to offset increased living expenses for fixed-salary employees. Likewise, Walter Goodchild, a shop assistant from Liverpool, worried that the promised rise in wages might not reach non-unionized trades like his own. He explained that thousands of assistants and clerks paid for lodging, and wondered, “If the food these people give us becomes dearer, can they board us for the same money and if we cannot get, what are we to do?” A similar concern motivated William Donnelly, a Liverpool gardener with eight children. Donnelly described his family’s habit of purchasing flour “by the sack” and listed his annual family, adding that he looked forward to how much he would stand to gain from the promised rise in wages. Few working-class Britons needed political organizations or statesmen to explain to them how painful even small rises in the cost of living could be, or the relief they would feel with secure employment and higher wages. These authors’ engagement with the issues of fiscal policy moved beyond the party slogans and political propaganda circulating around them, placing the debate in a more emotive and personal context. For them, the outcome of elections and the policies enacted would have real and potentially grave effects on their lives.

Conclusion

The tariff reform controversy was a national debate unfolding on numerous levels. At one level, it was a grand conversation among statesmen and intellectuals over competing visions of the nature of the state, narratives of imperial rise and decline, and the future of the ties between nation and empire. Beneath that, however, was a contest for power and influence between

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567 J. Charles to J. Chamberlain, 8 June, 1903. JC30/6/142.
568 W. Goodchild to J. Chamberlain, 18 June, 1903. JC30/6/220.
569 W. Donnelly to J. Chamberlain, June 1, 1903. JC/30/6/97.
political parties and partisan interest groups determined to win votes, take office, and put their visions into practice as tangible policies. Believing in the momentous consequences of reform, these groups spent enormous resources to spread their messages far and wide, making it practically impossible for the average Briton to remain unaware of the controversy.

The breadth and depth of these competing propaganda campaigns meant that in a way the ideological differences between free trade and tariff reform evolved into competing popular cultures, each with their separate languages, rituals, and values binding people together in a common identity. On one side was a free trade culture, a community of consumers and producers extolling the virtues of cheapness and plentiful food, and defending the people’s daily bread – exclusively portrayed as a wholesome and filling white loaf – against corrupt special interests. It was founded on the ideal of freedom, to buy and sell without restriction, and the freedom to conduct one’s business without interference. It also boasted a powerful historical lineage, burnished by the nostalgia for the prosperity of the Victorian period and the commemoration of principled statesmen against the hated Corn Laws.

In contrast to this was the culture of tariff reform, centered on the image and reputation of the missionary Joseph Chamberlain, fighting to defend the integrity and prosperity of the empire and the nation from the onslaught of unscrupulous foreigners. Vibrant, energetic, and modern, tariff reform was a plan for national rejuvenation to dispel the stagnation of the past, to tear down the false idols of Cobdenism. Hearth and home would be protected, the workman’s pride would be restored, and society’s ills would be done away in the flowering of economic prosperity. The nation would march on to a glorious imperial destiny, greater and stronger than ever, with Chamberlain and his devoted tariff reformers as its guide.
These “cultures,” however, were not meant to create two separate, distinct communities, but clashes in an effort to claim ownership of true Britishness. Appeals to patriotic sentiment and the demonization of the stereotyped foreigner were intended to link national values with specific government policies, and to tar the opposition with associations to otherness. Displays of John Bull robbed by foreign agents, vivid depictions of the crushing burden of unemployment, and frantic warnings about German sausages were all designed to show that one side or the other was truly British at heart, and to remind the British voter of this when they went to the polls. These propaganda strategies also magnified the sense of the controversy’s importance. Proposals for minor revisions to the taxation of imported goods escalated into a battle for the preservation of the British way of life, mobilizing a propaganda arms race and deploying veritable armies of political agents to inundate communities with election material.

For all the efforts political parties made to distribute this propaganda, it remains unclear how the British people actually responded. At one level, a sizable number of people undoubtedly engaged with the electioneering work of political parties and interest groups. Attending speeches and rallies, with their inevitable hecklers and rowdyism, the wearing of party colors, the carnival atmosphere on election day, all attest to a general sense of enthusiasm and excitement for the political process. But political participation in such forms appears more as entertainment, with elections akin to sporting matches. Many propagandists exploited this perception; films, songs, brightly-colored posters, dump shops, and more, aimed to catch the viewer’s interest and provoke an emotional response. Some politicians believed this blending of politics and entertainment was an effective means of generating publicity and capturing the attention of otherwise apathetic or busy voters. Others more cynically believed these same voters were
incapable of any deeper analysis of serious political issues and would be satisfied by the circus-like performances.

The collection of letters to Chamberlain preserved in the archive offer some validation of these attitudes. The outpouring of support for Chamberlain was impassioned and frequently unreserved, an easy breeding ground for uncritical and reflexive partisan conformity. Yet many of the letters illustrate the reasons why Britons might invest such emotion into a political cause. Whether a poor worker like William Donnelly or a wealthy business owner like Frederick Andrew, they understood that the outcome of Chamberlain’s reform proposals might mean the difference between poverty and prosperity. These authors drew their own conclusions from what they heard on the platform and read in the papers, applying their knowledge and expertise in ways that often exposed the limits and weaknesses of the arguments of Britain’s esteemed leaders. By volunteering their time and effort, a number of these letter-writers showed a depth of commitment to the idea of tariff reform that transcended mere party loyalty, while others were eager to learn, determined to understand both sides of the debate and come to their own conclusions. Placed in the context of these politically-active Britons whose voices have been preserved, the propaganda war between free trader and tariff reformer that surrounded them appears less as a battle to see which could deceive and trick most effectively, but rather a contest over whether they could effectively convince the electorate that these issues mattered enough for their attention.
CONCLUSION

The tariff reform campaign had a clear beginning. Joseph Chamberlain’s rousing speech in the Birmingham Town Hall on May 15, 1903 was a clear declaration of intent to overturn decades of established policy. But the campaign had no true ending. Electoral defeat in 1906 and Chamberlain’s retirement after a paralytic stroke later that year were followed by two more inconclusive elections in 1910. The First World War and the upheavals of the interwar period relegated tariffs to a secondary position. The old impetus behind Chamberlain’s call to action, the threat of a great struggle with foreign rivals, seemed to have lost its urgency; Britain had faced the challenge, and emerged victorious in the end.

But still the tariff reformers worked for the fulfillment of their agenda. Many of them found its realization in the passage of the Import Duties Act on February 4, 1932. A response to both the onset of the Great Depression and prohibitive American tariffs, the act imposed a general ten percent duty on foreign imports, with exemptions and preferences for colonial goods. Later that year at the British Empire Economic Conference in Ottawa, Britain negotiated a series of trade agreements between the metropole, the Dominions, and the Crown colonies, effectively creating a British imperial trade zone.570

It was not difficult for old tariff reformers to find the symbolism in these developments. Serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, Joseph’s youngest son, introduced

570 The provisions of these agreements varied with each colony and type of colony, both making it difficult to quickly sum up the conference in its totality and belying the old free trade argument that the empire was too diverse to create any kind of customs union. For the general outline of the Ottawa agreement, see D.K. Fieldhouse, ‘The Metropolitan Economics of Empire,’ 4:90-92 and B.R. Tomlinson, ‘The Economy of the Empire on the Periphery,’ 4:363-365 in The Oxford History of the British Empire, ed. Judith M. Brown and William Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
the Import Duties Act in Parliament. He carried his father’s old Cabinet dispatch box with him to the chamber. Joseph’s other son Austen, his daughter Hilda, and his widow Mary were also in attendance. Following a technical explanation of the bill’s provisions, Neville concluded with an emotional note. He explained, “There can have been few occasions in all our long political history where to the son of a man…has been vouchsafed the privilege of setting the seal on the work which the father began….His work was not in vain.”\(^{571}\) In a letter to Hilda, Austen wrote, “How proud father would have been of Neville and how it would have moved him that Neville should complete his work.”\(^{572}\)

For free traders, the events of 1932 were the culmination of an unfolding disaster in which the nation had seemingly lost faith in their creed. In November 1931, the Liberal head of the Board of Trade, Walter Runciman, introduced legislation to empower the government to raise punitive tariffs against “abnormal imports,” in effect an anti-dumping measure in response to the economic turmoil of the Great Depression. Before long, as one historian describes him, Runciman became the Judas of free trade, having not only supported but proposed the idea of a general tariff in the Cabinet.\(^{573}\) But in his willingness to sacrifice free trade for the sake of national economic recovery, Runciman was joined by many other Liberals. When the votes were finally tallied, 35 Liberals voted in favor of the tariff, while only 32 voted against. Speaking in the wake of Chamberlain’s address, the Labour MP Clement Attlee could not help but notice that “the most surprising feature is not that [Chamberlain] is officiating as chief priest at the sacrifice

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\(^{571}\) *Hansard*, 5s, 261: 296 (4 February, 1932).  
\(^{573}\) Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, 331.
of Free Trade, but the principal acolytes that surround him. It would be an amazing thing to anybody who looks back upon the tariff struggles of the past to see."

Not to be outdone, Leopold Amery addressed the Commons after Attlee and took the moment to relish the day’s historical significance. Since the onset of the Great Depression, Amery had anticipated the final demise of British free trade. He had certainly not forsaken his allegiance to tariff reform. Drawing upon the political philosophy that had sustained him since 1903, Amery equated the passage of the tariff to “the liberation of our political thought and our national action from the deadening shackles of a negative mental obsession…which for three generations has wasted our substance, cramped the energies of the nation and paralysed our thought.” He now looked forward to “all that we may yet achieve for the Empire and nation.” Amery turned next to a personal reminiscence, describing Joseph Chamberlain’s 1903 Birmingham speech as the birth of his own political life, and once more comparing it to Martin Luther’s condemnation at Wittenberg. “Now at long last,” he concluded, “we have triumphed.”

Perhaps this was a triumph, but it is less clear exactly what kind of triumph it was. For Amery, the occasion must have carried a personal significance of its own. Joseph Chamberlain had died in 1914 without seeing his work completed. Since 1930, Arthur Balfour, William Hewins, and Leo Maxse had all passed away, while Austen Chamberlain had retired from public life and James Garvin increasingly spent his days in the country due to ill health. There were few

574 *Hansard*, 4s, 261: 297 (4 February, 1932).
of the old allies left for Amery to share in this victory. At the same time, the public response was a far cry from the tumult of 1903. There were no crowds of celebrating tariff reformers, nor were there any outraged free trade demonstrations.\textsuperscript{577} Surveying the ruins of the global economy in 1932, it is hardly surprising that the desperate repeal of free trade was no great cause for jubilation. For its part, the press focused more on the personal significance of the Import Duties Act for the Chamberlain dynasty rather than any fundamental shift in British political thought. Newsreel footage of Neville Chamberlain’s announcement of the general tariff began with title cards reading “29 years after Mr. Joseph Chamberlain started his great campaign,” and interspersed the Chancellor’s speech with short cuts to footage of the elder Chamberlain.\textsuperscript{578}

The end of free trade in 1932 did not necessarily mean that the tariff reformers had truly won the debate. The \textit{Times} editorialized, “Can anyone still doubt the necessity for the Bill?” but with the caveat, “can anyone doubt the necessity for more than the Bill?”\textsuperscript{579} The Import Duties Act, and the agreements that followed from the Ottawa Conference, were first and foremost responses to unprecedented economic instability. At the same time, their effects on the British and imperial economies were mixed.\textsuperscript{580} Certainly, they did not result in the kinds of dire predictions or glowing promises free traders and tariff reformers had made in 1903. Free traders were perhaps vindicated in their belief that the ‘colonial offer’ was less generous than supposed, or that the negotiations would be contentious and leave ill-feeling; indeed, the Ottawa Conference nearly broke up without an agreement, and Dominions still maintained prohibitive

\begin{footnotes}
\item[577] Trentmann, \textit{Free Trade Nation}, 331-348.
\item[578] ‘29 Years After,’ British Pathé, (London, February 11 1932).
\item[579] \textit{The Times}, February 29, 1932.
\item[580] For the Ottawa Conference’s effect on the British economy, see Ian M. Drummond, \textit{Imperial Economic Policy, 1917-1939: Studies in Expansion and Protection} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).
\end{footnotes}
duties on British imports in spite of the preferential treatment. On the other hand, the six-month interval between the Import Duties Act and the Ottawa agreements seemingly confirmed tariff reformers’ assumptions that Britain, not the colonies, had been the greatest obstacle to working towards imperial economic cooperation.

Leaving aside the ambiguous economic benefits of the 1932 reforms, tariff reformers looking back over the previous thirty years might well have been right to say that Chamberlain’s warnings about Britain’s relative economic decline and the rising threat of foreign rivals were vindicated. Liberal, free-trade arguments that open markets and equal treatment in commerce would maintain the peace appeared rather naïve in the face of the First World War and the turmoil of its aftermath. But the fact remained that, although battered and scarred, Britain ultimately emerged victorious from the war, and the empire had rallied to the motherland in its time of need. The colonies had not required pecuniary compensation to aid the mother-country in the moment of crisis. The sentimental bonds of shared identity enshrined in the ideals of liberal imperialism were apparently more substantial than tariff reformers thought. But perhaps the bonds of unity could have been more substantial if plans for imperial reform and federation had not been stymied for nearly three decades. Such attitudes were implicit in Amery’s address to Parliament, and it would hardly have been contentious to suggest that the British Empire might have done more to prepare itself to face the crises that emerged after 1914.

In the final assessment, the arguments made by free traders and tariff reformers were not the kind that could be proven true or false. Instead, they simply evolved over time. By outward

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appearances, tariff reform did ultimately triumph. The imposition of a general tariff, the empowerment of an expert committee to adjust import duties in specific cases, and the signing of reciprocal preferential tariffs with the colonies were the essence of Joseph Chamberlain’s Glasgow program. And yet, in substance the victory was not much of a victory for the dream of a consolidated empire. Tariffs were coupled to extreme budgetary retrenchment and military disarmament, embodied by the World Disarmament Conference that opened in 1932. And in 1931, the Statute of Westminster passed through Parliament, conferring full sovereignty and independence to the Dominions in all but name, while nationalists in India and other non-white colonies pressed more and more forcefully for independence. The dream of a consolidated empire, a federal globe-spanning British state as the tariff reformers had imagined it, was further away than ever. Perhaps things would have been different if tariff reform had not needed so long to triumph. In either case, looked at in this perspective, the victory of tariff reform in February 1932 was an echo of what might have been, in much the same way as tariff reform in 1903 was a glimpse of what might be.

The glimpse of “what might be” is at the heart of what made tariff reform one of the most controversial issues in Edwardian British politics. Proposals for revisions to Britain’s fiscal policy that in other times and in other places would have been regarded as relatively minor and mundane issues were treated as having revolutionary implications for the very future of the British Empire. This dissertation began as an effort to understand and explore the depth of passion Britons invested into the debate. As I have explained in the above chapters, Joseph Chamberlain’s call for reform in 1903 was more than a demand for minor adjustments to the rate of taxation of imported goods; it initiated an ideological dispute over the verdict of the
development of British society and the proper course of its national and imperial development into the new century.

I argue that the central element of this dispute was empire. Whether they aligned as tariff reformers or free traders, Britons at the beginning of the twentieth century identified themselves as inhabiting the center of a vast imperial edifice that stretched across the world. Their understanding of what it meant to be British, and what that meant for their place in the world, was defined by that imperial outlook. Faced with myriad domestic and international challenges to their old Victorian dominance, Britons turned to the empire as a panacea. The colonies could be developed into lucrative markets for struggling British industries, sources of vital raw materials for industrial society, outlets for the nation’s surplus populations, key strategic points in a future global conflict, as well as examples of the superiority of British governance and culture. Although much of the tariff debate involved abstruse arguments of domestic political economy, at its foundation the tariff reform campaign was a crusade for imperial unification. As the leading voice of British imperialism, Joseph Chamberlain warned that the empire’s future was at stake in the outcome of this debate. Not to be outdone, his rivals and critics cautioned that Chamberlain’s movement would accomplish what he sought to avoid, the disintegration of the British Empire.

Scholarly accounts of tariff reform and Edwardian politics have largely ignored the controversy’s imperial context. Instead, they focus on the domestic elements of the contest, and emphasize the domestic political implications of the fight between free trade and protectionism. Minor adjustments to the taxation of imported foodstuffs would certainly have consequences for the general public’s cost of living, employment, and overall economic well-being, it is true, but
those involved in the debate repeatedly insisted that Britain’s very future was at stake. Free traders and tariff reformers proclaimed to all who would listen that the outcome of the debate could radically transform the social and economic makeup of the nation, and perhaps even jeopardize British democracy as well. The stakes were high indeed. Placed in its full context, the question of reform can be seen as an expression of a host of anxieties about Britain’s global status and the consequences of its integration within a global imperial system, and goes far to explaining the increasing polarization and radicalization of British politics that infected every major controversy in the prewar years.

The debate drove the nation to reevaluate its place in the world and think seriously about what it meant to be an imperial power. Joseph Chamberlain explicitly and repeatedly urged audiences to consider how much the British Empire meant to them, and what kind of nation Britain would be without it. For more than a quarter-century, historians of the new imperial history and the British World have demonstrated the degree to which British identity and society were shaped by the experiences and encounters resulting from the country’s imperialism. Because of the tendency to emphasize the cultural, linguistic, and social aspects of empire, and the long-standing depiction of tariff reform as a domestic political question, Chamberlain’s crusade for imperial unity has largely been neglected by historians of empire.

My study of the tariff reform campaign both reiterates the observation that British society was inextricably bound up in its connection to the empire, as well as offering a critique of the assumptions about the historical meaning of empire in the British imagination. At the turn of the century, British political discourse was saturated with the language of empire. The possession of huge swathes of territory across the world, and the heritage of decades of the empire’s expansion
and growth, were central components of British identity and the focal point of patriotic appeals. At no point in the course of the debate was there any serious voice contemplating the dismantling of the British Empire as a desirable end. Rather, tariff reformers and free traders vehemently argued with each other about the precise meanings and value of the empire. Tariff reformers sought for the consolidation of the empire into a compact federal state, with powerful institutions capable of withstanding the dangers posed by rival states. Free traders meanwhile insisted on a liberal vision of the empire as a vehicle for the development of new nations and the promotion of peace in an unstable world. The debate offered Britons a variety of competing visions of what British imperialism meant for themselves and the world, and what the empire could become in the future.

The starkly different attitudes both sides in the debate expressed on empire must be balanced by an understanding of the crucial similarities in how they conceptualized the British Empire. For as much as politicians and experts debated colonial unity and imperial consolidation, perhaps the most striking aspect of the debate was how much of the empire was simply ignored. It was almost as though India, the Crown Colonies, and others, simply did not exist in the imaginations of imperialists of either party. Rather, they remained fixated on how to maintain and deepen relations with the various settler colonies, or more specifically the dominant white populations of those colonies. They did so out of a concern for the preservation of the bonds of unity within the realms of Greater Britain between populations whose racial, cultural, and historical made them part of an amorphous but identifiable ‘British’ community. No tariff reform or free trade imperialist articulated any coherent vision of how the rest of the empire was to be fitted into this racialized imperial structure. The great vision of a unified British imperial state
was to be the sole preserve of approximately 50 million Britons, and not the additional 300 million people they claimed to rule.

A series of inherent contradictions and idiosyncrasies ran through British conceptions of their empire at the start of the twentieth century. Certainly, the empire was central to Britons’ identities and how they understood their place in the world at large; Chamberlain and the tariff reformers were fighting to unify the empire in order to safeguard Britain from threats both internal and external, while free traders fought to preserve the empire, and with it all that was best in the British way of life. But these conflicting visions of empire were each circumscribed by numerous blind spots that the ‘empire’ they imagined themselves a part of was in practical terms indistinguishable from a nation. The imperial subjects that reformers sought to draw closer were fellow Britons. The unification of Greater Britain, or the ‘Britannic’ nations, to use the terminology of Richard Jebb, rested on the idea that the people of the metropole and the colonies were the same, or similar enough that the sentimental desire for closer relations would overcome the effects of geographical distance. It did not follow, however, that reformers sought the inclusion within the body politic of those deemed too racially, religiously, and culturally different from the British people and their colonial cousins.

Even within this drastically limited imagined imperial space, the national-imperial unity project rested on a double layer of tension. Britain itself comprised a union of peoples, and, especially in the case of Ireland, a precarious and uneasy union. For many, Britain was synonymous with England, or the Anglo-Saxons, and so too was the empire. In this respect, a jarring combination of openness and exclusion can be seen in the imagined British Empire. At one end, imperialists prided themselves on the way British democracy and governance brought
harmony between different peoples and integrated minorities like the French Canadians or South African Boers, and made loyal colonial subjects of discontented emigrants. But at the same time as they welcomed these people as equal partners in the imperial project, with its mixture of advantages and obligations, they savagely rejected even considering the same possibility for the vast majority of the empire’s subjects.

The tariff reform debate brought all of these competing impulses, anxieties, and contradictions to the fore, and made them central parts of an impassioned national debate. When Joseph Chamberlain warned that the empire stood at a fateful crossroads, many accepted his verdict without hesitation and flocked to his banner. The tariff reform movement was a motley collection of devoted imperialists, young ideologues, opportunistic protectionists, and politicians of often dubious loyalty. Together, they attacked the laissez-faire, free trade liberal political consensus of the Victorian era as little more than a policy of stagnation and drift. Faced with growing foreign rivalries and national security threats, they believed the consolidation of the empire would provide the British people the strength to face the challenges that lay ahead. The fact that they and the colonial peoples shared a common British identity made the need for reform all the more urgent; the sentimental bonds of identity were a solid foundation for unity, but the tariff reformers feared that sentiment alone was not enough to survive the strain of the wars of the future. The empire was to be transformed, and Britain along with it.

The critics of tariff reform, and the defenders of free trade, were quick to appreciate the magnitude of the ideological attack they faced. To them, free trade rested at the heart of Britain’s moral economy. Through free trade, the people of Britain could afford cheap food, the economy prospered and those with the greatest skill prospered the most. Abroad, free trade justified
Britain’s possession of a sprawling colonial empire; no foreign state could accuse Britain of unfair treatment, and no colony chafed under the burdens of metropolitan selfishness. Free trade went hand-in-hand with colonial freedom, the right to full self-governance Britain had so wisely granted them. At home, free trade nurtured democracy, freeing the government from the corrupting influence of special interests and privileged classes. To undo free trade was to undo freedom, destroying British democracy, British prosperity, and the links that held the British Empire together.

The debate rapidly became an all-out propaganda war inextricably bound up in the nation’s electoral politics. The major political parties, as well as new nation-wide pressure groups and political organizations, mobilized for a battle for the hearts and minds of the British public. The scale of this effort was unprecedented in British politics, combining traditional electioneering methods with new techniques and technologies to distill complex questions of political economy and imperial reform into easily digestible imagery, symbols, and slogans. It was nearly impossible for anyone engaged in the politics of the day not to be a participant in the controversy to at least some degree. Fortunately, the preservation of a collection of letters written to Joseph Chamberlain allows for the analysis of the political opinions of a select sampling of common Britons. The sentiments and ideas expressed in these letters indicate that, contrary to the often patronizing and cynical attitudes of some political observers, people often thought deeply and critically about the issues raised by tariff reform, sometimes more so than the politicians and propagandists seeking their votes.

As the debate raged on in Britain, the empire continued to grow and change. The 1902 Colonial Conference, which had set in motion Chamberlain’s reform crusade, also laid the
groundwork for a new phase in the relationship between Britain and the settler colonies. A significant number of imperialists, hoping to avoid the intense partisan bickering that had emerged from tariff reform, sought to advance alternative schemes of imperial unity. These movements had long histories, stretching back decades, a reminder that Chamberlain and the tariff reformers did not have a monopoly on Britain’s imperial agenda. Recognizing that the self-governing colonies had developed national aspirations, reformers like Richard Jebb and the members of the Pollock Committee sought to give greater substance to the sentimental link of a shared British, or Britannic, identity. But like the tariff reformers, their reformist ambitions stumbled in the attempt to navigate between their desire for a closer imperial union and colonial wariness about any violation of their local autonomy. The conflicting impulses of the tariff reform controversy, imperial reform, and colonial nationalism came together at the 1907 Imperial Conference, in which the self-governing colonies were recognized as nations co-equal, at least in principle, with Britain. Yet, at the same time, this expression of liberal imperialism was turned on its head, as the members of the Liberal government used the principles of freedom within the empire to ignore colonial requests and ward off their desire for tariff reform.

To those attending the House of Commons on February 4, 1932, it may well have looked as though the tariff reform movement had triumphed after a long, twenty-nine year struggle. But the essence of what had driven the debate and made it so divisive, predated 1903 and continued on after 1932, and reached beyond the campaign for reciprocal preferential tariffs within the empire. It required the people of Britain to consider what the British Empire meant to them, what they valued most about it, and what they were willing to do to preserve it for the future. In 1903, the people of Britain lived in an imperial world, and saw themselves as
an imperial people. They were certain that the nation’s destiny was tied to the fate of the empire, and the tariff reform debate presented Britain with an opportunity to remake the empire and build it into something new. But the nation could not decide what kind of empire it was they wanted to build.
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